

Picturing Toronto: Photography and the Making of a Modern City by Sarah Bassnett

Jay Young

Volume 110, numéro 1, spring 2018

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1044339ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1044339ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (imprimé)

2371-4654 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Young, J. (2018). Compte rendu de [*Picturing Toronto: Photography and the Making of a Modern City* by Sarah Bassnett]. *Ontario History*, 110(1), 132–133. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1044339ar>

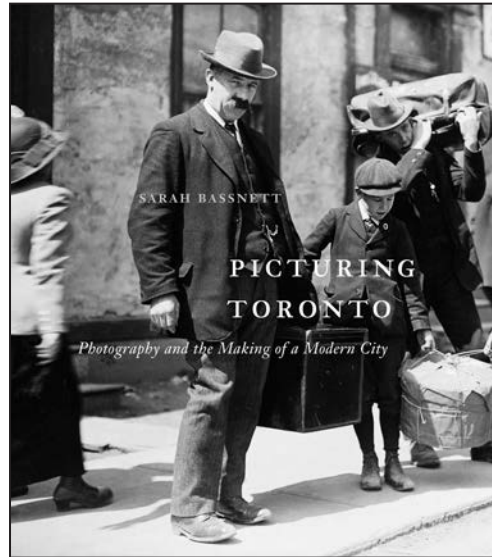
Picturing Toronto
Photography and the Making of a Modern City

By Sarah Bassnett

Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016. 228 Pages. \$54.00
 hardcover. ISBN 9780773546714 (www.mqup.ca)

Arthur Goss's photographs of the people and places of early-twentieth-century Toronto are some of the most well-known historical images of the city. Goss—in his professional capacity as the City of Toronto's first official photographer—snapped thousands of photos of subjects such as living conditions in the city's immigrant neighbourhoods and the progress of public works projects. Approximately 26,000 negatives of Goss's work that survive at the City of Toronto Archives have served as documentary evidence for historians, the focus of numerous exhibitions, and even inspiration for Michael Ondaatje's novel, *In the Skin of a Lion*. Simply put, these photos are an essential part of Toronto's public memory.

In *Picturing Toronto*, art historian Sarah Bassnett provides a new perspective on the importance of Goss's work and the culture of photography in Ontario's capital during the early twentieth century, a period when the Queen City experienced tremendous population growth, an influx of different immigrant groups, and the transformation of its urban environments. Winner of the 2017 Heritage Toronto Book Award, *Picturing Toronto* calls for a greater awareness of the impact of photographic images in the creation of the modern city. Photographs, argues Bassnett, “did not simply document the changing conditions of modern urban life in early twentieth-century Toronto; rather, they ... were



central both to the constitution and to the negotiation of urban modernity” (3-4).

Bassnett draws on a critical analysis of liberal governmentality as a theoretical underpinning of the book. Liberalism here refers to more than a political party or ideology; instead, it is an encompassing mode of governance that “operates through the production of freedom and the corresponding constitution of self-regulating subjects” (4) via the intersection of representations and institutions. In this regard, *Picturing Toronto* adds to the growing list of historical studies that have examined the impact of the “liberal order” system of government on Canada (particularly in the century after 1840) since the *Canadian Historical Review* published Ian McKay’s

highly influential article in 2000. Here, Bassnett breaks new ground by expanding application of the liberal order framework into art history scholarship.

Picturing Toronto develops in two sections and five case studies, coming into focus from the macro to the micro scale of urban life. Section I, “The City,” examines how photography played a central role in the attempts of elite Torontonians to reorder the urban environment. Public Works Commissioner R.C. Harris and other municipal bureaucrats understood the photographs of Goss and others as a tool that could further urban improvement agendas, including the building of the Bloor Street Viaduct (still today one of Toronto’s most iconic pieces of public infrastructure). Bassnett also shows the central role of photography in the Civic Guild of Art’s 1909 report, in which a group of Toronto architects, businessmen and other reformers articulated their vision of an ideal modern city. In contrast to the use of monumental architectural renderings in Daniel Burnham’s well-known *Plan of Chicago* of that same year, the Civic Guild drew on orderly photographs of improvement in other North American and European cities as examples of what could be possible in Toronto.

Section II, “Liberal Subjects,” focuses on the people of Toronto; or more specifically, how photography represented specific populations as subjects in relation to the ideals of liberal individualism. Again, photography served as a key tool for municipal government and reform advocates seeking public health and other improvement measures in The Ward, home to many of the city’s working-class central and eastern European immigrant groups. *Picturing Toronto* also analyzes how the *Globe, Toronto World* and other publications portrayed these ethnic groups through the camera

lens with varying degrees of sensationalist fear and assimilationist aims, reflective of these organs’ class biases and readerships. The book’s final chapter attaches a biographical lens to the work of Arthur Goss, and photography’s dialectic of emotion and rationality. Whereas Goss’s artistic works emphasized individualism, his professional photographs often depicted subjects in need of—or having benefited from—urban reform.

Picturing Toronto has many strengths. Most immediately striking is its impressive publishing quality. Featuring more than eighty photographic reproductions of various subjects during an era of tremendous change in Toronto, this book should appeal to a popular readership as well as a scholarly audience. In addition, Bassnett’s emphasis on the central role of photography provides a new layer to our knowledge of immigration, municipal reform, and city building in Toronto during a transformative era in its history. The book also benefits from numerous moments of comparison between Toronto and other modern cities facing similar issues. In fact, such comparison begs the question: to what degree did the liberal order play out differently in Toronto, with its prominent use of photography in reform circles, compared to other Canadian cities? Ultimately, Bassnett convincingly reminds us that historical photographs are not simply a mirror of past reality; instead, they are complex documents that embody the motivations, values, and subjectivities of the photographer and those who disseminated the image. And it is this complexity that makes photography a remarkably rich source in the study of the past.

Jay Young
Outreach Officer, Archives of Ontario