

Colleen Skidmore

Rare Merit: Women in Photography in Canada, 1840–1940

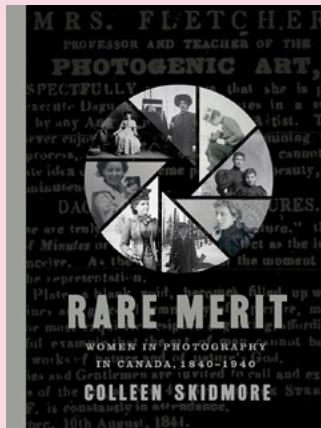
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The “woman problem” in photography is like many others in the history of art: one rooted in the structural inequalities of both past and present. Colleen Skidmore’s new book *Rare Merit: Women in Photography in Canada, 1840–1940* takes on the question that American photo historian Naomi Rosenblum asked in 1994—“why women?”—and leads us on a merry chase through history and across the territories that today are called Canada. Skidmore argues that, “only when women’s practices and photographs are recognized as integral to the concept of a history or histories of photography and critically examined for their social, technical, and aesthetic roles and merit can we begin properly to comprehend and assess photography’s extraordinary value and impact in history” (2). In setting herself this task—to recuperate and consolidate the history of women photographers in Canada in one volume—she faces the thorny fact that, during this time period, as Linda Nochlin most famously argued, “it was indeed institutionally made impossible for women to achieve artistic excellence, or success, on the same footing as men, no matter what the potency of their so-called talent, or genius.”¹



Putting aside the question of genius, which is Nochlin’s focus but not on Skidmore’s, does this structural inequality matter to Skidmore’s argument that women’s practices must be understood as integral to the history of photography? Well, yes, and no. Her approach is that of the typical feminist researcher who Nochlin cheekily describes as “swallowing the bait”: she seeks to recuperate and resuscitate, to compare and contrast, to critique erasure and read between the lines of history (often through the pages of Canada’s census records for occupations, namely, photographer) as a way to create a history where there was none. In this respect, *Rare Merit* is truly a remarkable and sustained feat of research, and one that was many years in the making: according to the acknowledgements, Skidmore began researching the question of women in photography in 1991 (287). Skidmore brings together woman after woman photographer: some old and some young, some trained and some self-taught, amateur and professional, artist and journalist, to name only a few of the

categories applied. By uniting so many women practitioners together in one volume, Skidmore makes a strong case for the contribution of the female gender to photography in Canada. What she doesn’t overcome is the pesky problem of exceptionalism that such a volume engenders.

In eight chapters, Skidmore spans a hundred years of photography, from Chapter One, “The Daguerreans, 1841–61” to Chapter Eight, “Artists and Amateurs, 1890–1940.” In between, we learn about specific studios and the role of women as businesswomen and printing-room workers (Chapter Two: “The Livernois Studio, 1854–74,” Chapter Three: “Notman’s Printing Room, 1860–80”) and as settler-colonial subject-makers (Chapter 4: “The Maynard Studio, 1862–1912,” Chapter Five: “The Moodie Studio, 1885–1905”). It is in these chapters that we get the most sustained analysis of individual photographers and their contributions to the medium in Canada. While other books exist on the works of Élise Livernois, Hannah Maynard, and Geraldine Moodie, Skidmore does an admirable job of explicating the social, legal, and familial roles each woman had to contend with alongside their business and artistic ambitions. She contextualizes these studies with references to period discussions of the place of women in the industry of photography. She also makes clear that, while many of these studios were family affairs, as in the case of the Livernois and Maynard studios, it was the women who were often at the helm. This stands in direct contrast to the Notman studio, of course, which is the

most studied of any of the nineteenth-century photography studios in Canada (Skidmore herself has written elsewhere on the women who worked under Notman). Rather than the usual review of prints and portraits, we are instead shown, through careful study of census records and period newspapers, the important (if sporadic) role that women played as assistants and printers who were paid lower wages than men for the same work.

Who were these women? What were their driving aspirations as photographers? When did they practice? Where were they? Why aren't they better known? All of these questions come to mind as the reader works their way through a series of eight chapters that can, at times, seem overwhelming in detail. Name after name, photograph after photograph, moving East to West and back again, we are inundated with the sheer number of female photographic practitioners. This is particularly true in the last three chapters, where Skidmore moves away from her more focused study of photographers and their studios to survey the photographic practices of women photographers more thematically. Sometimes this has a refreshing effect, as in Chapter Six, "Travel, Photography, and Photojournalism, 1872–1940," where we get a glimpse of how women used photography to free themselves intellectually and artistically (and sometimes financially) through the practice of picture-taking. Comparing Mary Schäffer (whose life and work Skidmore explored in *Searching for Mary Schäffer: Women Wilderness Photography*, 2017) with other

naturalist-photographers who are lesser known, such as Molly Adams and Mary M. Vaux, creates a stronger impression of "the widely cast web of women photographers," (163) who made their way into the world of travel writing and photographic publishing in the early twentieth century. Yet, the chapter, which runs to forty-four pages, does not stop to focus on any one individual photographer and instead progresses through a litany of practitioners that leaves the reader wanting more. I would have dearly loved to stay awhile in the land of the settler-colonial woman adventuress Agnes Deans Cameron and learned more about her travels but, sadly, only four paragraphs are given to her story (165–69). If anything, this survey approach, while sometimes frustrating to the reader, will offer inspiration to many scholars looking for fresh topics of study.

Chapter Seven, "Commercial Studio Photographers, 1860–1940," begins in the east and takes the reader west through a careful look at the social and financial state of women practitioners trying to run their own businesses. This chapter covers enormous ground and range in terms of period and regional practices, with subsections on proprietors in Ontario and Quebec, Manitoba, British Columbia, Alberta, and then back east again to Newfoundland (not yet a Canadian province). In this more biographical section, we are reminded that the "in Canada" of the title means that many of the photographers discussed, while geographically identified with a certain region, were settlers, migrants, refugees, and cross-provincial

businesswomen. With such a gloriously long list of women working in the field, this chapter almost convinces the reader that women made up a majority of commercial photographers in the period! This is something of the danger of excerpting women from the larger context of commercial photography in Canada, i.e., by removing the men photographers. As Skidmore herself writes, "[d]uring the 1880s and 1890s, Canadian women began to enter commercial studios as owners and photographers in greater, albeit still modest numbers" (190). This truth, alongside her point that census numbers and listings are often erroneous, sometimes gets lost when we are faced with such a vast number of successful women photographers and their images.

In Chapter Eight, the list of photographers and their thematic grouping becomes increasingly overwhelming for this reader. "Artists and Amateurs, 1890–1940" certainly has a nice ring to it, but the grouping of "artist" photographers such as Toronto-based Minna Keene, a proponent of Pictorialism and a professional photographer, alongside snap-shooters and album-makers such as Mattie Gunterman of the Kootenays, in British Columbia, and Clara Hartt of Thelma, Alberta does not attend to the important differences between these photographers. There are important and very specific divergences in their practices. Keene was using a large-format camera in her home studio while Gunterman and Hartt were using more commercially available cameras, while the differences in terms of class and culture between them

(the British-German emigré Keene was a member of the Royal Society while Gunterman and Hartt were Americans who worked and farmed) as well as their subject matters and ambitions for their photographs, artistic versus personal, are so different as to deserve their own chapters. This is an example of where the attempt to include too many women photographers may have led the project slightly astray. After all, the goal of recuperation is an unending one, and we can forever be discovering new additions to support the argument that women have made a valuable contribution to the history of photography. But you have to draw the line somewhere or else the writing of history becomes only a list of facts rather than a coherent narrative.

As Skidmore outlines in her conclusion, there have been many useful and important books on the history of photography published in recent years, with more and more work being done on global subjects, aimed at filling in the absences in what has tended to be a very white, Euro-American history. Yet, as Skidmore points out, even with this expansion and revision, women photographers still tend to be left out (284). While the “woman problem” in history, whether we are discussing the history of photography or otherwise, can never truly be resolved, Skidmore does an engaging job of telling and illustrating it. There is no doubt that *Rare Merit* will be of enormous value to students of photography, in Canada and elsewhere, as it offers a fresh perspective on the social history of the medium from a

feminist historical lens. The copious illustrations will delight and inspire researchers new and old to discover the lesser-known photographers who are included and to renew interest in those whose work remains understudied. The larger problem of a comprehensive history of photography in Canada is one that has yet to be addressed, although there are currently two forthcoming projects that will address this absence: one more scholarly, by Martha Langford and McGill-Queen’s University Press, and another more popular from Sarah Parsons and Sarah Bassnett via the Art Canada Institute. Skidmore’s book, with its focus on women photographers, will become even more valuable alongside such larger general surveys of photography in Canada.

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1. See Linda Nochlin, “From 1971: Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?”, *ARTnews.com*, May 30, 2015, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/retrospective/why-have-there-been-no-great-women-artists-4201/>. First published in the January 1971 issue of *ARTnews*.

Josianne Poirier

Montréal fantasmagorique. Ou la part d’ombre des animations lumineuses urbaines

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Valeria Téllez Niemeyer

Composante essentielle de la vie urbaine, la lumière artificielle est au centre de l’affirmation et de la promotion des métropoles

contemporaines. Cette question est analysée en profondeur par Josianne Poirier dans *Montréal fantasmagorique*, un ouvrage issu de sa thèse de doctorat, réalisée en 2018 à l’Université de Montréal. Dans une perspective critique, cet essai examine les illuminations dites spectaculaires du Montréal du XXI^e siècle comme faisant partie d’une stratégie d’élbouissement à double tranchant. Poirier souligne la capacité des interventions lumineuses actuelles à revitaliser la ville à l’aide de nouvelles sensibilités formelles, tout en dissimulant les enjeux sociaux, économiques et historiques inhérents à l’urbanité. L’objectif du livre consiste à relever « ce qui s’exprime dans le chatoiement de la ville contemporaine, à partir de l’intuition que ce dernier exprime une part plus sombre de l’expérience urbaine que l’on voudrait le croire » (p. 13). Trois études de cas guident l’analyse, à savoir les illuminations scénographiques du Quartier des spectacles (QDS), la mise en lumière du pont Jacques-Cartier, intitulée Connexions vivantes (2017), et les projections vidéo de Cité Mémoire (2016) dans le Vieux-Montréal. À travers ces analyses, le livre propose de transcender le sentiment de réjouissance auquel ces installations lumineuses sont communément associées, pour interroger plutôt leur nature et les valeurs qu’elles véhiculent. Le livre est structuré en trois chapitres. Le premier fournit le cadre historique et théorique permettant de situer le développement de l’illumination urbaine, tandis que les deuxième et troisième chapitres présentent des études de cas qui illustrent la thèse.