

RESEARCH ARTICLES

More than “competent description of an intractably empty landscape”: A Strategy for Critical Engagement with Historical Photographs

Joan M. Schwartz

The Prairie, on the Banks of Red River, looking south

In the early autumn of 1858, Humphrey Lloyd Hime set up his camera and darktent not far from what is now Winnipeg, Manitoba, coated a sheet of glass with collodion, and produced a view, which was subsequently titled, *The Prairie, on the Banks of Red River, looking south* (Figure 1). It presents a quintessential image of prairie topography, one which has come to be an enduring image of regional identity.¹ In it, the landscape has been reduced to what Canadian novelist W.O. Mitchell has called “the least common denominator of nature”: earth and sky.²

In the context of geographical concerns for the way in which landscape images influence perceptions of place, and conversely, for the way in which perceptions of place influence landscape images, *The Prairie ... looking south* raises a number of questions: Why did Hime take this photograph and what was it intended to convey? Even more importantly, why is this photograph of interest to historical geographers, and how should we interrogate it? As a source of visual facts, what can it tell us about the landscape it depicts? As a form of visual representation, what can it tell us about the time(s) and place(s) in which it was created, circulated, and viewed? As an act of visual communication, what meanings (messages) were invested in it and generated by it? And, more generally, what can it teach us about critical engagement with the photograph in historical geography?

Critical Engagement in Disciplinary Perspective

In 1981, Hime’s stark image of the prairie was included in the Museum of Modern Art’s landmark exhibition, *Before Photography: Painting*

Joan M. Schwartz is Senior Photography Specialist at the National Archives of Canada, as well as a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Postdoctoral Fellow/Assistant Professor in the Department of Art, Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario, Canada, and an Adjunct Research Professor in the Department of Geography, Carleton University in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. *Historical Geography* Volume 31(2003): 105-30. ©2003 Geoscience Publications.

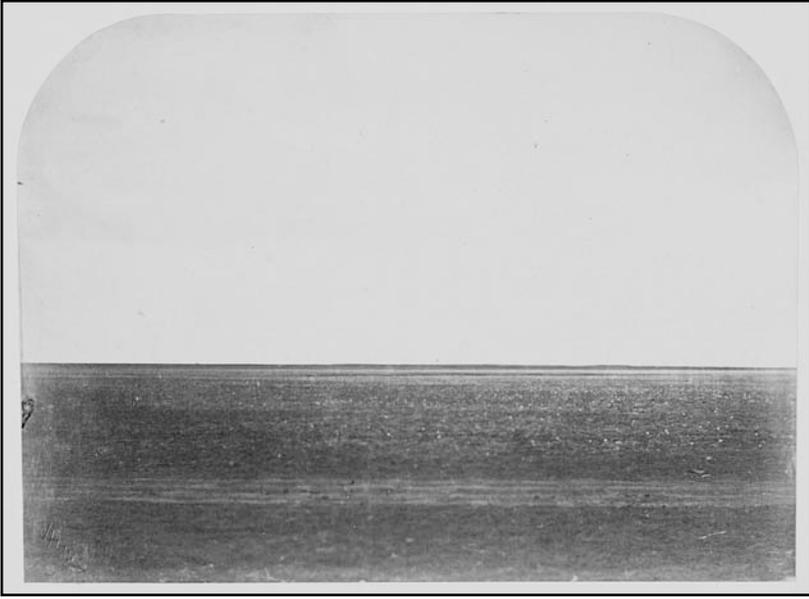


Figure 1. Humphrey Lloyd Hime, *The Prairie, on the Banks of Red River, looking south*, September-October 1858, albumen print from wet collodion negative, signed “Hime” in pencil lower left, accompanying Henry Youle Hind, *North-West Territory. Reports of Progress; Together with a Preliminary and General Report of the Assiniboine and Saskatchewan Exploring Expedition Made Under Instructions from the Provincial Secretary, Canada* (Toronto: Printed [by order of the Legislative Assembly] by John Lovell, 1859). Courtesy: National Archives of Canada, C-018694/e-9441.

and the Invention of Photography. There it participated in an art historical exercise to “show that photography was not a bastard left by science on the doorstep of art, but a legitimate child of the Western pictorial tradition.” In the accompanying book, MOMA Curator of Photography Peter Galassi wrote:

Radical formal simplicity is such an important element of modern art that one almost instinctively views Hime’s photograph as a bold, adventurous work. The picture, however, is probably best understood as a competent description of an intractably empty landscape.³

Galassi’s differential assessment of art or description typifies contemporary approaches to the photograph. Within this prevailing dialectic, the photograph is seen to have value as either a work of creative genius and aesthetic expression on the one hand, or a vehicle of visual truth and objective fact on the other. But the meaning of Hime’s *The Prairie ... looking south* is not, and never was, predicated on the binary opposition of art and description. To declare it adventurous modern art is problematic,⁴ but such a judgment falls outside the geographer’s disciplinary purview; however, Galassi’s flagging of *The Prairie ... looking south* as a form of “landscape description” suggests it is

worthy of further investigation in historical geography. But, as historical geographers, how should we interrogate it?

For guidance, we may look to theories of photographic meaning and models of photographic analysis.⁵ These exist “in dizzying number”⁶ and are scattered over an increasingly wide variety of disciplinary perspectives, including art history (old and new) and criticism, archives, cultural theory, communication studies, geography, history, anthropology, photographic history and criticism, philosophy, sociology, and semiology. This photograph can be subjected to a photo-historical analysis of process, format, image, and photographer; a formalist critique of line, design, light, and texture; an iconographical analysis of subject, representation, and symbolism; a semiotic analysis of first and second orders of signification; a Marxist interpretation of commodity chains of production and consumption; as well as postmodern analysis of power-knowledge relations; or, indeed, any combination of these.

This wide-ranging literature provides the larger, sometimes overlapping, sometimes competing discourses within which to situate a geographical approach to the photograph. However, disciplinary assumptions and priorities must govern interpretive strategies, and existing theories of photographic meaning cannot simply be applied like a theoretical template over geographical concerns. In particular, while dominating writing on the subject, the art history of photography is only one aspect of the history of photography whose social, cultural, technological, ethnographic, economic, and geographical resonances are now gaining increasing academic attention. In fact, the discipline of art history, itself, has moved away from its traditional focus on issues of connoisseurship to pursue the increasingly contextual concerns of the “new art history”—however, this common concern with context is a means to different disciplinary ends. The distinction is clear: where art historians are primarily concerned with bringing context to the image, better to understand the image, historical geographers (as well as others swept up in the visual turn) are essentially interested in bringing context to the image, better to understand the context.

Proceeding from this central premise, this essay explores the contexts in which *The Prairie, on the Banks of Red River, looking south* was created, circulated, and viewed. It is not a search for the “truth” of this image; nor an attempt to bring about closure of meaning. Rather, by seeking to comprehend this photograph—by looking *at* it, by looking *through* it, and by thinking *with* it—in terms of the meanings that swirled around it, we can achieve a clearer and fuller understanding of time and place, landscape and identity, image and reality. When returned to the action in which it participated—when contemplated against the history of nineteenth-century American expansionism that took root with the Louisiana Purchase, when considered in terms of the need to open up east-west lines of communication to link Canada to the British territories at Red River and on the Pacific, and when weighed against the opportunity presented by the im-

minent expiration of the Hudson's Bay Company lease on Rupert's Land—the power of this image to stir economic hopes and fuel political dreams among Canadian expansionists and British imperialists becomes clear.

Content and Meaning

The Prairie ... looking south was produced by Hime—junior partner in the Toronto firm of Armstrong, Beere, and Hime, “Civil Engineers, Draughtsmen and Photographists,” and an experienced surveyor⁷—on a Canadian government expedition. Of the forty-nine⁸ known photographs by Hime from his work with the Assiniboine and Saskatchewan Exploring Expedition, four were taken on the way to Red River and show Ojibways at Fort Frances and the members of the expedition (Figure 2). Eight rather poor images showing Fort Pelly and the topography of the Souris and Qu'Appelle valleys are all that survive from the period of fieldwork between June and September.⁹ Hime's best and most extensive work, of which *The Prairie ... looking south* is part, was done in September and October 1858 in and around the settlement founded at Red River in 1811 by Lord Douglas, the Fifth Earl of Selkirk, as an agricultural colony



Figure 2. Humphrey Lloyd Hime, *Encampment on the Red River*, June 1, 1858, showing members of the Assiniboine and Saskatchewan Exploring Expedition (likely left to right: Henry Youle Hind, expedition leader; John Fleming, assistant surveyor and draughtsman; and James A. Dickinson, surveyor and engineer), albumen print from wet collodion negative, 130 x 172 mm image on 247 x 318 mm card mount. Courtesy: National Archives of Canada, C-004572.

for displaced Scottish tenant farmers, and as another strategic post in the geography of the fur-trade wars.

Likely taken from near Water-mill Creek (between Fort Garry and Stone Fort or Lower Fort Garry), *The Prairie ... looking south*—and a complementary, more enigmatic west-facing view to which I will turn attention later in this analysis—portrayed the terrain described by expedition leader Henry Youle Hind as a “boundless, treeless ocean of grass, seemingly a perfect level” stretching to the horizon.¹⁰ It is a record of few visual facts, yet in its starkness is the quintessential representation of prairie immensity and flatness, a vivid, more than “competent description of an intractably empty landscape.” If, as Don Slater suggests, “the wealth of detail in the photograph draws one deeper into it, away from any awareness of the frame around it and thus away from any mark of its constructed nature,”¹¹ then *The Prairie ... looking south*, with its paucity of detail, should allow us more easily to draw back from the photograph, to become more aware of the frame around it, of the constructed nature of this image, and of its power to construct an image of place.

Looking *at* *The Prairie ... looking south*, we focus on the photograph as a photograph, as a visual image and physical object—as art, fact, and artifact. We consider the choice of subject matter, the composition, its aesthetic quality, its physical presentation, its relationship to the photographer’s oeuvre. Its standard dimensions, domed top, texture, finish, and warm tones exhibit the patina of age and the aura of the original, but also betray its technological origins as either a salted paper print or an albumen print from a wet-collodion glass negative. We indeed become more aware of its containment within borders formed by the angle of a camera lens and the edges of a glass-plate negative.

Looking *through* *The Prairie ... looking south*, we are drawn into the image and focus on the landscape depicted in it, on a wedge of the material world sliced from a larger geographical reality. Only a cart track in the foreground breaks the sweep of the view. Vegetation is limited to low ground cover. What appears to be a line of low-lying hills in the distance is likely the far bank of an oxbow bend in the Red River. The horizon divides the composition neatly into two elements: the ground occupies the lower third and the sky occupies the upper two-thirds. As a portrait of place, its content is defined as much by what is not in the photograph, as much as by what is: it is a photograph of treelessness. It is a simple and stark portrayal of an empty, unsettled, seemingly endless expanse of flat land stretching unbroken to the horizon. As a historical geographer, I want to know what meanings were invested in and generated by *The Prairie ... looking south*—not as a photograph reflecting the immanent genius of the photographer or the aesthetic qualities of the image, but as a landscape, as a visual representation of place, as a medium of geographical engagement with unfamiliar terrain.

Hime’s photograph of this “intractably empty landscape” is inherently ambiguous. Nothing in its content reveals what it is *about*—why it

was taken or what it was meant to convey. Nothing in the image reveals that a prairie fire just swept across the landscape, further reducing whatever plants or shrubs might have been growing there. *The Prairie ... looking south* is a record of visible appearance at a given point in time, but the meaning of this treeless scene of monotonous flatness is not an observable property.¹² In this instance, an iconographical analysis yields few secrets. Its content offers visual facts about the nature of land; however, the meanings invested in and generated by those facts are constructed, negotiated, and contingent—inextricably tied to the technological, historical, functional, and documentary circumstances and to the social, cultural, political, and economic contexts in which it was created, circulated, and viewed. Was its assigned title, *The Prairie, on the Banks of Red River, looking south*, merely a neutral indicator of physical location? Should it be approached, in Roland Barthes' terms, as a parasitic message or, in Stuart Hall's terms, as a preferred reading?¹³ To understand this "plain" image as an active participant in a project to inscribe landscape meaning, appropriate new territory, extend political power, and push back geographical frontiers—indeed to see it, in spite of its dearth of factual detail, as a highly charged document about Canadian government aspirations to expand into the British North American west—we must think *with* it, to recover its contexts of creation and circulation and its pre-texts¹⁴ of viewing and meaning-making.

Contexts and Pre-texts

Contexts of Creation and Circulation

The mandate of the Assiniboine and Saskatchewan Exploring Expedition itself clarifies the photograph's functional origins. On the basis of preliminary reports from the Red River Expedition of 1857 led by Hind, the Canadian government decided to extend its geographical investigations of the western interior. Hind, Trinity College (Toronto) professor of geology and chemistry and leader of the expedition, was instructed to gather information "respecting the Geology, Natural History, Topography and Meteorology" of the region west of Red River. He was also directed to produce a map on a scale of two miles to one inch, and to collect objects to illustrate the natural history of the country. On April 14, 1858, Hime was appointed official expedition photographer and, because of his training as a practical surveyor, he was given additional duties as an assistant in surveying operations. He was charged with the task of furnishing "a series of Collodion Negatives for the full illustration of all objects of interest susceptible of photographic delineation, from which any number of copies can be taken to illustrate a narrative of the Expedition and a report on its results."¹⁵

The physicality of *The Prairie ... looking south* alerts us to the photograph's technological roots in the wet-plate era when cumbersome

equipment and refractory procedures circumscribed the range of subjects and the mobility of the photographer.¹⁶ The need to travel with hundreds of pounds of equipment, bottles of chemicals, and boxes of glass plates, to carry and set up a portable darkroom at each location, and to coat, expose, and develop a glass-plate negative while the emulsion was still "wet" made Hime's work anything but spontaneous or haphazard. *The Prairie ... looking south* represents an investment of time and effort. Its very existence attests to the desire and intentions behind its creation, signifying Hind's commitment to engage the services of an official photographer and his determination to add visual testimony to his scientific findings.

Unlike its appearance in Galassi's exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, *The Prairie ... looking south* would never have been seen by nineteenth-century viewers as a single image, mounted, framed, and displayed on a wall. It was not viewed at a distance in a gallery, but rather handled physically, studied, ordered, and compared in a documentary universe of text, engravings, maps, tables, and statistics. Examined on a viewing stand, on a table, or on one's lap, *The Prairie ... looking south* was involved in a relationship to its audience that was both intimate and tactile. The borders of the image, its placement in a sequence, and its assigned title were elements of meaning-making that served as framing devices to establish the content of the photograph (its "of-ness") and shape its meaning (its "about-ness") as a representation of some part of the material world.

Taken as part of an official government expedition, Hime's photographs legally belonged exclusively to the Canadian government, but their authority was very much vested in Hind's writings on the North-West that provided the larger documentary contexts in which the photographs were circulated. These took three literary forms: pictorial press, government report, and popular narrative. A week before the expedition was to depart, and ever alert to opportunities to publicize the expedition, Hind sought permission from the provincial secretary to arrange for publication of "a series of sketches of the forts belonging to the Hon. Hudson's Bay Co., of Indians and of Scenery, either drawn by hand or taken by photograph during the proposed exploration of the vallies of the Assiniboine and Saskatchewan...." in the *Illustrated London News*.¹⁷ Permission was granted, and each sketch and photograph, accompanied by a brief description, was to be sent to the provincial secretary for review and approval before being forwarded to London. The first photographs, taken in late May and early June, along with a preliminary report were dispatched to the provincial secretary when the party reached Red River, and appeared in the *Illustrated London News* the following October, before the expedition had even returned from the field.¹⁸

Hime's photographs also formed part of Hind's official expedition report submitted in April 1859 to the Canadian government. Entitled *North-West Territory. Reports of Progress; together with a Preliminary and General Report of the Assiniboine and Saskatchewan Exploring Expedition*

*made under instructions from the Provincial Secretary, Canada,*¹⁹ it began with a copy of the instructions issued to Hind on April 14 and 27, 1858, consisted of twenty chapters and five appendices, and included a series of woodcuts; two maps, two plans, and four sections were folded and bound into the report. Appendix V listed the twenty watercolor drawings²⁰ and thirty-three photographs²¹ that accompanied the report. In his introduction, Hind noted that the “interest manifested by the Government and people of Canada in the North-West Territory” called for “a precise description of the manner in which the exploration was conducted,” and stated that his “instructions, as regards objects to be observed and facts to be recorded, were precise and exact.” Hind’s official report was subsequently reissued in London.

The following year, in 1860, confident of the broad and enduring interest in his work, Hind published a two-volume work entitled, *Narrative of the Canadian Red River Exploring Expedition of 1857 and of the Assiniboine and Saskatchewan Exploring Expedition of 1858*.²² The text, which differed little from the official reports that Hind had submitted to the Canadian government, was accompanied by seventy-six woodcuts and twenty full-page chromoxylograph²³ plates; seven of the woodcuts and seven of the chromoxylograph plates were based on Hime’s photographs. Appended to the end of Volume II of Hind’s *Narrative* was a “List of Photographs of Red River” and a note indicating “These Photographs can be procured from Mr. J. Hogarth, No.5, Haymarket, London. Price two guineas.” The portfolio of original albumen prints made from Hime’s glass-plate negatives was entitled, *Photographs Taken at Lord Selkirk’s Settlement on the Red River of the North, to Illustrate a Narrative of the Canadian Exploring Expeditions in Rupert’s Land. By Henry Youle Hind, M.A., F.R.G.S. in Charge of the Assiniboine and Saskatchewan Expedition. (Humphrey Lloyd Hime, photographer)*. It consisted of thirty prints and came with a key to the images; *The Prairie, on the Banks of Red River, looking south*, was No.19 in the Hogarth portfolio.

A review of Hind’s *Narrative*, which appeared in the London *Daily Post* on January 7, 1861, situates Hime’s photographs within prevailing thought and suggests why these photographs, in their capacity to mediate the encounter between people and place, are of interest in historical geography:

To the general reader, [the *Narrative*] will prove attractive for its varied and pleasing descriptions of places and scenes in the far-distant West.... To the emigrant, proposing to seek his fortune in the backwoods of the West, it is invaluable for its clear elucidation of the resources of those interminable tracts.... But it is to the Government, both Canadian and British, that the information contained in these volumes is most valuable. It points out the means how ... a vast tract of land ... may be made a chain of communication from one side of the continent to the other.²⁴

Hime’s work was integral to the effort to gather and disseminate geographical information for the purposes of travel, colonization, and communication, at the same time appealing to prevailing interest in ethnography, geology, and travel. How Hime’s geographical facts in visual form were received and made meaningful very much had to do with the documentary contexts in which they circulated, but also with the pre-texts brought to their viewing. Who, then, saw *The Prairie, on the Banks of Red River, looking south*, and under what circumstances?

Viewers and Pre-texts of Viewing

The primary audience for Hind’s efforts and for Hime’s photographs were, of course, the Canadian and British governments, the legislators who would decide the fate of the Great North-West. Indeed, Hind’s report was published in Canada in 1859 in both English and French; it was subsequently printed in London for Her Majesty’s Stationery Office and “presented to by Houses of Parliament by command of Her Majesty.” The expedition’s findings were of great interest to Hind’s immediate circle at the Canadian Institute with a membership of more than 500 of the scientific, academic, and political elite of English-speaking Canada.²⁵

The accounts and engravings from the expedition reached an enormous worldwide readership in the October 2 and 16, 1858 issues of the *Illustrated London News*. Hind’s London-published, two-volume *Narrative* was read in scientific, academic, and business circles in Britain, Canada, and the United States, and reviews of this “noble work”—as it was dubbed in one newspaper—appeared in the *American Journal of Science* and no fewer than thirteen British journals, including *The Guardian*, *The Economist*, and *The Athenaeum*. The *Narrative*, as Suzanne Zeller points out, was favorably received in Montreal,²⁶ where *The Canadian Naturalist and Geologist* called it “a credit to the Province” and declared, “This book should be in all our public libraries and be carefully studied by those who interest themselves in the prosperity and extension of the Province to the Westward.”²⁷ Called “one of the most important contributions that have been made for many years to our commercial and political knowledge,”²⁸ Hind’s *Narrative* “afforded the world an opportunity of obtaining in London, what they might have had a difficulty in procuring from the archives of Toronto.”²⁹

For these nineteenth-century viewers, the photograph was a surrogate for first-hand observation—a convincing visual experience akin to “being there.” Encountered in a sequence of images—initially as part of the series of photographs that accompanied the official expedition *Reports of Progress* and subsequently as part of the Hogarth portfolio issued in conjunction with Hind’s *Narrative*—and examined in conjunction with the other documentation and evidence generated by the expedition, the meaning(s) of *The Prairie, on the Banks of Red River, looking south* not only

derived from its visual content, but also swirled around and through it, anchored by or bouncing off other forms of representation. But these meanings, so caught up in its contexts of circulation, were also inextricably tied to the pre-texts of viewing, that intellectual baggage which needs to be teased out by thinking not only *about*, but also *with*, the photograph, by using it not simply as a source of facts, but as a mode of inquiry, by bringing context to the photograph, better to understand the context. What, then, did *The Prairie ... looking south* mean to those who read the texts, saw the images, studied the maps, and examined the specimens from the Assiniboine and Saskatchewan Exploring Expedition?

Manifest Destiny and Expansionism

The assigned title, *The Prairie, on the Banks of Red River, looking south*, tethered the image to geographical location and compass direction, but it was not simply a neutral marker. Its three elements situated the nineteenth-century viewer not only in space, but also in prevailing thought. “The Prairie” was more than a topographical description; it was a value-laden spatial label that differentiated the area of arable potential from any possible northern extension of the Great American Desert. “On the Banks of Red River” positioned the viewer in a location politically and economically defined by contemporary debates over the renewal of the Hudson’s Bay Company’s exclusive license to trade in the North-West. “Looking south” directed the viewer’s gaze toward the economic and political threats of the American agricultural frontier of the Upper Mississippi Valley, an American military post just across the border at Pembina, and the growing center of trade and commerce at St. Paul, Minnesota. Viewers of *The Prairie ... looking south* metaphorically encountered the northward expansionist gaze of American Manifest Destiny.

Manifest Destiny—the doctrine that asserted the God-given right of the U.S. to an empire defined by the natural boundaries of the North American continent—has, within the national context of the U.S., been interpreted almost exclusively, both in historical account and popular understanding, as a westward movement. However, it was the northward component of American continental ambitions that posed a serious concern to British and Canadian interests in North America. Indeed, the perceived threat from the south motivated most nineteenth-century military, political, and commercial activities in Canada, ever since “the capture of Canada” had been a major objective of “Mr. Madison’s War” of 1812, and after several subsequent Fenian-inspired mini-invasions of Canada.

This notion of geographical predestination had gathered momentum since the mid-1840s. Its expansionist rhetoric, divided over the means to achieve territorial goals, was used by Ohio Representative Hiram Bell in his address to the U.S. Congress in January 1853. Having rejected the use

of force to annex Cuba and having questioned the value of Cuba to the U.S. and the interest of its population in American democratic principles, Bell sought to shift political ambitions away from Cuba and toward Canada:

But, sir, there is a country and there is a people competent for self-government, that are prepared to take upon themselves the responsibilities of free men, and which we may find for our interest to receive among us—I mean peaceably—and allow them to become a part and parcel of this country, and I care not how soon. I refer, Mr. Chairman, to the whole British possessions upon the north, containing an area of two millions two hundred and fifty-two thousand three hundred and ninety-five square miles. There is something worth looking at. There are two millions six hundred and fifty-two thousand people, bone, as it were, of our bone, flesh of our flesh, deriving their origin from the same Anglo-Saxon source, a large class of them disciplined in that school which is calculated to train them up as independent freemen, and all anxious and ready to come into the possession of enjoyment of those great principles which we are now enjoying. I say it may be for our advantage to acquire that country and that people, if we can peaceably.

The advantages were threefold—elimination of the vast expense of maintaining fortifications and custom-houses along the northern borders, free navigation of the St. Lawrence River and sole control of the Great Lakes, and the addition of “strength and vigor to the body-politic” as well as of abundant cheap, good land. Bell concluded, “Here, sir, is something worth turning the attention of this nation to.... [T]he annexation of that territory to this Union ... Destiny has ordained, and it will ere long take place.”³⁰

Such expressions of nineteenth-century American territorial expansion—that gained momentum in the 1840s with the election of President James Polk with his rallying cry of “54° 40’ or Fight,” and that crystallized in the ideology of Manifest Destiny (1845), in the Mexican-American War (1846-48), and in the Treaty of Oregon (1846)—can be traced back to the Louisiana Purchase (1803). The word “purchase”—referring to the acquisition of the vast lands of the North American interior ceded from Spain to France and then bought by the U.S.—is appropriately ambiguous here, signifying not only “something bought” but also, and more significantly, “a firm hold on a thing to move it or to prevent it from slipping; leverage.” The Louisiana Purchase gave the U.S. a purchase on continental sovereignty and set in motion a century of territorial expansionism played out in political, military, and diplomatic theatres. The meanings invested in and generated by Hime’s photograph, *The Prairie, on the Banks of Red River, looking south*, are very much linked to, and framed by, that drama.

Canadian Westward Expansion

Canadian enthusiasm for westward expansion had its own historical context. By the time Hime set up his camera pointing south near Watermill Creek, Canada's own version of Manifest Destiny was very much tied to a westward push north of the 49th Parallel, one which would not only mirror American westward expansion to the south, but also counter any northward American proclivities. As well, despite the obvious north-south axis of the Cordillera and the Great Plains, Canada's struggle over geography has, for four centuries, been an effort to work with it, as modern Canada and its various colonial and imperial predecessors sought to exploit (or manufacture) an east-west orientation on the northern half of the continent to counter-balance the north-south pull of geography, trade, and sometimes politics. Ever since Jacques Cartier first sailed up the St. Lawrence River in 1534, the push was ever westward from the eastern colonial settlements: first by French explorers seeking "La Mer de l'Ouest"—the Great Western Sea that led to China—then by fur traders, followed by private colonization initiatives, government scientific expeditions and surveyors, corporate railway interests, state-sponsored immigration programs, and later highway, broadcasting, and airport infrastructures. Samuel de Champlain, the La Verendrye family (father and sons), Alexander Mackenzie, Henry Kelsey, Simon Fraser, Peter Pond, and others all pushed progressively deeper into the western interior of British North America, following the great waterways, traveling up the St. Lawrence River, across the Great Lakes, and over the prairie rivers, thereby staking out the east-west geography of Canada. Indeed, more than a decade before Lewis and Clark set off from St. Louis, Missouri, to explore the trans-Mississippi, Alexander Mackenzie had reached the Beaufort Sea (1789) and the Pacific (1793) following canoe routes beyond the prairies to the Arctic Ocean on the north and to the Pacific Ocean on the west.

The Assiniboine and Saskatchewan Exploring Expedition of 1858 was, in fact, following the route of the North West Company fur-trading voyageurs who, based far away in Montreal, used these east-west waterways to carry on a fierce rivalry and compete profitably with the western-based Hudson's Bay Company. And its base of operations was the settlement at Red River that had begun the colonization of the Great North-West. Hind's expedition—along with the concurrent British-backed expedition of John Palliser³¹—carried the scientific interests and political clout of eastern Canadian and British imperial authorities further west, paving the way for territorial expansion and subsequent railway building, settlement, and sovereignty on the Canadian prairies in the post-fur-trade era.

In the late 1850s and early 1860s, when *The Prairie ... looking south* circulated to audiences in eastern Canada and Britain, the prairie west, as Canadian historian Peter Waite has observed, "was a vacuum, of population, and hence of power."³² Not only were the westering spirit and con-

tinental aspirations of the U.S. perceived as a possible threat to British sovereignty in North America, but the availability of land in the American Midwest was attracting settlers and enticing immigrants to Canada southward. The buildup of population in the American territories west of the Great Lakes was, therefore, not only a physical but also an economic threat to British control over the lands west of Red River. In addition, just as Hind was making final preparations for the departure of the expedition, gold was discovered on the gravel bars of the Fraser River, setting off a rush that saw thousands of fortune-seekers flock to the area and led to the establishment of the Crown Colony of British Columbia later that year. Suddenly, as Hind wrote to the provincial secretary in February 1859, “The discoveries of gold in British Columbia have invested with great interest the facilities for communication which exist between the Atlantic and Pacific seaboard, north of the 49th Parallel.” Anticipating “a large emigration” and “great commercial activity,” Hind commented:

The valley of the Mississippi being separated from the northern Pacific Territories of the United States by an extensive region presenting extraordinary difficulties in the initiation of a commercial or even emigrant route, until the construction of a railway removes the obstacles, public attention in the north-western States of the Union and in Canada has been directed to the valley of the Saskatchewan, and the feasibility of employing it as a link in a great chain of communication between the Mississippi and St. Lawrence on the one hand, and the western slope of the Rocky Mountains on the other.³³

Thus, in response to both ongoing as well as newly presented circumstances, Canadian and American expansionist concerns shaped Hind’s interpretation and presentation of the data collected on the expedition. With an eye for westward expansion and sovereignty north of the 49th Parallel, the Canadian party sought information to strengthen the case for annexation of the North-West. *The Prairie ... looking south* was an integral part of its case.

The Great American Desert: Treelessness and Aridity

In his assessment and presentation of the area’s agricultural potential, Hind had to confront the concept of the Great American Desert that had emerged earlier in the nineteenth century, and that, by 1857, had become a firmly entrenched feature of maps, atlases, textbooks, climate research, railway surveys, and political rhetoric. *The Prairie ... looking south*, as a depiction of the flat and treeless prairie, must be situated in the context of this prevailing notion of the Great American Desert. Treelessness had long been considered a marker of aridity or sterility. A land that could not grow a tree could not be expected to support agricultural settlement. Not

only was the absence of trees, portrayed so eloquently in *The Prairie ... looking south*, a sign of a hostile environment, it also posed practical problems in terms of lack of fuel, lack of building materials, and lack of shelter from the elements.³⁴ However, *The Prairie ... looking south* was created at a time when the image of the North-West and beliefs about treelessness were under review.³⁵

These ideas about the nature of the land and climate of the North-West had long mitigated against agricultural settlement and favored the Hudson's Bay Company's monopoly. The expansionist vision required a change in the perception of the North-West. Scientific observation was enlisted in the service of territorial and imperial expansion, and geographical knowledge was tied to the political aspirations and economic needs of central Canada. Lorin Blodget's *Climatology of the United States and of the Temperate Latitudes of the North American Continent*, published in Philadelphia in 1857, paved the way for the necessary reappraisal of the agricultural potential of the North-West.³⁶ His work "challenged the assumption that latitude determined climate," and concluded that "any real understanding of a region has to come from following the isothermic temperature line rather than the degree of latitude."³⁷ With this statement, Blodget's work removed climate as a barrier to settlement and recast the pre-text for responding to the treeless landscape portrayed in *The Prairie ... looking south*.

Located on the map prepared by John Arrowsmith and included in Volume I of the *Narrative*,³⁸ *The Prairie ... looking south* can be situated in the colored area designated by Hind as a "FERTILE BELT," which formed the northern boundary of the "Great American Desert." Hind's designation of this "fertile belt" gave "more than passing interest"³⁹ to this part of British North America, and helped to change the perception of the suitability of the soil for growing crops and sustaining settlement. In the context Hind's text, Arrowsmith's map, and growing interest in "the idea of a route across the continent of America lying wholly within British territory," this was a portrait of a landscape key to the ambitions of the expansionists. The absence of trees and notions of aridity were then explained away by Hind as the result of prairie fires set by the Indians.⁴⁰ If, as Hind claimed, prairie fires were responsible for "the destruction of the forests that once covered an immense area south of the Qu'Appelle and Assiniboine," then the aridity of those vast prairies could be reversed:

The reclamation of immense areas is not beyond human power; the extension of the prairies is evidently due to fires, and the fires are caused by Indians, chiefly for the purpose of telegraphic communication, or to divert the buffalo from the course they may be taking. These operations will cease as the Indians and buffalo diminish, events which are taking place with great rapidity.

Not only could the land be reclaimed for agriculture, but Hind went on to explain:

Migratory bands of Indians dependent upon wild animals for their support must diminish or increase with the area over which their sustenance extends, and it is apparent that the extension of absolutely treeless prairies and of sterile soil ... is unfavourable to the increase of the buffalo, the elk, the moose, the antelope and the bear,—animals which always seek protections of ‘woods’ during the terribly inclement winter of the north-western part of the American continent.⁴¹

Thus, the spread of the prairie landscape, caused by fires set by the Indians, would result in diminished numbers of wild animals which, in turn, would seal the fate of the Indian population. Then, with the cessation of the Indian-set prairie fires, the willows and alders would return and the land would regain its fertility.

Hime portrayed this argument in visual terms in a second landscape photograph, *The Prairie, looking west* (Figure 3), which showed the same combination of land and sky, but with a human skull and an animal femur carefully placed in the foreground. This enigmatic image was subse-

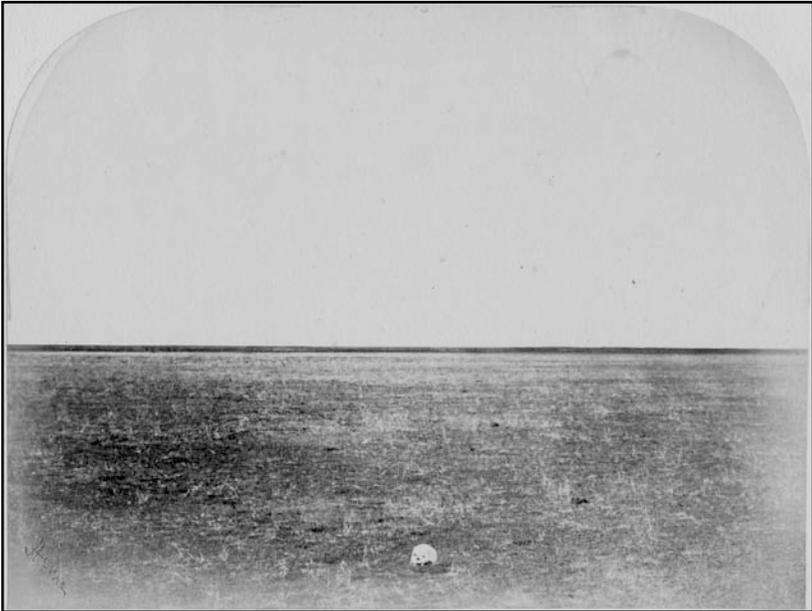


Figure 3. Humphrey Lloyd Hime, *The Prairie, looking west*, September-October 1858, albumen print from wet collodion negative, signed “Hime” in pencil lower left, accompanying Henry Youle Hind, *North-West Territory. Reports of Progress; Together with a Preliminary and General Report of the Assiniboine and Saskatchewan Exploring Expedition Made Under Instructions from the Provincial Secretary, Canada* (Toronto: Printed [by order of the Legislative Assembly] by John Lovell, 1859). Courtesy: National Archives of Canada, C-017443.

quently transformed into a color plate for Hind's *Narrative* (Figure 4). In it, a flock of birds, or more likely waterfowl, and wisps of high cloud were added to a clear blue twilight sky tinged with red. The addition of color and the presence of the flock infused the scene with life and suggested the availability of winged game for food; the change in compass direction directed the gaze to the promise of the lands stretching all the way to the Pacific; and the presence of a skull—which, by Victorian standards of morality, could only have been that of an Indian—and an animal bone symbolized the disappearance of the physical threats to westward territorial expansion. Tethered to Hind's argument, Hime's prairie portraits epitomized the expansionist dream: an empty (and therefore available), treeless (but no longer barren) land, free of Indian threat (to either land or life), and with potential for agricultural settlement and commercial development, expanded lines of communication and transportation, and increased national security.

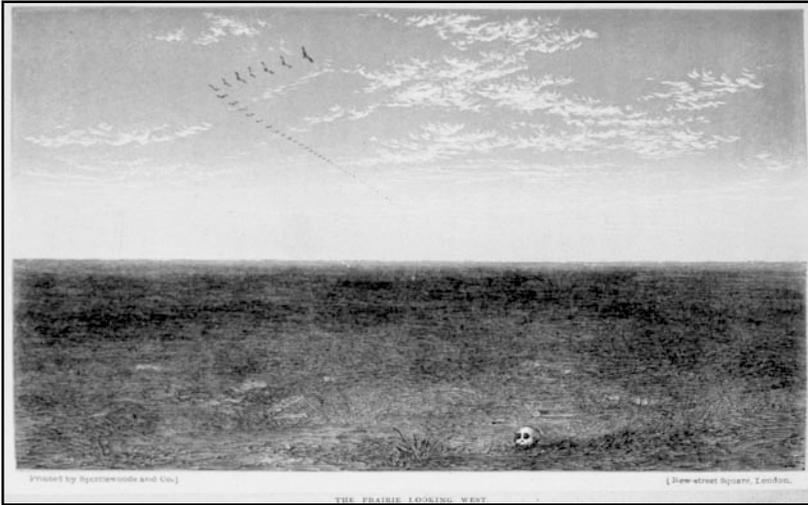


Figure 4. Humphrey Lloyd Hime, *The Prairie, looking west*, chromoxylograph printed by Spottiswoode and Co., and published in Henry Youle Hind, *Narrative of the Canadian Red River Exploring Expedition of 1857 and of the Assiniboine and Saskatchewan Exploring Expedition of 1858*, 2 vols. (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1860). Courtesy: National Archives of Canada, e-9450.

The Prairies: Stretching to the Horizon

Hind's descriptions of the prairies and prairie fires would have had particular interest to mid-nineteenth-century readers. At the time, the prairies, as a topographical phenomenon, were regarded as a wonder of nature, at least in Britain, where such large, empty, flat spaces were unknown. When a book, *Wonderful Things; or Accurate and Interesting De-*

scriptions of the Wonders of All Nations, devoted to “the Wonderful in Nature and Art” and intended for young readers, was published in London in 1866, an entry named “The Prairies” was included among its 114 main entries (only three of which were in North America):

The scenery of America is of that vast and extensive character which impresses the mind in most instances with a sense of wonder rather than of beauty.... [T]here are no hills sufficiently elevated to break the surface of the plain, and the utter absence of large trees renders the prairie a strange wild scene, silent and mournful, and reaching out to the horizon in all directions....⁴²

Much in keeping with Hind’s effort to dispel fears of the sterility of a treeless landscape, its three pages of text included a description of the burning of the prairies by Indian hunting parties and an illustration of “The Prairie on fire.” To the reader at the imperial center, the three elements of note in this entry, as in Hind’s writings and in Hime’s photographs, were vastness, treelessness, and the horizon.

Repeated reference to “the horizon” in descriptions of the prairie bears closer scrutiny. To understand viewer reaction to *The Prairie ... looking south* and *The Prairie, looking west*, as well as the landscapes they depicted, we must also look to the history of seeing, and, in particular, to the discovery of “the horizon” in the 1780s when Goethe first comprehended the horizon as a sensory experience on a sea voyage to Italy, when Robert Barker produced the illusion of the horizon in the first 360° panoramic painting in London, and when the Montgolfier brothers first made it possible to experience the horizon from a hot-air balloon in France. As Stephen Oettermann explains in *The Panorama: History of a Mass Medium*, Goethe’s “discovery” of the horizon as a “long, closed, almost mathematically pure line, as it can only be experienced at sea,”⁴³ made it possible to experience the previously abstract mathematical notion of the horizon in a concrete way, through the natural limits of sight. Growing enthusiasm to “experience the horizon” was manifest in variety of ways over the next century: in the popularity of seeking views from an elevated point, whether an observation platform, a mountain peak, or a cathedral tower; through the illusion of the 360° painted panorama and its various successors, including the Diorama and the Georama; and through hot-air balloon ascents. It was also extolled in literature, in art, in caricature, and in photography.⁴⁴

But the horizon was not simply a mathematical concept, a visual illusion, or a sensory experience, it was also a powerful metaphor. “The discovery of the horizon reflects the historical experience that the known world is contained within it and an unknown world begins beyond it.”⁴⁵ The horizon, previously feared as a threshold to a *terra incognita* of danger and death, increasingly became associated with hope, with new places

and New World possibilities “beyond,” with movement to see what was “there,” indeed it provided the “safety valve” of Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis, the assurance of there being a “there” in contrast to “here.” The horizon thus separated the known from the unknown, the reality of here from the promise of there. With this new association between the experience of the horizon and the sense of hope, Oettermann claims, “the idea of paradise had acquired a new spatial component: the Promised Land now lay not across the threshold of death, but beyond the horizon.”⁴⁶ The promise of the West, in both American and Canadian history, lay beyond a frontier associated with the horizon.

Prominent in both *The Prairie ... looking south* and *The Prairie, looking west* is the horizon—that line which aroused hope or fear, piqued curiosity, and invited reflection or discovery, according to the assumptions and expectations of the observer. Hind’s metaphorical reference to the prairie as an “ocean” of grass not only echoed Goethe’s response to his experience of the line where sea meets sky, but also gave voice to the fact that, in 1858, where else but on the ocean would viewers of Hime’s *Prairie* photographs have seen such a vast, unobstructed expanse of flat topography or experienced what Goethe called “the simple, noble line of the maritime horizon.”⁴⁷ For the expansionists, the fate and the future of Canada loomed, in different measure, just over the horizon, both south and west.

There would, of course, have been different pre-texts brought to the viewing of the horizon in Hime’s south-facing and west-facing views, with the specification of cardinal direction signalling spatially oriented tensions that may explain the inclusion of *The Prairie, looking west*, and not *The Prairie ... looking south*, in Hind’s *Narrative*. Contemplated in terms of prevailing British and Canadian assumptions and expectations about the frontier and the possibilities beyond the visual horizon, *The Prairie ... looking south* directed the viewer’s eye towards the expanding settlements and military might of the U.S., a frontier of potential political and economic threat; *The Prairie, looking west* directed the viewer’s eye towards the symbolic space of Canadian sovereignty, a frontier of political and economic promise. Little wonder that it was the westward view—manipulated in its transformation into a chromoxylograph to communicate the message of bounteous prospect—that Hind chose for inclusion in a book intended to further expansionist objectives.

Reconstituting the Prairie

Had the technology existed to permit the *Nor’-Wester*, the Selkirk Settlement’s first newspaper, to publish a photograph of the boundless, level prairie on the front page of its inaugural issue in December 1859,⁴⁸ the headline might have read “GATEWAY TO THE PACIFIC” or trum-

peted “EMIGRATION OPPORTUNITY,” “COMMERCIAL PROSPECTS,” or “AGRICULTURAL POTENTIAL,” where only a few short years earlier, the banner accompanying such an image would surely have declared “BARREN DESOLATION.” Thus, the meanings of Hime’s images of earth and sky varied according with the pre-texts of viewers, and also, during the decade of the 1850s, changed over time according to geographical, social, cultural, economic, and political circumstances—an illustration of Simon Schama’s claim, “Landscapes are culture before they are nature; constructs of the imagination projected onto wood and water and rock.”⁴⁹

As Blodget’s isotherm theory and Hind’s “fertile belt” effectively reconstituted the image of the North-West, the vast, treeless prairie was no longer a barrier to settlement, agriculture, or westward expansion. To the proponents of British imperialism and to members of the Canadian expansionist movement that emanated from the English-speaking, Protestant circles of the Canada West [now Ontario], the “ocean of grass” in *The Prairie ... looking south* and *The Prairie, looking west* signified agricultural potential and heralded political expansion—a response that was shaped by their fundamental belief that the destiny of Canada and the British Empire lay in the Great North-West. Of course, their vision was not necessarily shared by Hudson’s Bay Company officials, fur-trade factors, Indian buffalo hunters, Métis trappers, Catholic missionaries, French Canadian politicians, and American traders; despite Blodget’s findings, the meanings assigned to Hime’s *Prairie* views by these groups who opposed the development of the North-West as a hinterland for English, Protestant, central Canadian commercial interests would have differed radically.

The Assiniboine and Saskatchewan Exploring Expedition, along with the British Palliser Expedition, provided the requisite scientific confirmation needed to change perceptions of place. Hime’s photographs added visual testimony to the textual, cartographic, quantitative, and artifactual evidence that brought about the change. As Doug Owrain points out in *Promise of Eden*, the physical reality of the North-West remained constant, but the perception of the prairie changed, shaped by hopes and fears, political aspirations, social values, and economic opportunities. That perception, in turn, “determined the evolution of the expansionist movement and of Western Canada as surely as did the harsh economic realities faced by the would-be farmer or merchant on the new frontier.”⁵⁰ In the context of this reformulation of the geographical identity of the North-West, Hime’s portrayal of the prairie can be seen as a rhetorical device in the service of Canadian national and British imperial interests—“created” by Hime, but “authored” by Hind, in support of expansionist efforts, by communicating a message about the “vast capabilities” of the North-West to an audience of political decision-makers, financial investors, and prospective settlers.

Photographic Images and Geographical Imaginings

Canadian history is often characterized as a “struggle over geography.” Such a struggle, Edward Said has argued, “is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings.”⁵¹ *The Prairie ... looking south* shows a tract of land at the heart of political controversy, scientific debate, and cultural conflict. It is an image where empty space triggered expansionist imaginings. In it was the essential confrontation between urban Victorian viewer and vast virgin lands. Through government report and popular publication, it participated in a conscious effort to shape ideas about the North-West, and, combined with words and maps, helped to forge an enduring regional identity. In offering the viewer in Toronto or in London a surrogate for the “drama of seeing,”⁵² it gave visible substance to the idea of a “vast ocean of level prairie,” which, Hind insisted, “must be seen in its extraordinary aspects before it can be rightly valued and understood in reference to its future occupation by an energetic and civilised race, able to improve its vast capabilities and appreciate its marvellous beauties.”⁵³ Waxing eloquent, he declared that the prairie had to be seen at sunrise, at noon, at sunset, by moonlight, and at night in order to form “a true conception of the Red River prairies in that unrelieved immensity which belongs to them in common with the ocean, but which, unlike the ever-changing and unstable sea, seem to promise a bountiful recompense to millions of our fellow-men.”⁵⁴

The Prairie ... looking south allowed those “extraordinary aspects” to be seen and, thus, the prairie to be “rightly valued” in expansionist terms. It was a surrogate for viewing the prairie first-hand and a basis for conceptualizing the details presented in Hind’s textual and cartographic descriptions. It helped readers of the government report or the published *Narrative* to visualize—with unprecedented confidence—a “boundless, treeless ocean of grass, seemingly a perfect level” stretching to the horizon, to comprehend its “unrelieved immensity,” to appreciate its “marvellous beauties,” and to imagine its promise of a “bountiful recompense.”⁵⁵

In its minimal detail and stark horizontality, *The Prairie ... looking south* was surely a dramatic portrayal of austerity and abundance. Here Romanticism and nationalism clashed over the meaning of unspoiled wilderness.⁵⁶ Here Canadian politics challenged corporate monopoly, fur traders disagreed with agricultural settlers, the local Indian and Métis populations encountered absentee British and Canadian interests, Canadian westward expansion deflected American Manifest Destiny, and French Catholics faced off against English Protestants. Here European civilization came face to face with the Canadian wilderness. As worlds collided, and destinies were transformed, notions of place found expression in words and pictures, and in turn, these literary and visual images influenced ideas about place and the decisions they engendered.

The Assiniboine and Saskatchewan Exploring Expedition was key to defining perceptions of the western interior of British North America, perceptions that had a major impact on Canadian government settlement policy, and dominated official decision-making until the end of the nineteenth century. Hind's *Narrative* offered the first widely available general description of this very important geographical and political region, and has been credited, along with the reports of the British expedition under Captain John Palliser, with laying "the basic conceptual framework for our present interpretation of the physical geography of Western Interior Canada."⁵⁷ Hime's photographs were neither incidental to, nor independent of, Hind's work. Rather, as an integral part of the Canadian government project to explore, describe, and promote the western interior, they merit recognition and further investigation as a tool of Victorian "inventory science,"⁵⁸ as a mode of geographical engagement, and as a source in geographical inquiry. As such, they represent the beginning of a rich tradition of Canadian government expeditionary photography by which the new medium was quickly harnessed to serve older ambitions, and by which a modern image-making process was employed to shape images about a modern nation. For the remainder of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, photography and nation-building went hand-in-hand in Canada, as advances in technological means were repeatedly used to foster the progress of political ends.⁵⁹

This reading of *The Prairie, on the Banks of Red River, looking south* has explored the contexts of creation and circulation and pre-texts of viewing and meaning-making of a single photograph. It may be read, yet more closely, in relation to the other photographs Hime took on the expedition, to the engravings that appeared in the *Illustrated London News*, to the selection that accompanied the government report, to the original prints in the portfolio issued by Hogarth, and to the woodcuts and color plates in Hind's published *Narrative*. Perhaps yet more meaning may be coaxed from their captions, their sequencing, their subjects and absences,⁶⁰ or from their role in a larger documentary universe of words; of sketches and watercolors; of maps, sections, and plans; of tables of distances, meteorological observations, and magnetic variations; of statistics; and of geological and natural-history specimens. And, there may be still more meaning to be gleaned from it with respect to Hind's position as expedition leader, his participation in the Canadian expansionist movement,⁶¹ or his involvement in the Canadian Institute.⁶²

In shifting concern from the indexicality of the image to its instrumentality, this analysis of the functional origins⁶³ of *The Prairie, on the Banks of Red River, looking south* reveals how a spare and relentlessly descriptive image can be the bearer of complex cultural meanings. In so doing, it is equally a call for historical geographers to incorporate photographs more fully into their research agendas, to pay greater attention to the role of visual materials in the inscription of landscape meaning, the

creation of symbolic space, and the construction of regional identity. Yet, it must be stated that no effort to recover and carefully consider the functional origins that created *The Prairie ... looking south*, the technological constraints that shaped its look, the authorial intentions that determined its audience and directed its trajectory, the documentary universe in which it circulated, or the political and economic circumstances brought to its viewing, can lead to absolute meaning. Looking at photographs in historical geography is, ultimately, not a search for "truth" but rather a mode of inquiry. By going beyond subject content and photographic realism to think more broadly about the way in which photographs, gathered in the empirical practices of exploration and surveying, played an active role in the production of geographical knowledge and the construction of imaginative geographies, we can begin to understand how Hime's *The Prairie ... looking south*, in concert with other photographs and other forms of representation, mediated the geographical encounter with the Canadian prairie and constructed a symbolic space believed to hold the key to Canada's trans-continental destiny. Viewed in these terms, this photographic image, so devoid of content, can be seen as a geographical imagining, so rich in meaning.

Acknowledgements

This research was initially presented in the session "Photography, the State, and the North American West," at the 1995 Association of American Geographers Annual Meeting in Chicago, and subsequently in the session "Visual Perception and the Making of Identities," at the 1996 Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association. My reading of Hime's *The Prairie, on the Banks of Red River, looking south* has benefited over the years from the critical insights of generous colleagues, scholars, and friends: Keith Bell, Andrew Birrell, Douglas Cole, Terry Cook, Gerald Friesen, Gilbert Gignac, Deryck Holdsworth, Richard Huyda, Lynda Jessup, Joni Kinsey, Lilly Koltun, Andrea Kunard, Roger Lee, Colleen McNaughton, Viv Nelles, Glenn Norcliffe, Brian Osborne, Ron Rees, Rebecca Roberts, Marni Sandweiss, John Wadland, John Warkentin, and Suzanne Zeller, as well as participants in the Department of History Colloquium, University of Manitoba, and the Department of Geography Seminar, Queen's University, Kingston. I also extend my thanks to two anonymous reviewers for their kind comments and valuable suggestions. Research for this paper was supported by an education leave from the National Archives of Canada and by doctoral and postdoctoral fellowships from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Notes

1. In *Vertical Man / Horizontal World*, Laurence Ricou traces the language of Canadian prairie fiction back to observations by the early explorers, suggesting that “bewilderment at the vastness of the prairie” was a common response for the explorer. He points to Hind’s “awareness of the difficulty one has in forming an adequate conception of these spaces,” and remarks that the elements in Hind’s description of the prairie became typical of Canadian prairie fiction. In the context of Ricou’s examination of “how thoroughly, and in what fashion ... this vast, level landscape enter[ed] into the psychology and the literature of the prairie west,” Hime’s photographic expression of the “uninterrupted view” can be seen as the visual articulation of “an imagined geography ... characterized by flatness.” Laurence Ricou, *Vertical Man / Horizontal World: Man and Landscape in Canadian Prairie Fiction* (Vancouver: The University of British Columbia Press, 1973): esp. 9-13. For a parallel exploration of the prairie in landscape painting, see Ronald Rees, “Images of the Prairie: Landscape Painting and Perception in the Western Interior of Canada,” *The Canadian Geographer* XX:3 (Fall 1976): 259-78. For a “hybrid curatorial approach” to representations of the Canadian West in photographs, paintings, pamphlets, film, and objects of popular culture, see Dan Ring, Keith Bell, and Sheila Petry, *Plain Truth* ex.cat. (Saskatoon, SK: Mendel Art Gallery, 1998). For an analysis of landscape perceptions of the American prairies, see Joni L. Kinsey, *Plain Pictures: Images of the American Prairie* (Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum, 1996); see also, Joni Kinsey, Rebecca Roberts, and Robert Sayre, “Prairie Prospects: The Aesthetics of Plainness,” in *Prospects: An Annual of American Cultural Studies* 21 (1996): 261-97 (reprinted in Robert Sayre, ed., *Recovering The Prairie* [Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999]: 14-46).
2. W.O. Mitchell, *Who Has Seen the Wind?* quoted in R. Douglas Francis, *Images of the West: Responses to the Canadian Prairies* (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1989): xv. Mitchell was referring to the Saskatchewan prairie.
3. Peter Galassi, *Before Photography: Painting and the Invention of Photography* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1981): 12, 139.
4. For a critique of the appropriation of survey photography into art historical discourse, see esp. Rosalind Krauss, “Photography’s Discursive Spaces,” originally published in *Art Journal* 42 (Winter 1982) and reprinted in Richard Bolton, ed., *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992): 286-301. A counterargument concerning the legitimacy of analyzing documentary photographs in aesthetic terms is made in Joel Snyder, “Aesthetics and Documentation: Remarks Concerning Critical Approaches to the Photographs of Timothy O’Sullivan,” in Peter Walch and Thomas Barrow, eds., *Perspectives on Photography: Essays in Honor of Beaumont Newhall* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1986): 125-50.
5. While not specifically focused on photographs, Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies* (London: Sage, 2001) offers a guide to methods of interpreting visual materials, for investigating their meanings and their effects. In it, Rose quite rightly points out that “interpreting images is just that, interpretation, not the discovery of their ‘truth’....”, p. 2. More limited in its methodological aim as “an introduction to the use of visual evidence in history,” is Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001). Within the history of cartography, we find conceptual frameworks for understanding graphic representations. Useful strategies for the interpretation of photographs can be extrapolated from J.B.Harley, *The New Nature of Maps: Essays in the History of Cartography* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).
6. Neil Harris, “Iconography and Intellectual History: The Halftone Effect,” in *Cultural Excursions: Marketing Appetites and Cultural Tastes in Modern America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990): 317.
7. Hime was born in Moy, County Armagh, Ireland, on September 17, 1833 and died in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, on October 31, 1903. The definitive volume on Hime and his work remains Richard J. Huyda, *Camera in the Interior, 1858: H.L.Hime, Photographer. The Assiniboine and Saskatchewan Exploring Expedition* (Toronto: The Coach House Press, 1975). Included is an inventory of known Hime photographs. Copies of Hime’s Red River photographs are held by the National Archives of Canada in Ottawa; the National Anthropological Archives of the National Museum of Natural History (formerly the Bureau of American Ethnology) in Washington, D.C.; the Foreign and Commonwealth Office Library in London, England; the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library of Yale University; and the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa. The copy at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., has been “deemed missing in inventory.”

8. All forty-nine images are reproduced in Huyda, *Camera in the Interior*.
9. Hime left his negatives taken during the field season on the Souris, the Assiniboine, and the Qu'Appelle rivers at Red River, in "direct opposition" to the "expressed wishes" of the expedition leader; they were never recovered. A subsequent effort to recover them was unsuccessful. The unfortunate loss of these negatives was only one circumstance that strained relations between Hime and his superior. See Huyda, *Camera in the Interior*, 22-23.
10. Henry Youle Hind, *Narrative of the Canadian Red River Exploring Expedition of 1857 and of the Assiniboine and Saskatchewan Exploring Expedition of 1858*, 2 vols. (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1860): I:134.
11. Don Slater, "Photography and Modern Vision: The Spectacle of 'Natural Magic'" in Chris Jenks, ed., *Visual Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995): 235.
12. Slater, "Photography and Modern Vision," 221.
13. Barthes discusses the relationship between text and image in "The Photographic Message" (trans. Stephen Heath, 1977, from "Le message photographique," *Communications* 1, 1961), in *Image/Text/Music* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1992): 15-31, esp. 25-27; see also his "Rhetoric of the Image" (trans. Stephen Heath, 1977, from "Rhétorique de l'image," *Communications* 4, 1964), in *Image/Text/Music*, 32-51. Stuart Hall distinguishes between three possible readings of a photograph: the preferred or dominant reading, the negotiated reading, and the oppositional reading. See Stuart Hall, "Encoding / Decoding," first published 1980, reprinted in S. During, ed., *The Cultural Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 1993): 90-103.
14. Without wishing to signal deeper theoretical arguments, I adopt these terms to draw a simple but important distinction between "context"—in the sense of the circumstances (social, cultural, political, economic, documentary) in which photographs are created, circulated, and viewed—and "pre-text"—as the (pre-conceived) intellectual baggage (knowledge, ideas, values, beliefs) brought to the process of viewing photographs and making them personally or collectively meaningful.
15. National Archives of Canada / RG5 C1, Vol.578-579, 1858, No.761, quoted in Huyda, *Camera in the Interior*, 8.
16. Huyda reproduces an inventory of Hime's photographic apparatus and includes useful discussions of "the wet-plate photographer in the field" as well as "photographic proof and print making in the 1850s" in *Camera in the Interior*, 30-31, 36-51.
17. National Archives of Canada / RG5 C1, Vol.578-579, 1858, No.907, H.Y. Hind to the Provincial Secretary, Toronto, 23 April 1858, quoted in Huyda, *Camera in the Interior*, 8.
18. *Illustrated London News*, XXXIII, 939, 2 October 1858 and XXXIII, 941, 16 October 1858.
19. Henry Youle Hind, *North-West Territory. Reports of Progress; Together with a Preliminary and General Report of the Assiniboine and Saskatchewan Exploring Expedition Made Under Instructions from the Provincial Secretary, Canada*. (Toronto: Printed [by Order of the Legislative Assembly] by John Lovell, 1859); also issued in French; reissued in London, printed by G.E.Eyre & W. Spottiswoode for HMSO [Her Majesty's Stationery Office], 1860.
20. The watercolors were done by Hind's brother William George Richardson Hind from sketches done by John Fleming, assistant surveyor and draughtsman to the expedition. See Mary Jo Hughes, *Hindsight: William Hind in the Canadian West / L'Ouest canadien selon William Hind: un nouveau regard*, with an essay by Gilbert L. Gignac. ex. cat. (Winnipeg: Winnipeg Art Gallery, 2002); see also, J. Russell Harper, *William G.R. Hind, 1833-1889*, Canadian Artists Series No.2 (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1976).
21. The photographs by Hime were divided into sections: there were five photographs of "The Red River" that were said to "exhibit the general character of the river."; six photographs of "Churches of the Selkirk Settlement"; five photographs of "Houses and Stores of the Settlers"; five photographs of "Indian Tents and Graves"; two photographs of "The Prairie"; three photographs of "Forts and Stores of the Honourable Hudson's Bay Company"; five photographs of "Native Races"; and an additional two, without a section heading, of *Red River Freighter's Boat* and *Dog Carioles: Expedition Returning to Crown Wing, By the Winter Road*. No.22 in a section of just two images of "The Prairie" was *The Prairie, on the Banks of Red River, looking south*.
22. Hind, *Narrative*.
23. A chromoxylograph is a color wood engraving, "chromo" meaning color and "xylo" indicating wood.
24. *Daily Post* (London), 7 January 1861, quoted in Huyda, *Camera in the Interior*, 26.
25. Founded in Toronto in 1849 by a small group of civil engineers, architects, and surveyors, and open to "those whose pursuits or studies were of a kindred character," the Canadian Institute, through its lectures, museum, library, and journal, was dedicated to the "encouragement and

- general advancement of the Physical Sciences, the Arts and Manufactures ... and more particularly ... Surveying, Engineering and Architecture....”
26. Suzanne Zeller, *Inventing Canada: Early Victorian Science and the Idea of a Transcontinental Nation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987): 174.
 27. *The Canadian Naturalist and Geologist* (Montreal), February 1861, excerpted in “Opinions of the Press,” [Supplement to] Hind, *Narrative* (Toronto: Maclear & Co., [1861]).
 28. *John Bull*, 19 January 1861, excerpted in “Opinions of the Press,” [Supplement to] Hind, *Narrative* [1861].
 29. *Oriental Budget*, January 1860, excerpted in “Opinions of the Press,” [Supplement to] Hind, *Narrative* [1861].
 30. See Norman A. Graebner, ed., *Manifest Destiny* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968): 271-73.
 31. In 1857, the British government also sent an expedition into the western interior of British North America under the direction of Captain John Palliser and Dr. James Hector to make a scientific exploration of the Hudson’s Bay territories and to assess the agricultural and settlement potential of the area between Lake Superior and the Rocky Mountains. Palliser had previously hunted in North America and published an account of his trip, *Solitary Rambles of a Hunter in the Prairies*, in London in 1853. Palliser’s funding initially came from the Royal Geographical Society who proposed a private exploration party, but as a result of British government interest in the Hudson’s Bay territories, Palliser ultimately received official support as a major government expedition. Palliser’s name was attached to a triangle of land in southern Saskatchewan and Alberta designated as “arid plains,” thought to be a northern extension of the Great American Desert.
 32. P.B. Waite, “The 1860s,” Chapter 11, in J.M.S. Careless, *Colonists & Canadiens, 1760- 1867* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1971): 265.
 33. “On the Qu’Appelle, or Calling River; and the Diversion of the Waters of the South Branch of the Saskatchewan Downs [sic] its Valley, with a View to a Direct Steamboat Communication from Fort Garry, Red River, to Near the Foot of the Rocky Mountains,” Henry Y. Hind to The Hon. C. Allyn, Provincial Secretary, 3 February 1859, in Hind, *North-West Territory*, 23.
 34. Doug Owrarn, *Promise of Eden: The Canadian Expansionist Movement and the Idea of the West, 1856-1900*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980): 14.
 35. This change in attitudes is examined in Owrarn, *Promise of Eden*, esp. Chapter 3, “A Means to Empire: Canada’s Reassessment of the West, 1857-69,” 59-78; see also Zeller, *Inventing Canada*, esp. 173-76; and Zeller, *Land of Promise, Promised Land: The Culture of Victorian Science in Canada*, Historical Booklet No.56 (Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, 1996): esp. 12-15.
 36. Lorin Blodget, *Climatology of the United States and of the Temperate Latitudes of the North American Continent* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott and Co., 1857). The 1856-57 *Annual Report of the Council of the Canadian Institute* (Toronto) lists Blodget’s *Climatology of the United States* as one of the books purchased for the institute’s library. *The Canadian Journal of Industry, Science, and Art*, New Series XIV, March 1858, 169-77.
 37. Owrarn, *Promise of Eden*, 66.
 38. “Map of the Country from LAKE SUPERIOR to the PACIFIC OCEAN, Showing the Western Boundary of Canada & the Eastern Boundary of British Columbia, also the Fertile Belt Stretching from the Lake of the Woods to the Rocky Mountains,” folded and bound into Hind, *Narrative II*, facing p.223.
 39. “Preface,” Hind, *Narrative I*, vi.
 40. Hind’s observations on prairie fires were published in *North-West Territory* and were excerpted in a review published in *The Canadian Journal of Industry, Science, and Art* (New Series) XXVI (March 1860): 187-95, 191. They also appeared in his *Narrative I*, 335-37.
 41. Hind, *Narrative I*, 337-38.
 42. *Wonderful Things; or Accurate and Interesting Descriptions of the Wonders of All Nations, with Numerous Illustrations on Wood*, First Series (London: Houlston and Wright, 1866): 221-24. There were only three entries for all of North America; the other two were the Natural Bridge in Virginia and the Timber Bridge over the Schuylkill in Philadelphia.
 43. Stephen Oettermann, *The Panorama: History of a Mass Medium*, Deborah Lucas Schneider, trans. (New York: Zone Books, 1997): 7.
 44. It was in 1858, the same year that Hime pointed his camera at the unbroken view to the horizon, that Nadar (the pseudonym used by the great French writer, caricaturist, and photographer, Gaspard-Félix Tournachon) ascended to the height of several hundred meters over Paris to produce the first aerial photographs from the gondola of a captive balloon.
 45. Oettermann, *The Panorama*, 13.
 46. Oettermann, *The Panorama*, 18.

47. Quoted in Oettermann, *The Panorama*, 8. I am grateful to noted Canadian historian, Viv Nelles, for posing a question that prompted me to consider more closely why Hind likened ocean and prairie.
48. *The Nor'-Wester*, published at Red River, appeared for the first time on 28 December 1859.
49. Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (Toronto: Random House, 1995): 61.
50. Owsram, *Promise of Eden*, 6.
51. Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1994): 7.
52. Eric Homberger concludes his review essay, "Can We Say Absolutely Anything We Like About Photography?" with the conviction that all photography can ever be asked to do is recreate the drama of seeing. *Word and Image* 4:3/4 (July-December 1988): 732-38.
53. Hind, *Narrative* I, 134.
54. Hind, *Narrative* I, 135.
55. Hind, *Narrative* I, 134.
56. See Chapters 2 and 3, "West to Eden: The Romantic West: 1845-1885" and "The West, the Nation, and the Empire: 1845-1885," in Francis, *Images of the West*.
57. John Warkentin, *The Western Interior of Canada: A Record of Geographical Discovery, 1612-1917* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1964): 147.
58. Zeller uses the term "inventory science" for various branches of Victorian science, all linked by a common "inventorial purpose." Zeller, *Inventing Canada*, esp. 4-6.
59. For an overview of photography on government boundary, geological, and railway surveys in western Canada during the second half of the nineteenth century, see Chapter 6 "The West, the North, and British Columbia," in Ralph Greenhill and Andrew Birrell, *Canadian Photography, 1839-1920* (Toronto: The Coach House Press, 1979): 84-92. Birrell has written extensively on this topic; see his *Benjamin Baltzly: Photographs and Journal of an Expedition through British Columbia, 1871* (Toronto: The Coach House Press, 1978); "The North American Boundary Commission: Three Photographic Expeditions, 1872-74," in Joan M. Schwartz, ed., *Canadian Photography*, a special issue of *History of Photography* 20:2 (Summer 1996): 113-21; "The Early Years, 1839-1885," in Lilly Koltun, ed., *Private Realms of Light: Amateur Photography in Canada, 1839-1940* (Toronto: Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1984): 2-15; "Survey Photography in British Columbia, 1858-1900," in Joan M. Schwartz, ed., "The Past in Focus: Photography and British Columbia, 1858-1914," a special issue of *BC Studies* 52 (Winter 1982): 39-60; "Fortunes of a Misfit: Charles Horetzky," *Alberta Historical Review* (Winter 1971): 9-25. See also Edward Cavell, *Journeys to the Far West* (Toronto: James Lorimer and Company, 1979).
60. Pierre Bourdieu calls the photographic act an "ontological choice of an object which is perceived as worthy of being photographed" and distinguishes between "the range of 'takeable' photographs or photographs 'to be taken', as opposed to the universe of realities which are objectively photographable given the technical possibilities of the camera." Pierre Bourdieu, *Photography: A Middle-brow Art*, Shaun Whiteside, trans. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990; originally published in French as *Un art moyen: essai sur les usages sociaux de la photographie* by Les Éditions de Minuit, 1965): 6. At the same time, John Berger points out that "a photograph, whilst recording what has been seen, always and by its nature refers to what is not seen." John Berger, "Understanding a Photograph," in *The Look of Things: Selected Essays and Articles* (New York: Viking Press, 1974); reprinted in Alan Trachtenberg, ed., with notes by Amy Weinstein Meyers, *Classic Essays on Photography* (New Haven, CT: Leete's Island Books, 1980): 291-94; quote on 293.
61. Hind's articles in the *Canadian Almanac* of 1857 and 1858 promoted the extension of the railway and of settlement into the North-West. As Zeller points out, Hind's "enthusiasm towards the north-west was well known before his departure." Zeller, *Inventing Canada*, 174.
62. A lone print, signed by Hime, of a fossil resting on a volume on paleontology by James Hall in his *Natural History of New York* suggests a direct connection between Hind, Hall, and the scientific and academic community through their involvement in the Canadian Institute.
63. For an archival approach to the functional origins of photographs, see Joan M. Schwartz, "We make our tools and our tools make us: Lessons from Photographs for the Practice, Politics, and Poetics of Diplomats," *Archivaria* 40 (Fall 1995): 40-74; these arguments are further elaborated in Joan M. Schwartz, "'Records of Simple Truth and Precision': Photographs, Archives, and the Illusion of Control," *Archivaria* 50 (Fall 2000): 1-40.