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HOW SUBLIME!
RELIGIOUS EXCLAMATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS IN
THE PRODUCTION OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY
CANADIAN TOPOGRAPHICAL LANDSCAPE
PHOTOGRAPHS

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In 1871, photographer Benjamin Baltzly was assigned to accompany the Director of the Geographical Survey of Canada, Alfred R. C. Selwyn, on an expedition to chart and record the newly confederated British Columbia. While Baltzly’s topographical photographs have, historiographically, been understood almost entirely in terms of the purposes of the geographic survey – documentation, geography and science – Baltzly’s journal kept during the expedition indicates that these photographs were not produced by scientific motivation alone. For example, in his journal entry for Sunday September 10, 1871, Baltzly exclaims,

I have a grand view of the range with its bold bluffs, boulders and chasms. [...] With the whole, the scenery has a tendency to raise my thoughts and feelings from the created to the creator. How grand! How Sublime! (Baltzly 1871, 81)

Considering photographs of North American landscapes made during the nineteenth-century for topographical purposes has posed significant methodological problems for contemporary art historians. Teetering between scientific documentation and aesthetic object, a case can be made for an examination of these types of photographs under either lens. Baltzly’s exclamation complicates the perception of an objective scientific document and makes clear the religious sentiment that Baltzly brought to his photographic practice, indicating the confluence and tensions between religion, art and science that can be found in nineteenth-century Canadian topographical photographs. Taking into account Baltzly’s religious thoughts about supposedly objective documentary photographs, the borders of investigation surrounding Baltzly’s photographs need to be challenged and redrawn in order to
examine Canadian nineteenth-century topographical landscapes as encapsulations of artistic, aesthetic, and social influences. Such a reading would provide a richer and more balanced perspective on the images and their historical moment.

The scene is set in 1871, when the Colony of British Columbia was coaxed into joining the eastern provinces in Confederation. The stipulation: the extension of a transcontinental railway through to British Columbia to begin in two years and be completed in ten. Prime Minister Sir John A. MacDonald appointed Sir Sandford Fleming as his Chief Engineer for the project. Fleming, in turn, dispatched a series of survey teams to both document this new part of Canada and to determine the best route for the promised railroad. Alfred R. C. Selwyn, Director of the Geographical Survey of Canada, himself headed one of the expeditions, charged with the creation of geographical and topographical records that documented everything from rock formations and compositions, to plant life and soil, to map charting and record keeping of the various inhabitants. Selwyn was given permission to take on a photographer as part of the British Columbia Survey expedition in 1871 with “a view to secure accurate illustrations of the physical features of the country and other objects of interest which may be met with during the expedition, you are authorized to make arrangements with Mr. Notman of Montreal, for a photographic artist to accompany the expedition, on the understanding that he is paid and equipped by Mr. Notman; his traveling expenses only being paid by the government.” (Selwyn 1871, 17) While the construction of the railway will generate many photographs, our interest, in this instance, is restricted to the expedition and survey surrounding its planning.

Mr. Notman, or William Notman, was a Scottish-born, Montreal-based photographic tycoon of the second half of the nineteenth-century. It is unclear whether Notman or Selwyn first thought of adding a photographer to the expedition team, but certainly Notman believed the resulting landscape photographs could be sold to a public that was eager to consume photographs of the farthest reaches of the country. The notion of the armchair traveler was made possible by the ease of which photography could be bought and circulated, allowing the viewer of the photograph and of the three-dimensional stereoscope to experience distant and exotic locales. A savvy businessman, Notman would undoubtedly tap into this trend in Victorian tastes to turn a profit on images of the unexplored Canadian wilds. It can even be speculated that Notman and Selwyn, both members of the Art Association of Montreal, reached an agreement to attach a photographer to the expedition as something that would be mutually beneficial. Once agreed, Notman appointed staff photographer Benjamin Baltzly to the expedition team. Baltzly, who had moved from Ohio to Montreal in 1866 to open a photographic studio after serving as a lieutenant in the American Civil War,
quickly joined the Notman Studios in 1870 after a fire destroyed his own studio. In one year, Baltzly must have impressed Notman as an able and skilled photographer whose experience in the army also ensured that he would have the fortitude to endure the rigours of the project through to the end. Notman may not have been aware that Baltzly’s regiment, the 169th Ohio National Guard Infantry, was only banded together for a period of several months before being “mustered out” due to the illness of many of its soldiers. (Reichstein 1993, 219) Baltzly, as we will see, did not turn out to be the outdoorsman Notman had foreseen.

From the outset, the survey was beset with difficulties: leaving Montreal late, missing a ferryboat from San Francisco to Victoria, and quickly exhausting their budget for supplies. However, these initial hardships seem almost trivial compared to those they experienced on the three-month journey. Bad weather, snow, non-existent trails, detours, the poor state of underfed horses and the capsizing of canoes, one of which contained Baltzly’s 8x10 glass plates – fortunately all recovered and dried overnight by campfire. For Baltzly, the servant of two masters, the problems extended beyond these physical conditions: he had to satisfy Notman, who surely wanted exciting and beautiful photographs to sell and Selwyn who wanted accurate records of geographical features. Baltzly managed to please both quite successfully, selling several hundred dollars worth of prints on the return trip, as well as having a set of his photographs submitted to the Secretary of State by Selwyn. In spite of such successes, little scholarly art historical attention has been given to this particular series of photographs within Baltzly’s larger corpus. It may be that these photographs have too long rested in the discipline of geography and are, therefore, out of bounds to art historical contemplation.

To date, only Ann Thomas, in her 1979 catalogue for the McCord Museum exhibition, *Canadian Painting and Photography 1860-1900*, has attempted to take on nineteenth-century photography under a specifically art historical lens. More recently, the writing of Joan Schwartz, though not from the discipline of art history, has opened up the meaning of Canadian topographical photographs to a more culturally perceptive understanding. Counter to the notion that nineteenth-century photographs have traditionally been used to corroborate manuscript findings or to illustrate written text, in her essay “The Geography Lesson: photographs and the construction of imaginative geographies,” Schwartz proposes that early landscape photographs have the potential to reveal much more, “analysed not as visual transcriptions of fact but as products of historically-situated observers—the photographers who made them, the patrons who commissioned them, the entrepreneurs who published them and the audiences who consumed them—photographs join other documents, both textual and visual, as social
constructs capable of performing ideological work.” (Schwartz 1996, 35) Yet, despite of such efforts to shake Canadian topographical photographs from their traditional role as supplemental illustrations, a fundamental gap or lack in the study of the Canadian photographic tradition within art history still exists. Since the photographs of Baltzly and other contemporaries were circulated in their day for reasons in addition to that of science and documentation, it seems worthwhile to consider such specific bodies of work as vital parts of the early Canadian art historical photographic canon and as nuanced capsules of nineteenth-century Canadian culture, ideology and value. To do so is not to forcefully impose upon them some sort of art tradition, but rather to consider their full historical and cultural implications.

An under-examined piece of evidence in the consideration of Baltzly’s photographs from 1871 is his travel journal, held in Montreal at the Notman Photographic Archives of the McCord Museum. In this journal, Baltzly records information about the photographs he takes, and, more significantly, describes his experience of the journey and of the landscape. This valuable document has only minimally been utilized by two scholars: Stanley Triggs in *William Notman: The Stamp of a Studio* (1985) and Andrew Birrell in *Benjamin Baltzly Photographs and Journal of an Expedition through British Columbia 1871* (1978). Neither publication gives the journal much serious consideration, passing over its value in understanding the thoughts, influences, and working processes of the photographer. Birrell’s monograph draws on the journal as it was revised by Selwyn for a series of installments in the Montreal Gazette, as opposed to the journal itself. In addition, Triggs and Birrell frame Baltzly through the aims of his British Columbia expedition, which is essential to understanding both the context of the photographs’ production and the photographer himself, but also strips Baltzly’s photographs of artistic and visual merit, instead focusing on their descriptive and documentary precision, as well as the technological developments of the camera as a tool for documentation.

In an exacting review of Birrell’s *Benjamin Baltzly*, David Mattison confirms this when he says that, “The Baltzly photographs are valuable primarily for their historical and geological/geographical statements. Their importance as artistic statements is secondary. Birrell has ignored, or possibly avoided for whatever reason, these aspects of history, geology/geography, and art.” (Mattison 1978, 246) Indeed, Birrell provides only occasional reference to the aesthetic movements and cultural influence that enrich Baltzly’s photographs. Where Birrell seems unconcerned with a more engaged and culturally nuanced reading of the photographs, Triggs is unmoving in his understanding of the documentary nature of the photographs. For example, Triggs suggests that Baltzly’s fervent religiosity is “unexpurgated” throughout the journal, yet
his focus shifts away from religion to the documentary stating that, “Baltzly’s photographs seem not at all influenced by his religious fervour, there is no uplifting quality to them, nothing speaks to us of the divine or Sublime. Instead Baltzly worked in a truly documentary style.” (Triggs 1985, 55-56) It must be noted, however, that focus on the factual account of the expedition and the camera technology, is not without merit. These initial studies by Triggs and Birrell brought Baltzly and his photographs out of the archival depths to the fore, and thereby creating a foundation for future investigation.

Baltzly’s journal is an invaluable resource and one of those rare archival treasures that scholars hope to find, because it contains not only accurate record of the day-to-day travels of the expedition, but opens a window into the photographic processes and emotional disposition of this photographer. The journal is a fundamental starting point for the reconsideration of Baltzly’s works, and especially for their examination in terms of religion as a personal, contextual, and artistic influence. Baltzly’s journal creates the possibility of reading his photographic production in a more personal and culturally embedded way. How did Baltzly feel about the landscape, about Selwyn, about Notman, about the viewers of the photographs and about the medium itself? One gets a sense from his journal that Baltzly was a deeply religious person, someone who was sensitive to the presence of God in his life, and who very often used moments alone in the wilderness as a way to think about and communicate with God. Over the course of the expedition, Baltzly found himself at odds with Selwyn, particularly when wanting to observe what he believed was God’s day of rest. At one point, he records that he had exclaimed to Selwyn “You are not a Christian! You Swear! You lie!” (Baltzly 1871, 74). Such episodes would have fueled Selwyn’s conception of Baltzly as fanatic, an opinion passed on through Birrell and Triggs.

To cope with this adversity, Baltzly went for walks on his own or sometimes with his assistant and his camera, to pray or think religious thoughts. Baltzly preserves these moments in his journal, expressing a connection to the landscape. For example, on one such walk, Baltzly comes face to face with a view of the North Thompson River Bend, and in his journal, he writes,

I have a grand view of the range with its bold bluffs, boulders and chasms. Here and there small mountain streams can be seen rushing over the mountain sides, looking more like silver ribbons. With the whole, the scenery has a tendency to raise my thoughts and feelings from the created to the creator. How grand! How Sublime! (Ibid, 81)

From his journal it is difficult to tell specifically which photographs were taken at these moments, or if Baltzly revisited the sites as the expedition moved forward, the
latter being the case in this instance of the North Thompson River Bend. In either case, the connections to the landscape made at these moments are made clear in his journal as the tone of his writing in the subsequent pages moves from a buildup of frustration with Selwyn and disenchantment with the conditions of the expedition, to one of reinvigoration and excitement to move on through the wilderness. The images Baltzly produced at this time – as can be deduced by his description of the geographical location of the survey team in correlation with the titles of the photographs – are reflective of this invigoration and are, in my opinion, the most visually appealing and captivating. The Junction of North and South Thompson River at Kamloops, BC (1871) is, from the description and location of the scene Baltzly provides in his journal, the result. (Note that all of the Baltzly images can be viewed on the McCord Museum’s online archival database: http://www.mccord-museum.qc.ca/.) Beyond the play of light and dark, crisp and soft, reflection and shadow, the composition of the image takes the viewer snaking across the glass-like river, up one side of the mountain, down the other and across the peninsula to the solitary tree that sits in the foreground reaching upwards, enticing the viewer to look back up at the scene and trapping them in this winding cycle. The tree in the foreground is fundamental. By the emptiness on either side, it seems that Baltzly could have easily left it out of the frame, but instead it is there like a pointing finger urging the viewer to look at the scene, to the mountain and to the sky – to see and feel what Baltzly does.

The nineteenth-century was undoubtedly steeped in religion, and art production was no exception. The eighteenth-century German philosophical notions of Romanticism were quickly absorbed by artists such as David Caspar Friedrich, who brought together religious experience with visual experience of the landscape in art. For Americans, a belief in Manifest Destiny made a firm connection between the Christian religions, the land and the landscape as well as a way to reconcile the oddities and wonders of the new world – a view that, as an American, Baltzly may have brought to his photography or felt that potential audiences for his work may have shared this heritage. While in Canada, a sentiment of Manifest Destiny may have been felt as a remnant of colonial expansion and conquest, more pertinent connections may be made to the French-Catholic and English-Protestant tensions over land particularly during this moment of Canadian Confederation, as well as the stronghold of the Catholic church in Canadian image-making. Religion and art are historically, commonly intertwined, but this does not mean that religion and science are mutually exclusive, especially when it comes to the landscape. Theories of catastrophism, for example, in which the development of the landscape occurs suddenly by God-driven moments of cataclysm, greatly influenced the American scientific, geological surveys of Clarence
King and his photographer Timothy O’Sullivan. (Trachtenberg 1989, 119-163) The confluence, therefore, is undeniable, and the avenues for exploration that become available in the case of Baltzly become prismatic and profound.

It is perhaps most appropriate to begin with Baltzly’s own beginnings. Baltzly was born in Springfield, Ohio in 1835 and raised in the state until his departure for Montreal sometime between 1866 and 1867. (Reichstein 1993, 218-9) Religion played a central role in the cultural, social, and political development of nineteenth-century Ohio. That Ohio was “the only state in which Congress set aside public land for the support of religion” (Knepper 2003, 162) is indicative of the interwoven aspects of religion with state administration and politics. Indeed, Ohio was tolerant of the various religious denominations that settled within state limits, including Jewish, Catholic, Methodist, Episcopal, Anglican and Lutheran (Pennsylvania Dutch) faiths, to name only a few. The best organized religious denomination in Ohio at this time, and therefore arguably the most prominent and influential, was Presbyterianism. Indeed, as indicated in an 1871 census of Montreal West, Baltzly is listed as Presbyterian. (Library and Archives Canada 1871) But, in lieu of anything but piecemeal information on Baltzly’s early life, it is worthwhile to consider the religious, and particularly Presbyterian, dominance throughout the state of Ohio as a factor of influence in Baltzly’s religious dedication and overall personality. George W. Knepper, in his book Ohio and Its People, describes the Presbyterians of nineteenth-century Ohio as particularly devout, stating that they “prohibited frivolous activities such as dancing and card playing. Sundays were reserved solely for rest and worship.” (Knepper 2003, 163) Baltzly’s spats with Alfred Selwyn over days of rest and Christian values are no doubt evidence of this link. If Baltzly brings such religious sentiments to his lifestyle, it is not unreasonable to link Presbyterianism and his religious outlook to his photographic practice.

The Presbyterian influence is not the only possible one to come out of Baltzly’s early years in Ohio. An American art movement, the Hudson River School, found its way into Ohio when Thomas Cole, arguably the group’s most prolific member, moved to Steubenville, Ohio in the 1820s. (Ibid., 192) The Hudson River School painted the American landscape as an embodiment of specifically American Romantic ideologies like discovery, exploration and the power of nature held together under the banner of what is referred to in 1845 formally as Manifest Destiny. (Pratt 1927, 795) The Hudson River School artists believed that nature in the form of the American landscape was an ineffable manifestation of God. Surely, the devoutly religious Ohioans, who had no artistic school of their own, embraced such a belief as well as a sense of pride in Cole’s connection of their landscape – the Ohio River Valley – to a God present in nature. Yet, for all that one can get wrapped up in the Romanticism of Hudson River School
landscapes and the Sublime presence of God in the American wilds, in a pre-photographic world, the paintings of the Hudson River School could not escape their function as descriptors of the landscape. Framed as breathtaking works of God, oddities and spectacular sights of the landscape were consciously topographically rendered – Cole’s 1836 painting *The Oxbow* is one such prominent example.

Canadians too participated in this tradition, though, perhaps more modestly. Early British-Canadian topographical watercolors are an example of a crossover between documentation, artistic medium and an aesthetic outlook. In the discipline of art history, attempts to understand topographical photographs under an aesthetic lens through direct comparisons with painting has looked to these types of topographical paintings, but not to the conditions of the their production in a scientific and geographical context. While such studies are useful in engaging the photographs in an art historical discourse, the dependency on painting to talk about the photographs art historically also undermines the possibility for the photograph to develop its own independent photographic aesthetic. Similarly, recent practical and aesthetic uses of early Canadian photographic landscapes in contemporary collection, exhibition and curation, are inflected by these types of readings of Canadian topographical photographs, and work only to further reinforce their constraints (Goldfarb 2009). It is my view that in order to be compared with topographical paintings, the dialogue must move both ways – the influence of painting on photography as well as the influence of photography on painting. In his journal, Baltzly describes this process of creating a landscape that was both documentary and yet filled with the potential to provide viewers with an experience, most certainly a religious experience and therefore Sublime experience, of the landscape. Baltzly was not taking all of his cues from painting, though undoubtedly he was taking some, but rather was developing his own interaction with the landscape through his camera and photographic process.

Take for example, *Forest Scene on the North Thompson* (1871). Baltzly’s account reveals that the photo was taken to show the density of the forest and the consequent difficulty of cutting a trail. Yet, according to Birrell, the rest of his description of the location “is quite apart from Selwyn’s interest in it, pure Romanticism; it is evident that he was deeply moved by the scenery.” (Birrell 1978, 19) Though Birrell doesn’t develop this statement further, or explain it, it does seem so. For, if this was to be a purely documentary and scientific image, then why are the tops of the trees not shown and why is no scale of reference provided? Without this, one gets no sense of how tall these trees are, or how much area of land they cover – a square kilometer, infinitely? Visually, emphasis is placed on the texture of the trees where twisting of the bark, the bare and
reaching branches and the foliage on the ground and in the trees make the subjects chaotically interwoven and almost indistinguishable from one another.

Baltzly’s writing in his travel journal suggests that he himself wanted to produce images of artistry and interest. For example, when Baltzly arrived in Victoria, he was met with steady rain and fog. In his travel journal, Baltzly’s frustration with the fog is quite evident when he remarks that a good photograph cannot be taken in these light conditions and that these photographs would be “nothing special.” (Baltzly 1871, 35) And indeed, the resulting images lack the tonality of light and shadow because of the dispersive nature of light in fog. In other words, the images are flat and grey. Baltzly reluctantly took these panoramic photographs from the top of Mission Hill because he had to. He had to document the city for the purposes of the survey expedition. What is particularly interesting is that in a weak attempt to give these photographs an element of visual interest, Baltzly inserted clouds into the photograph. While one could dismiss this as a mere darkroom trick, it is more serious as an element that undermines the factual nature of the photograph. If Victoria were consistently foggy, why then would it be documented with clouds? If these photographs were meant to be accurate documents of reference to the land, then the manipulation of these images seems to go against that very notion, most likely to make these images attractive and sellable. But further, as described earlier, Baltzly was a photographer who produced his most successful images – those rich in tone, balanced in subject, and with a stillness that is somehow vital – when he felt a spiritual connection to the landscape he was in.

With this in mind, it is an interesting avenue to complicate Baltzly’s own religiosity as manifest in his photography by looking at his concurrent Transcendentalist tendencies. The movement developed in the 1830s and '40s as a protest against the general state of culture and society, and the doctrine of the Unitarian church. Among Transcendentalists' core beliefs was the belief in an ideal spiritual state that "transcends" the physical and empirical and is realized only through the individual's intuition, rather than through the doctrines of established religions. It can be argued that transcendental philosophies emerged hand in hand with Romantic ones. Ralph Waldo Emerson was partly influenced by German philosophy and Biblical criticism. His views, the basis of Transcendentalism, suggested that God does not have to reveal the truth but that the truth could be intuitively experienced directly from nature. (Hankins 2004, 136) While such a philosophy flies in the face of Baltzly’s commitment to the institutional values of the Christian church, Baltzly’s moments alone in nature, as confided to his journal, are his most spiritual and arguably his most photographically inspiring. The moment at the North Thompson River Bend, as previously mentioned, can be seen to be a transcendentalist experience for Baltzly. Like
Henry David Thoreau, who has said that the most influential question he was asked was if he kept a journal, Baltzly’s own journal could be compared quite readily to Thoreau’s 1854 *Walden*, which emphasizes the importance of solitude, contemplation, and closeness to nature.

From the perspective of an art historian working with topographical landscape photographs, my hope is not to reclaim Baltzly’s photographs exclusively for the aesthetic, the Romantic, and the art historical, but to bring them into a discourse that seeks to explain a Canadian tradition of photography in its historical moment and context and to give these photographs a voice. Canadian historian Cole Harris had remarked about Baltzly’s expedition that, “in less than four months, Baltzly had created a unique photographic record of British Columbia. He had crossed a colony becoming a province of Canada, had found a trace of settlement, and had plunged into the wilderness.” (Harris 1981, 88) Hinted at by Harris, Baltzly’s unique photographic record reveals so much more than the topography of the then unknown British Columbia wilds, though the individual images do a fine job of it, as indicated by Selwyn’s submission of a series of Baltzly photographs with his Report of Progress. Baltzly’s journal, this neglected piece of archival evidence, has opened the photographs to reveal the inner workings of a nineteenth-century “scientist” charting the frontiers of Canada. Religion, in this instance, has played a profound role in shattering the preconception of Baltzly’s survey photographs as rigorously scientific. Instead, we see Baltzly as a complex and textured figure – a product of the values of his upbringing and the influence of the modes of image-making around him.
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