THE OFFICIAL PICTURE

The National Film Board of Canada's Still Photography Division and the Image of Canada, 1941–1971

CAROL PAYNE

The Official Picture

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Carol Payne

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For Meg and Alice

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6.12 Project Naming website, Library and Archives Canada, http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/inuit/index-i.html. Courtesy LAC. 182

6.13 "Customers at the Trading Post," 1953. Photograph, J.C. Jackson. Reproduced with the permission of the Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada. Credit: J.C. Jackson, Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development fonds e002213392, LAC. Project Naming citation, "Customers at the Trading Post René Inuksatuajjuk (*left*) and his friend, Peter Katokra (*right*)," 1953, e002213392, LAC. "René Inuksatuajjuk is Nunavut Commissioner Peter Irnik's adopted brother's grandfather. Both men are from Naujaat, and the photograph was taken at the Hudson's Bay Company Store in the spring. The men are wearing 'atigis' (caribou clothing with hair against their skin). The Hudson's Bay Company was not heated; therefore, the manager and staff would have to wear their heavy parkas while working. Peter Katokra's first wife was Genova (Kadslajuuqaaq), who died many years ago. Peter Katokra is still living in Naujaat-Repulse Bay." 184

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In researching and writing *The Official Picture*, I have benefited from the help of many institutions and individuals. It is a pleasure to acknowledge these debts. My key resource has been the National Film Board's Still Photography Division archive, which is housed in Ottawa and divided between two federal institutions: Library and Archives Canada (hereafter LAC) and the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography (hereafter CMCP). The LAC holds individual Still Division photographs along with their identification materials made between 1941 and 1961, as well as a limited amount of textual material related to their publication. As the repository of most of the National Film Board of Canada's papers, the LAC is also an invaluable resource for the division's institutional history. In drawing extensively on the LAC's holdings, I also have benefited from the historical knowledge, insight, and camaraderie of its staff. Archivists Andrew Rodger, Jill Delaney, Beth Greenhorn, and Sarah Stacy have been tremendously generous and helpful. Andrew read and commented on chapter 3, and both at the LAC and since his retirement has engaged with me in long and fruitful discussions about the division. Beth, with whom I continue to work on the Nunavut visual repatriation project, read chapter 6 and offered valuable suggestions.

In 1984, the Still Division became the CMCP, now an affiliate of the National Gallery of Canada. CMCP holds materials from the later years of the division's history, beginning in 1962, including all photographic negatives made after 1962, a full run of the 565 photo-story mat releases produced between 1955 and 1971, and detailed records of their distribution, copy prints ("grey cards") of all negatives, a card-catalogue index system developed in the early 1960s, and correspondence dating from the 1960s. The photo stories housed at CMCP have yielded a particularly fascinating picture of how the division narrated Canadian nationhood in photo-textual terms. In making sense of that vast array of material, I am deeply indebted to Robert Evans, who, as a graduate research assistant, developed a database of these photo stories under funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. (Robert also helped prepare some of the reproductions appearing in this book.) The database Robert developed has been essential to my research and will provide a useful resource for researchers interested in Canadian visual culture and cultural history during the postwar years. In turn, Claudette Lauzon provided assistance to Robert during this project. My research at CMCP was aided immeasurably by various museum staff

members, who were my much-valued colleagues when I was a curator at the museum in the late 1990s. Then-director Martha Hanna, as well as Sue Lagasi, Tim Campbell, Carmen Robichaud, Pierre Desurreault, Jonathan Newman, and Andrea Kunard, welcomed me back to the CMCP, making all material accessible and responding with patience and interest to all of my questions. At the NGC, Emily Antler and Raven Amiro facilitated image reproductions with great efficiency. Many thanks especially go to Sue Lagasi, who offered invaluable expertise and assistance with image reproductions at all stages of the project, and to Andrea Kunard, who read a draft of the manuscript.

I have been fortunate to draw upon the recollections and experiences of former division staff members. I am particularly grateful to John and Hélène Ough, Norman Hallendy, John Reeves, and Ted Grant, who gave their time and vast knowledge of the division in interviews with me and with the help of Robert Evans and Charity Marple. Interviews conducted with the division's two long-term staff photographers Chris Lund and Gar Lunney have been important to this study. Pierre Dessureault, then a producer with the division and later a curator with CMCP, interviewed Lund in 1982; Charity Marple, as a graduate student, interviewed Gar Lunney in 1996. In addition, I have also drawn on taped interviews with the photographers Walter Curtin (interviewed by Martha Hanna), Pierre Gaudard (interviewed by Pierre Dessureault), and Michael Semak (interviewed by George Baczynski). Like the Lund and Lunney interviews, these were produced as part of the *View* Canadian photographer series of audio interviews paired with images. Finally, an extensive oral history interview conducted by Lilly Koltun, formerly of the LAC, with Lorraine Monk, executive producer of the division during the 1960s and 1970s, has provided detailed information about Monk's perspectives.

I have presented aspects of this research at conferences and in special lectures including the Universities Art Association of Canada (1999, 2001, 2005, 2008), College Art Association (2007), Canadian Studies Association (2004), Mosaic (University of Manitoba) conference The Photograph (2004), and the Canadian Historical Association (2005), as well as in special lectures at Carleton University, York University, and Queen's University. I am grateful to all of the organizers, respondents, and audiences for the opportunities to test out this material and for their feedback.

Portions of this book have already appeared in print, though all have been extensively revised. Parts of the introductory chapter as well as much of chapter 6 appeared as "Lessons with Leah: Re-Reading the Photographic Archive of Nation in the National Film Board of Canada's Still Photography Division," *Visual Studies* 21, no. 1 (April 2006). I initially introduced some of the history of the division seen in chapter 1 in CMCP's catalogue *A Canadian Document* (1999), though I have added extensive new research, and wording from only a couple of paragraphs of that original text remains. An earlier version of chapter 2 was published as "A Land of Youth: Nationhood and the Image of the Child in the National Film Board of Canada's Still Photography Division" in *Depicting Canada's Children* edited by Loren Lerner (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2009). Finally, the discussion of natural resources photo stories that comprises about one-third of chapter 4 originally appeared in a different format in *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity, and Contemporary Art*, edited by John O'Brian and Peter White (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007). I thank all of the presses and editors for their guidance and for permitting me to republish this material.

Generous institutional support has facilitated the research, writing, and production of this book. I am grateful to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRCC), which has provided a Standard Research Grant covering research on the Still Photography Division in general and then two subsequent strategic grants. The first of

these grants facilitated research for this book and the development of the database of photo stories (as described above). The strategic grants have funded ongoing research into Inuit visual repatriation – the use of photographs to reclaim histories and forge intergenerational connections between Inuit youths and elders. This latter funding was crucial to the thinking behind chapter 6 and my subsequent research program, but it also informs my discussion of the archive in other portions of the book. Two institutional SSHRCC grants administered through Carleton University helped fund student research assistants. In addition, a Research Achievement Award from the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences of Carleton University providing course releases gave me the time to complete the manuscript, and further funding helped secure the numerous high-quality reproductions used in this book; for these, I particularly thank FASS dean John Osborne and the Research Achievement adjudicating committee. In addition, this book has been published with the help of a grant from the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, through the Awards to Scholarly Publications Program, using funds provided by SSHRCC.

Over the course of writing this book, many colleagues, editors, and indulgent friends have read, listened to, and commented on portions or all of the chapters. I am grateful for the incisive ways that they have challenged my assumptions and pushed me. Thank you to Angela Carr, Katie Cholette, Robert Evans, Martha Fleming, Mitchell Frank, Beth Greenhorn, Peter Hodgins, Catherine Khordoc, Annette Kuhn, Andrea Kunard, Martha Langford, André Loiselle, Kirsten Emiko McAllister, John O'Brian, Andrew Rodger, Joan Schwartz, Carol Williams, and the anonymous readers for *Visual Studies*. Thanks, too, to Anna Khimasia and Erin Macnab for their help in the production of the book. I want to send out a special thanks to Jim Opp, who reread most of the manuscript at a near-final stage with his usual keen intelligence. I also heartily thank the three anonymous readers, who all responded to the manuscript for McGill-Queen's University Press; their comments were invaluable in helping me refine this manuscript. I am particularly grateful to series editor Martha Langford, a former executive producer of the Still Division, who brought a wealth of knowledge and experience to her reading of the manuscript. At the press, I benefited from the skilful contributions of Maureen Garvie, Ryan Van Huijstee, and Elena Goranescu, among other staff. Finally, I have had the great good fortune to work with editor Jonathan Crago, whose readings of this manuscript have enriched my thinking and whose support has been invaluable.

Throughout, I have been sustained by my family's love. John, Meg, Alice, Allan, Margaret, Susan, Mary Ellen, and Elizabeth, thank you. I dedicate this book to my daughters, Meg Collins and Alice Payne, who have lived with these images and ideas for years and who kept me looking to the future while I was immersed in pictures from Canada's past.

The Official Picture

INTRODUCTION

Several years ago while working in Ottawa at the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, I began to ponder the photographs, histories, and ideas that would form this book. The museum holds an extensive collection and has organized dozens of exhibitions dedicated to Canada's vibrant contemporary photographic activity;[1] as a curator there, I spent my days immersed in contemporary photographs and photo-based art. But while I was and continue to be highly engaged by contemporary photography and art practice, I kept catching out of the corner of my eye the shadows of photographic images from the past. What I at first dismissed as a distraction soon took a solid and weighty form: a series of old file cabinets crowding the museum's former offices. As I squeezed by them, I would open a drawer here or there and surreptitiously peek inside. The cabinets were bursting with thousands of copy photographs depicting Canada and Canadian life, mainly during the 1960s, with some dating back as far as the 1940s. Organized through an elaborate cataloguing system based on subject matter, they surveyed the country: fishing scenes on the East Coast and in the Arctic, prairie vistas, depictions of forestry in the West, urban views of Toronto and Montreal, and portraits of prominent artists and politicians, as well as the faces of countless unidentified Canadians.

The file drawers I happened upon housed a portion of the photographic archive of the National Film Board of Canada's Still Photography Division,[2] the predecessor of the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography (CMCP), with the remaining holdings located a short walk away at Library and Archives Canada (LAC). Although it was eclipsed in the national imagination by the NFB's celebrated motion picture units, the Still Division was also a prolific chronicler of Canadian life and promoter of governmental programs. Over a history spanning 1941 to 1984 and in approximately 250,000 unique photographic images as well as numerous publications and exhibitions, the division pictured a vast array of people, places, work, leisure, and cultural activities across the country.[3] These photographs were often jingoistic, but they also included some of the most innovative photo-journalistic images made in this country at the time. They were consumed regularly by millions of Canadians as well as international audiences in newspapers, magazines, NFB-produced books, filmstrips, and exhibitions. In effect, the division served as the country's image bank, producing a governmentally endorsed portrait of Canadian society.

I wondered what these photographs had to say about the ways that Canadian identity had been imagined at the federal level during those years, what role the photographic medium

0.1 "Filmstrips Division," February 1945. Photograph, F.C. Tyrell.

played in that imagining, and how that visual archive was used – and continues to be used. Increasingly, I came to see the images less as encroachments on the present than as visual iterations in dialogue with contemporary life. This book is the result of those musings. In bringing this long-neglected agency to public light, *The Official Picture* tells the story of the Still Photography Division's role in Canadian nation building during the Second World War and the two decades that followed. At the same time, this study explores the distinctive and changing ways that the division's documentary still photographs played that role.

The NFB Still Photography Division has been the subject of surprisingly little scholarly writing. As a result, this study has been built largely from primary research, the raw materials of the historian's craft: thousands of photographic prints and negatives, publication proofs, distribution ledgers, office correspondence, scrawled notes on negatives and memos, the minutes of meetings, annual reports, and other archival records, as well as interviews with and texts written by division staff or figures affiliated with it. But there are a few noteworthy written commentaries on the division. In the late 1970s, Paul Couvrette, a photographer who had worked temporarily at the division, produced two studies, one written in 1978 for internal use and the second, completed in 1979, as his master's thesis for Ryerson Polytechnic Institute (now Ryerson University).[4] Both essentially articulate the division's self-image under Lorraine Monk's leadership and, accordingly, are useful as gauges of those attitudes during the 1960s and after, rather than as critical historic surveys. In 1984, Martha Langford, the division's former executive producer and founding director of CMCP, wrote an introduction to an in-house history of the division examining it from a more intellectual and historical perspective.[5] Langford's essay provides a brief overview of NFB activities and insightful analyses of specific images. Renate Wickens-Feldman contributed to the discussion in a 1996 *History of Photography* article, examining John Grierson's legacy in the division.[6] In articles and exhibitions for LAC, Andrew Rodger has provided invaluable material about the NFB's photographic activities.[7] CMCP curator Andrea Kunard's 2004 doctoral dissertation[8] provided a comparative institutional critique of the division and the National Gallery of Canada's Photographs Collection.[9]

During the NFB's existence, its cinematic units consistently overshadowed the Still Photography Division, and in subsequent years scholarly studies have reaffirmed that hierarchy by privileging film production, distribution, and policy over still images. Indeed, the literature on NFB cinema is vast.[10] While this body of scholarship provides little specific information on the workings of the Still Division, it has nonetheless been invaluable for historical context on the NFB and the policies that guided it. The earliest writing on the topic, again, came from the NFB itself. John Grierson, the country's first film commissioner and the film board's celebrated founder, was a prolific commentator whose essays and speeches articulated the film board's early approach to documentary and its relations with the government. Grierson's writings are indexed and annotated in an invaluable resource guide edited by Jack Ellis;[11] many of his best-known pronouncements on documentary are also included in a volume edited by Forsyth Hardy.[12] In 1964, Marjorie McKay, an NFB staff member, wrote a history of the film board that has also been useful for specific dates and information; however, like Couvrette's texts, as an in-house publication it is an index of the institution's attitudes more than an analytic text.[13] Subsequently, several historical studies appeared, including those by Peter Morris, C. Rodney James, D.B. Jones, Gary Evans, and Joyce Nelson.[14] While much literature on NFB film has focused on Grierson, recent studies by Janine Marchessault, Brian J. Low, Malek Khouri, and Zoë Druick as well as Thomas Waugh, Michael Brendan Baker, and Ezra Winton, among others, have addressed the NFB as

an institutional entity by exploring how cultural and social policy and cultural resistance impacted its work.[15]

Clearly, the Still Photography Division is overdue for an appraisal of its place in Canadian cultural history and, more specifically, in the history of Canadian visual culture. But *The Official Picture* is not merely the fruit of a recovery project, an exercise aimed to reinsert a body of work into the historic record. The Still Division also provides an exemplary case study for an examination of the role that the photograph played at the time in the formation of national identity. In these pages I explore how the rhetoric of the documentary photograph and the photographic archive reify conceptualizations of Canadian nationhood and support federal nationalism. Detailed readings of key historic periods and iconographical topoi within the division archive demonstrate how the abstract concepts of nationhood and citizenship as well as attitudes toward gender, class, linguistic identity, and conceptions of race were visualized by the division, and the social implications of that governmental vision.

The Still Division reproduced Canadian national identity not through the "grand gestures" of public monuments or stirring political oratory that we typically associate with nation building but instead with representations of the everyday and the familiar, rendered in photography, itself a commonplace and middlebrow medium.[16] Indeed, I suggest throughout this book that the power of the division's work in part rests – paradoxically – in the sheer banality of its presentation. However, in using the word "banal," I am not suggesting that the photographs are technically or aesthetically lacking; many of the images produced under the division's auspices are beautiful and technically sophisticated. Reflecting tastes in photojournalism and commercial photography of the day, they are among the most dynamic media images produced in Canada in the war and postwar periods. In adopting the term "banal" to indicate their depiction of the commonplace and their use of repetition in themes and in widespread dissemination, I draw on Michael Billig's concept of "banal nationalism," arguing that in their routine, unobtrusive, and yet ubiquitous "flaggings" of Canada, the hundreds of thousands of photographs seen in newspapers, magazines, exhibitions, and governmental publications naturalized governmental attitudes about nationhood.[17] Billig's concept also helps me to understand that while division images produced a visual model of normative Canadian identity, it was one usually seen by Canadian viewers in a happenstance, often peripheral way. These were images that circulated amongst others, negotiated by viewers in an often disjointed manner, coming in and out of focus. But come into focus they did. Appearing in publications and exhibitions amongst dozens of other images, individual photos – particularly those that long-time staff photographer Gar Lunney termed "stoppers"[18] – drew viewers in to contemplate their image of the country. In short, division photographs were not instrumentalist impositions of federal authority so much as commonplace models that Canadians took in, fully adopting some, rejecting some, experiencing many as the backdrop of daily life, and being called to attention by others.

The banal nationalism of the Still Division's work differs significantly from the production and cultural impact of the NFB's celebrated cinematic units. Audiences purposefully attended film screenings and engaged with cinematic experience in an embodied manner that was quite different from their happenstance and routine – though periodically absorbing – encounters with mass-circulated division photographs. As such, a study of the division's banal nationalism also provides an opportunity to consider instructive distinctions and links between documentary photography and film. As a photographic unit housed within a largely cinematic agency, the division was uniquely positioned to reveal these significant though often ignored relationships. Typically, film and photography scholarship occupy discrete disciplinary positions and view their objects of study from

differing perspectives, using distinct criteria. In drawing on some aspects of both, this study attempts to illuminate how social documentary photography operated in relation to contemporary non-fiction cinema and how it "represented reality" (to borrow Bill Nichols's phrase) differently.

As a cultural history of the Still Division and its construction of Canadian identity, this book explores visual rhetoric and nationalism through necessarily selective examinations. Working with a vast archive of hundreds of thousands of photographs and other materials amassed by dozens of staff members over almost three decades, I have chosen specific case studies to illuminate larger perspectives that were present at key points in the division's history. This approach has allowed me to provide meaningfully deep readings of select images and image texts rather than a surface-level introduction to a broader scope of the archive. At the same time, I have tried to establish throughout that the division's photographs – like media photography in general – were experienced as a multiplicity. In contrast to the directed focus on a single art work in a museum, for example, media photographs are made in large numbers and consumed by viewers in groups and amongst other material. But in selecting key images, groups of images, and moments from the archive, I have, of course, also had to make omissions. Detailed analyses of photographs used in filmstrips and in the promotion of NFB films are beyond the scope of my considerations, as are cross-institutional comparisons.[19] Instead, I have focused on how images – largely seen through publications – conveyed official messages about Canadian life at key moments.

I have conducted or drawn on numerous interviews with division staff and consulted scores of archival records pertaining to their work. Staff members appear as actors throughout this study, some prominently. Long-time staff photographers Chris Lund and Gar Lunney were responsible for thousands of images in the Still Division archive, for example; their work is featured in this history, but contributions by other photographers – including Harry Rowed, Wilfred Doucette, Ronny Jaques, Ted Grant, Michel Lambeth, and Pierre Gaudard – as well as staff members Ralph Foster, Lorraine Monk, John Ough, Hélène Proulx Ough, and Norman Hallendy, among many others, are also recounted here. Yet this is not principally an account of individual accomplishments. Instead, my focus is on developing an *institutional* picture of the division, which (as I stress in chapter 1) comprised work undertaken by a collaborative team redolent of newsroom employees.[20] I acknowledge the ways that individual staff including photographers, writers, editors, and bureaucrats shaped the division's message while also balancing individual agency with a sense of institutional authorship. And, of course, the photographs produced by the division were not straightforward or unequivocal messages absorbed passively by their audiences. These images were part of a complex network of cultural signs, which contributed to identity formation including national identity formation.

Covering a thirty-year history bracketed by the Second World War and the early 1970s, *The Official Picture* opens two years after the founding of the NFB. It was only then, in 1941, that the board established a photo service and began making and distributing still photographs. The book closes in the early 1970s when the division stopped routinely commissioning images that promoted the Canadian nation. While it continued to exist until 1984, in those remaining years it was transformed into a national collection of expressive photographic prints, subsequently becoming the CMCP. Since the 1960s, the division and then the CMCP have helped to foster the emergence of a vital and innovative community of photographers in Canada – but that is another story.[21] The narrative unfolded here follows the years when the Still Division was an unabashed visual propagandist for the federal government.[22]