Conclusion: Canada in the photographer’s century

This book has explored the significance of the Colonial Copyright Collection of Canadian photographs and the view they provide of the history of Canada. Through the interpretation of individual images and sets of images deposited by a variety of photographers across Canada between 1895 and 1924, the collection adds rich understanding to the development of Canada as a nation. In places it adds detail to – and challenges the acceptance of – established grand narratives; in others it allows a glimpse of rarely considered fragments of the Canadian story.

The origins of the collection, and the particular mechanisms of its growth, provide an eclectic and unusual slideshow of Canada at this time. The context and nature of the collection’s development through formal legislation and institutionalised practice have a significant bearing on the analysis presented in this book. It has also meant that the collection has spent much of its life in the British Museum Library, and latterly in the British Library, in something of a twilight zone, with successive curators unsure what to make of it and researchers unable to access it. In this conclusion I provide a synthesis of the argument presented in this book, highlighting themes which cut across the specific chapters. I also address the contemporary possibilities opened up by new digital technologies for the management of such photographic collections in the twenty-first century.

Canada in the frame

The account of Colonial Copyright Law presented in the Introduction initially situated the Colonial Copyright Collection within the context of wider projects of knowledge accumulation associated with the British Empire in the nineteenth century. As such, the collection examined in
this book may be considered part of a geography of knowledge which centred on the imperial metropole and institutions such as the British Museum Library in particular. However, consideration of the nature of copyright also illustrates the role of the individual, the market and the commercial value of photography in the formation of the collection. As its development was ultimately dependent on the decisions of individual photographers seeking to protect the commercial value of their photography, this collection reflects the logic of the market for photography as understood by producers at this time. This being the case, the view of Canada and its history presented by the collection is unique. It bears a more chaotic quality and multiplicity of views than a collection such as the stills division of the National Film Board, which Payne characterised as displaying a ‘benign nationalism’. However, this sense of chaos recedes once the collection is viewed geographically, historically or thematically, as the previous chapters have illustrated.

To this end, the Colonial Copyright Collection required a different methodological approach. The concept of a ‘visual economy’, explored throughout this book, explicitly acknowledges the materiality of the photographic image and its status as a commodity, as well as its location within specific local and regional contexts of production and consumption. That is to say notions of the market, of consumption and of the value of the photograph were neither abstract nor homogenous across Canada or across different periods of time. Each chapter in this book has illustrated the way in which local photographers catered to somewhat different markets, responded to different popular tropes and articulated different photographic values. These differences are inherent to a collection founded on local initiative and the logic of the market. They also invite us to appreciate the multiplicity of views sought by ever greater numbers of consumers.

The substantive studies making up the body of this book were selected on the basis of the content and format of the collection. They explore the significance of particular themes (the overarching importance of modernity and Canada’s peoples considered via the city, the railway, the postcard, the portrait, migration and war) for the Canadian image world as a whole during the period between 1895 and 1924. Chapter 2, for example, illustrates how the urban landscape provided opportunities for photographers to respond to various kinds of place-making projects. Here the camera is not just a witness to urban change, but also was actively involved in the process of change. The relationship was also reciprocal: the city provided the subject and the camera articulated ways of seeing, with the city and its administrative networks then
providing the visual economy through which these images circulated. **Chapter 1**, meanwhile, highlighted the importance of a particularly significant photographic medium – the postcard – in creating a market for the increasing number of photographers operating across Canada in the period. In these and other chapters of the book, photographic imagery is also used as a means to address wider questions about the visualisation of both landscape and people in an era of significant change.

In undertaking this research, I have therefore sought to broaden the understanding of the Colonial Copyright Collection, its place within the British Library and its relationship to the Canadian image world. In the process, the work has highlighted the historical and material depth of a significant component of the library’s collections as a whole, contributing to an established body of research on the library’s history. This has been done by intensive scrutiny of the materials within the Colonial Copyright Collection itself, and also by linking them to other materials within the library. These include, for example, newspapers, government papers, journal articles and books, as well as collections elsewhere – notably at The National Archives (Kew), The British Museum and Library and Archives Canada. The research also paid close attention to the colonial origins and significance of the collection, as these factors have important consequences for its future uses, particularly in the context of the British Library’s commitment to public engagement. (This is considered in a digital context below.)

The book has also sought to show how work on the collection can provide insight into both Canadian history and visual culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, contributing to a growing body of research on the history of Canadian photography in particular. **Chapter 2**, for example, illustrated how important the photograph was to developing contrasting visions of the urban environment in Canada, while also highlighting the complexity of the photographic networks of production, exchange and meaning making. **Chapter 3** used images in the collection to reconsider Canada’s relationship with the railway, starting from Charland’s call to problematise Canada’s ‘technological nationalism’. **Chapter 1**, meanwhile, makes a significant contribution to the history of the postcard by locating it more firmly in the context of Canadian visual culture and economy. As suggested in that chapter, the material form, as well as the content, of many of the photographs contained in the Colonial Copyright Collection provides further clues as to their intended function, in this case as postcard images. **Chapters 4** and **5** illustrate how the depictions of different people in Canada varied
significantly across Canada, reflecting differences in the regional context of settler–indigenous relations in the case of First Peoples subjects, and revealing the intended photographic market and the nature of the relationship between photographer and subject. As in the other chapters, the research in this chapter is intended to contribute to a substantial body of existing research, much of it non-Canadian, on portraiture in colonial contexts. Finally, Chapter 6 shows the complex national and international roles of Canadian photography, with the images themselves and the legislation underpinning this collection being used for personal, nationalistic and interimperial aims. In this respect, it contributes to a large body of academic work on how the visual arts are manipulated by particular groups and individuals to achieve personal or national gains, while also considering the less discussed and flexible role of legislation and copyright in facilitating the impact of the visual arts.

The book has also highlighted the relevance of the collection to contemporary concerns within Canada, as illustrated in particular by the study of portraits of First Peoples in Chapter 4. Rafton-Canning’s images provide some of the few records we have of nineteenth-century Blackfoot material culture, partial though his perspective undoubtedly was. Similarly, Geraldine Moodie’s images have been used in the late twentieth century to reinvigorate the Inuit oral history tradition; they provide important material links with a past at risk of being lost if histories are not passed on. Many of the other First Peoples images in the Colonial Copyright Collection could be put to similar use, and the research presented in Chapter 4, while contextualising and problematising the images, also opens the door to different kinds of work with these images.

This book also seeks to contribute to the history of photography in more general terms, working at both the level of individual images and at the level of the collection as a whole. By extending the notion of ‘visual economy’ beyond the specific context in which it was initially developed by Deborah Poole, I have sought to demonstrate the value of focusing specifically on the market value and materiality of photographs. While the approach departs from Poole’s concerns (for example, I have not dwelt at any length on the connections between photography and the worlds of literature, painting and the creative arts), the idea of visual economy and the ‘image world’ has particular resonance in the case of the Colonial Copyright Collection. It has also helped to illustrate the ways in which photographs and photographers themselves circulated in national and international networks.

In the search for new contexts for the interpretation of photographs in the collection, a number of general themes have recurred throughout
the book. The first thematic context is that of colonialism and colonial networks. As noted in the Introduction, there is an increasing body of work which emphasises the spatial differentiation of colonial networks, whether they be political, legislative or economic. Through this book we have seen Canada’s photographers and their work being drawn into a colonial network which sought to regulate the intellectual property of empire and aggregate a vast span of knowledge about the places of the globe under imperial rule. We have also seen the colonial landscape and colonised peoples visualised through the lenses of individuals and firms operating across Canada.

In this respect, the images of civic ceremonies discussed in Chapter 2 and of the railway in Chapter 3 can be seen as attempts to re-imagine Canada’s spaces in the light of the various colonial projects which spread out across a nation that had only relatively recently spanned the continent. Similarly, Chapter 4 considers photographs of First Peoples produced directly or indirectly as part of Canada’s colonial projects. Born of colonial legislation, the collection as a whole must be viewed in the context of the effects of British colonialism in Canada between 1895 and 1924.

A second thematic context running in parallel, and sometimes in contradiction, to this colonial history concerns the lure of modernity within Canada during this period. This is frequently expressed through images of technological modernity and its impact on the Canadian landscape and society. The culture of technology is an inescapable aspect of Chapters 1 and 3, in which the aeroplane and the railway are depicted as having significant effects upon the landscape imaginary. Similarly, in Chapter 5 the significance of the railway in not just facilitating the colonisation of Canada’s prairies, but also directly affecting its geography and demography is apparent.

Wider landscapes of technological modernity are also evident in Chapter 6, where modern transportation took Canadians around the world into a mechanised battlefield. The evolution of the camera itself, along with changes to printing and postal technology, was just as significant as other elements of this technological modernity. The significance of modernity as a theme is also reflected in the history of the Toronto Industrial Exhibition (and its later guise, the Canadian National Exhibition) as discussed in several chapters. The images contained in the Colonial Copyright Collection both depict and were most probably sold at this significant site of Canadian modernity.

Alongside colonialism and modernity, the emergence of a market for photographic imagery has provided a third thematic context for
the substantive analyses undertaken in this book. The visual materials forming the basis of the Colonial Copyright Collection were assembled through a piece of legislation designed to protect the market value of photographs for their producers. The development of this market provided opportunities for photographers across Canada to depict new subjects and to disseminate their work in myriad ways. This is perhaps most clearly evident in Chapter 4, where the market for particular views of First Peoples encouraged the production of portraits showing Canada’s indigenous people as either unchangeably exotic or increasingly white. In Chapters 2 and 3 we also saw how larger-scale business interests (in the form of Eaton’s consumer empire and the Canadian railway companies) grasped the opportunity to use photography to present particular views of the modern Canadian landscape.

A final thematic context is provided by geography itself, both material and imaginative. At the level of the collection as a whole, geography mattered to the very definition of Colonial Copyright. A colonial geography of knowledge pulled information about the colonies back to the imperial hub, creating an archival, museum and library system which is still of worldwide significance and shaped by its imperial past, often in surprising and shifting ways.

Furthermore, a geographical perspective on the contents of the collection provides a lens on how the Canadian landscape and nation was persistently rearticulated and reinterpreted in light of the progress of technological modernity, producing insights into successive ‘drafts’ of the Canadian landscape as discussed by Cole Harris. It is clear from the various chapters that the Canadian image world itself had a distinctive geography which both reflected and shaped the modern history of Canada. Taken as a whole, the collection illustrates the complexity of the Canadian landscape and its constantly changing nature, perceived from the perspective of many photographers and communities.

The Colonial Copyright Collection in a digital age

If the late nineteenth century was a time of paper empires, today’s world is one of digital domains. This presents challenges and opportunities for research on the Colonial Copyright Collection, which was born of the material mobilities and collecting impulses of the nineteenth century. Given its origins in a systematic process of information relocation across the Atlantic, it is ironic that the collection then languished for so long in the back rooms of the British Museum Library, until the cataloguing
work of curators and academics in the 1980s prepared the path that led eventually to the undertaking of this book. However, *Canada in the Frame* does not represent an end point in the academic engagement with this collection, nor in the social life of these photographic objects. Research for this book has suggested many ways in which work on the collection could be taken further, notably highlighting the potential of digital technology in shaping the twenty-first-century life of the collection. This relationship between the material, the institution and new technology will form the main avenue for future work with the Colonial Copyright Collection.

*Canada in the Frame* has highlighted that the Colonial Copyright Collection is a mobile, internationally significant collection of potential interest to many different public audiences in both the UK and Canada. Given the emphasis throughout the book on the plurality of these images, their ability to be produced in particular contexts and subsequently to speak to broader themes, this should come as no surprise. Such a perspective on the continuing life of collections is very much in tune with the argument of Elizabeth Edwards in *Raw Histories*, which suggests that the rawness and infinite re-codability of the image invests it with significant potential for re-engagement and rearticulation, particularly within the context of the museum, archive and library collection. Indeed Edwards argues that it is the responsibility of the institution to provide opportunities within which the image can be ‘articulated, digested and made active’ in a variety of contexts. Such a call resonates with a wider body of work on the role of museums and other public institutions involved in the promotion of access to culturally significant artefacts, which asserts the inherent role of these sites in recontextualising the meaning of objects. Charles Saumarez-Smith made this argument in his chapter in *The New Museology*, pointing out that from their inception museums (and by extension other public institutions of this ilk) were conceived as spaces which would change the meaning of objects, by virtue of moving them from the private sphere to the public. Similar arguments have been taken up in geography by Hilary Geoghegan, Jude Hill and others. The digital landscape of the twenty-first century offers yet a further context for engagement with the Colonial Copyright Collection, with the possibility of its virtual mobility bringing access to a global audience.

The account of the shape and development of the collection has illustrated its sheer size, diverse contents and varied forms. As a result of its obdurate and sometimes awkward materiality the collection is relatively stationary, and its audience is therefore somewhat limited. By this I do not simply refer to the absolute geographical distance between, say,
London and the rest of the UK, let alone Canada, but also the relative distances between the Colonial Copyright Collection and the various specialist and non-specialist publics who may potentially be interested in its holdings. As many of the case studies have suggested, a large number of the images in the collection could potentially speak to these sorts of publics. To re-mobilise the collection digitally provides opportunities for engagement of these photographs with these publics, and for the sorts of rearticulation of these ‘raw histories’ envisaged by Edwards and others.

Mapping out the next phase in the life of the collection presents some serious challenges, as highlighted by wider discussions regarding the digitisation of various types of material object, image and text. Here I take my cue from Joanna Sassoon’s work in *Photographs, Objects, Histories*, where she suggests that the digitisation of material objects is more than just a translation of the object from physical to digital form, but also represents the creation of a new object, which speaks to different audiences and has different cultural effects. This perspective needs to be nuanced as the ‘raw histories’ of the digital images themselves are liable to undergo change and yield multiple interpretations, just as the original images themselves are. In both forms, paper and digital, the object would be open to being read in specific ways, mediated by the setting of engagement and the audience doing the reading. Digitisation, in this respect, does not bypass the need to consider the forms and channels of engagement, nor does it diminish the importance of the material object. Rather it opens up opportunities for further and more varied kinds of engagement.

The potential of the digital era can be exemplified with reference to the images discussed in Chapter 4. The photographs of Albert Rafton-Canning and Geraldine Moodie have recently been used to re-establish links with the lived and imagined histories of the ‘Plains Indian’ and Inuit groups, whose cultures and memories had been eroded by the colonial projects discussed in this chapter. Dorothy Eber, for example, used the photographs of Geraldine Moodie to prompt discussions about the history of the Inuit of Fullerton Bay with individuals who were the elders of the area in the 1980s. Similarly, Dempsey used Rafton-Canning’s images from the Galt Museum Archives to construct a book about the material culture of his ancestors. In both these contexts the colonial gaze of these images is redirected in order to reconnect with, and redefine, the culture and identity of these indigenous groups. However, in both these cases, and others like them, regret is frequently expressed that the collections are not more extensive and, most importantly, more publicly accessible. An opportunity therefore exists to exploit the full
potential of the Colonial Copyright Collection, using readily available digital technology.

The digitisation of images in this collection has benefits beyond the immediate context of First Peoples and indigenous history. The scale and depth of the collection is such that it would provide a useful resource for studying and teaching a variety of subjects, such as the growth of Canadian cities during the early twentieth century, the study of immigrants, the history of transportation – including the railway, the automobile and the aeroplane – and the history of Canada’s involvement in the South African and First World Wars. While these have been the themes of this book, much material remains only thinly considered here, begging for more eyes and further historic and cultural interpretations to be built around them. Furthermore, the photographic views of landscape will be particularly valuable, especially to those wishing to research the expansion of agriculture, industry and the railways across Canada.

In this respect, the collection also constitutes a notable resource for artists and scientists interested in the possibility of re-photography. Photographers such as Byron Harmon (discussed in Chapter 3 for his railway photographs) depicted much of Canada’s natural heritage. Harmon in particular extensively photographed the eastern side of the Rockies and its many glaciers; his work provides opportunities for considering how the landscape around these features has changed through re-photography and other techniques.

A further opportunity presented by the digitisation of the images of the Colonial Copyright Collection would be the possibility of undertaking a full reappraisal of the contents of the original collection by comparing photographs held in London with those in Canada. Neither the British Library nor Library and Archives Canada hold a complete collection as a result of historical damage or other forms of loss. On the basis of a 2008 research visit to Ottawa and Gatineau, the sites of Library and Archives Canada, I was able to confirm that the two collections are nearer completion than previously assumed, suggesting that obtaining an accurate overview of the original collection would be feasible. A digital ‘bridge’, highlighting duplicates and displaying each collection’s unique images, would in principle provide the possibility of access to the complete collection on either side of the Atlantic.

It is with this context and thinking as background that the British Library recently undertook a small project to digitise part of the Colonial Copyright Collection of photographs. In partnership with Wikimedia Commons and the Eccles Centre for American Studies, I and
Andrew Gray, the Library’s ‘Wikipedian in Residence’, used a small grant to digitise the main bulk of the collection. These digital objects, released into the public domain, are now available on the British Library’s digital delivery service as well as Wikimedia Commons, allowing them to be referenced and dynamically reused by a globalised community of researchers and people with a general interest in the content of the collection. This work, known as ‘Picturing Canada’, is still ongoing and evolving, but it should be mentioned here as it grounds some of the theory above.

From the beginning of the digitisation work it was clear that, as Edwards and Sassoon have argued, this work was not creating a replica or a supplement; it was rather producing an object with a new, independent and dynamic agency of its own. The physical and digital objects are not separate, divorced entirely from one another; instead they are already operating a complex dialogue of interaction. Photographs from the ‘Picturing Canada’ series currently illustrate over 100 Wikipedia pages in upwards of 20 languages, including an image by G. E. Fleming entitled, ‘Young Cree Man’ which illustrated the site’s ‘Cree’ entry in multiple languages. More dynamically, the images have also been used by the Canadian and American press to illustrate articles on Canada’s history or landscape. The Huffington Post for example published an article using photographs from the collection, which it placed against twenty-first-century photographs from a similar spot. Meanwhile the National Post ran a week-long series using the collection to talk about lesser known elements of Canadian history and culture.

The use of archival photography within the news media is unremarkable, but it has served to illustrate two things. Firstly, it has shown the new dynamism and agency of these imaginations of Canada generated by the creation of new digital objects. In both of these articles the photographs have also been heavily commented on, generating debate on local figures such as Joe Fortes or reflections on tragedies such as the Enterprise train disaster (discussed in Chapter 3). The latter of these is notable, especially as commenters drew direct links between these photographs and similar recent tragedies; the photograph indeed caused one commenter to note the enduring relationship between transport and accidents.

This raises a second significant issue, the connection and reconnection of these images with personal and local histories. In the above these images are becoming bound into people’s understanding not just of the history of Canada, but also of the world around them. They provide a way of making sense of the world, as they did for the Canadians who produced and consumed the images during their period of physical
circulation. As a curator I also inhabit a privileged space where I hear other stories the collection stimulates, such as the presence of a photograph from the collection in a family album or its reminding of a significant local event, with these instances often generating new questions or routes of research. Furthermore, there is evidence that the circulation of these new digital objects is also driving interest and traffic back to their physical counterparts – an interesting development that may begin to undermine some of the assumptions about the relationship between digitisation and physical collections.

While concluding *Canada in the Frame* I am not going to try and make meaning of all the above; it is far too early to do so and the points noted here are observational rather than quantified. However, it is appropriate to note that the use observed fits the frameworks for understanding digitised collection objects proposed by Edwards and Sassoon. These observations also begin to suggest some of the ways in which the peculiarities of this collection, and the complex local–international relations it maintains, may develop the understandings suggested by these frameworks. Most importantly these few examples show that the images contained in the Colonial Copyright Collection are not done forging new connections and developing new meanings. Indeed the visual economy of the twenty-first century, where the images can be in more than one place at once, is just as dynamic as that of the previous centuries this collection has encountered.

As a result the Colonial Copyright Collection, born of a ‘paper empire’ and composed of myriad individual deposits, will take on a new life in a digital age. Despite, or rather because of, its colonial origins, the histories and geographies it depicts remain relevant to Canada in the twenty-first century. I have sought in this book to make a case for the significance of the collection, and to provide examples of the sort of stories that can be told about and through it. Transforming the material form of the collection through digitisation has enabled these stories to be engaged with by a much larger and diverse public audience. It also allows new stories to be added. Given the origins of the collection in the experience of mobility and the possibilities presented by the communications technology of the twenty-first century, the only thing we should truly fear for this collection in the future is immobility.