RARE MERIT
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INTRODUCTION

“AS PERFECT AS THE IMAGINATION CAN CONCEIVE”

TO THIS DAY, PHOTOGRAPHY ENTHRALLS THE IMAGINATION like no other invention of the Industrial Revolution. In 1839, three centuries of experimentation in science and technology, undertaken by women and men seeking to capture and preserve what and how the human eye could see, precisely and permanently, finally met with success. Combining light and chemicals on a polished metal plate produced an image, which appeared as if captured in a mirror. Named for its French inventor, the daguerreotype proved, to the eye of one Mrs. Fletcher in Pictou, Nova Scotia, “as perfect as the imagination can conceive.” Fletcher knew well of what she spoke. In 1841, she had stepped behind the camera to become North America’s first professional woman photographer.

Photography spread rapidly around the world with British and French travellers and colonialists, and into various and diverse aspects of human endeavour. Women took up the technology immediately, as sitters and collectors, yes, but more importantly as photographers, printers, and industry workers. Like the early daguerreotypes, however, most women who worked in photography during its first hundred years faded quickly and permanently from view, as did the images they created for their clients. Though her daguerreotypes suffered that fate, Mrs. Fletcher did not. Traces she left in print by advertising her wares secured her place in the historical record.
In 1994, American photography historian Naomi Rosenblum asked, “why women?” as she set out to write the first historical survey of women photographers. The question remains compelling, and readily answered: Only when women’s practices and photographs are recognized as integral to the concept of a history or histories of photography and critically examined for their social, technical, and aesthetic roles and merit can we begin properly to comprehend and assess photography’s extraordinary value and impact in history. The act of making a photograph is not just a mechanical imprinting of a moment in time. It is embedded in the photographer’s social, technological, and historical contexts, which inform what is seen, what can be photographed or is considered photographable, and what is sought after, goes unnoticed, or is excluded in a shot. This means that photography serves well as a complex and credible resource for questioning, examining, and understanding human history, as well as natural phenomena. Just as oral traditions maintain historical knowledge in some societies, and the written word performs the same role in others, photography made viable a third means of record keeping: visuality, or that which has been seen.

Equally rich in context and impact is the act of viewing a photograph, informed as it is by concepts and concerns of a viewer’s era and place, whether at the time the photograph was made or into the future. Viewing is further influenced by the technologies used to make the picture, which determine its appearance and a viewer’s familiarity with its visual syntax. The “perfect,” mirror-like image of the one-of-a-kind daguerreotype that Mrs. Fletcher produced nearly two centuries ago looked decidedly different, both literally and imaginatively, to her clientele than it does to modern viewers awash in colourful, sharp, infinitely replicable (or, in today’s parlance, sharable) digital images made and viewed on a smartphone. For all their impact on the act of viewing, the specific technologies underpinning a photograph – type of camera and lens, negative and printing processes, chemicals, papers – are not always known or discernible. To some extent, they can be deduced on the basis of the period in which a picture was made or by the nature of a print or negative or other format (such as glass, paper, or metal plate), but few specifics survive. Such is commonly true for the early women photographers in Canada and elsewhere. Nevertheless, they took their cameras into parts of the country and its societies to photograph people, places, and nature that had never before been the object of a lens. How they did it, how and why their images look the way they do, and the knowledge or meanings that their photographs convey can become questions only if women photographers themselves are seen as subjects of interest, worthy of study.

The question today is, why not women? From the beginning, they participated in the invention and practices of photography, so why not include them in the histories of early photography? American historian Nicole Hudgins attributes this dearth to “suppressive obscuring” by a nineteenth-century photography trade press that was dominated by men and to women photographers’ concomitant “refusal to document themselves” by failing to establish journals that showcased their pictures. Kristie S. Fleckenstein sees matters differently, arguing that men were “neither villains nor gatekeepers,” but their
unmistakable dominance during a period of “cultural resistance to professionalization for women” is evidence not only of the shortage of women in photography but also of the “failure to recognize women photographers already in the field.” A few women photographers, including Catharine Weed Barnes, Myra E. Sperry, Laura M. Adams, and Gertrude Käsebier, wrote for trade journals in Britain and the United States. At least one, Maria Fitzgibbon, became a publisher and editor in the later nineteenth century. Some, such as American Frances Benjamin Johnston, sought to have women photographers and their work featured in general interest magazines that were edited by men but read by women, thereby acting, in Fleckenstein’s view “to change photography’s status quo.” Such women were scarce on the ground, however, and “the galloping masculinization of photography, as both a profession and an organized recreation,” as Hudgins characterizes the gendering of the field, laid the groundwork for entrenchment and valorization of men photographers and their work in the historical record. In turn, when the first surveys of photography were written, by men alone, in the twentieth century, the erasure of women created critical misrepresentations and misapprehension of photography’s histories and legacies.

Why women in Canada? After Beaumont Newhall published the first American survey of the history of photography, forty-five years elapsed before the release of Rosenblum’s 1994 volume. But in Canada, no comprehensive and critical survey of women in photography followed Ralph Greenhill’s 1965 survey, *Early Photography in Canada.* In fact, no such national or international survey of early women photographers has appeared anywhere since Rosenblum’s. In Canada, it is not for lack of women and their work, relatively small though their numbers were, ranging from 5 to 10 percent before the turn of the twentieth century. Nor are they absent from historical records and collections. Canada is fortunate to have a comparatively rich range and depth of materials gathered in private and public archives across the country. The complex and diverse places, practices, and historical periods in which women photographed in Canada offer researchers an opportunity for comparison and contrast to the activities and experiences of other women photographers at work at the same time around the globe. Census, newspaper, and other archival documents, for example, show that most women who worked in photography during its first century in Canada were not unlike the women who were employed in a range of industries and professions prior to the Second World War. Most were of European descent, francophone and anglophone, from the small business and professional classes, financially responsible for themselves and, often, their family members, married, widowed, or single, generally (publicly) heterosexual but some also lesbian, and ranging in age from mid-teens to late seventies.

Records also show that their access to subject matter, patrons, geographic and business locations, equipment, investment, and the financial means to work in Canada was consistently dictated and constrained by gendered social mores, laws, and practices. Nevertheless, they undertook their professional and personal photography in a variety of ways that proved effective. Nor were they impeded by international boundaries.
FIGURE I.2 | Miss Caroline Bowie, 1869–70. William Notman Studio
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Whereas Mrs. Fletcher travelled to pursue her living with her husband in tow, Edith S. Watson journeyed alone with her camera until she met Victoria Hayward, the woman who became her professional and personal partner. Mary Schäffer’s travel horizons broadened considerably upon widowhood, and opportunity opened for her to travel with other women who were also photographers, most of them single and younger than she in her forties. Studio photographer Geraldine Moodie gained admission to the Arctic when her husband was posted there by the North-West Mounted Police (NWMP). Thirty years later, photojournalist Margaret Bourke-White was assigned by her employer, Life magazine, to cover the governor general of Canada’s tour of the North. Except for Moodie, all these women were Americans who lived in the United States. Yet each of them, and many others, contributed in critical and original ways to Canada’s history of photography.

The variety and range of practices and images made by women show that Canada’s early history of photography is anything but conventional and prove how much broader and far more significant it is than originally conceived. This book, therefore, took shape by following a course set by the women themselves. Their trajectory emerges from the print and visual records of their lives and practices, which in turn coalesce on a foundation of their photographic work and the commonalities and priorities of what figures most prominently in the records of the day. These vary across time but include technology, such as the daguerreotype or the Kodak camera; the type of photography, such as travel, commercial portraiture, or fine art; and where the women worked, whether Newfoundland or Nunavut, Quebec, Winnipeg, Edmonton, or Vancouver Island. The ordering is roughly chronological, as technology, women’s opportunities and interests, and subject matter, though changing gradually over time, also overlapped. For example, those who travelled to make their living with a camera worked at the same time as those who established long-running commercial portrait studios. Professional photographers appeared in public records before amateurs did, and their numbers expanded more readily in part because of the expense, complexity, and rarity of early photography equipment. However, amateurs became increasingly numerous as technology and the concept of who could photograph and what could be photographed widened. Throughout, women also worked behind the scenes, in darkrooms, printing rooms, dressing rooms, and front of house reception and sales rooms. They also worked alongside and competed with men who were hired as photographers and studio employees. Some of these men make an appearance here.

The book is further demarcated by milestones set by researchers since the late 1970s, as summarized in the concluding chapter. It began with the recovery of names and, occasionally, photographs. Meticulous biographical studies followed. And then, the boundaries of how women’s early photographic work was thought about, often mired in nineteenth-century language and attitudes, broke open. Critical analyses asked demanding and disrupting questions about how colonialism and capitalism shaped and constrained what was photographed, who photographed, and how photographs were
seen and consumed. The landscape of study is uneven. Some photographers and images have been thoroughly and thoughtfully studied; others have gained only introductory recognition and consideration as yet.

Collectively, however, as these researchers have discovered, the photographic field for women was wide-ranging, and some of its corners were well populated. This book does not encompass all the female photographers and industry workers who are documented in business and census records. Nor does it consider at length the careers or images of ex-patriots who did not seek a visual or physical touchstone in Canada. Furthermore, it is confined to the century between the invention of the medium and 1940. Within that vast sweep of time and the technological and social changes that mark it, the number of women in photography and their archival traces are substantial enough to be assembled in one introductory survey. The social, technological, and visual disruptions wrought by the Second World War, and women's rapid increase in numbers and the diversity of their photography pursuits, make 1940 a crucial break. Much more history, on both sides of this date, remains to be written.

In Canada, the earliest trace of a woman in photography appears in the 1841 newspaper advertisement placed by Mrs. Fletcher. It is an eye-catching bit of promotion for a nascent technology and a fledgling industry of portrait photography, and for women's place in both. Not only did Fletcher make daguerreotypes, she also taught the craft to other women. This combination of professional practice and gathering of women into the field, in a world of colonialism, industrialization, and disenfranchisement, sets the stage for the themes explored in the book ahead. Chapter 1 follows both Fletcher as she opened her studios in pre-Confederation Canada and eight women who worked during the next fifteen years as daguerreotypists. They positioned themselves in the public sphere as modern, progressive, and ambitious – hardly the place that the inventor of the daguerreotype or nineteenth-century capitalist society imagined for women – and they found a clientele that responded favourably to their work.

Opportunities in photography evolved with the technology itself. The one-of-a-kind, direct-positive daguerreotype, a prized commodity, did not lend itself to demands for mass production or to photographers’ need for a financial return on their investment in equipment, materials, premises, and training. Nor did it prompt customers to return time and again or create many jobs in the field. The mid-1850s, however, saw the rise of a negative–positive process that could generate multiple prints of an image. With that, photography came into its own as a burgeoning industry, especially in urban centres in Quebec, Ontario, and British Columbia, where demand led many more men but still only a handful of women to operate commercial studios. Leading the way in 1854 was Élise L'Heureux Livernois in Quebec City (Figure I.1). As detailed in Chapter 2, she founded a studio that survived for more than a century and had a profound impact on the imagining of Quebec history and culture, an outstanding achievement by any standard.
FIGURE 1.3 | Mrs. R. Maynard Photographed by Lillie Maynard, c. 1880. Lillie Maynard
FIGURE I.4 | Geraldine Moodie, 1910. William Topley Studio
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Women proprietors of commercial studios were few and far between, but women staff photographers were non-existent. In contrast, women were commonly employed as printers, retouchers, sales clerks, and receptionists in the darkrooms and storefronts of galleries. And though men and women photographers would teach their trade to women, women were rarely apprenticed or hired as photographers in nineteenth-century Canadian studios. In Chapter 3, the work environment for women is reconstructed from the business records of William Notman’s Montreal studio and the portraits made of and by its women employees (Figure I.2). These images confirm that the women who worked at Notman’s knew not only how to make photographs, but how to use them in the contexts and constraints of their time to claim social status while challenging the stability of photographic identity, which they knew was as precarious as their employment lives.

During this period, one of Canada’s best-known early women photographers, English immigrant Hannah Maynard, set up shop in Victoria on Vancouver Island, at the western edge of the British Empire (Figure I.3). The subject of Chapter 4, she ran a portrait studio for fifty years that matched the elite studios of central Canada in its documentation and imagining of the Pacific coast and its residents, mainly British, Asian, and Indigenous. Her images represented what the new nation of Canada looked like to (and for) immigrants and settlers living in the region. She also equalled central Canadian studios for quality, variety, and experimentation. Her wares and innovations included seasonal photographic products, criminal mugshots, and surrealist-like self-portraits made by using multiple-exposures. Her studio is distinguished as well by the presence and role of her eldest daughter, Emma, as a photographer. Despite her location in a small and remote market, or perhaps because of the opportunities such a market presented, Maynard also engaged with the photography trade press in the United States, staking a claim for her expertise and experimental image making, modern marketing approach, and professional status among colleagues in Canada and the United States.

Canadian-born photographer Geraldine Moodie, who worked on the western prairies and eastern Arctic, is the focus of Chapter 5 (Figure I.4). Unlike her urban counterparts, Moodie worked in bare-bones conditions. She was isolated as a photographer, but she enjoyed an unprecedented presence at the centre of political interests in national expansionist aspirations on the territories of the Cree and Métis nations, and the Inuit in the Arctic. Ambitious and serious about her occupation, and equipped with visual and technical skills, Moodie produced some of the most significant photographs at, and of, the intersection of Indigenous and settler cultures in Canadian colonial history. These continue to resonate in complex ways in today’s post-colonial reconceptualizing of contemporary nationhood and historical narratives, and massive environmental change to the landscapes that were the subject of her photographs.

During the century that is the focus of this survey, camera and processing technologies changed steadily, and at times substantially, as Moodie noted in her letters. Women’s access
to the medium expanded with each shift, and their use of the medium changed with it. Another industry, shaped by technological change as well, not only attracted women but became inextricably linked with photography: travel. Mrs. Fletcher’s peripatetic photography business could range across international boundaries only because of an expanding infrastructure of steamship and train, a new development at the time. From the early 1870s onward, women journeyed more often and farther afield, as travel modes became more accessible and affordable. Many carried with them increasingly portable cameras and means of processing negatives and prints, while hotels began to offer darkroom facilities to tourists. At this point in the story, Rare Merit begins to encompass a much larger number of women, all lesser known and studied than those in preceding chapters.

Chapter 6 explores the work of women who photographed as they travelled. Their purpose and pursuits align in three groups. The first made their images in service to British colonialism, beginning with English aristocrat Lady Annie Brassey in 1872 and including British women’s advocate Ishbel Marjoribanks Gordon (Lady Aberdeen) in 1892, the year before her husband became governor general of Canada. The second are those who earned their living through travel writing and photography. These include Canadian ex-patriot Agnes Laut of New York state, Agnes Deans Cameron of Victoria and Chicago, Mary Schäffer of Philadelphia, Edith S. Watson of Connecticut, and Clara Dennis of Halifax. New York City portraitist Gertrude Käsebier appears among this number too, with a rare series of landscape shots taken during a visit to Newfoundland, as does ex-patriot Margaret Watkins of New York. Third are two Americans, Margaret Bourke-White and Lorene Squire, whose efforts to forge careers in photojournalism led them to Arctic Canada during the later 1930s (Figure 1.5).

It was in commercial studio photography that women showed in greatest numbers, however. Between 1881 and 1901, their participation in the industry, as studio owners and photographers, grew from about 5.4 percent to 9.4 percent of the photography workforce in Canada. These skilled photographers and determined businesswomen, scattered across the country, worked in isolation from one another. Why they entered the profession appears to have been a matter of opportunity, whether following a family member or being hired to assist in a studio, where they learned the trade before setting up or acquiring their own studio. Many left their jobs upon marriage, but others did not. Instead, they retired in later life, fêted in their local press following long careers. For the vast majority of women whose names appear in city directories, no photographs or business documentation survive in public collections. The studio materials that have been preserved, however, including audio recordings of interviews with two proprietors in Alberta, offer insight into women’s commercial photography, from Prince Edward Island to British Columbia. Among them, Alice Bowness, Pauline (Polly) Ann Henry, Jane Powell, Margaret Henderson, Alvira Lockwood, Éugénie Gagné, Rosetta Carr, Margaret Bryant, Mary Spencer, Helen McCall, Lena Gushul, Gladys Reeves, Elsie Holloway, Sally Wood, Marie–Alice Dumont, and Violet Keene make up the roll call of Chapter 7.
FIGURE 1.5 | Self-Portrait, 1938. Lorene Squire
FIGURE I.6 | Self-Portrait with Grouse and Rifle, c. 1907. Mattie Gunterman
Women’s potential for growth in commercial photography was curtailed in part by three factors: the industry’s systemic blocking of their access to training and work as staff photographers in commercial studios, the social stereotype of women as intuitive and artistic rather than rational and scientific, and the invention of the hand-held Kodak camera. The Kodak was marketed as a hobby item with which women could take snaps of their family lives. But when it came to processing and printing the negatives, they were encouraged to rely on Kodak to “do the rest.” Chapter 8 examines this phenomenon. Among those few who made a name in fine art photography are Minna Keene, a member of the Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain and a British immigrant who settled in Oakville, Ontario, as well as Edith Hallett Bethune of Berwick, Nova Scotia. Small towns are a hallmark of the lives of amateur women photographers who gained prominence in their local communities, from Harriett Amelia May in Enterprise, Ontario, to Mattie Gunterman in the Kootenay mining camps of British Columbia (Figure I.6), settlers Ella Hartt and Caroline Campbell in southern Alberta, aspiring novelist Lucy Maude Montgomery and Kodak fiend Millie Gamble on Prince Edward Island, and gallerist Madge Smith in Fredericton, New Brunswick. Unencumbered by the demands of a commercial enterprise, these amateurs flexed their visual imaginations, choosing what was worthy of shooting and, consequently, who could and should be defined as a skilled photographer and valued contributor to photography’s history.

In 1980, Canadian photographer and early documentarian of women’s photographic history in Canada, Laura Jones, argued that “women took photographs for different reasons ... Whatever their reasons, the photographs of these women live on as a significant historical record.” The evidence presented in the following chapters proves Jones right.
New Advertisements.

MRS. FLETCHER,

Professor and Teacher of the Photogenic Art,

RESPECTFULLY announces that she is prepared
to execute Daguerreotype Miniatures in a style
unsurpassed by any American or European artist.
Those who have never enjoyed an opportunity of ex-
amining the Photogenic process, or a specimen of the
art, cannot form an adequate idea of the extreme per-
fecions, beauty, and wonderful minuteness of the

Daguerreotype Pictures.

These are truly "the pencillings of nature," the pro-
duction of minutes or seconds, and as perfect as the ima-
gination can conceive. As the object looks at the mo-
ment it is taken, so is the representation.

The Plate, a blank void, becomes filled up with all
the fairy lines and graceful symmetry of a picture,
mor perfect than the most exquisite designed engraving,
affording another beautiful example that the art
of man cannot be compared to the works of nature and
of nature's God.

Ladies and Gentlemen are invited to call and examine
specimens of the art, at MRS. BLANCHARD'S, where
MRS. F. is constantly in attendance.

Splendid Fire-Board Prints
The Daguerreans 1841–61

On July 7, 1841, the first woman to work as a professional photographer in either North America or Britain opened shop – in Canada. Mrs. Fletcher, “Professor and Teacher of the Photogenic Art,” announced her enterprise in the Mechanic and Farmer, the local newspaper of Pictou, Nova Scotia (Figure 1.1). Evoking the novelty of the medium, she enticed the skeptical and the curious by praising the “extreme perfections, beauty, and wonderful minuteness” of the daguerreotype.1 A month later, she closed shop and boarded a steamship bound for the St. Lawrence River.2 On August 6, 1841, she reappeared, announcing the opening of her second Canadian portrait studio, this time in Quebec City, centrally located in Upper Town. A month later she again moved on, to Montreal, and again she strategically situated her daguerreotype rooms in the heart of the city, on Place d’Armes next to the Union Bank. In both cities, Fletcher used the same wording for local newspaper readers. “Ladies and Gentlemen,” specifically, were “invited to call.”3

Figure 1.1 | “Mrs. Fletcher.” Mechanic and Farmer, July 7, 1841
No trace remains of Mrs. Fletcher's daguerreotypes, as is true for those produced by her female successors in Canada. This loss creates an immutable gap in our knowledge and understanding of the foundational years of photography as a visual, social, and technological phenomenon. It makes knowledge about early women photographers all the more elusive, for as the images disappeared so too did memory of their creators and their roles in the development of the medium as a visual practice and a business pursuit in Canada. These are some of the questions that can be explored, despite the loss of visual artifacts, because Mrs. Fletcher made the fortuitous decision to advertise her service and wares. Who were they, and where did they operate? How and why did they enter the profession, and how did they fare? What did their images look like, and why did they look as they did? Who were their clientele and who were not? How and where did their daguerreotypes circulate, and what meaning did they create for those who viewed them? In what ways did women and men photographers interact in their new commercial profession?

Mrs. Fletcher's advertisements offer a slice of insight into women's strategies, experiences, and significance in the early history, practice, and influence of photography in an industrializing, colonizing, and capitalist world. The manner in which she ran her business, the challenges she faced, and whom she targeted as clientele can be gleaned and analyzed. There is also much that cannot be known and questions that cannot be fully answered but that nonetheless need to be kept in mind when drawing conclusions about the practices of early women photographers. How did Mrs. Fletcher and her colleagues, both women and men, view her own and other women's opportunities and barriers? How did she and other women negotiate their gender with patrons and with colleagues? What were the social profiles of those who patronized her rooms? And, how much money did she make? She described her business as “lucrative” and offered to instruct “enterprising young ladies” in its secrets. Was she indeed as financially successful as she claimed? Her ads are also more broadly instructive, as they identify a range of social, economic, and aesthetic factors that can be explored to determine how such factors informed or were perhaps themselves shaped by women's practices in photography between 1840 and 1940.

Fletcher's business was transnational, competitive, and entrepreneurial. It was public and professional; the work of making a daguerreotype, let alone running a business (marketing, building a clientele, delivering a final product to positive response), was complex and specialized. The product— a portrait— was at first a luxury item but soon became a meaningful discretionary expense for a burgeoning middle class. In time, it became an indispensable tool for claiming and portraying social status. Market demand for both the service and the goods produced by daguerreotypists grew as exposure to the new medium spread, in part through the work and words of photographers like Mrs. Fletcher. Her business, and by extension Fletcher herself, were positioned in the public mind as modern and progressive, engaged as she was with technology, travel, advertising, and education. The “professor and teacher of the photogenic art” was a literate woman
who was intelligent enough to master the technology and wealthy enough to pay for the necessary training and equipment. She was also a person of ambition and aspiration to financial return from her own professional pursuits, an especially challenging objective for women in mid-nineteenth-century North America. Furthermore, she not only promoted the medium to consumers but enabled other women to take it up as an occupation by teaching them the process. And so, though she was the first woman photographer in the profession, she was not alone for long.

THE INVENTION OF PHOTOGRAPHY

The invention of the daguerreotype in 1839 and, with it, photography, opened an entirely new way of seeing and representing, exploring, and organizing the world. New knowledge—scientific, social, economic, political—could be sought, documented, preserved, imagined, and even created through the novel medium. Very much a product of its time, it was lauded as momentous. Edgar Allan Poe conveyed the sense of the era when he described photography as “the most important, and perhaps the most extraordinary, triumph of modern science.”4 In 1857, British essayist Lady Elizabeth Eastlake treated North American readers to a wide-ranging overview and analysis of the growth, innovations, and impact of photography. She set out a socially centred account of its breadth, complexity, and application. “Photography,” Eastlake observed, “has become a household word and a household want; is used alike by art and science, by love, business, and justice; is found in the most sumptuous saloon, and in the dingiest attic.”5

The invention of photography was long coming, and when it finally materialized at the end of the first Industrial Revolution (c. 1760–1840), it proved a critical, disruptive, and enduring breakthrough. The Industrial Revolution was an unprecedented period in human history. Technological developments provoked rapid change across the spectrum of European and North American societies, including means of communication such as photography, along with mechanization, new materials, and energy systems. Massive changes occurred in political economies and social and cultural infrastructures, including expansion of financial means to spawn a new “middle” class of real property owners, merchants, and professionals and their families. Photography was an invention that captured minds and imaginations and, in time, touched everyday lives.

The daguerreotype process created a finely detailed, life-like three-dimensional-looking image on a polished metal plate. Its inventor introduced it by showing samples of images at the Académie des Sciences in Paris in early January 1839. Two weeks later in London, William Henry Fox Talbot announced his invention of a different kind of process to capture an image. Called a photogenic drawing, it did not use a camera or a lens. Instead, it permanently fixed a negative image created by light shining on and through an object, such as a leaf, placed directly on sensitized paper. Not until September 1840 did Talbot announce his own camera-based method, called the calotype, a negative-positive paper-based process that he patented in February 1841. It laid the
groundwork for the industrialization and massive consumer uptake of photography, but not until the mid-1850s. France and Britain were arch competitors in scientific, industrial, and humanist discovery, and their race to be first made the swiftly succeeding announcements of Daguerre and Talbot no coincidence. Newspaper stories about both processes reached Quebec City, Kingston, and Halifax between March and May 1839, but it was daguerreotyping that North Americans embraced first and most decisively, especially in the United States.

Two events were crucial to the successful launch of photography, and especially daguerreotyping, as a scientific, industrial, commercial, and artistic enterprise, and to women’s entrance into the field. One was the French government’s acquisition of the rights to Daguerre’s process, which it then made freely available everywhere except in Britain, its economic and imperial rival, and thus in principle, but not in practice, in Britain’s colonies, including British North America. Daguerre’s invention was the outcome of twenty-five years of collaborative and competitive experimentation to fix permanently the image rendered in a camera obscura, a wooden box with a pinhole opening. This early camera projected light reflecting from the scene in front of it onto a back wall of frosted glass, which could then be traced on paper, and it assisted artists such as Daguerre himself in drawing accurate renderings of scenes. Free use of daguerreotype technology spurred international adoption of the process. Market demand stimulated experimentation and innovation in photographic processes, as well as the rapid expansion of the medium into commercial, scientific, and political applications. Free use also provided readier entrée to the field for middle- and upper-class European and North American women, whose financial means, social independence, and access to capital were tightly restricted by gendered conventions in the era of industrial capitalism. In England especially, where both Talbot’s calotype and the daguerreotype were constrained by patents and licensing fees until 1853 and 1854, women had even lesser and later access, leaving the door open for Mrs. Fletcher to be credited as the first known professional female daguerreotypist in North America.

The other crucial event in the launch of photography was Daguerre's explanation of his process to a joint assembly of the Académie des Sciences and the Académie des Beaux-Arts in Paris in August 1839. From the beginning, photography was branded as an art born of science, an intimate connection that has been critical to its histories and legacies ever since. The concept of its purity as an art form or its utility as a tool of science has been picked apart over the decades to little avail and less purpose, but its ubiquity in human activity and the complexity of its roles and impact on human affairs since its invention is indisputable. Its integrated origin in science and in art – if science is understood as the chemical means of picture making and art as the consequence of the human eye and hand by which an image was made – was a matter of course rather than discomfort in the mid-nineteenth century. In 1841, applying the art and science to commercial ends, Mrs. Fletcher fashioned herself not only as a teacher of the "photogenic art" but as a daguerreotypist whose style surpassed “any American or European artist.”
WOMEN AND PHOTOGRAPHY

When Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre presented his process to the French public through his learned scientific and artistic colleagues, he invited women to try it, at least those of the “leisured class” (who lived on income derived from capital rather than their own labour). Daguerre was an entrepreneur. He had invented the diorama, also a light-based medium, albeit one that depended on the movement and change of light to simulate the effect of nature rather than fixing the effect at a single moment in time. His successful diorama business in Paris strived to produce immersive spectacles of nature that were as transient as nature itself. In contrast, he and others were interested in permanently capturing the effect of light, an ambition that took him twenty-five years to realize. In 1829, he had partnered with Nicéphore Niépce, who had invented the heliograph, the first process that permanently retained an image made from light exposure, and who produced the first photographic picture on a pewter plate using a camera obscura in 1826 or 1827. Niépce died in 1833, but Daguerre continued to build on his work with Niépce’s son, Isidore, to speed up exposure times (from days to minutes) and to better stabilize the final image so as to reduce, if not fully prevent, fading over time. Daguerre and Isidore Niépce accepted life pensions from the French government in exchange for the patent to their processes. Daguerre clearly understood the commercial potential of his invention. Perhaps to that end, he downplayed its complexity and instability, presenting it as a fast and simple chemical process that was within the reach and ability of his leisured, literate, moneyed audience:

By this process, without any idea of drawing, without any knowledge of chemistry and physics, it will be possible to take in a few minutes the most detailed views, the most picturesque scenery, for the manipulation is simple and does not demand any special knowledge, only care and a little practice is necessary in order to succeed perfectly.

Everyone, with the aid of the DAGUERREOTYPE, will make a view of his castle or country-house ... Even portraits will be made.

The leisured class will find it a most attractive occupation, and although the result is obtained by chemical means, the little work it entails will greatly please ladies.⁶

In referring to the leisured class, who filled its time with pleasurable pursuits, Daguerre may not have imagined that middle-class women would use his invention to make a living. However, it is the activities of those who did, such as Mrs. Fletcher, that populate the historical record today. Their absolute numbers, like their share of the profession, were small. In the United States, fewer than 2 percent of daguerreotypists were women. That fact alone makes them and their work a vital component of the history of photography.⁷
In 2008, Graham Garrett compiled an exhaustive list of the individuals who were associated with Canadian daguerreotyping between 1839 and 1871, from those who operated a camera to those who sold equipment, wrote articles, or painted from or on daguerreotypes. Of the approximately 560 people whom he documented, 20 (or 3.4 percent) were women. All 20 worked professionally, either independently or as part of a family business. Like negative space in a photograph, women’s work occupies the gaps and the margins in the written history of photography, but also like negative space, it is essential to seeing the whole picture.

Mrs. Fletcher is the first woman identified to have practiced camera-based photography independently, professionally, and commercially in either Britain or North America. In Britain, botanist Anna Atkins (1799–1871) is credited as the first person to use a photographic method, the cyanotype, to illustrate a book — her privately published *Photographs of British Algae: Cyanotype Impressions*, of 1843. Constance Fox Talbot (née Mundy, 1811–80) is often credited as the first woman to make a photograph. She did not use a camera. Instead, in 1839 she used photogenic drawing to produce a direct-to-paper image of a poetry manuscript. Samples of both women’s work survive today.

In contrast, as mentioned above, none of Mrs. Fletcher’s daguerreotypes survive, which means that the range and quality of her work cannot be described or assessed. Daguerreotypes and the cases in which they were enclosed to protect their fragile surfaces from dirt and light did not initially accommodate a way of recording the name of the photographer. An alternative means of locating and identifying such work is through written records, such as letters or bills of sale, naming sitters who patronized a studio (or rooms or galleries, as daguerreotype businesses were first called) and whose portraits may still survive. Over the years, a small amount of such documentation has come to light for Mrs. Fletcher. Thus, we know that she photographed at least one of the most significant public figures of the day in Quebec, lawyer and politician Louis-Hippolyte LaFontaine, a driving force in the union of Upper and Lower Canada in 1841. Commissioning such a work, in which LaFontaine was seated with his wife, Adèle Berthelot, is an indicator of the value.
accorded early portrait photography and its role in recording or commemorating significant moments in individual lives. Mrs. Fletcher and her pictures were also known to George-Étienne Cartier, a colleague of LaFontaine, who on August 25, 1841, wrote of her as “un bon Daguerréotipeur.”

Both practitioner and teacher, Fletcher encouraged others to follow in her footsteps. She first offered to teach daguerreotyping “to enterprising young ladies” in Quebec City, a service she advertised in the Quebec Gazette and Quebec Mercury (Figures 1.2 and 1.3). In Montreal, Fletcher fine-tuned her pitch to women (Figure 1.4).

It is not clear when Fletcher began to earn a living from daguerreotyping. The famed Boston daguerreotypist Albert Southworth, who opened his studio in 1843, reportedly noted in an unpublished memoir that she had learned the process through experimentation in nearby Cambridgeport, Massachusetts, in 1840. In the spring of 1840, the Massachusetts Historical Society in Boston hosted a demonstration of daguerreotyping by François Gouraud, who had been trained by Daguerre. Perhaps Mrs. Fletcher was among his audience and was motivated to try her hand at it. At best, she could have been daguerreotyping for only a year or so before her arrival in Canada, certainly not enough time to prove the long-term return on a major expenditure in an untried field. Given that she may have mastered her trade by trial and error and that she was not the only Bostonian who was interested in learning photography, she may have encountered stiff competition and limited opportunities, especially for a woman. Alternatively, she may have enjoyed immediate success as she travelled to various cities and potential patrons at a time when demand in those places was new and the number of practitioners few. The cachet of being from a storied American city may have added prestige to a commission. Was a woman practitioner also an attraction for patrons, as either novelty or scandal? Or was the connection, given the newness of the process, seen as normal? Historical evidence is too thin to say.
MRS. FLETCHER AND DAGUERREOTYPING IN CANADA

Fletcher was not the first American daguerrean to come to Canada. Nor was the daguerreotype unseen there prior to her arrival. Canada’s earliest example was, as might be expected, a view of Niagara Falls, already the country’s most famous and most popular destination for British travellers and armchair tourists. English visitor Hugh Lee Pattinson, a chemist and metallurgist, photographed the Horseshoe Falls in April 1840.11 His image is memorable, reminiscent of drawings and engravings published by earlier travellers but conveying an unprecedented sense of the scope and energy of the falls. The view is framed from an elevated – and necessary – distance so that the fixed lens could encompass the vast scene. Pattinson was not the first to choose that particular viewpoint. He set up his camera on the terrace of a hotel overlooking Niagara. The falls fill the mid-ground, a blur of water and spray moving too fast for the lens to freeze in motion, given the lengthy exposure time needed, before sweeping past in the river cut into the curving landscape. Standing on the escarpment in the foreground is the diminutive silhouette of a man, the spectator’s companion and proxy observer in the monumental landscape and a conventional feature of Niagara images.

Pattinson’s view, with some modifications, was published in Paris in 1841 as an aquatint etching, one in a series entitled *Nouvelles Excursions Daguerriennes*, which were derived from daguerreotype views made around the world.12 This trace of his work is of further significance in the study of women photographers, as professional view photography became a popular and important sector of the Canadian industry by the late 1850s, but, as will be seen in subsequent chapters, it was initially a predominantly male purview. Not until the late 1880s did women and their cameras make their way into the Canadian landscape in notable numbers. Without a single known daguerreotype made by a woman in Canada, we cannot know whether they made landscape views, though it would be surprising if they did not, given the market for such images. Nor can we know what views they might have chosen, how their images looked, and where they circulated. Did a woman ever stand in as the figure in the landscape? Were the views monumental or intimate? Popular or off the beaten track? Sold to customers or reproduced by publishers? Daguerreotypers promoted portraiture in their advertisements, but any work they may have done outside the studio went unrecorded.

The first commercial daguerreotypists to advertise their services in Canada were business partners Andrew Halsey and Henry Sadd of New York, who announced their “Daguerreotype Rooms” in Montreal and Quebec City in local newspapers during the autumn of 1840. Mrs. Fletcher followed the next summer, as did a few more men, appropriating the terrain of itinerant miniaturists who, from the late eighteenth century, had roamed the British colonies seeking commissions for their watercolour portraits on ivory. How or why these American photography entrepreneurs saw opportunity so far afield is not readily apparent, given the distance, cost, and comparatively small urban centres they visited. Conversely, these towns and cities possessed growing industrial, mercantile,
polical, and financial sectors and middle-class populations to whom the photographic portrait was pitched as a commodity that resonated with their status and ambitions. These towns, provinces, and colonies were also becoming better linked by modernized transportation networks. Steam-powered ships had been launched in Canada only five years before Mrs. Fletcher voyaged from Pictou to Quebec City. The next fifty years saw the establishment of a web of ship and train routes connecting the Maritimes across the continent and through the Rocky Mountains to the west coast. Photography developed in tandem and expanded geographically as women and men carried their cameras and darkrooms along modern transportation and economic networks.

First, however, the daguerreotype offered new concepts for capturing and portraying the appearance of sitters as well as something of their essence or status or character, much as drawing, painting, and sculpture had done in the past. It also altered the possibilities for display and distribution of one’s portrait and additional means of money making for the photographer. Whereas the portraits created by artists were rarefied and costly commodities, the photographic portrait was the product of a skilled technical trade, one that created competition for employment in a burgeoning market. The expansion of the means of portraiture and the power of consumers to represent themselves as they chose was culturally disruptive. No longer was portraiture the preserve of a moneyed elite, a means of demonstrating heritage, exclusivity, substance, status, legacy, and social endurance; though a small personal portrait was not inexpensive, it could now be purchased or, better, invested in by those of middle-class means or aspirations. The expansion of the portrait market through photography, especially after 1855 when prices fell substantially thanks to new technology, has been described as the “democratization” of portraiture. This was not really so, although the sentiment is not without merit in conveying the broader reach and social impact of the medium than had been obtained by drawing, painting, or sculpture. Portraiture remained thoroughly class-bound and out of reach (if not out of interest) for those who occupied lower economic brackets, such as domestic, rural, and industrial labourers. The photographic portrait was as much a contributor to class demarcation and status as it was a tool of capitalism’s middle class.

For the rare sitters who were not of European origin, including Indigenous, Black, and Asian patrons in North America and Europe, having their portraits taken was an especially significant marker to claim and document competitive social positions. Access to the practice and profession of photography was similarly circumscribed, not just by gender and class, but also by racial categories. Only women of European heritage are known to have worked as professional photographers in Canada prior to 1940. Among men daguerreans between 1840 and the mid-1860s, only two non-Europeans are known thus far. David B. Wawanosh, the first professional photographer in Sarnia, Ontario, advertised his daguerreotype gallery in the newly established local paper the Lambton Shield in 1852 (the paper was edited by Alexander Mackenzie, later Canada’s second prime minister). A member of the Chippewa St. Clair Indian band (now the Aamjiwnaang First
Nation), Wawanosh was its last hereditary chief. J.T. Fisher, a Black daguerreotypist (and cook), opened his business in Toronto in September 1849.

At first, commentators found the daguerreotype difficult to describe. “The pencil of nature” and “the mirror with a memory” became popular catch phrases to convey its wonder. Never before had an image been made almost instantaneously, at most within minutes during the early days of portrait photography, and retained permanently. Nor had the subject ever looked more realistic – as if viewed in a mirror. The daguerreotype had to be seen to be believed. It also required marketing to persuade patrons to try it. Mrs. Fletcher’s well-considered advertisements captured it all. However much overstated her descriptions may sound today when a daguerreotype is viewed alongside a digital photograph, such imagery was unprecedented in 1841.

A daguerreotype was made by the reflection of light from the subject, at first through a pinhole opening and later a lens mounted in a light-sealed box holding a polished silver-plated copper plate that had been coated with iodine to make it light sensitive. During the early years, an exposure lasted from seconds up to a few minutes, depending on the size of the plate, the brightness of the day, and the sensitivity of the chemicals. A full-size plate was 6.5 x 8.5 inches, best suited for landscape views on sunny days. Half (4.25 x 5.5), quarter (3.25 x 4.25), sixth (2.75 x 3.25), ninth (2.0 x 2.5), and sixteenth (1.375 x 1.625) sizes were common, the smallest ones especially so for portraiture, given the shorter exposure time required for the smaller surface and the lesser cost. Sitters were required to remain motionless and to refrain from blinking despite the bright light. Failure to do so would blur the figure and depict the eyes as closed, so the faster the exposure, the better. After exposure, the plate was removed from the camera in a darkroom and treated or “developed” with mercury vapour to stop the action of the light. It was then “fixed” with a salt solution to make the image permanent.

When well made, the daguerreotype’s sharply focused and detailed image appears to float on the mirrored surface, coming into view only when held at a precise angle so as to catch the light. Most are small enough to be cupped in the hand, making an intimate connection with the viewer. As Mrs. Fletcher explained, nature, rather than an imperfect human artist, did the work of picture making. However, a photographed landscape or face did not look exactly as they would to the human eye. The plate did not portray colour, and like a mirror, it literally reflected its subject matter so that a portrait, for example, depicted how a sitter saw herself in a mirror rather than in reverse as others would perceive her.

Like painted or drawn portraits, the daguerreotype was unique; because it was made directly onto the plate rather than exposed first as a negative and then printed as a positive image, it could not be reproduced. It was small, intimate, and fragile. It could also remain sensitive to light exposure. If the fixing process were not properly conducted and the finished plate protected from light, it would continue to darken until the image disappeared altogether. In the early years, consumers commonly complained about this failing. To help prevent it and to protect the polished surface from abrasion
and fingerprints, the plate was matted, covered with glass, framed, and enclosed in a leather-bound case that was readily opened to view with the slip of a latch.\textsuperscript{15}

After leaving Montreal, Mrs. Fletcher eventually resurfaced in Charleston, South Carolina, but not until February 1842, when she advertised her Daguerreotype Gallery in the \textit{Charleston Courier}. Hers was the first such gallery operated by a woman in that state. Where she was or whether she worked between the date of her planned departure from Montreal around October 8, 1841 (we do not know exactly when she left) and the appearance of her Charleston ad has not yet come to light. At the same time, on October 9, Charles Taylor, who is believed to have been the first professional daguerreotypist in Charleston, working there briefly from December 1840 to January 1841, announced that he had purchased daguerreotyping equipment from Mrs. Fletcher earlier that month.\textsuperscript{16} This raises the question of whether she also earned income as an equipment distributor or, alternatively, was without equipment for a time, and whether her interaction with Taylor encouraged her to relocate to Charleston as a promising market. What we can deduce is that she still had sufficient means to move on to another city and to place a newspaper notice. Perhaps she had set up shop somewhere between Montreal and Charleston, or perhaps she took time away from photography during the shorter and greyer winter days in the northeastern states.

In Charleston, Fletcher revised her advertising tactics. This time, she concentrated on the quality of her work rather than the daguerreotype itself, and her ad was more succinct and more competitive: “Daguerreotype miniatures executed in a very superior manner by Mrs. Fletcher, 149 Meeting Street. Charges including case or frame, $5.” This was not an insignificant price, amounting to $151 US in 2019.\textsuperscript{17} Advertising also tells us something of Fletcher’s personal life. A separate notice in the same newspaper, as occurred in Quebec City and Montreal, reveals that her Daguerreotype Gallery shared its space with a Phrenology Office operated by her husband, John Fletcher, who in 1839 in Boston had published \textit{Mirror of Nature, Part I: Presenting a Brief Sketch of the Science of Phrenology}. He gave evening lectures and offered private examinations and written descriptions of individuals’ character and abilities (based upon study of the size and shape of the skull) daily between 9:00 a.m. and 2:00 p.m., the same hours that Mrs. Fletcher worked, according to the invitation to take daguerreotyping lessons with her.

She did not work for or with her husband. Nor did she call herself Mrs. John Fletcher, discarding the common North American custom of identifying a married woman by her husband’s name. Using her own first name would have signalled widowhood. The absence of her first name means that she is traceable only through the public records that relate to her husband, which have not yielded any information. She took up daguerreotyping at about the time his book was published, and as he embarked on the lecture circuit, she was equipped to earn her living while travelling as well. The fact that her name was not subsumed under his or omitted entirely from business directories or other documentation has proven an advantage for her legacy. Historians have not
been led or allowed to presume, on the basis of scanty documentation, that Mr. Fletcher was the professional who had taught his wife to work in his studio. This was the initial assumption (in some quarters continuing) for Élise Livernois, Hannah Maynard, and Geraldine Moodie, among others, all of whom trained their husbands.

Mrs. Fletcher’s advertisement in the Charleston Courier ran for just a few weeks, as it had in Quebec City and Montreal. And then, she vanished into history. It is possible that she placed announcements in town newspapers where she next visited, which researchers have not yet detected. Her disappearance from history is not unusual, of course, shared as it is by most women who worked in nineteenth-century photography, in Canada and elsewhere.

**MRS. FLETCHER’S SUCCESSORS**

Fletcher was succeeded by eight female daguerreotypists who worked in Canada over the next fifteen years. Their activities laid the groundwork for constructing an early history of camera women in Canada. Little is known of them, much less than about Mrs. Fletcher’s business, outside of what is revealed by local business directories, newspaper advertisements, and the 1861 census. These sources offer a glimpse into the evolution of photography as a technology and business in Canada, and the foothold that women claimed, during the industry’s earliest years.

All eight women had two things in common: the technical knowledge, skills, and equipment required to make daguerreotypes, and confidence in their abilities – or at least the daring – to compete in the commercial market. They operated as small and independent business owners, without partners or staff. How they financed their enterprises is unknown, but in the world of commercial capital at the time, family support from parents (including mothers, as will be seen in a future chapter), siblings, or husbands, as loans, gifts, or inheritances, would have been essential. Three of the women were married, three were single, and two widowed. Those who advertised in the newspaper presented themselves as modern, competent, and well equipped. The sameness of their advertising strategies suggests knowledge of such matters elsewhere, which is overtly claimed on occasion. There are variations among the women and their practices as well. Though all were in business for only a short time in comparison to the women photographers of subsequent decades, the documented presence of their studios ranges from just months to eight years. Only one was itinerant, as Fletcher had been; the rest were based in Canada and were immigrants themselves or the Canadian-born children of immigrants. They worked in various cities and provinces, including larger urban centres such as Quebec City and Halifax, and small towns such as Kemptville, Kingston, and St. Andrews. All left textual traces; if any of their daguerreotypes have survived, they are not known to us.

Like Mrs. Fletcher, Miss Sarah Holland came from Boston. She visited St. Andrews, New Brunswick, in early October 1845, where she made portrait photographs for three
dollars apiece. Holland is believed to have learned daguerreotyping from Albert Southworth. She supplied miniatures, the smaller plate sizes that required least exposure and were most intimate to view. She promoted her work in the local newspaper (Figure 1.5), the only historical evidence of her occupation, as modern and well made. After she left St. Andrews, she reappeared in other venues, including various Massachusetts and New Hampshire towns in 1845 and 1846.

In 1847, the first Canadian-born woman daguerrean – Ann Martyn – and the first to establish a studio at a fixed address opened for business in Quebec City. Born in Quebec in 1808, she was also the first woman daguerrean whose occupation became entwined in public records with that of her husband. Her mother was Frances Richardson, also born in Quebec, and her father, John Lamblyn, originally from Suffolk, England, was the harbour master of the Port of Quebec. In 1826, Ann Lamblyn married John Martyn, a Quebec City watchmaker (according to their marriage record), who later sold chronometers and watches at Martyn's Chronometer Depot. Like Mrs. Fletcher, Ann Martyn shared premises with her husband's business. The first advertisements for Martyn's Chronometer Depot and for daguerreotypes being made at the same address appeared in the Quebec Morning Chronicle on May 22, 1847 (Figure 1.6). Like Sarah Holland, Martyn addressed known concerns about the shortcomings of daguerreotypes, including the problems posed by low-light conditions, the instability of the image when exposed to varying levels of light and humidity, and the lack of colour.

The ad mentions neither the qualifications nor the name of the photographer, and Ann Martyn's name did not appear in a public record until she became a widow. In 1850, following the death of her husband, she assumed ownership of both enterprises under her own name. From 1850 to 1853, the Quebec City commercial directory lists her business as a “chronometer and watch depot, and daguerreotypist.” In the 1854
directory, however, she is no longer given as a daguerrean, but solely as operating the Chronometer Depot, under the new name of “Mrs. Harrison, late Mrs. Martyn.” Perhaps growing competition and more choice for Quebec City consumers of photographic portraits prompted Martyn to concentrate on chronometers.

In October 1853, at the time that Ann Martyn left the daguerreotyping business, Miss C. Cochrane opened shop at 55 St. John Street in Upper Town, Quebec. By this time, technology and the public’s knowledge of the medium had evolved, and Cochrane was prepared to appeal to that market. As she explained to readers of the Quebec Mercury, she could provide any number of prints (Figure 1.7).

Presenting her work as modern, much like Sarah Holland nearly a decade earlier, and herself as well trained in the United States, competent in the most recent technologies, and employing quality instruments, Cochrane also tied the making of a daguerreotype to its reputation as a contemporary way of depicting oneself. Photographed group portraits were not common prior to this point. Exposure times were lengthy enough to preclude using the large plates that could render the details of faces in a group. The long sitting times increased the risk that subjects would move or blink, thus marring the finished image. But exposure times were now shrinking markedly, making such portraiture viable. By definition, the group portrait entailed a need for multiple copies, and a method was soon invented to make that possible.

The mid-1850s marked a tipping point in photography as a technology, an enterprise, and an aesthetic. Sharper lenses, the introduction of glass plates rather than metal as the platform for exposure, improved chemical processes, and finer-grained papers, coupled with demand, enabled the advent of not just multiple production, but mass generation of images. These developments broadened opportunities for employment in the industry and both the number and percentage of women working in it began to climb. Miss Cochrane, who was at work when the scales tipped in favour of glass negative and paper print technologies, remained in business until at least 1855, the last time her name appeared as a daguerreotype artist in the Quebec City directory (Figure 1.8). In 1857, McLaughlin’s Quebec Directory listed her only as the proprietor of a “Bible Depository.”

Why Cochrane and her predecessors disappeared from the record as daguerreans, we do not know. Demand and business in Quebec, and women’s participation in the field, were certainly increasing. For example, Élise Livernois, whose work is discussed in
FIGURE 1.8 | “Daguerreotype Artists.” McLaughlin’s Quebec Directory, 1854–55
the next chapter, founded her Quebec City studio in 1857, which remained open for well over a century. Perhaps Cochrane decided not to learn or invest in the new glass and paper technologies. Other scenarios could include financial loss, illness, or as appears to be the case with Martyn, choosing to concentrate on different business pursuits.

Sometimes, a woman’s name simply stopped appearing in a business directory because of listing practices that favoured males as heads of households, as happened to Mrs. A.A. Coombs, Ontario’s first-known professional woman photographer. Coombs worked in Kingston from 1851 until at least 1861. In that year, the Canadian census recorded that she had been born in Milverton, Ontario, and was forty years of age. It gave her name as “A.A. Coombs” and her occupation as “photographer.” Her husband, “W.H.,” was listed as a teacher. They had three children, a daughter aged nineteen and two sons aged fifteen and thirteen.

A decade earlier, in March 1851, Mrs. Coombs had placed a prominent and descriptive advertisement in Kingston’s Daily British Whig:

**SKYLIGHT DAGUERREOTYPES!**

*MRS. COOMBS* having the best light possible and availing herself of all the latest improvements in PHOTOGRAPHY, takes LIKENESSES, pronounced by the most competent judges to be far superior to any others that have been taken in Kingston.

*As she never exhibits any Pictures but those of her own taking; Persons can judge for themselves by examining Specimens either at her own Rooms, opposite the Convent, Bagot Street; or at Mrs. Cridiford’s Hair Dressing Rooms, King Street.*

*Kingston, March 5, 1851.*

Coombs clearly had stiff competition, as an even longer and more effusive ad for the Daguerrean Gallery of Becker and Griffing appeared just two days later, seemingly in response. The business environment appears to have included some misleading and shady practices, or so Coombs implied when she claimed that her sample daguerreotypes were indeed her own. Three years later, between September 13, 1854, and November 6, 1855, she advertised more simply with a business card (Figure 1.9), describing herself as a “Daguerrean Artist” and providing her address. She may have been spurred to place this ad as a precaution, given that a “New Daguerrean Gallery” operated by men partners “Wescott and Sheldon” announced its opening on September 5, 1854.

Despite Coombs’s years in business, the 1857–58 Kingston directory printed two entries for her husband, William J., at 25 Bagot Street, but none for her. The first described him as the proprietor of an English, commercial, and mercantile academy; the second noted that he owned a daguerrean gallery. Perhaps the second listing was supposed to have been under Mrs. Coombs’s name, as her newspaper ads and the 1861 census
confirm that she was the photographer in the family. Her absence from the directory should not be read as withdrawal from work, even as her husband supplanted her in a public record. Normally, a married woman’s name did not appear in a directory unless she had her own occupation. Even then, as records show, her name was not automatically included. The names of single and widowed women did normally appear, although absences occurred as well and even occasionally for men. Historical documentation and gendered social practices can cloud the veracities of women’s employment and public roles. Absence from public records cannot be read as absence from professional life.

Little is known about two more women who made their living as daguerreotypists during the 1850s, but the rarity of women in the field makes even the slightest evidence useful. Between 1853 and 1858, a Miss Kelly, born in 1833 in Gaspé, Quebec, operated a daguerrean and ambrotype room in Kemptville, Ontario.22 (An ambrotype was a positive image made by placing a black backing on a glass negative.) The 1861 census recorded that she lived in Kemptville with her parents and four siblings, but none of the Kelly children, aged nine to twenty-eight, were listed as employed. In 1853, Miss Kelly would have been twenty, unusually young to have acquired the skills and resources to operate a studio of her own, but she may well have obtained training in her youth while living elsewhere in Canada, as her parents moved between Quebec, New Brunswick, and Ontario. Her father was a newspaper publisher, then known as a printer, and perhaps saw opportunity in a daguerreotyping business in Kemptville, as no other daguerreans worked in the city during the years the family lived there. Farther west, in Hamilton, Mrs. J. Thompson worked with her husband between 1854 and 1862 in a business called the First Premium Daguerrean Rooms. Little more is known of her or the business other than that one of her daguerreotypes won a prize at the 1855 Upper Canada Provincial Exhibition in Coburg.23

The record is much richer for Mrs. Jane Carroll, who in 1852 established a studio in her Halifax home. She began in rented quarters on the upper floor of a house at 50 Granville Street but soon moved to the top floor of a house on the corner of Prince and Barrington Streets. Carroll first announced her enterprise in the local newspaper,
the *British Colonist*, on September 23, 1852 (Figure 1.10). She emphasized quality and a contemporary look.

No daguerreotype attributable to Jane Carroll is known, but the ads she placed in the Halifax paper between July 1852 and January 1854 are evocative remnants of her life and practice, much like those of Mrs. Fletcher. Prior to opening her studio, Carroll was a teacher and an artist.\(^{24}\) We do not know where or how she gained experience in daguerreotyping, or whether her studio was a financial success. Her advertisements reveal, however, that she travelled to the United States and the West Indies. It is likely that she was a self-supporting widow, as she coupled her married title with her own first name or initial, rather than that of her husband, as was the convention for widows. In addition to her studio, Carroll opened a private primary school, “Mrs. Carroll’s Seminary” (Figure 1.11). There, she gave instruction in writing, reading, and elocution between 8:00 and 10:00 a.m., and from 6:00 to 8:00 p.m. – outside the prime hours of daylight needed to make daguerreotypes. This begs the question of how, or whether, she was able to manage both a daguerreotyping business and a day school, as well as evening classes. Her competitor A.H. Lincoln offered “pictures taken in any weather, from 7½ A.M. to 6 P.M.” at his studio on Prince Street, and D.J. Smith operated his Granville Street gallery between 9:00 and 6:00. Moreover, Smith taught daguerreotyping: “any person wishing to learn the Art can have a good opportunity on reasonable terms.”\(^{25}\)

Jane Carroll occasionally ran concise business card ads in the *British Colonist* (Figure 1.12). In late June and early July 1853, she advertised “A Rare Chance” to purchase daguerreotyping equipment, with “Instructions given in the art if required.”\(^{26}\) During early July, she also notified sitters that they could retrieve unclaimed photos she had acquired from a former Halifax daguerrean, Thomas A.
Cleverdon, who had been in business there between December 1848 and June 1851. How Carroll financed and operated her photography business is not evident, but her ads suggest that she may have acquired Cleverdon’s business or parts of it, such as his inventory and perhaps his equipment, and may have intended to liquidate her own enterprise in late summer 1853. She advertised her gallery until July 21, 1853, her school until mid-August of that year, and her writing classes into late 1854. She also advertised daguerreotyping and penmanship in Charlottetown in June and July 1854. She was not alone in Charlottetown that summer. George P. Tanton, “Practical Daguerreotypist,” mounted vigorous competition, literally alongside Mrs. Carroll in the local newspaper (Figure 1.13). And then, less than two years after she first appeared, and like Mrs. Fletcher and every other woman daguerreotypist in Canada and their images, she faded into history.

PURSUING THE PROFESSION

Between 1841 and 1855, professionalism – that is, being qualified, up-to-date, skilled, and experienced – and self-identification as artists or as practitioners of “the art of” daguerreotyping are recurring motifs in the ads of women daguerreans in Canada, from Mrs. Fletcher to Miss Cochrane, Mrs. Coombs to Mrs. Carroll. In “Professionalism as Critical Concept and Historical Process for Women and Art in Canada,” art historian Kristina Huneault warns that, when studying women artists, artisans, and photographers, “to participate in the methodological privileging of professionalism is ... to play with intellectual fire.” This is because the very concept of professionalism has been used historically to exclude women and their work. To employ professionalism as a scaffolding for analysis risks further exclusion of their work, significant though it nonetheless was; conversely, doing so can open avenues of insight that are otherwise hidden. Huneault’s warning resonates when we focus on women in Canadian photography. During the profession’s first fifteen years, modes of learning and practice were quickly established
but evolved, and consumers and photographers alike determined what could or needed
to be depicted, from landscapes to likenesses. The field was open to structuring, not
yet defined, circumscribed, or encumbered by legacies and networks of training and
patronage, as with fine art and craft. This is not to say that women enjoyed unfettered
or unprejudiced opportunities and roles in the new profession let alone an equal profes-
sional or artistic or business status with men. The field was already rife with gendered
parameters of access and ability because of the social mores of the period in which it
was invented and the places in which it was practised.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the social structure of public and private spheres,
most unequivocally demonstrated in the exclusion of women and racialized citizens
from the core democratic principle of suffrage, restricted women to the home, at least
conceptually, either as family member or domestic labourer, or both. In fact, many women
earned a living by working outside the home, including as photographers, but the idea
that they were confined to the private sphere made their work, paid and unpaid, invisible
to history. The concept also shaped ideas and generated debate about opportunities for
their employment and ways and means for them to negotiate a viable, if not visible and
respected, place and practice as a “professional” – a commercial, paid photographer work-
ing in the public realm. Daguerre’s pointed reference to “ladies” and to daguerreotyping’s
potential as a leisure pursuit was the beginning of a century-long (and more) argument
about opportunities, limitations, and roles for women as professionals in photography.
How they themselves felt about the subject was rarely a matter of public record until
well into the twentieth century (as evinced in Chapter 7). As a result, a great deal of
weight is placed on just a few cases, and any conclusions drawn, to be valid, must be
extrapolated with historical sensitivity and specificity.29

For the most part in early years, especially the daguerrean years, public discussions
and documentation about women’s private practice of photography as a fine art or ama-
teur pastime were rare at best. In Canada, there is just a hint of one non-commercial but
accomplished practice – that of Mary Hastings Meyer. In the 1850s, the St. Catharine’s
Constitutional newspaper noted that she was an award-winning painter and photographer
who competed in professional categories at juried exhibitions.30 We do not know whether
she also made and sold her daguerreotypes for paying clients. In contrast, we do know
that she worked during the 1860s as a painter in James Inglis’s photography studio in
St. Catharine’s. Meyer’s husband, also an artist, was employed there as well. Women
were reasonably well represented as photograph retouchers and finishers, applying paint
to correct infelicities or adding a bit of colour to heighten realism, when paper prints
became the norm after 1855. Meyer’s position at the Inglis studio, whether as a contracted
or staff artist, situates her in a public economic and social role. Although she may have
continued her independent, professional fine art and photography practice for exhib-
tion, commission, and sale during and following her time at the studio, her success as
an individual, professional artist creating works independently on commission or for
sale did not garner her even a footnote in the history of Canadian art.
As for the category of art and artist, Huneault suggests that middle-class women photographers deployed “the gentility of ‘artistry’” to insulate themselves from the “commercial concerns of the work a day world” and that their complementary work as teachers served as a tie to “the feminine realm.”31 These traditional models for women’s behaviour may have assisted those who accepted Daguerre’s invitation – or challenge – and stepped into the instantly popular and promising field. However, men too, including Wescott and Sheldon in Kingston and Léon-Antoine Lemire in Quebec (Figure 1.8), positioned themselves as artists and described daguerreotyping as “Art” in their advertisements.32 Indeed, as we have seen, the branding of photography as an art form and daguerreotypists as artists was so common that even business directories employed it. This suggests that the references to art and artists were more concerned with attracting clients than with placing or mediating a photographer within their gendered sphere. The description also suited the many miniature portrait painters who moved into daguerreotyping when it began to threaten the viability of their occupation.

Men such as Albert Southworth in Boston, Daniel J. Smith in Halifax, and Léon-Antoine Lemire in Quebec also taught daguerreotyping. Initially, novices learned their art and its science from experienced photographers, women and men alike, as both students and teachers. Later, as the profession developed (and as will be seen in Chapter 3), men undertook photography apprenticeships under other men, leading to employment in large studios. In Canada, women rarely found an apprenticeship, and even when they did, employment as a studio operator did not follow. In the meantime, once they possessed the basic daguerrean skills, most worked as independent business owners, occasionally with a partner but typically alone. Only two of the nine women discussed above, Mrs. Fletcher and Sarah Holland, were peripatetic, setting up studios for brief periods in various locales. Most operated for months or years in a home community. Whereas many men also worked from permanent sites, many more entered and exited the public record through advertising or newspaper stories as visiting daguerreotypists, who brought their portable darkroom “saloons” or “rooms” or “wagons” with them.

In 1856, the one-of-a-kind daguerreotype became obsolete, as new technologies enabled the production of multiple prints on paper, using a glass-plate negative. With these developments was born not just a viable commercial industry, but one that could – and did – expand exponentially. Women entered this field in growing numbers as studio workers in urban areas, especially in Quebec at first. The ranks of women photographers, in contrast, remained comparatively small for the next several decades. Their accomplishments, however, were anything but small. Along with women studio employees and patrons, they staked claims in the new commercial studios and shaped ways in which photography, now truly “a household word and a household want,” imagined and portrayed the later nineteenth century in Canada.
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Chambre de Daguerreotype

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