

Visual Records and Urban Development

Jim Burant

Volume 12, numéro 3, february 1984

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1018942ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1018942ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (imprimé)

1918-5138 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cette note

Burant, J. (1984). Visual Records and Urban Development. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 12(3), 57–62. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1018942ar>

Résumé de l'article

Le présent article décrit l'histoire et les collections de la Division de l'iconographie des Archives publiques du Canada et souligne notamment leur utilisation en tant que documents relatifs à l'histoire du Canada. Ne s'intéressant point suffisamment à la création et aux créateurs des archives iconographiques, les chercheurs en font souvent un usage abusif peut-être plus que pour tout autre document d'archives. L'auteur cite divers exemples à l'appui de cette affirmation et porte son attention sur quelques livres dans lesquels une partie intégrale du texte est composée d'archives iconographiques. Nous sont fournis ensuite une courte liste de répertoires de publications, utile à l'étude des archives iconographiques du Canada, ainsi que des renseignements sur les procédures à suivre pour accéder aux collections de la Division de l'iconographie.

Research Notes/Notes des recherches

Visual Records and Urban Development

Jim Burant

Résumé/Abstract

Le présent article décrit l'histoire et les collections de la Division de l'iconographie des Archives publiques du Canada et souligne notamment leur utilisation en tant que documents relatifs à l'histoire du Canada. Ne s'intéressant point suffisamment à la création et aux créateurs des archives iconographiques, les chercheurs en font souvent un usage abusif, peut-être plus que pour tout autre document d'archives. L'auteur cite divers exemples à l'appui de cette affirmation et porte son attention sur quelques livres dans lesquels une partie intégrale du texte est composée d'archives iconographiques. Nous sont fournis ensuite une courte liste de répertoires de publications, utile à l'étude des archives iconographiques du Canada, ainsi que des renseignements sur les procédures à suivre pour accéder aux collections de la Division de l'iconographie.

This article describes the history and the holdings of the Picture Division of the Public Archives of Canada, with especial reference to their use as documents in the history of Canada. Visual records are often the most abused and misunderstood of all archival documents because researchers do not attempt to learn more about the context of their creation or their creators. Various examples are cited to buttress this contention, and attention is paid to some books where visual records form an integral part of the subject posited. A brief listing of useful resource publications in the study of Canadian visual records are given, as well as an explanation of how to gain access to the Picture Division's collections.

Among the thousand of records held by the Public Archives of Canada (PAC) are those of the Picture Division. This division was formed in 1905 with the intent of collecting, preserving and diffusing pictorial material of all types which related to the history of Canada, and it originally included paintings, drawings, prints, photos, costume illustrations, medals, seals, posters, caricatures and heraldic devices among its holdings. It later added film and television kinescopes to the collections, heralding a multi-media approach which we would now describe as "total archives." Since the mid-1970s the National Film Archives and the National Photography Collection have become separate divisions of the PAC; nevertheless, the Picture Division still possesses a formidable collection. At the present time, over 1,000 oil paintings, 15,000 watercolours and drawings, 60,000 prints of all types, 12,000 posters, 10,000 costume designs, 8,000 medals, 5,000 coats of arms and other heral-

dic devices and 3,000 seals are held in the Division. The greater part of these collections were acquired by purchase, over the years, but notable gifts have also been made by the families of British officers and officials formerly stationed in Canada. Among the more prominent recent acquisitions made by the Picture Division might be noted: The Coverdale Collection of Canadiana, formerly owned by Canada Steamship Lines, which comprises over 2,000 paintings, watercolours and prints, acquired in 1970; the C.W. Jefferys collection, donated to the PAC by Imperial Oil Limited in 1972; and the Duncan Macpherson collection, 1,200 editorial cartoons donated by the Toronto Star to the PAC in 1979. Each year, new additions to the collections are made, enhancing an already excellent repository of visual records.

In the Picture Division of the PAC, the visual art records are defined as any two-dimensional works of art which are documentary in nature, that is, which have been collected for the purposes of gathering the information depicted therein which might be of use in reconstructing our past. These works



FIGURE 1. George Bulteen Fisher, *View of Quebec from Montmorency Falls*, c. 1792, Watercolour, 54.6 x 76.2 cm

SOURCE: Public Archives of Canada, Neg. No. C-10660

of art take many forms — they are most normally single objects, but they might also be found as sketchbooks, or as part of albums, scrapbooks, illustrated journals, or published accounts. They also come in various media — as original paintings or drawings in pencil, pen and ink, watercolour, oil or tempera paint, and gouache, on paper, canvas, ivory, board, or birchbark; or as prints, including engravings, etchings, aquatints, lithographs, woodcuts, drypoints, or any of the many photomechanical reproduction processes. Generally speaking, the medium is unimportant to the contents of any picture, but an original work of art done on the spot is considered to be more accurate than a print copied after an original. Many of the visual records held by the Picture Division are very pleasing to look at, such as, for example, a George B. Fisher watercolour of *The City of Quebec from Montmorency Falls*, 1792 (Figure 1), but they are not primarily collected for aesthetic purposes, as are works by the National Gallery of Canada. In fact, the vast majority of all visual art records in archival collections tend to be crude and uninspiring, although some are charmingly naive, such as Henry Ainslie's *View of Gananoque Mills*, 1839 (Figure 2), or John Muir's *View of Coaticook, Quebec in 1878* (Figure 3). The main point which connects these objects is that they are not intended to be looked upon solely as works of art but also as records, which contain valuable information for the historical researcher. A vast number of these visual records

exist in Canada and while they are there to be used, they are not often exploited and understood in the same way as the written and published record.

The problem with visuals is that most researchers take two approaches to them. Either they are not utilized because of the fear of trying to deal with an unfamiliar medium, which means an incomplete survey of the problem at hand, and a failure to examine all the evidence; or they are heavily used, but indiscriminately and thoughtlessly, without regard for analysis or any questioning about their inherent historical value. Like any other record, a picture must be read, interpreted, analyzed and understood as part of a larger context in order that it be utilized properly. This is partly the job of an art historian, but it is also the obligation of anyone who intends to use visual records. No professional historian would use written records or textual documentation lacking dates, signatures, or provenance as accurate sources of historical information, unless the handwriting of the document or the context of the creation of the record was somehow known or understood. In the same fashion, a visual record can only be understood fully by knowing something of the artist, his biases, the background and the context of the creation of the record. The best and easiest way of illustrating this point is to take the example of Bartlett prints, which are

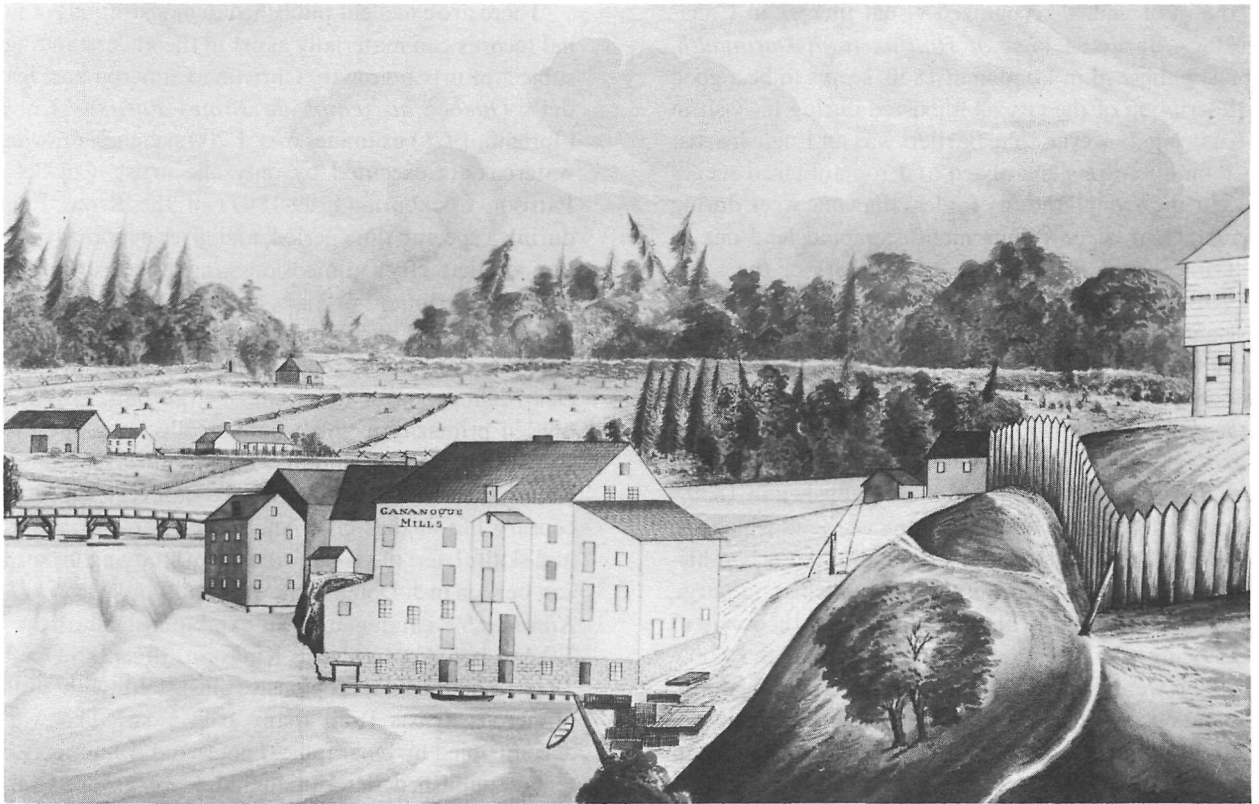


FIGURE 2. Henry Francis Ainslie, *Gananoque Mills*, c. 1839, Watercolour, pen and ink, 23 x 32 cm.

SOURCE: Public Archives of Canada, Neg. No. C-520

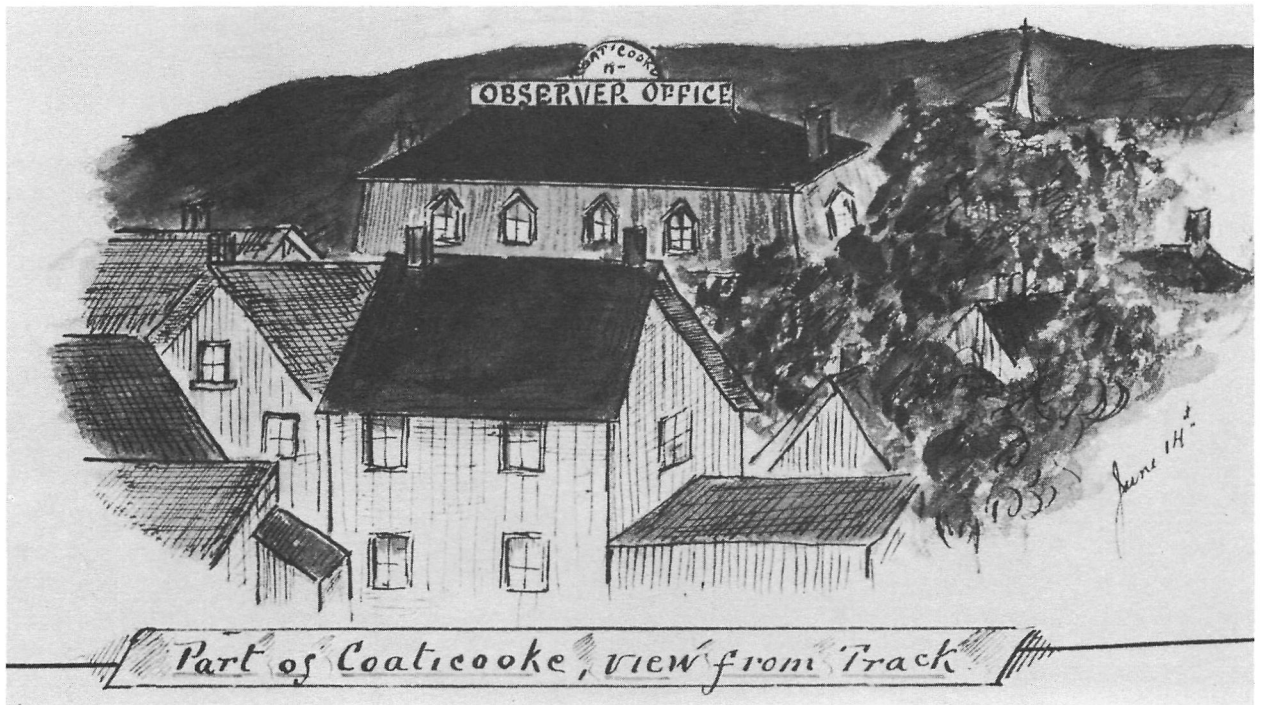


FIGURE 3. Jonathan M.C. Muir, *Part of Coaticook, Quebec, viewed from the track of the Grand Trunk Railway*, June 14, 1878, page 34 of a sketch book, watercolour, pen and ink, 10.1 x 19 cm.

SOURCE: Public Archives of Canada, Neg. No. C-44443

surely the most widely-recognized visual images in Canadian history. Bartlett's *View of Halifax from Dartmouth*, (Figure 4) published in London in 1840, seems to be a good visual description of the city as it existed during his visit in 1838. Knowing, however, that Bartlett was an English artist with a reputation for generalized and romanticized scenes who was in and around the city for less than one week during a Canadian tour of only four months, should lead one to question and compare this work with others of the same period.¹ Of particular interest are the prints prepared by two professional artists who lived in Halifax, and whose work was more specifically aimed at the city's inhabitants than at the British public, as Bartlett's were. J.S. Clow's *Halifax from the Eastern Battery* or *Halifax from the Narrows, Dartmouth* (Figure 5), and William Eagar's *Halifax from the Red Mill, Dartmouth* (Figure 6) all published in 1839,² are more detailed, proportional, and precise views which are far more readily understood and valuable to the urban history researcher. Bartlett prints were published in large editions; ultimately a large number have found their way to Canada. Being more common than the Eagar and Clow prints, which were printed in small editions and aimed at a smaller audience, the Bartlett view, though less accurate, has come to dominate the visual impression of the city in that period.

There are excellent published demonstrations of how visual records can materially assist in the understanding of the subject of urban growth. Christina Cameron and Jean Trudel's *Quebec au temps de James Pattison Cockburn*³ (Toronto, 1976) examines over 1,200 sketches, drawings, and watercolours executed by only one artist, Colonel James Pattison Cockburn (1799-1847) of the Royal Engineers, during a specific time period, and gives a more vivid impression of that city's dimensions and appearance than any written descriptions or maps alone could hope to equal. The veracity of Cockburn's images is undeniable, since we know that his professional reputation rested upon accuracy and clear delineation of the scenes before him. His works are housed primarily in three public collections, the PAC, the Royal Ontario Museum and Laval University, and provide an urban historian with evidence on every aspect of 19th century life in that city. Another example of the massive, and skillful, use of visual evidence in studying urban growth can be seen in J. Douglas Stewart and Ian Wilson's *Heritage Kingston*,⁴ a catalogue of an exhibition held at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre in Kingston, June 3 to October 28, 1973. The book is copiously illustrated with visuals by numerous artists from many collections. The works are accompanied by biographical notes and contemporary written or published descriptions, and are grouped in easily-

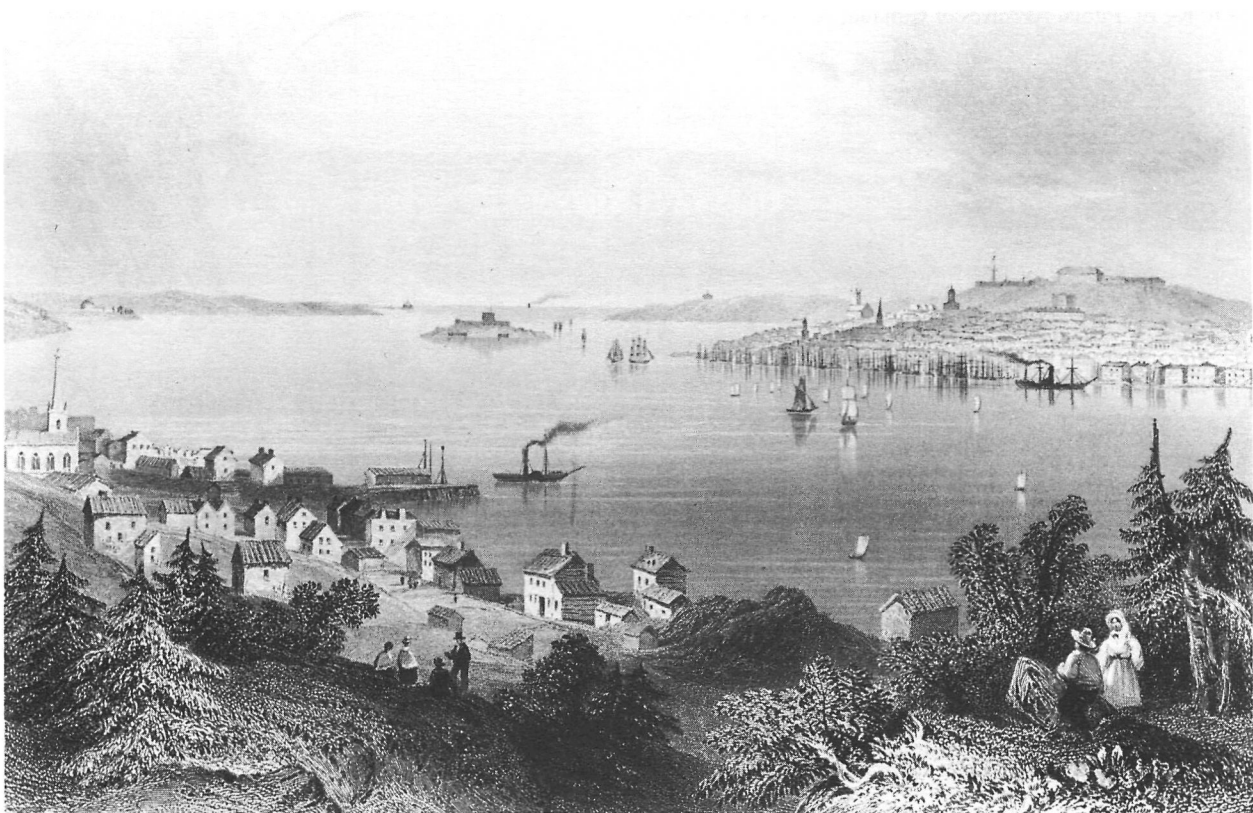


FIGURE 4. William Henry Bartlett, *Halifax from Dartmouth*, drawn by W.H. Bartlett, engraved by R. Wallis, 12.7 x 18.4 cm., published in N.P.Willis, *Canadian Scenery*, Volume II (London, 1840).

SOURCE: Public Archives of Canada, Neg. No. C-2419

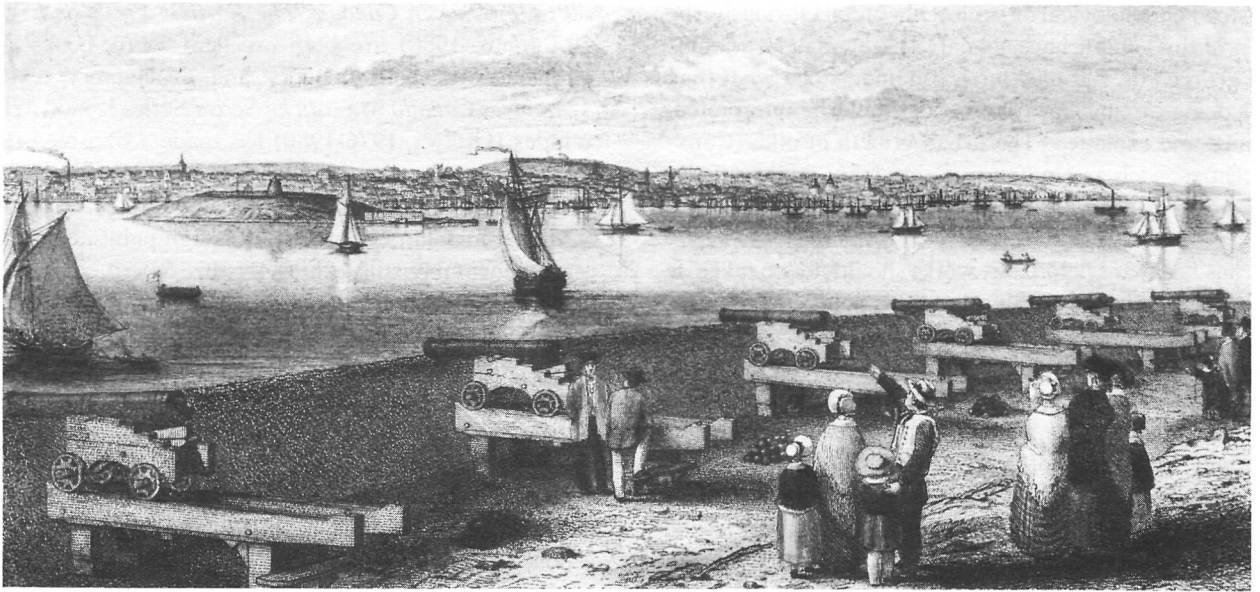


FIGURE 5. J.S. Clow, *Halifax from the Eastern Battery*, 1839, drawn by J.S. Clow, engraved by W. Douglas, 13.8 x 22.8 cm., published by C. Mackenzie & Co., Halifax, N.S.

SOURCE: Public Archives of Canada, Neg. No. C-41907



FIGURE 6. William Eager, *Halifax from the Red Mill, Dartmouth*, 1839, drawn by W. Eager, lithographed by T. Moore, Boston, 16.5 x 25.4 cm., published by Clement H. Belcher, Halifax.

SOURCE: Public Archives of Canada, Neg. No. C-13360

understood chronological or subject chapters. Obviously, the authors of this volume have not only sought out a large number of art records, but they have also understood what they were looking at, and how the works should be interpreted, explained and exploited. The urban growth of other Canadian centres, such as Halifax or Saint John, might equally be examined by a similar treatment.

As has been said before, art works should not be taken at face value. Another brief allusion to this point can be made by examining two views of Montreal, a watercolour by Philip John Bainbrigg of 1838 in the PAC, and the 1830 engraving by W.S. Leney after Robert Sproule's drawing, which was published by Adolphus Bourne (not illustrated). Bainbrigg, as an army officer and Royal Engineer, should, like Cockburn, be reasonably expected to be an honest interpreter of the scene before him. Equally, the Bourne view of Montreal, drawn and engraved by Montreal-based artists, published by a Montreal printer, and aimed primarily at that city's public, would presumably be an accurate likeness of the city at that time. However, in both views, the twin towers of the newly-constructed cathedral of Notre Dame are clearly delineated, when in fact they were not finally completed until 1841 and 1843 respectively.⁵ Both Bainbrigg's watercolour and the print have attempted to project a vision of the completed cathedral to their views of Montreal. The less propagandistic but more literal view drawn by James Duncan, which was engraved and published in *Hochelaga Depicta* . . . in 1839⁶, is more accurate for an urban historian, but it does not encompass the sense of pride and self-congratulation which the people of Montreal held towards that building. In this regard, the most truthful or honest image is not necessarily the best psychological one in explaining the time and place of Montreal in the 1830s.

The major problem for the visual researcher, however, is not generally one of comparison of known images. More difficult for most researchers is that few have any idea of what visual resources exist for their use, and not all have the luxury of visiting several archival repositories personally to find out. This is because of the dearth of published resource books available in the field. The efforts of the past fifteen years have happily resulted in the publication of a number of basic guide-books to Canadian visual resources, which complement the two early classics in the field, John Ross Robertson's *Landmarks of Canada: What Art Has Done for Canadian History*, 2 volumes (Toronto, 1917-1921) and Doctor J.C. Webster's *Catalogue of the John Clarence Webster Canadiana Collection; New Brunswick Museum*, 3 volumes, (Saint John, N.B., 1939-1949). J. Russell Harper's *Early Painters and Engravers in Canada* (Toronto, 1970) is perhaps the Bible of visual researchers, containing not only biographical notes about well over 2,000 artists, but also references to the physical location and general range of their works. There is also a large bibliography of visual resource books included at the end of the book. Mary Allodi's *Canadian Watercolours and Drawings in the Royal Ontario Museum* (Toronto, 1974) and

Printmaking in Canada: The Earliest Views and Portraits (Toronto, 1980) are both excellent source-books as well, replete with both imagery and explanatory texts. The *Archives Canada Microfiche Series* Series I, Nos. 1-10, and Index (Ottawa, 1976-1980) has made a sizeable beginning to diffusing some of the collections of the Public Archives of Canada, especially of artists such as Ainslie, Alexander C. Mercer and James Peachey, although published catalogues are lamentably still lacking for this superb collection. Less scholarly, but equally interesting, are the volumes by Charles De Volpi and others on Montreal, Toronto, Ottawa, Québec, the Niagara Peninsula, Nova Scotia and Newfoundland,⁷ which make some attempt, not always successful, to gather visual images together in some chronological fashion. Regrettably, accompanying and explanatory texts are often poor, and the original sources for the images are not given. A host of other, more recent publications might be mentioned here, but will not, for obvious reasons of space and time restraints.

The best place to begin a search into the visual records of this country, however, is the Picture Division of the PAC. Its manual card catalogue encompasses sixty thousand images divided in five main headings: personalities, geographical locations, historical events, subjects and artists, all cross-referenced to several categories. There are also special finding aids for images in many published sources: The *Canadian Illustrated News*, for instance, with its 15,000 images of all aspects of Canadian life photographed in their entirety and accessed by means of title and subject indices; or the volumes of *Canadian Scenery* (1840), *Ocean to Ocean* (1873), and *Picturesque Canada* (1882). At least twelve such special finding aids exist, which will be more fully described in a forthcoming guide to the Picture Division's collections. Any reader who requires more information or would like to make further enquiries about its holdings, please write to: Picture Division, Public Archives of Canada, 395 Wellington Street, Ottawa, Ontario, K1A 0M3, (613-995-1300).

NOTES

1. See Alexander M. Ross, *William Henry Bartlett; Artist, Author, and Traveller* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973) and Henry C. Campbell, ed., *Bartlett's Canada; A Pre-Confederation Journey* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1968) for further information about Bartlett.
2. Refer to Jim Burant, *The Development of the Visual Arts in Halifax, Nova Scotia, 1815-1867* . . . (M.A. Thesis, Carleton University, Institute of Canadian Studies, 1979), copies of which are on deposit at the Public Archives of Nova Scotia, the Nova Scotia Museum and the PAC.
3. This book was also published in English at the same time.
4. J. Douglas Stewart and Ian Wilson, *Heritage Kingston* (Kingston: Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 1973).
5. Franklin Toker, *The Church of Notre-Dame in Montreal: An Architectural History* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1970), 60.
6. Newton Bosworth, ed., *Hochelaga Depicta* . . . (Montreal, 1839).
7. A more complete listing of these works can be found in Harper's *Early Painters and Engravers in Canada*, 352.