



Photographs contain miniature worlds. They capture ... enrapture ... reveal ... and sometimes conceal what comes to be regarded as “the truth” or “the way it was.” Photography, as Lady Eastlake suggests, was, indeed, a new form of communication, and one that had a profound impact on not only the Victorian world, but every era since. Suddenly — or so it seemed — permanent pictures of the natural and built environments could be drawn by sunlight and fixed forever.

Photographs as Historical Records

Transfixed by the magic realism of the new medium — in which there was more detail than the hand could produce or the unaided eye detect — early observers, and their descendants, forgot, ignored, or were unaware of just how much a human construction all photographs are, whether created in 1839 or now. Although recorded by a mechanical device — with its own limitations, requirements, and tendencies — every photograph is the product of human intention. It is influenced by the who, what, where, when, and why of its creation ... as well as its reception.² When using photographs as primary sources, as this book does, all these factors must be noted down (wherever possible) and considered. For this reason, the photographs in this book are as carefully identified as knowledge about their creation and use will allow. Each photograph is regarded, at best, as “one way it was,” not as a singular or unalterable “truth.” And very often, other non-photographic materials

have been investigated to enhance understanding of the miniature worlds contained in the photographs.

For all their distinctiveness, photographs are records like any other. As Lady Eastlake hinted, they can tell us much that cannot be communicated in any other way, just as letters and videos and maps each have their virtues and their limitations. Photographs offer immensely detailed and valuable records of what once appeared before the camera. But they also reflect the people who took them, who posed for them, who purchased them, and who received them. Like other primary sources of information, photographs must be subjected to intense scrutiny. What bias might the photographer — like the cartographer or diary-writer or film-maker — bring to the subject? What personal interest might the photographer, or the subject, or the publisher of the photograph, have in the dissemination of the picture? What was going on while the photograph was being taken? Was something excluded from the record? Was the photograph created to celebrate the sitter or a client institution? Was the photographer trying to produce a commercial product that would sell? And so on. Such questions are important and a healthy scepticism is often required to assess just what might be learned from the object in hand.⁵

Interior Life of a City

Interior photographs are relatively rare, always informative, and often evocative — drawing the viewer further and further into their private and

1.1: Emily Brown, 1902

In the absence of diaries, letters or other documentary evidence, reading this photograph depends almost entirely on the contents of the picture, its relationship to other photographs collected by sculptor Merle Foster and presented to the City of Toronto Archives, and a few scraps of information gleaned from such sources as City Directories and Assessment Rolls.³

In 1902, when this snapshot was taken, Merle Foster's grandparents, the William Brown family, lived at 1050 Bloor Street West, near Dufferin Street. Here, Merle's aunt, Emily Brown, sits casually by the window, in a thoughtful, even languid, dreamy pose. No flash or artificial light has been used to capture the chiaroscuroed figure. Whether she is holding music (as she was in another photograph), a sketch pad, or something to read is unclear. But she conveys an artistic more than a conventional respectability. The photograph is obviously an amateur snapshot rather than a professional portrait, and was perhaps taken by Ms Brown's sister, Merle Foster's mother, who is seen with her sister in other family snaps, sitting on the front steps of 1050 or riding bicycles along Park Road near Rosedale.

The atmosphere is intimate, casual, and very Victorian, although the date is actually a year after Queen Victoria's death. Ms Brown is surrounded by the accoutrements of a modest, middle-class parlour — upright piano, uncomfortable Victorian ladies chair, potted Kentia palm⁴, gold-framed Prince Albertine gentleman, subdued floral wallpaper, and cluttered corner-cabinet decorated with odd knick-knacks. The unusual, if amateurish, hand-tinting reveals that the auburn-haired Ms Brown was wearing a blue, lace-trimmed gown, and suggests that this small, 3.5 by 4.5 inch snapshot was an especially precious family object. The cracks in the picture — one through the central portrait and one along the right-hand edge — support this view. Rather than being thrown out, the damaged picture was kept, and perhaps cherished.

CITY OF TORONTO ARCHIVES: Fonds 1185, Item 29

