Canada in the Frame
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The subject of this chapter has already played a prominent role in the previous one. Assessing the relationship between urban development and place-making, as in the example of Timothy Eaton’s Toronto, inevitably highlights the importance of the railway. Indeed, the railway has often been represented as the prime technology in creating an integrated economy in the Canadian Confederation. Furthermore, it had a profound impact on the social geographies of communities across Canada, opening up spaces and changing the relationship between people and place. In global terms, the chronology of railway development runs roughly in parallel to the development of photography, and the two technologies have a much-discussed relationship. Given the myriad views it offers of the impact of the railway on society and space in Canada, the Colonial Copyright Collection provides a unique opportunity to consider Canada’s changing relationship with the railway at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth. This chapter elaborates on the depiction of the railway through the Colonial Copyright Collection and considers the views it presents of the technology and its landscape.

As a symbol of national dynamism in turn-of-the-century Canada, there are few technologies that rival the railway in the popular imagination. Since before confederation, as well as increasingly after the completion of the transcontinental railway in 1885, the railway came to stand for all that Canada had achieved in the latter half of the nineteenth century and could achieve in the twentieth century. Across Canada, the United States and the world, the railway was increasingly held up as an iconic technology that could breach gaps, link spaces and realise the national and imperial endeavours of politicians and capitalists, while also increasing the potential of a truly globalised economy. Symbolically, the railway and the locomotive were seen to be ushering in a new era, one of irresistible progress and unbridled ambition.
However, as the twentieth century in particular was to show, the effects of the railway were not inevitable or uniform. Undoubtedly it was an engine of unparalleled change, with the construction of the transcontinental railway and the resulting explosion of branch lines changing the face of Canada forever. Yet these changes were not evenly spread across a flat, featureless plain, nor were the resulting effects uniformly positive. The railway remade places, adjusted spaces and left many Canadian nationals, not to mention new arrivals, running to catch up with the pace of change (see Chapter 5 for more on migrants in Canada). Furthermore, as the railway brought new opportunities, it also brought unexpected dangers that Canadians, like others, had to become accustomed to.

These changes, mediations and articulations are pictured in the photographic record from a variety of local and individual perspectives, as exemplified by the Colonial Copyright Collection. While there are images which undoubtedly reflect the pride and wonder that many Canadians felt at the sight of the railway, they also represent more nuanced and localised responses to the ‘iron horse’. In dealing with images made locally by individual photographers, this chapter will consider the view of the railway (and by extension the modernity of Canada) from a series
of more localised perspectives. By considering photographs depicting different types of event from a variety of locations, the chapter will attest to the complex processes involved as Canadians tried to come to terms with their new world, and with the idea of becoming modern themselves.

The chapter begins with a brief overview of literature regarding the railway in Canada, in order to illustrate significant tropes that the photographic images reflect and reinforce. It then considers the extent to which images from the collection articulate progressivist tropes widely associated with the railway at the time.⁸ Not all of the images in the collection speak directly to narratives of progress and modernity, and this chapter reflects on two specific themes represented by the camera to demonstrate this variety: the commodification of the landscape via the expansion of the railway and the horror of the railway accident. Through these two bodies of photographic work, which comprise a significant component of the Colonial Copyright Collection, it is possible to situate the culture of the railway within the complex, contested landscapes of Canada in the process of modernisation.⁹

**The railway as an icon of national development**

Across the breadth of historical scholarship regarding Canada there are two significant and pervasive themes relating to the development of the nation which are relevant to this chapter. One concerns the harshness of the land and its reluctance to yield to European settlement; the other explores the increasingly efficient use of modern technologies in the successful settlement of the nation from coast to coast. As examples of this, we can cite two works otherwise poles apart in terms of their time of publication, their proposed audience and their approach to historical narrative as a whole – namely, Pierre Berton’s *The National Dream*¹⁰ and Cole Harris’s *The Reluctant Land*.¹¹ It should be noted that these are not the only works (Canadian or otherwise) that deal with this subject,¹² but the arguments put forward by Berton and Harris allow engagement with the major themes visible in the railway images of the collection.

Berton’s populist historical narrative about the building of Canada’s transcontinental railway is underpinned by the idea that the railway was the technology by which the whole of Canada’s inner shield could finally be tamed and opened up to settlement. His account of the endeavour is monumental in tone. It is underpinned by the casting of the landscape as a hard and unforgiving obstacle to the realisation of Canada’s national dream, achieved only through technological ingenuity
combined with hard work and determination. Harris’s more measured and methodical text also attributes prime importance to the ‘reluctance’ of the land itself to accept human habitation and cultivation as a crucial factor in the making of modern Canada. Throughout his book the landscape throws up obstacles as well as opportunities, while the application of communications technologies – such as waterway transport, canal building and, towards the end of the work, the building of railways – gradually subdues the resistance of the landmass.

While Berton’s rhetorical style in *The National Dream* has been criticised as nationalistic mythmaking, it is clear from looking at the broad scope of Canadian historical work that images of the landscape and the application of technology to master it have been very important in the development of ideas of the nation. More generally, the importance of the railway in the creation of nations was a common theme in the work of many artists, writers and theorists of the time. However, Berton’s celebratory tone masks the possibility of further consideration of what sort of nation the railway wrought (if it even wrought one homogeneous space) or how it affected different groups in different places. Indeed, the same can be said for more academic histories of Canada and/or the railway, for example Stevens’s two-volume work on the history of the Canadian National rail company. While much more sober in tone and rooted in compilations of historical documents, accounts such as this are prone to get bogged down in railway-centric thinking which celebrates the creation of the nation, emphasising how this could only have been made possible by the railway – without moving too far away from the 4 feet and 9 inches spanned by the railway itself.

In contrast, the work of more recent historical geographers such as Cole Harris emphasises the various ‘drafts’ of the Canadian national landscape that were created by patterns of living, trade and communication with Canada’s urban centres (and, by extension, the rest of the world, especially Europe). Harris’s account illustrates how various communication and trade links persistently reshaped the economic and cultural geography of Canada, asserting with regard to the St. Lawrence Valley that ‘[n]ew transportation technologies, and with them changing relations of space and time, reworked the relative locations of towns along the St. Lawrence River and even the St. Lawrence Valley itself’. Similarly, Harris draws out how the growing rail interconnectedness of Canada and the United States increased trade between the two, opening the door for the economic and cultural changes that would affect Canada profoundly in the twentieth century.
In this context the railway supplanted the maritime vessel while mineral resources created increasing connections to the United States, creating profound anxiety and a desire to fix the political identity of British Columbia more firmly. Through his discussion of these changing geographies, Harris’s account stresses how different spaces and places move to the centre or the periphery of national and regional frameworks as a result of the medium of communication. Similarly, the cultural, social and political definitions of the nation were reshaped by the prevailing mechanism of communication and the real connections it makes between places. As a result, an account such as Harris’s allows the reader to consider exactly what type of nation was created in Canada by the development of the railway network and its supplanting of other forms and networks of communication.

Harris’s approach has some parallels with the arguments of the early twentieth-century historian Harold Innis. In his paper *Empire and Communications*, Innis argued that global empires required modern and thorough communication networks in order to work efficiently and survive, but that these networks also undermined the culture of the empire. As such, modern technology, put to work on behalf of empires, would eventually bring about their transformation. The basis of this argument that efficient communication networks link places and people creating the conditions for unanticipated changes can also be applied to the impact of the railway on economic and social geographies. That is, the railway does have a central role in the formation of the nation, but it also leads to the reconfiguration of its spaces and temporalities. The railway, therefore, is not simply a homogenising force but instead one that creates the potential for changes and unintended happenings too.

It is from this perspective that I consider the railway photographs that form a significant part of the Colonial Copyright Collection. As Berton argues, the completion of the transcontinental railway had underpinned the successful confederation of Canadian provinces and by 1895 Canada was a nation on the cusp of major economic and demographic growth. However, the railway also had significant, social, political and geographical consequences for the shape of the nation. It had rewritten the landscape and the economic infrastructure of the country: rural backwaters were now major settlement hubs, stable economic geographies (such as the St. Lawrence Valley) were changing dramatically and in many areas of the country people had to come to terms with the shining artery of modernity that was running through their land and next to their homes.

There are a significant number of railway scenes deposited in the Colonial Copyright Collection. As the above paragraphs stress, these
deposits were made in a period of growth and change for both the railways and Canada as a whole. While the railway industry had actually struggled financially, between the completion of the transcontinental railway and the mid-1890s a great deal of political and public enthusiasm developed for the railway, as well as national pride in its construction. Further, by the mid-1890s the railway was beginning to benefit from (as well as facilitate) the changes being wrought contemporarily in Canadian society. As a result, it was, once again, expanding to cover the country ever more thoroughly.

The photographs in the Colonial Copyright Collection provide a series of ground-level views of this major historical transformation from various perspectives: the individual, the local, the corporate and the national. They provide significant evidence of the enthusiasm with which the railway was greeted, how it was represented by investors, constructors and owners, and some of the changes it wrought on the landscapes it cut across. However, it also highlights more unexpected repercussions of this sudden entry into modernity: the railway intersected with people’s lives and homes as well as the physical landscape. The collection illustrates the impact of the railway on the lives of people in Canada in those instances when the railway relinquished its status as a symbol of progress and malfunctioned, creating the conditions of disaster.

The ‘Rotary Snow Plow’ photographs (Figs 3.1–3.4) are four of the most striking images of the railway and its technologies in the collection. Copyrighted in 1910 by Byron Harmon, the images depict a snow plough that operated clearing the mountain pass railways and services around Banff, Alberta. The images convey a sense of the majesty of the scene and strength of the machine as the plough surges on through Canada’s winter terrain, forcing it to relinquish the stranglehold it attempts to place on the landscape and Canada’s arteries of communication. Compelled by steam and mechanical power, the plough forces its way through drifts and avalanches in order to clear a path for subsequent locomotives. The billows of steam and the arching plume of snow that erupts from the front of the engine communicate to the viewer the unstoppable progress of the locomotive and the plough. The message of the image is clear. The engine will progress without impediment, the locomotive will run on time and, despite the vicious Canadian winter, the country will not hibernate: it will keep moving.

Harmon’s images articulate two key iconographic themes. The first is a narrative of progress. The railway and the locomotive are powerful icons of modernity, due not only to their mechanical nature but also to the way in which the mechanics of the railway and, especially, the
locomotive are harnessed. The railway and the locomotive always progress; the movement of the engine is, as near as possible, constant, due to the work of the surveyor, the engineer and the labourer in levelling the landscape and laying the track to provide the least possible impediment to the engine as it steams across the country. As a result, the locomotive

Fig. 3.2 ‘Rotary Snow Plow, Number 1’. Copyright Byron Harmon, 1910 (copyright number 22136).
surges on across the landscape, linking places and vastly reducing once astonishing distances. In these images the railway and its machinery are also seen to be physically removing the snow that various historians depict as smothering the landscape, thus conquering Canada’s great physical and meteorological adversary. In such imagery the railway was an exemplar of contemporary ideas of what it was to be ‘modern’; modernity was progress and progress was linear. These notions are clearly communicated through Harmon’s lens. Banff is part of a modern...
and powerful nation, one where the pulse of industry is not slackened and where progress through the application of technology is seemingly constant.

The ubiquity of snow in these images provides the second point in this discussion. In Harmon’s images snow is everywhere, overwhelming the landscape and dwarfing the people placed in it. The photographer has gone to great lengths to communicate this in Fig.3.4, deploying a wide angle lens, panoramic film and considerable technical expertise to emphasise the scale of the task at hand for the indefatigable machine toiling at its centre. Canada’s geography and climate, despite being the bearers of many virtues, were seen as the major factors in impeding its growth and economic success. In the introduction to Berton’s *The National Dream*, Canada’s winter snow is deployed rhetorically in order to communicate a nation in hibernation and even bondage, restrained from achieving its goals by the conditions that smothered its interior for one-third of the year. Snow is still perceived as an obstacle today, its annual fall across the country bringing out a hastily mobilised militia of shovel-bearing homeowners and snow removal contractors in the cities and the countryside, engaging in a contest of attrition with each new dump of snow.

It is the relationship between Canada, its citizens and the snow that informs the perspective portrayed through Harmon’s images of the snow plough. In these images the plough is an agent of change and of progress. The force of steam and the irresistibility of the plough drive the snow from the line, clearing depots and reopening passes that once would have been closed to all travellers both before the railway and in the early days of locomotive travel. As the indefatigable engine forces its way through the overwhelmed valley in Fig.3.4, the message is just as powerful: Canada has not only drawn in its spaces and increased its openness; it has also conquered the elements. Such imaginative geographies of the landscape were influential not just in Canada, but in many other colonial projects of settlement, national development and industrialisation more broadly.

The narrative of progress, both national and technological, is continued in another branch of railway photography contained in the collection and shown here by photographs of railcars and bridges. Fig.3.5 was taken in order to commemorate the opening of the railway that linked Prince Rupert to the Grand Trunk Pacific line. It depicts the first passenger train to leave the Prince Rupert depot on 14 June 1911, showing the train steaming vigorously along with its passengers in comfort. Button’s image is striking both as a celebration of the opening of the
railway and for the composition it adopts in order to portray the event. In the image we see the train steaming off into the mountains, forests and wilderness of British Columbia and the juxtaposition of the locomotive, its carriages and the landscape deserves further consideration.

The landscape that surrounds the train is rugged, even imposing; the woods are thick and the mountains are tall. It is the sort of landscape that has been perceived as a barrier to travellers and settlers alike since Canada was first encountered by Europeans. Yet now a channel has been cut and the gravel, wood and iron of the railway wind through the landscape on the most gentle of inclines, carrying passengers across the landscape with ease. As a result, a landscape that was once a barrier and would have appeared as imposing is now a backdrop, a pleasant vista for the passengers sat in comfort on the back of the train. In a landscape where once sturdy boots, adequate supplies and the strength to carry all you needed were required, a comfortable suit and a hat to keep out the sun are all that is now required for a successful journey.

In Button’s image, the railway is a highway of civility, linking the hubs of civilisation, through the sprawling wilderness. Such compositions are not rare among photographs of the railway and were used to great effect by many in the promotion of the railway and the implicit taming of the landscape. One example of this is the photography of William Henry Jackson, used to promote the Baltimore and Ohio Railway at the Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition in 1893. As such, this image can be seen

Fig. 3.5 ‘First Passenger Train to Leave Prince Rupert. Mile 45, June 14th, 1911’. Copyright Fred Button, 1912 (copyright number 25535).
as part of an intense mechanism of promotion for the railway which had a developed and ideologically significant visual style.

The taming of extreme landscape features is also illustrated in the collection by photographs of the Nanaimo canyon and the Lethbridge viaduct – striking examples of how the boundaries of geography and nature were conquered by feats of engineering and the appliance of technology. The gorge and the valley are obstacles in two ways, the gorge representing a barrier to progress and the valley an impediment to efficiency.

Howard King (Fig. 3.6) photographs the bridge and the canyon from the level of the river, accentuating the size of the cavern cut by the

![Fig. 3.6 ‘Nanaimo River Canyon’. Copyright Howard H. King, 1907 (copyright number 19017).](image-url)
river and the relief of its walls. Further, the trees that bound it and loom in over the shot accentuate the characteristics of the bridge. It is an artery through the wilderness – and a statement that the railway will not be deterred, even when the landscape is suddenly rent apart. The ability of the railway to cross, mediate and tame even the most extreme parts of the Canadian landscape is celebrated in the image as the camera looks up in awe of the bridge across the expanse.

Arthur Rafton-Canning’s photograph of the Lethbridge viaduct (Fig. 3.7) shows a monument of a different kind. While the bridge over the Nanaimo canyon is depicted by the photographer as evidence of the ability of the railway and Canada to transcend any boundary, the image of the Lethbridge viaduct captures more than the scale of the endeavour involved in having the railway traverse the canyon. It is also a statement about the technological expertise deployed in the name of efficiency, another aspect of capitalist modernity. Rafton-Canning’s image captures the straightening and flattening of the landscape by the railway and communicates this to the viewer in his gigantic reproduction of the scene. In this respect, this image of the viaduct is a testament to the rationalising of the Canadian landscape. What was once a sloping, winding river valley has been overlain by sculpted, straight, flat lines in the name of efficiency for the locomotive.

In iconographic terms, this change has two effects. Firstly, transcending geography’s barriers asserts an undoing of the natural order, with nature now subservient to society’s needs and overwritten by its constructions – an endeavour underpinned by architectural and technical expertise. Secondly, the production of a panorama further

Fig. 3.7 ‘Panoramic view of the Canadian Pacific Railway viaduct, at Lethbridge, Alberta’. Copyright A. Rafton-Canning, 1909 (copyright number 21152).
enforces the opening up of the landscape, as the panorama was by this point often deployed in order to symbolise the accessibility of previously uninhibited spaces. As a result, both visual effects combine to communicate that the landscape has been tamed and opened up; it no longer hinders human progress.

These seven photographs are representative of many others in the collection, and of a common view of the railway during the period covered by the Colonial Copyright Collection. A significant number of the railway scenes deposited in the collection highlight the civilising and taming of the landscape, contrasting the wild and inhospitable surroundings of the railway with the straight, flat, uniformity of the tracks themselves. In creating these juxtapositions the photographs shape a narrative for Canada itself: a nation that can tame its rugged contours and bend them to its will, use them to its benefit and develop into a great power.

Significant as these generic visual tropes are, they only go so far in illuminating the image world represented within the Colonial Copyright Collection. The railway’s effects on space and place were neither homogenous nor ubiquitous; as Harris points out, Canadian landscapes were constantly in the process of being reshaped to accommodate new pressures and endeavours. Given its localised origins, the collection reflects more than just the narratives discussed above. The camera was turned on the railway for all manner of reasons, not all of which were intended simply to celebrate the grandeur of modern technology. The next section considers the ways in which photography was used to promote the railway before this chapter moves on to depict the results of railway disaster.

The landscape open for business

The camera played an essential role in the commercial promotion of the railway. Beyond acknowledging the grandeur of the achievement of the railway, many Canadians had little experience of it and the railway companies initially struggled to generate enough use of their tracks to justify the expense of their production and maintenance. The railway therefore had to promote itself to the public, generate interest and stimulate use. The following discussion focuses on how the railway companies set about establishing a relationship with the public and the importance of the camera and the photograph in this project. This continued an established relationship, as the development of photography and the
railway drove one another forwards in the early days of both technologies, especially in Canada during the 1860s and 1870s.\textsuperscript{37}

When discussing the commercial significance of the railway, it is necessary to look beyond images of the railway \textit{in situ}. Fig.3.8, for example, is a revealing image of the Canadian Northern Railway Company permanent exhibition in Winnipeg, taken in 1912 by the Lyall Commercial Photo Company.\textsuperscript{38} The display is spectacular, despite its small space, with trophies, trinkets and decorations adorning all the wall space and large sections of the floor. It depicts a cross-section of the technologies, locomotives, sites and commodities linked together and brought into Canada by the Canadian Northern Railway. The pictures on the walls depict the company’s famous locomotives and some of the sights of the route (such as the Pacific coast), while on the wall are mounted trophies from hunting opportunities (predominantly of moose and deer) opened up by the railway’s branches. Also on the floor and the lower walls are statements of what the Canadian

\textbf{Fig. 3.8} ‘Section of the C.N.R. Exhibit, at the Winnipeg Permanent Exposition’. Copyright Lyall Commercial Photo Co., 1912 (copyright number 25224).
Northern Railway brings to Canada, in the form of agricultural produce and even alcoholic beverages. The sheer abundance of these products in the exhibition makes the claim that the Canadian Northern is a gatekeeper to the agricultural plenty of Canada’s North West.39

The composition of the photograph and the decision to create such an exhibition also deserve further comment here. Forty years previously the landscape covered by the railway was untouched by commercial development, but by 1912 its spaces and produce were being represented in and transported through Winnipeg as the effects of the railway were felt. Further, animals that once ran wild in this untamed landscape were now placed on the walls as trophy-commodities, icons of nature’s untapped potential in the north. The same can be said of the other products pictured: all harvested, branded and organised in order to be sold (symbolically) elsewhere in Canada or even the world. The exhibit is a symbol of what has happened to the wild spaces surrounding the railway. They have not only been tamed by its rationalising effect; through it such spaces have been changed into commodities, products packaged for export and sale.

This binding of the landscape to a corporate enterprise has parallels with the depiction of Timothy Eaton’s Toronto, as discussed in Chapter 2. Here too was a landscape rearticulated for the purposes of a business and a brand. In the case of the Canadian Northern Railway exhibition, we see the landscape articulated to express the control and opportunity extended by the company, as well as to promote the sale of its produce. As in the case study of Toronto: Album of Views, the identity of the photographer is unknown, asserting that these are corporate productions and imaginations.

The four photographs comprising Fig.3.9 (Fig.3.9a, Fig.3.9b, Fig.3.9c and Fig.3.9d) were also taken to promote an image of the Canadian Northern Railway, but their focus and delivery are somewhat different. The depiction of two men pursuing and then riding a bull moose across a lake at first appears an unlikely vehicle for the promotion of a railway. Indeed, the only initial clue to its purpose is that the copyright to the image is owned by the Canadian Northern Railway Company. Once considered in this context, the aim of the photographs become clearer, suggesting that they have been produced and copyrighted as a result of their promotional value. The images depict two men pursuing their quarry across an open wilderness, vast, empty and no longer inaccessible. Now that the railway has opened up a passage it is a place of new potential, full of bountiful hunting opportunities to be exploited. As the animals and plants discussed in the Winnipeg image have been re-appropriated from
characters of the wilderness into commodities bound to the urban centre, so here the camera rearticulates the northern wilderness into a leisure space that is now accessible via the railway. The images offer the viewer a taste of the opportunities for hunting and exploration in these spaces, where even the most bizarre adventures can be catered for. This point is driven home further by other images produced by the railway company that bear titles such as, ‘A Good Day’s Haul’ and ‘Up to the Limit’, which depict hunters struggling to carry their quarry home.

By considering these more evidently commercial images we gain another perspective on the relationship between the railway and the

Fig. 3.9  (a) ‘Bull Moose Swimming’; (b) ‘Bull Moose Pursued by Canoe’; (c) ‘Canoe Man Stepping on Back of Bull’; (d) ‘Canoe Man Dropping onto Back of Bull’. Copyright Canadian Northern Railway Company, 1914 (copyright numbers 28254–7).
camera in twentieth-century Canada. While the images discussed in the previous section celebrated railway technology, here we see the camera being used to articulate and promote the railway and the landscapes surrounding it as commodities. The exhibition photograph is almost a shrine dedicated to the railway and its produce: progress through technology is still the theme, but the exhibition has converted it into tangible qualities that the public can discern. In these images, the focus is not on the abstract qualities or aesthetic associations of the locomotive and the railway itself. It is rather on how the railway is benefiting Canada and providing opportunities by opening up fertile land and hunting grounds that make it more productive. The images and the exhibition, viewed as advertisements, assert that Canada is being driven forward by the
railway; the country is becoming more modern, more productive and using its land more positively. Further, they assert that both the land and its produce are there for the taking. Technology, in the form of both camera and railway, has practically and visually turned the wild into a commodity, the wilderness into a tourist destination. All one needs to do is use the railway to reach it.

However, these images, viewed in the context of their dates (1912 and 1914 respectively), evidence something else about the Canadian Northern Railways System. Despite the enthusiasm that had greeted the railway and its operators since the completion of the transcontinental line, many, including the Canadian Northern, were not actually delivering on their proposed financial potential. While the photographs and public image of the railway portrayed it as unstoppable, many of its branches had in fact over-extended their reach and were running their owners into bankruptcy. \(^4\) Indeed, despite the Canadian Northern’s best attempts to promote use by the public, it was by 1914 running on empty; by 1916 it would be bankrupt and in need of nationalisation.

The bankruptcy of Canadian Northern and many other national rail network owners was a major crisis for the Canadian government. It resulted in the government buying major shares in the rail network and taking the lines under their own maintenance, creating a nationalised system that still operates today. \(^41\) In covering this particular period and presenting many views of the railway, the Colonial Copyright Collection might be said to evidence the volatility of railway investment as much as the triumph of the railway in early twentieth-century Canada. This volatility is an inherent part of modernist projects such as the railway and is encountered in various ways, the most dramatic of which in Canada at this time was the locomotive crash.

**Collisions: the impact of the railway**

To invent the train is to invent the rail accident of derailment. \(^42\)

The relationship between the accident and technology is a well discussed field. \(^43\) A dominant theme is the assertion that the ‘acceptability’ of new mechanical technology (objects that bestow, speed power, force, etc.) is underpinned by the ability to pass off the ‘accident’ as just that: an aberration, a far from normal occurrence. \(^44\) According to the view of Virilio and others, however, the invention of technology is in actual fact also the invention of its accidents. As a result, the attempt simply to suppress the
inevitability of the accident is indicative of a desire to mask the duality of modernity; the potential for both unbridled progress and disastrous crashes. This is a theme that has been hinted at in the preceding discussion. In spite of the boosterism surrounding the railway the technology was in reality fragile and partial, carrying within it the potential for catastrophic physical and financial derailment.

The Colonial Copyright Collection provides a lens through which we can perceive various sorts of understandings about the railway, both positive and negative. The following section focuses on two sets of images submitted for copyright after significant accidents on the rail network, using them to investigate perceptions of the darker, often hidden side of the railway. My perception of these images is influenced by Marshall Berman’s argument in *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*, where he asserts that ‘modernism’, as a concept, embraces a wide variety of projects to get to grips with the experience of modernisation. In this perspective it is possible to see photography as a means of getting to grips with a new technological modernity that was bringing both benefits and hazards into Canadian lives.

The images that comprise the focus of this section were taken at the site of two major train crashes, in two different places and by two different photographers. While the context (what the trains were carrying) and situation (where they occurred) of these accidents differed, both happened when the rail network was expanding again nationally. The first set of images are William Gillespie’s photographs of a train crash near the settlement of Azilda, Ontario. The Azilda wreck was a collision between two trains, one carrying freight and the other passengers, outside Azilda in September 1906, and it stimulated considerable local interest. The first photograph illustrates the scale of the incident (see Fig.3.10) while the second depicts a large number of individuals (including children) attending the site in order to view the accident, and subsequently posing for their portraits in front of the wrecked locomotives (see Fig.3.11).

It is the size of this crowd that interests me predominantly – a substantial proportion of what is still a small community turns out to view the spectacle that has unfolded just outside of town. Theorists of the crash have argued extensively that the public act of crowding and viewing an accident is an expression of ‘eye hunger’, where the dynamics of the crowd accentuate the visual stimulus at the ‘spectacular centre’. In the context of these images, the damaged locomotive forms a spectacular centre to the scene: an awe-inspiring object in a condition rarely seen. Similarly, the crowd gathers in order to view the spectacular event. The presence of children serves to underscore the idea of a form of ‘eye hunger’ being indulged; the object is divorced of some of its horror and rendered into a pure spectacle, acceptable for a child to see.
While the lure of the spectacle is evident, however, it is important to consider what it actually represents. The crowd too is witnessing the scene in order to make sense of the event, and one needs to understand what it means for them and what they think of the collision of these two gargantuan objects. Similarly, the photographer is present not only to document the spectacle of the accident, but also to deploy a tool and produce an artefact that will help subsequent viewers to make sense of this accident.

What has brought the photographer and this small town together is the need to understand a new type of event – to perceive the danger of something promoted as so safe and unstoppable. The photographer thus captures not just the scene of an accident, but also the site of an investigation. Here people are making sense of an object that has changed all their lives, since Azilda was made into a settlement by the presence of the railway, but that now represents a new and previously unperceived danger. These images remind us that the railway was not just significantly re-forging spaces on the frontiers. It was remaking long-established settlements, as noted in Chapter 2, where the impact of the railway on the relative economic significance of Victoria and Vancouver was highlighted. In the case of Azilda, the space has also been remade as one of potential danger, a concept at odds with the boosterist narratives discussed above.
It is also worth reflecting on how these photographs of the Azilda crash circulated. While they undoubtedly circulated in various forms it is notable that the images were also printed as postcards (see Fig. 1.1 in Chapter 1), tying them into the networks of nation-building represented by both the railway and Canadian postal service. As a result, such a postcard, as well as showing the hunger to consume the spectacular scene of the accident, also frays the seams of these nation-building ideals. It undermines the trust of sender and receiver in locomotive technologies, and uses the Canadian postal service as a mechanism through which to circulate discordant visions of the nation-building project.

The potential of this danger is depicted more strikingly in the photographs of the Enterprise train disaster. This accident occurred in Enterprise, Ontario in June 1903, when a train ferrying artillery across country was derailed into the town itself. The Enterprise photographs are a riposte to those of the rotary snow plough and passenger trains seen earlier in the chapter, showing that this supposedly unstoppable force can in fact be halted – and exactly what happens when it is.

In the 18 images which photographer Harriett Amelia May took of the Enterprise derailment, the explosion of material is the predominant theme. The images communicate to the viewer where all the speed...
and momentum of the locomotive go during the incident of derailment, flinging the carriages and their contents in all directions away from the confinement and order of the railway line itself. The photograph with the sole military officer captures the scale of the devastation and communicates the attempt to take in what has happened, as he stands alone on the wreck, surveying the scene (Fig. 3.13).

May’s images are also a statement of what the image that celebrates the railway necessarily omits: the fact that this new technology brings unprecedented dangers to personal, intimate spaces, as well as opening up previously unobtainable benefits and riches from the frontiers. The photograph with the posing family provides the most striking evidence of this (Fig. 3.14). The images of Harmon’s snow plough and Button’s leisurely jaunt, as well as those of many famous railway photographers from later in the twentieth century, portray the domain of the railway, its sphere of influence, predominantly as the spaces between places (that is, the natural world of forests and mountain passes). However, May draws out the dangers of the intersection of the train with urban space and human lives. When the train acts on and within a natural setting, the interaction...
between machine and natural world is depicted as being without human danger; the locomotive progresses constantly and nature stands (or is moved) out of its way. Here, however, we see the locomotive smashing into the homes of those families who live in Enterprise, shattering the everyday rhythm of the place and violently depositing its machinery and cargo into a place where they should not be. The result of this is danger, to the family depicted and to the running of their lives. While the subjects are obviously posed after the event (as the family stand to have their portrait taken in their Sunday best, surveying the scene of the accident), the image still communicates how horrifying the few confused moments of the event must have been.

It is the disjuncture caused by the invasion of the railway into everyday life that poses questions here. It forces the viewer to consider the inherent dangers of technology that Virilio discussed at length almost a century after this event. The central arguments in Virilio’s work, *The Original Accident*, are twofold: firstly, that you cannot invent the machine without also inventing its inherent dangers and, therefore, the accident itself; and secondly, that the full potential of technology’s

![Fig. 3.13 ‘The wreck of the artillery train at Enterprise, Ontario, June 9, 1903 (Number 7)’. Copyright Harriett Amelia May, 1903 (copyright number 14100).](image-url)
inherent dangers is realised when the technology is placed in close proximity to, or intersects with, the general public. It is these two themes that the population of Enterprise is trying to understand, and that the photography attempts to communicate in the production of these images. In so doing, they assert (after the accident has revealed) that the characteristics of the railway articulated and promoted by the images earlier in this chapter are not all that technology actually brings. Instead the accident photographs (along with the chequered commercial history of the railway boom) serve to remind us that there is a politics of omission in imagery intended to promote the railway. Theorists of the accident from Virilio to Beckmann would assert this is intended to mask the inherently unsettling nature of the accident and promote the acceptability of the technology.

* * *

The railway images contained in the Colonial Copyright Collection, when taken as a whole, can be read as attempts to understand the varied characteristics of the ‘iron horse’ and its effects, both positive and
negative. The accidents and their documentation are not used here in order to discredit the images discussed in the previous sections, nor to frame them as ‘untrue’. Instead they are used to nuance these more celebratory images and to establish a relationship between the triumphant, promotional and warning sets of images in the light of arguments made by Virilio and others concerning technology and accidents.

The defining characteristic of the Colonial Copyright Collection also reminds us that all these images are potential commodities in which individuals have invested time and money. Both sets of images reflect not just a fascination with the railway and its puncturing and reordering of spaces, but also an attempt in principle to capitalise on it. While the images depict different locomotives, different lines and were produced by different photographers, together they combine to form a collage of the ‘substance’ of the railway itself. In this sense the collection allows us to perceive photographers and publics grappling with the notion communicated by Virilio: namely, that accidents should not be seen as ‘exceptionalities’ but rather as ‘eventualities’, something that is preordained to happen by virtue of the characteristics of technology. In turn, the collection’s railway images as a whole present a reflection upon the price paid for technological progress across Canada’s landscapes. Through the multiplicity of views, we see modernism in action.

Essentially then, what we see in all of these images is an attempt by Canadians to grasp the multifaceted effects of rapid modernisation since confederation and the subsequent opening of the transcontinental railway. The railway was not alone, of course, but it did have very notable effects. Between 1895 and 1924 the national landscape and imaginative geography of Canada underwent a marked change. As the railways traversed the vast distances of the continent and obliterated its obstacles, cities became more closely linked together, settlements sprang up and the six confederate territories coalesced together to form one, increasingly independent nation. With these changes came other developments, as Canada shifted from being a nation of settlers to one underpinned by its metropolitan spaces and ideals. Networks of radio, electricity and other modern advances also sprang up at this time, largely using the railway and the paths it cut as their guides between cities.

Alongside this came changes in the perception of Canada’s landscape. The once unruly and overbearing force of nature was increasingly transformed into a commodity. As a result, Canada’s natural wildernesses were being repackaged and rebranded for integration into Canada’s and the global economy, turning once inhospitable places into...
landscapes of opportunity for wealth and leisure – an absolute expression of human control over nature. This repackaging was often capped by the construction of grand railway hotels in sites with dramatic scenery, such as Banff, and these edifices of modernity’s expansion also became significant photographic subjects in their own right. However, this process was partial and uneven, meaning that national, regional and local spaces, and Canadians themselves, had to adapt in a multitude of ways.\footnote{58} Further, the railway also brought the risk of crisis and hazard, most violently represented at the scenes of great railway disasters.

It is particularly fitting that these visions of modernity should be constructed through the lens of the camera, a machine that offers the possibility of infinite reproducibility. The Colonial Copyright Collection offers a variety of ways of visualising these changes in the material and imaginative geographies of Canadian railway development. The first images discussed in this chapter evoke the power of the railway and its ability to reshape the Canadian landscape.\footnote{59} They are followed by images that are more self-consciously commercial, promoting railway investment and use. These indicate the insufficiency of the imagery of technological mastery to sustain the railway boom: what was also required were money and passengers. Finally the images of accidents discussed in the final section bring the other side of railway development into full view, enabling others to imagine and memorialise the experience of disaster.

In all these cases photographic imagery was not only the means of representing these geographies of progress and crisis, but was also a form of investment in itself. The fact that the raw materials of these points of view – the photographs themselves – were made locally, and their copyright protected by local photographers across Canada, gives a ‘bottom up’ perspective on the public imagination of the railway.\footnote{60} These images, like the railway itself, were meant for circulation.

This link between railway and image brings Part 1 of this book full circle as the media of circulation, transportation technologies and the spaces within which photographs such as these were circulated have formed the core of this part of the book. They were the spaces and the conduits through which a changing Canada was communicated and photographers travelled. During these travels and their observations of daily life the photographers who underpin this collection also captured Canada undergoing profound change. Part 2 moves on to consider how this transition affected peoples across the country, and how this was visually articulated through photography.