

Modern Eyes: A Cultural History of Vision in Rural Nova Scotia, 1880–1910

by

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Abstract

This dissertation explores a series of interconnected histories of vision and modernity in rural Nova Scotia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Approaching rural life and culture as a history of vision provides a new analytical lens for investigating the ways that rural people encountered, negotiated, and responded to the transformations being felt in both rural and urban places at the time. Informed by sensory history and visual culture studies, this unconventional perspective provides a coherent surface for cultural analysis across topics that are not traditionally discussed together, bringing to light and recuperating a variety of overlooked aspects of rural culture and knowledge. In their encounters with natural science, consumer culture, new technologies, and the Canadian state, rural Nova Scotians engaged in historically-specific practices of observation and articulated unique ideas about vision, which were frequently interlaced with ideas and anxieties about modernity. Chapters include analyses of nature-study and sensory training in rural elementary schools, practices of skilled vision at agricultural exhibitions, the professionalization of optometry in rural communities, the vision of sailors in relation to new maritime navigation infrastructure, and rural outreach from the Halifax School for the Blind. The result is a cultural history that places rural communities in Nova Scotia at the centre in of a conversation about modernity in Canada in the years bracketing the turn of the twentieth century.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Table of Contents	v
List of Figures	vi
Introduction Historicizing Modern Rural Vision	2
Chapter One Observers in Training: Nature-Study and Rural Vision	46
Chapter Two Sights Worth Looking At: Skilled Visions and Visual Culture at Agriculture Exhibitions	91
Chapter Three Buying Eyes: Opticians, Eyeglasses, and the Popular Culture of Vision	153
Chapter Four Seeing at Sea: Sailors, Lighthouses, and the Politics of Vision	216
Chapter Five Looking for the Blind: Locating and Performing Blindness	253
Conclusion Making Vision Visible	294
Bibliography	304

List of Illustrations

Maps

1	Map of Nova Scotia (created by Daniel MacDonald)	1
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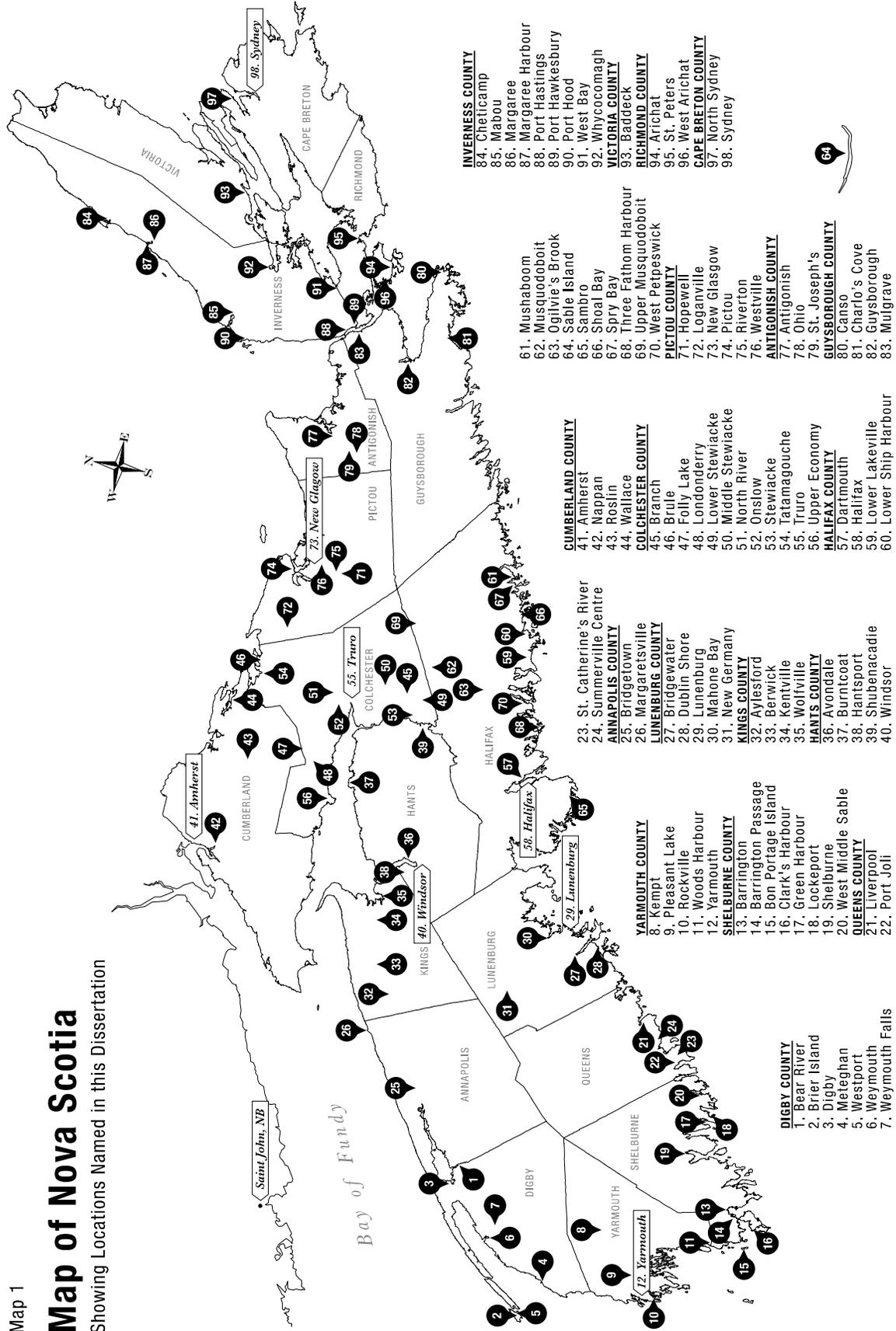
Figures

1.1	Page of A. H. MacKay's ledger of phenological observations	51
2.1	Judge's ribbon, Western Counties Divisional Exhibition, 1896	98
2.2	Advertisement, Lewis Rice	107
2.3	L. G. Swain, photograph, District Exhibition, Yarmouth, 1882	108
2.4	Front page of <i>Yarmouth Herald</i> , October 5 1882	111
2.5	Poster, Windsor Agricultural Society Exhibition, 1884	120
2.6	Ticket stub, Provincial Exhibition, Halifax, 1904	122
2.7	Season ticket, District Exhibition, Yarmouth, 1882	122
2.8	Prize ticket, Provincial Exhibition, Halifax, 1891	124
3.1	Advertisement, R. B. Dakin	153
3.2	Advertisement, James Eastwood	174
3.3	Advertisement, J. E. Sancton	174
3.4	Advertisement, A. M. Ross	176
3.5	Advertisement, Lazarus, Morris & Co.	180
3.6	Selection of advertisements, B. Laurance	183
3.7	Selection of advertisements, opticians with credentials	194
3.8	Advertisement, James Eastwood	198
3.9	Advertisement, R. B. Dakin	198
3.10	Generic syndicated advertisements for opticians	202
3.11	Advertisement, W. A. Aston	206
3.12	Advertisement, T. C. Grant	208
3.13	Advertisements, T. C. Grant	210
5.1	Postcard of the Taylor Concert Company	286
C.1	Advertisement, J. R. Webster	302

Map 1

Map of Nova Scotia

Showing Locations Named in this Dissertation



Introduction: Historicizing Modern Rural Vision

At the 1882 district exhibition in Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, visitors marvelled over the “Zoological Garden” created and displayed by taxidermist Benjamin Doane, Jr. The editor of the *Yarmouth Herald*, Alexander Lawson, described the scene:

An eagle seemed to be emerging from a nest up under the bandstand somewhere and was swooping down toward the ground. An owl looked complacently on its companions, and a moose thrust its head out so naturally from a festoon of flags that we couldn't tell whether the rest of him was there or not. We were a little in doubt about the names of some of the mammals that were grouped with fine effect upon the table, but fell back on a hen with her chicks about her as something we had seen before and recognized. A lady accompanied by her husband just then pushed by us, and by the conversation which followed we knew she couldn't be from Kempt [a rural area inland from Yarmouth], but failed to properly locate her. In ecstasies [sic] over Mr. Doane's workmanship she said to her husband: “Dear what is that bird with the big round eyes?” “An owl, my dear.” “Is that an owl? I'm so glad. I never saw an owl before; and what is that great ugly looking head up there?” “A moose, my dear.” “Is that a moose? I never saw a moose before.” And when the attentive husband ventured the remark that that hen and chickens looked particularly natural, we were expecting every moment to hear her exclaim: “Is that a hen? I never saw a hen before!”¹

Visitors at rural exhibitions such as this one navigated dense visual environments, reading and interpreting the visual spectacle of rural life, agricultural improvement, and emergent consumer capitalism with a variety of aptitudes and inclinations.

Lawson began his report by establishing his own visual repertoire, connecting words and things—an eagle, a moose, an owl—before admitting to a lack of familiarity with some of the mammals. This might be read as a politeness to the taxidermist, but a short note in the *Cape Sable Advertiser* from neighbouring Shelburne County in 1886 is a reminder that before the mass circulation of images, some animals we might think of as common today in Nova Scotia were not expected to be known by sight. A creature with a

¹ *Yarmouth Herald*, October 19, 1882.

“pointed nose [and] bushy, ringed-streaked tail” was described as “a strange animal, looking like a queer compound of fox and wild-cat.” After being “brought out for examination ... only the most ancient hunters could classify it” as a raccoon, though the decision was not unanimous.²

Eagle, moose, owl, and especially hen, however, were among the animals that one was to know by sight. To be without such culturally appropriate visual knowledge in rural Nova Scotia was to be ridiculous, the object of gentle mockery, and to be excluded from access to the full range of cultural meanings circulating in one’s society. The demonstrated lack of such knowledge immediately marked the woman in this anecdote as an outsider. To note that “she couldn’t be from Kempt,” a backwoods region of Yarmouth County, was in fact a tongue-in-cheek way of suggesting that she must have been visiting from “the city.” The implication was that no self-respecting rural person would have been caught out in such a public display of obvious cultural ignorance. Moments such as these reveal the boundaries around what an acculturated person was expected to be able to see at a given time and place.

In February 1896, in the midst of a booming winter logging season, a community correspondent for the Musquodoboit Valley in the Dartmouth-based *Atlantic Weekly* reported:

The sleighing is perfect, and everybody is on the fly. The lumberman are piling out the logs at a merry rate. ... A rather unique lumbering crew may be seen hauling logs to Ogilvie’s Brook. Peter Hurley, a blind man, and Alex Streach, near-sighted, with a small pony for a team are putting out a lot of logs. Mr. Hurley either rides on top of the loads, or else holds on behind, and when they get to the brow, helps to unload. He has been at this work over a month and has escaped injury so far.

² *Cape Sable Advertiser* (Barrington), December 23, 1886.

Mr. A. B. Shaw also blind is doing the largest business of any merchant in Musquodoboit. He intends putting up a large store, and a good dwelling house in the spring.³

Among those who were potentially excluded from the cultural capital of modern visual discernment were people with visual impairments. But these people were not necessarily excluded from other aspects of nineteenth-century community life. The flexibility of small-scale industry and cooperative labour enabled people with a range of capacities to live and make a living in rural places—even as these three men navigated a world organized and managed by and for a predominantly sighted society. Their relationships with vision were, just as for their friends and neighbours, informed by a complex admixture of physiology and culture. All sensory perception, including vision, is highly individualized and exists along a spectrum rather than in a binary of light and dark: an embodied combination of biology, experience, skill, and context.

By challenging (while also reiterating) assumptions about the relationship between blindness and debility, this column encouraged readers to marvel at the accomplishments of these three men. It did so by framing their successes in terms of their participation in the capitalist marketplace that was transforming their valley and the province as a whole. Shaw, who attended the Halifax School for the Blind before returning to his home community and setting up shop, was an up-to-date merchant doing good business in a busy agricultural and lumbering region. The previous fall, he installed a set of “large scales” at his store, the newspaper correspondent remarking that this was something “new in our valley, and no doubt will be kept in constant use in weighing loads, etc.”⁴ The demand for precision and standardization in trade seemed to contrast

³ *Atlantic Weekly* (Dartmouth), February 8, 1896.

⁴ *Atlantic Weekly*, October 26, 1895.

with the more traditionally-paced, slow and steady work of Hurley, Streach, and their small pony, whose labour was nevertheless able to coexist with the increasingly industrial-scale logging going on throughout the valley around them. Stories such as this, then as now, positioned an ostensibly sighted newspaper reader in relation to the “rather unique” experiences of Hurley, Streach, and Shaw, provoking reflections on the value and significance of the reader’s own eyesight.

In the summer of 1904, a journalist was among the passengers enjoying the moonlit view from the deck of the coastal steamer *Senlac* as she approached the village of Barrington by night. He described the scene:

Barrington Passage ... is well marked by buoys; and the value of the [ship’s] searchlight was well illustrated as the *Senlac* made the course. Her searchlight flashed over the waters and picked up the buoys, one after another, with the greatest ease. It was extremely interesting to stand beside the pilot house and see the long shaft of brilliance reach out until, as it was moved from side to side, a white spot would gleam on the surface far ahead. A black buoy will show white in the rays of the searchlight.

The attention of the observers was presently attracted by an almost continuous stream of what seemed to be burning red sparks; passing through the shaft of electric light. It was clear that electric rays passing through the air would not emit red sparks and enquiry was made as to the cause. It was explained that the air was full of small flies, and as each passed through the radius of the searchlight it became illuminated, and shone like a spark from a fire. The passengers were not conscious of the presence of flies in the air around them, but the searchlight revealed great numbers of them in this novel manner. The entertainment given by the searchlight was even more interesting than that given by the man in the moon.⁵

Even as new railways were built, criss-crossing the province and connecting it to the interior of the continent, coastal steamships remained a primary conveyor of passenger and freight traffic in and around Nova Scotia. In fact, their rate was increasing—in terms

⁵ *Yarmouth Herald*, September 27, 1904.

of both speed and frequency—and with this came renewed demands for reliable modern navigation infrastructure, such as buoys and lighthouses. Searchlights mounted onboard ships were a more recent addition to this arsenal, extending and bolstering the visual skills and capacities of sailors, who used their finely-tuned eyes to identify friend and foe amid the waves of these tricky coastal waters.

The eyesight of sailors, in particular their ability to discern objects on a distant horizon, was legendary, but on this particular night it was the eyesight of the passengers that was brought to attention as they struggled to make sense of what they saw in the air around them. This passage reveals a historically-specific relationship to illumination, including the persistent incomprehensibility of electric light among the public and its sheer novelty in many settings in the early twentieth century. The description of the searchlight here brings to mind a film projector, a luminous moving entertainment created by a beam of light in the darkness, but in this case the amusement is not an image, but the revelation of the unseen and unperceived, the extension of human vision by modern technology.

This dissertation is about such rural encounters with vision: moments and circumstances in which looking and seeing were explicitly brought into focus and made a topic of conversation or an object of concern. Approaching rural life and culture as a history of vision provides a new analytical lens for investigating the ways that rural people encountered and responded to the conditions of modernity that were transforming both rural and urban places in the late nineteenth century. This unconventional perspective provides a coherent surface for cultural analysis across topics that are not

traditionally discussed together, bringing to light and recuperating a variety of overlooked aspects of rural culture and knowledge. Doing so reveals some of the fascinating ways in which ideas and anxieties about modernity were articulated and negotiated through discussions about vision. The result is a cultural history that places rural communities in Nova Scotia at the centre in of a conversation about modernity in Canada in the years bracketing the turn of the twentieth century.

Rather than seeking to reveal an overarching “way of seeing” that is part of the tacit knowledge of a culture, this dissertation instead explores in detail a series of specific, historically-situated practices of observation and discourses about sight. This analytical orientation is informed by the work of anthropologist Cristina Grasseni and her concept of “skilled visions,” which she conceptualizes “in the plural, to acknowledge a plurality of visual practices that employ different kinds of gestural competence, develop within different kinds of apprenticeship, and are differently embodied.” Studies from this perspective “stress the importance of local rules and highlight the processes by which consensus on notions of beauty, propriety, and exactness is achieved socially.”⁶ This model does not isolate vision from the other senses, but acknowledges that “one ‘learns to see’ in cultural ways,” and in ways that are embedded in multi-sensory practices relevant to a specific set of competencies.⁷ Following Grasseni, my project is interested in specific instances of visual enskilment and historically-specific practices of

⁶ Cristina Grasseni, “Skilled Visions: Toward an Ecology of Visual Inscriptions,” in *Made to Be Seen: Perspectives on the History of Visual Anthropology*, ed. Marcus Banks and Jay Ruby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 22. See also Cristina Grasseni, *Developing Skill, Developing Vision: Practices of Locality at the Foot of the Alps* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009); Cristina Grasseni, ed., *Skilled Visions: Between Apprenticeship and Standards* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007).

⁷ Grasseni, “Skilled Visions,” 23.

observation. Disaggregating vision in this way also opens a space to explore locally-situated histories of vision more broadly.

This dissertation presents five distinctive analyses in which specific practices and ideas about vision reveal anxieties about modernity and the modernization of rural lives in late nineteenth-century Nova Scotia. In chapter 1, readers will learn about a unique nature-study exercise in rural Nova Scotian elementary schools and efforts to teach scientific observation to students. In chapter 2, they will encounter the spectacle of local agricultural exhibitions where efforts to modernize farming included the cultivation of visual skills attuned to the standards of scientific agriculture. In chapter 3, they will meet newly professionalized opticians who pursued formal training and then advertised their expert visual skills for correcting the vision of others. In chapter 4, they will witness the medicalization of the famed sea-vision of sailors, whose local knowledge was often implicated in the modernization of marine navigation infrastructure by the Canadian state. And in chapter 5, they will learn how, in the absence of a medical model, blindness (and thus vision) was conceptualized by the rural extension program of the Halifax School for the Blind, enumerators of the Canadian census, and blind Nova Scotians in rural communities.

At the heart of this dissertation are two interrelated conceptual propositions. First, that vision is historical. And second, that rural Nova Scotia is a meaningful site from which to explore articulations of late nineteenth-century modernity. This dissertation argues that the notion of modernity (which will be theorized in more detail below) is best understood as a multi-sited experience of cultural transformation, rather than a formation or condition that existed in a pure form in Western cities and eventually made its way to

other places. The point here is not to argue that late nineteenth-century rural Nova Scotia *was modern*, a contention that would be difficult to support, not least of all because of the slipperiness of such a designation.⁸ Such generalization also risks flattening the variations and idiosyncrasies among an assortment of large and small places, economies, cultures, and environments, and the countless experiences of being in those places. Instead, I argue that people in rural Nova Scotia, like their counterparts in cities, were registering the effects, cultural forms, and transformations of what Lynn Thomas has called “the ideological and institutional formations that make up modernity,” in ways that illuminate the broader culture in which they lived.⁹

In their encounters with natural science, consumer culture, new technologies, and the Canadian state, rural Nova Scotians engaged in historically specific practices of observation and articulated unique ideas about vision, revealing, as well, the networks within which such discourses were disseminated. Charting this history of vision offers an innovative perspective through which to explore the ways that rural Nova Scotians encountered and responded to the transformations that were taking place in the world around them. As Daniel Samson has argued, the technologies, ideas, and political and cultural forms that changed rural Canada in the nineteenth century “were not the

⁸ The complexities, contradictions, and polysemy of the concept of modernity and its uses by historians, particularly in relation to questions of periodization and its entanglements with modernization theory, have been skillfully explored by the contributors to “Historians and the Question of ‘Modernity’: *AHR* Roundtable,” *American Historical Review* 116, no. 3 (2011): 631–751.

⁹ Lynn M. Thomas, “Modernity’s Failings, Political Claims, and Intermediate Concepts,” *American Historical Review* 116, no. 3 (2011): 737. Work on twentieth-century Nova Scotia by Ian McKay has generated a substantial body of scholarship focused on the anti-modern gaze of urban tourists and other observers in rural Nova Scotia, which has contributed to a broader notion of rural Nova Scotia as, itself, anti-modern. As will become evident, this dissertation actively problematizes this notion. See especially Ian McKay, *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth Century Nova Scotia* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1994); also Ian McKay and Robin Bates, *In the Province of History: The Making of the Public Past in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2010).

pernicious effects of modernity's penetration of a traditional countryside but were instead rural aspects of the modern world."¹⁰ People in rural and urban places may have encountered the formations of modernity in different ways, but they were all nevertheless engaging with the same broader transformations and understanding these experiences as modern. Many of the formations discussed in this dissertation were not exclusively rural, but are explored here in their rural forms.

Related to this positioning, throughout this dissertation, activities, behaviours, and perceptions that were conventionally derided by reformers as the result of rural ignorance or backwardness are instead recuperated as examples of local knowledge or historically-significant rural perspectives. These instances (conflicts over agricultural aesthetics or the placement of navigation infrastructure) were not sites of "resistance," but rather sites of contestation in which various formations of modernity were encountered, negotiated, and incorporated into rural lives and places. Although the context of her analysis is somewhat different than mine, recent work by Tina Loo encourages us to consider the complexities of these interactions and the level of individuals, rather than to see local knowledge and modern imperatives as essentially opposites. She writes, "it might be more productive to consider such labels as the outcomes of conflict, not the causes of them, and, hence, to focus on how certain bodies of knowledge come to be labelled local and parochial, while others come to be deemed global and universal."¹¹ Approaching rural culture as a history of vision offers a way to examine the formations of modernity, their contours, and their

¹⁰ Daniel Samson, *The Spirit of Industry and Improvement: Liberal Government and Rural-Industrial Society, Nova Scotia, 1790-1862* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008), 5.

¹¹ Tina Loo, "High Modernism, Conflict, and the Nature of Change in Canada: A Look at *Seeing Like a State*," *Canadian Historical Review* 97, no. 1 (2016): 46-47.

effects, differently than traditional models that emphasize top-down processes of modernization.

Situating this project in Nova Scotia offers an opportunity to explore a number of unique historical visualities. My analyses of agricultural exhibitions, optometry, and maritime navigation are locally-situated studies, which provide distinctive regional perspectives on these transnational cultural formations. Additionally, the rural extension program of the Halifax School for the Blind, discussed in chapter five, which was unprecedented in Canada at the time, allows me to explore rural meanings and experiences of blindness within a framework that would not be possible for other parts of the country in the same period. Likewise, in the extent of its reach into rural communities and the number of its participants, the nature-study experiment that is the subject of chapter one was unparalleled in the world at the time, presenting an exceptional opportunity to explore the ongoing and incomplete work of establishing the authority of science and the standardization of practices for scientific observation.

Although the close relationship between the three Maritime provinces and the states of New England has produced a body of compelling scholarship that highlights significant networks of sociality and labour and argues for the Northeast as a meaningful transnational region, respecting the provincial boundary is also consistent with the social imaginary of late nineteenth-century Nova Scotians, who described and understood themselves as such.¹² Situating this study in Nova Scotia provides an opportunity to study

¹² On the transnational Northeast, see Betsy Beattie, *Obligation and Opportunity: Single, Maritime Women in Boston, 1870-1930* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000); Stephen Hornsby and John G. Reid, eds., *New England and the Maritime Provinces: Connections and Comparisons* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005); Colin D. Howell, *Northern Sandlots: A Social History of Maritime*

a range of ruralities. Late nineteenth-century Nova Scotia was made up of long-standing, multi-generational settler communities similar to those in other parts of eastern North America, even as the violence and displacement of colonialism was still actively shaping the province.¹³ These included coastal fishing and shipbuilding communities and a variety of small- and medium-scale farming, forestry, and resource extraction communities, all of them characterized by myriad forms of occupational pluralism. These diverse geographies allow me to complicate the prevalent focus on farm life and agricultural landscapes in rural historiography.

My working definition of rural for this project is broad, but it need not be. Nova Scotia, like Canada, *was* rural in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Indeed, recent work by Ruth Sandwell has put to rest the cherished chestnut, based on an uncritical reading of census data, that Canada had become “urban” by 1921. In fact, it was not until after 1941 that a majority (51%) of Canadians lived in communities of more than 1000 people, and not until after 1961 that the same small majority lived in communities of more than 5000.¹⁴ In Nova Scotia, only Halifax reached above 10,000 in the period of this study (its population was just above 40,000 by 1911). There were substantial industrial populations centred around resource extraction in Cape Breton and the northern mainland, and the busy towns of Truro and Yarmouth were centres of

Baseball (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995); Sasha Mullally, “Unpacking the Black Bag: Rural Medicine in the Maritime Provinces and the Northern New England States, 1900-1950” (PhD diss, University of Toronto, 2005); Harvey Amani Whitfield, *Blacks on the Border: The Black Refugees in British North America, 1815-1860* (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2006).

¹³ See Hal S. Barron, *Those Who Stayed Behind: Rural Society in Nineteenth-Century New England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

¹⁴ R. W. Sandwell, *Canada's Rural Majority: Households, Environments, and Economies, 1870-1940* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 9; R. W. Sandwell, “Notes toward a History of Rural Canada, 1870-1940,” in *Social Transformation in Rural Canada: Community, Cultures, and Collective Action*, ed. John R. Parkins and Maureen G. Reed (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2012), 23–24.

shipping, by rail (the former) and sea (the latter). Beyond these, Nova Scotia was a landscape of small rural towns and villages, mostly clinging to the coast, and sparsely-settled inland country districts.¹⁵ But rurality is not simply a number and I am much more interested in the character and qualities of life that made a place seem to be—or to feel—rural, rather than something else. Sandwell offers a useful social-historical metric, noting that what distinguished rural Canadians before 1940 from their urban counterparts was the comparative amount of time they spent outdoors, the amount of physical labour they regularly performed, and the centrality of the family household to the structure of their lives.¹⁶ Metrics such as this offer a meaningful way to characterize a range of small and somewhat larger communities as rural, not by abstractions such as population numbers, but by the way that life was primarily organized and lived for most of its inhabitants.

As the map on the first page of this dissertation reveals, this project covers a lot of ground, moving through the villages of Nova Scotia's eighteen counties to meet a man whose barn was obscuring a lighthouse in Cheticamp, Inverness County, a young woman with a sore eye in Mushaboom, Halifax County, and an over-enthusiastic botanist teaching in the one-room school in Port Joli, Queen's County. But this project also spends quite a bit of time in what I am characterizing as rural towns, including county seats such as Digby, Lunenburg, and Windsor and the more populous among them, such as Yarmouth, New Glasgow, Truro, and Sydney. These were the places where many agricultural exhibitions were held, where opticians tended to have their shops, and where most regional newspapers (to be discussed below) were published. To repeat, even the

¹⁵ Population statistics are drawn from Canada, Department of Agriculture (Census and Statistics Office), *The Statistical Year Book of Canada* (Ottawa: Government Printing Office, 1881–1911).

¹⁶ Sandwell, *Canada's Rural Majority*, 11–25, passim.

largest of these places was small and all would also fit comfortably within Sandwell's characterization. But just as importantly, they were all oriented outward. In his *Studies in Rural Citizenship*, J. S. Woodsworth offered a useful yardstick for thinking about the relationship between rural towns and their hinterlands. "The distinction," he wrote, "between 'city' and 'country' is fairly well recognized. ... [T]he test should be that of mentality rather than of location. Suburban communities think with the city; country towns and villages are essentially rural in view point and attitude."¹⁷ This vague description, replete with moralizing undertones, nevertheless gives a sense of how the towns of Nova Scotia might have been oriented outward, to their counties and hinterlands. When the editor of the *Yarmouth Herald* mocked a woman from the city for failing to recognize a moose, he did so by self-identifying with a rural "view point," even if he may have walked through busy streets from his home to the exhibition that day. Throughout this dissertation, the towns under discussion were rural towns. My project broadens our understanding of the cultural histories they share with the villages and country districts around them.

Historicizing Vision

The analytical perspective of this dissertation is informed by the work of scholars who have sought to understand the historically-situated character of vision, and of human sensation more broadly. The modern West is widely understood to be a society that privileges sight. The rise of literacy with the print revolution and the development of the scientific method during the Enlightenment led to vision—which Descartes called "the

¹⁷ J. S. Woodsworth, *Studies in Rural Citizenship* (Winnipeg: Canadian Council of Agriculture, 1914), 7.

noblest of the senses”—being assigned pride of place in the creation and dissemination of what has been prioritized as “knowledge.”¹⁸ But this schematic explanation of the prominence of vision is not sufficiently nuanced. The other senses did not disappear in modernity; rather, the meaning and value of all the senses, together and individually, were reorganized. As Mark Smith suggests, the privileging of vision happened “quite unevenly and certainly not always at the expense of the other senses.”¹⁹ All of the senses have been prioritized and privileged in historically- and culturally-specific ways—formations that are increasingly taken up for historical analysis. Likewise, practices and meanings assigned to vision have been complex, partial, and situated, and their dominance constantly contested.

The major scholarship in these areas appears in two fields, the history of the senses (closely aligned with anthropology) and visual culture studies.²⁰ While they

¹⁸ The idea of literacy as a “great divide,” marking a new sensory ratio that privileged vision, was first popularized in the work of mid-century communications theorists Marshall McLuhan and Walter Ong. Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962); Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1964); Walter J. Ong, *The Presence of the Word* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967). However, they were not the first to posit the unique role of vision in modernity. Among others, Lucien Febvre was attentive to the sensory shift of the seventeenth century, noting, “a series of fascinating studies could be done on the sensory underpinnings of thought in different periods.” He wrote, “like their acute hearing and sharp sense of smell, the men of [the sixteenth century] doubtless had keen sight. But that was just it. They had not yet set it apart from the other senses. They had not yet tied its information in particular in a necessary link with their need to know.” Lucien Febvre, *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century: The Religion of Rabelais*, trans. Beatrice Gottlieb (1942; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 436, 437.

¹⁹ Mark M. Smith, *Sensing the Past: Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting, and Touching in History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 2.

²⁰ *History of the senses* and *sensory history* tend to be used interchangeably, as do *visual culture studies* and simply *visual culture*. Each of these fields of study is well-developed in its own right, although visual culture studies is much more formally established institutionally. For introductions to the history of the senses, see Smith, *Sensing the Past*; “The Senses in American History: A Roundtable,” *Journal of American History* 95, no. 2 (2008): 378–451; “The Senses in History: AHR Forum,” *American Historical Review* 116, no. 2 (2011): 307–400; Joy Parr, “Notes for a More Sensuous History of Twentieth-Century Canada: The Timely, the Tacit, and the Material Body,” *Canadian Historical Review* 82, no. 4 (2001): 720–45. See also the journal *Senses and Society* and the collection of sense-specific readers in the Berg *Sensory Formations* series, especially David Howes, ed., *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader* (Oxford: Berg, 2005); Elizabeth Edwards and Kaushik Bhaumik, eds., *Visual Sense: A Cultural Reader* (Oxford: Berg, 2008).

seldom overlap in practice, it is worthwhile to consider some of the concerns shared by these two fields as a way to position this project between and among them. These include, first, a foundational interest in historically-situated sensory formations, and second, a critique of the ocularcentrism of Western culture.

Constance Classen, who, along with David Howes, has been at the forefront of the anthropological study of the senses for more than two decades, notes that the field was founded on an interest in understanding the unique “sensory models” of various societies across time and geography, the ratios of perception that have privileged certain senses over others and have therefore contributed to the particular character of their cultures.²¹ The history of the senses emerged with similar concerns. Alain Corbin, a pioneer of the field, writes, “the organization of the sensory regime constitutes one of the major elements in the formation of the social imagination.” He emphasizes that studying the senses is not just about characterizing a society, but contributes to our understanding of how power circulates: “The decreed hierarchy of the senses both ordered and reflected the hierarchy that functioned within society. The way in which individuals made use of touch, smell, hearing and sight made it possible to distinguish” their positions in relation

Many readers and introductions to visual culture studies have been published. For introductions to the field itself, see Margaret Dikovitskaya, *Visual Culture: The Study of the Visual After the Cultural Turn* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005); Marquard Smith, ed., *Visual Culture Studies: Interviews With Key Thinkers* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2008); W. J. T. Mitchell, “Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 1, no. 2 (2002): 165–81. See also the *Journal of Visual Culture* and the readers in the Routledge *In Sight: Visual Culture* series, especially Jeannene M. Przyblyski and Vanessa R. Schwartz, eds., *The Nineteenth Century Visual Culture Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

²¹ Constance Classen, “Foundations for an Anthropology of the Senses,” *International Social Science Journal* 49, no. 153 (1997): 402. See also Constance Classen, “Sweet Colors, Fragrant Songs: Sensory Models of the Andes and the Amazon,” *American Ethnologist* 17, no. 4 (1990): 722–35; Constance Classen, *Worlds of Sense: Exploring the Senses in History and Across Cultures* (New York: Routledge, 1993). How to best characterize the extent to which, and in what ways, sensation is a matter of both biology and culture, and how best to approach the study of the senses, is an ongoing debate among anthropologists. For an overview of this debate, see the rather intemperate exchanges between Sarah Pink, David Howes, and Tim Ingold across two issues of *Social Anthropology*, 18, no. 3 (2010) and 19, no. 3 (2011).

to the norms and privileges of a particular culture.²² Sensory formations are not neutral, but political; and they are historically specific. More recently, Mark Smith has argued that a respect for the historicity of the senses on these terms means that historians, including those working in “living history” contexts, cannot rightly claim to recreate the sensory experiences of the past, but can only attempt to convey historical meanings to their audiences. Our contemporarily-embodied experience of historical sensory phenomena (e.g. recreated sounds, flavours, or odors), including our thresholds of tolerance, the meanings that we assign to various sensations, and our environmental contexts are all necessarily distinct from those of the past.²³

Historians of Canada have only recently developed an interest in historically-situated sensory formations and experiences as topics of historical analysis. Sixteen years ago, Joy Parr called for “a more sensuous history of twentieth-century Canada.” The temporal designation was significant: Parr situated the possibility of “reclaim[ing] more of the past whole sensing bodies have known” in the growing archive of visual and aural recordings and oral histories that had not existed prior to the twentieth century.²⁴ More

²² Alain Corbin, “Charting the Cultural History of the Senses,” in *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*, ed. David Howes (Oxford: Berg, 2005), 130, 136. Extract from *Time, Desire and Horror: Towards a History of the Senses*, trans. Jean Birrell (1991; London: Polity Press, 1995). Corbin brilliantly illustrates these social/sensory stratifications in his studies of the senses in modern France, notably *The Foul and the Fragrant* and *Village Bells*, in which he describes how various populations were characterized in relation to shifting thresholds of tolerance for certain odors and the political and emotional meanings they assigned to bell peals in the French countryside. Alain Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odor and the French Social Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986); Alain Corbin, *Village Bells: Sound and Meaning in the 19th-Century French Countryside*, European Perspectives (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

²³ Mark M. Smith, “Producing Sense, Consuming Sense, Making Sense: Perils and Prospects for Sensory History,” *Journal of Social History* 40, no. 4 (2007): 841–58; Smith, *Sensing the Past*, 118–25.

²⁴ Parr, “Notes for a More Sensuous History,” 721, 722. To highlight the reluctance of Canadian historians to take up sensory history, it is worth noting that Parr’s article was part of the same *CHR* Forum series of turn-of-the-century reflections by prominent historians as Ian McKay’s now-renowned article “The Liberal Order Framework: A Prospectus for a Reconnaissance of Canadian History,” *Canadian Historical Review* 81, no. 4 (2000): 616–78.

broadly, however, Parr has suggested that sensory history should be self-evident for historians: “That human bodies are conditioned by the circumstances of time and place is easy enough for historians and geographers to grasp. Ours are fundamentally contextualizing crafts, committed centrally to the recuperation of elements that were once common sense, relationships enduring in the place and now passed out of mind.”²⁵ However, in his foreword to Parr’s book, Graeme Wynn is somewhat “less sanguine,” and I can personally confirm his “suspicion that initiating a conversation about a study of the senses is quite likely to be heard and understood by colleagues as a proposal to study the census.”²⁶ (Likewise, my description of my work as a history of vision in Nova Scotia has frequently been understood as a history of *fishin’*.) Nevertheless, recent monographs by Nicholas Kenny, Barbara Lorenzkowski, and Parr herself point to an emerging interest in Canadian histories of the senses, including studies that incorporate sensory experience into broader histories of embodiment and those that interrogate a single sense intensively, using it as an entry point into the social, cultural, and political formations of a time and place, like this dissertation does.²⁷

²⁵ Joy Parr, *Sensing Changes: Technologies, Environments, and the Everyday, 1953-2003* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010), 8.

²⁶ Graeme Wynn, “‘Now I Am Ready to Tell How Bodies Are Changed Into Different Bodies,’” foreword to *Sensing Changes: Technologies, Environments, and the Everyday, 1953-2003*, by Joy Parr (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010), xiii, xiv.

²⁷ Nicolas Kenny, *The Feel of the City: Experiences of Urban Transformation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014); Barbara Lorenzkowski, *Sounds of Ethnicity: Listening to German North America, 1850-1914* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2010); Parr, *Sensing Changes*. A small number of journal articles have also contributed to a Canadian history of the senses. See Bruce Curtis, “‘I Can Tell by the Way You Smell’: Dietetics, Smell, Social Theory,” *The Senses and Society* 3, no. 1 (2008): 5–22; Deborah Davis Jackson, “Scents of Place: The Dysplacement of a First Nations Community in Canada,” *American Anthropologist* 113, no. 4 (2011): 606–18; Kirsten Greer and Laura Cameron, “‘Swee-Ee-et Cán-a-Da, Cán-a-Da, Cán-a-Da’: Sensuous Landscapes of Birdwatching in the Eastern Provinces, 1900–1939,” *Material Culture Review* 62 (2005): 35–48; Lianne McTavish, “Learning to See in New Brunswick, 1862–1929,” *Canadian Historical Review* 87, no. 4 (2006): 553–81.

From a different perspective, visual culture studies also has a foundational interest in the historical specificity, not so much of vision as a sense, but of visuality: “the distinct historical manifestations of visual experience in all its possible modes.” Considered together, the study of vision and visuality by scholars of visual culture reveals “the many differences, among how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see, and how we see this seeing.”²⁸ Although it always positions vision in relation to images and practices of representation—revealing its roots in art history and communications studies—visual culture studies has nevertheless provided insights on the historicity of vision more broadly. Like the “sensory models” of anthropology, Martin Jay’s notion of a “plurality of scopic regimes” in art history established a way of thinking about historically-situated ways of seeing as internally cohesive, yet always contested, breaking with “the fiction of a ‘true’ vision.”²⁹

The notion that certain cultures are, or have been, more or less “visual” than others is central to the logic of visual culture studies, an insight that has most often been used to assert the specific (even unique) relevance of the field to the allegedly hypervisual and image-saturated postmodern present. For example, W. J. T. Mitchell’s phrase *pictorial turn* describes an interpretive framework that centres “the problem of pictorial representation,” a successor to the linguistic turn, which Mitchell contextualizes

²⁸ Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (University of California Press, 1993), 9; Hal Foster, preface to *Vision and Visuality*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988), ix. For a different interpretation of visuality that advocates a return to its nineteenth-century meaning as the capacity to visualize—to visualize history, a battlefield, the totality of an operation that is beyond human perception—see Nicholas Mirzoeff, “On Visuality,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 5, no. 1 (2006): 53–79; Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

²⁹ Martin Jay, “Scopic Regimes of Modernity,” in *Vision and Visuality*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988), 4, 20. Jay is now widely associated with the concept of scopic regimes, the plural form of a phrase he credits to Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, trans. Celia Britton (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982).

specifically as a response to the pervasiveness of digital media and images in the late twentieth-century.³⁰ However, alongside this preoccupation, visual culture studies has always also explored the constitutive role of visibility in other historical moments and formations.³¹

Within the purview of visual culture studies, historians of Canada have mainly studied specific media, especially photography.³² A few works address visibility more broadly; Gillian Poulter and Karen Stanworth each explore the ways that distinctive visual cultures of representation, display, and performance were essential to the production of nineteenth-century Canadian identities.³³ More aligned with the concerns of this project, book chapters by Lianne McTavish and Keith Walden are notable Canadian examples of work that highlights the historicity of unique practices of vision. A key point of departure for my own study of scientific observation and nature-study,

³⁰ W. J. T. Mitchell, "The Pictorial Turn," in *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 16. This emphasis on contemporary contexts is one reason why visual culture studies is frequently charged with ahistoricism and presentism. For a discussion of some of these charges, see Marquard Smith, "Visual Culture Studies: History, Theory, Practice," in *Visual Culture Studies: Interviews With Key Thinkers*, ed. Marquard Smith (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2008), 9–11.

³¹ A classic early work that historicizes vision is Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983). Major recent works include, Martin Jay and Sumathi Ramaswamy, eds., *Empires of Vision: A Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014); Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*. On situating visual culture historically, see also Vanessa R. Schwartz and Jeannene M. Przyblyski, "Visual Culture's History: Twenty-First Century Interdisciplinarity and Its Nineteenth-Century Objects," in *The Nineteenth Century Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Vanessa R. Schwartz and Jeannene M. Przyblyski (New York: Routledge, 2004), 3–14.

³² The literature on the social and cultural histories of photography in Canada has become fairly extensive. The following book-length works offer a sense of the field. Peter Geller, *Northern Exposures: Photographing and Filming the Canadian North, 1920-45* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004); Martha Langford, *Suspended Conversations: The Afterlife of Memory in Photographic Albums* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001); Carol Payne, *The Official Picture: The National Film Board of Canada's Still Photography Division and the Image of Canada, 1941-1971* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013); Carol Payne and Andrea Kunard, eds., *The Cultural Work of Photography in Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011); Carol Williams, *Framing the West: Race, Gender, and the Photographic Frontier in the Pacific Northwest* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

³³ Gillian Poulter, *Becoming Native in a Foreign Land: Sport, Visual Culture, and Identity in Montreal, 1840-85* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2009); Karen Stanworth, *Visibly Canadian: Imaging Collective Identities in the Canadas, 1820-1910* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015).

McTavish writes about the attempts of the New Brunswick Natural History Society to train the visual practices of New Brunswickers through nature-study exercises, one piece of her larger history of the New Brunswick Museum.³⁴ Walden's chapter is part of his study of the Toronto Industrial Exhibition. In it, he describes the norms for urban looking, in which it was "necessary to observe others without seeming to be an observer." He writes that "gazing was an acquired skill" and that a "lack of control over the eye was considered a sure sign of country origins."³⁵ While this is undoubtedly an accurate description of urban opinions, Walden's presentation of it universalizes this perspective and the urban norm it justifies. In both of these works by McTavish and Walden, urban people describe rural people looking, but we hear very little about how rural people themselves understood these gazes. This dissertation offers a different perspective. The anecdote above about the visual repertoire of animals known to visitors at the Yarmouth exhibition, and the many other modern rural practices of looking discussed throughout this dissertation, offer counterpoints to the universalization of urban visual perspectives.

If the history of the senses and visual culture studies have both been interested in historically-situated formations, they have also shared a deep ambivalence toward vision and are unified by a primary interest in critiquing, challenging, and seeking to understand the ocularcentrism of Western culture. From the perspective of sensory history, ocularcentrism has deprioritized attention to other sensory ways of knowing. The intimate understandings of embodied sensory experience are often positioned in opposition to the

³⁴ Lianne McTavish, *Defining the Modern Museum: A Case Study of the Challenges of Exchange* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 48–70; McTavish, "Learning to See."

³⁵ Keith Walden, *Becoming Modern in Toronto: The Industrial Exhibition and the Shaping of a Late Victorian Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 154, 155, 156.

distancing and abstraction felt to be inherent to visual knowledge, in such a way that vision is only reluctantly included in the purview of scholarship on the senses. In an often-quoted passage, David Howes wrote that the aim of the anthropological study of the senses was “to liberate us from the hegemony which sight has for so long exercised over our own culture’s social, intellectual, and aesthetic life.”³⁶ While this was an important intervention, the long-term result of such approaches has been a lack of attention to vision studied, critiqued, and evaluated *as a sense*, despite the widespread attention to visuality more broadly in the field of visual culture studies. For its part, visual culture studies, as suggested above, is premised on a critique of the hegemonic visualism of our present era and the increasing technological/visual mediation of knowledge. A distrust of vision emerges from scholarship that is attentive to the networks of power interlaced through the histories of many imaging technologies, including photography, ethnographic filmmaking, medical imaging, modern mapmaking, and so on.³⁷ Concerns about the political ramifications of imaging and representational technologies overlap with broader concerns about cultures of appropriation, surveillance, and forms of oppression and

³⁶ David Howes, “To Summon All the Senses,” in *The Varieties of Sensory Experience: A Sourcebook in the Anthropology of the Senses*, ed. David Howes (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 4. While this rhetoric has become more tempered, it has not diminished. For discussions and counterpoints, see James W. Cook, “Seeing the Visual in U.S. History,” *Journal of American History* 95, no. 2 (2008): 432–41; Cristina Grasseni, introduction to *Skilled Visions: Between Apprenticeship and Standards*, ed. Cristina Grasseni (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007), 1–19; Tim Ingold, “Stop, Look and Listen!: Vision, Hearing and Human Movement,” in *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*, by Tim Ingold (New York: Psychology Press, 2000), 243–87; Barbara Maria Stafford, *Good Looking: Essays on the Virtue of Images* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).

³⁷ See, for example, Lisa Cartwright, *Screening the Body: Tracing Medicine’s Visual Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995); Elizabeth Edwards, ed., *Anthropology and Photography 1860-1920* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992); J. B. Harley, *The New Nature of Maps: Essays in the History of Cartography*, ed. Paul Laxton (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); Fatimah Tobing Rony, *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996); Shawn Michelle Smith, *American Archives: Gender, Race, and Class in Visual Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

aggression through the gaze of hegemonic—often imperial, racist, and masculine—power.³⁸

The work of Michel Foucault has been fundamental to contemporary scholarship in this area. Most notable has been the influence of his discussion of panopticism, crystallized in the dictum “visibility is a trap.”³⁹ In his well-known formulation in *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault contrasts the visual spectacle of political power in the public execution with the targeted visibility of modern discipline, revealing how these two different ways of prioritizing the visual underwrote the workings of power in these historical periods. Indeed, in all of his works, who is enabled to look at whom and what, and under what conditions, is integral to Foucault’s conceptualization of power. This is apparent in *Madness and Civilization*, in which the spectacle of mental illness “had become a thing to look at” and in *The Birth of the Clinic*, which begins with “the act of seeing, the gaze,” in particular “the doctor’s discursive, reflective perception”—the medical gaze or glance.⁴⁰ In *The Order of Things*, Foucault targets the alleged rationalism of the scientific gaze, noting that what was visible and therefore knowable to natural science was highly circumscribed. Observation came to be associated strictly with the function of the eye and Foucault notes the exclusion of “hearsay,” of taste and smell, and the limitations on touch. The cultural formation of scientific objectivity, hardly neutral, rested on a reprioritization of the senses: “The area of visibility in which observation is

³⁸ Classic works include Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles L. Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967); Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 6–18; Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

³⁹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977; New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 200.

⁴⁰ Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (1965; New York: Vintage Books, 1988), 70; Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception* (1973; Vintage Books, 1994), ix, 96.

able to assume its powers is thus only what is left after these exclusions: a visibility freed from all other sensory burdens.”⁴¹

All of these are examples of what Gilles Deleuze has called Foucault’s “visibilities,” which, he clarifies, “are neither the acts of a seeing subject nor the data of a visual meaning.” Rather, visibilities are historically specific regimes of visibility: “each historical formation sees and reveals all it can within the conditions laid down for visibility, just as it says all it can within the conditions relating to statements.” The possibilities for new ways of seeing, for visually recognizing an entity and verbally enunciating it, for having it appear as an object of knowledge, emerge at specific historical moments. Deleuze adds that “if things close up again afterwards, visibilities become hazy or blurred to the point where ‘self-evident’ phenomena cannot be grasped by another age.”⁴²

Foucault’s insights on vision and visibility have proven extremely generative for scholars of visual culture. His work has also been important to the history of the body, drawing attention to the body by placing it at the centre of his analysis of power, and thereby positioning it as an object of knowledge at the same time that it became an object of historical inquiry. This removal of the body to discourse has been generative at the same time that it has been troubling for some historians.⁴³ But perhaps because scholars have not been particularly interested in vision itself as an embodied sensory practice, the

⁴¹ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1970; New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 132, 133.

⁴² Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 58, 59, 57. This formulation brings to mind Walter Benjamin’s warning that “every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably,” and, indeed, invokes the work of historians generally. Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. John Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 255.

⁴³ For a discussion of this from the perspective of sensory history, see Kenny, *The Feel of the City*, 16–19; Parr, *Sensing Changes*, 8–12.

emphasis of these engagements and concerns has been on the status of the discursive bodies constituted through a disembodied gaze, rather than the embodied act of looking itself. While Foucault clearly intended vision to be understood analogously, throughout his work he also identifies and describes specific, real practices of looking: the spectatorship of the execution audience, the surveillance of the prison guard, crowds staring at the insane, the doctor's glance, the naturalist's scientific observation. In doing so he historicizes not only the political formations that these gazes constituted, but also the gazes themselves. Foucault reminds us that there is nothing natural or self-evident about these ways of looking, while also fundamentally undermining their claims to objectivity. Security guards, doctors, and scientists must all be taught to see according to the conventions of their disciplines. Likewise, reformers in late nineteenth-century Nova Scotia tried to teach schoolchildren, farmers, and sailors to see in particular ways. Reading Foucault in this way invites not only a genealogy of institutions, but a genealogy of vision itself, dissembled into a multitude of situated practices of looking.

This interpretation of Foucault's relationship to vision notwithstanding, Martin Jay rightly places him in a lineage of anti-ocularism in French philosophy, noting that in his work, "the ocularcentrism of those who praised the 'nobility of sight' was not so much rejected as reversed in value. Vision was still the privileged sense, but what that privilege produced in the modern world was damned as almost entirely pernicious."⁴⁴ In the responses it has generated, however, Foucault's anti-ocularism has in fact contributed to an ever expanding scholarly literature on vision and visual culture.⁴⁵ Much of this

⁴⁴ Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 384.

⁴⁵ For a thoughtful reflection on this contradiction, see the section "On Hating Empires Images Properly," in Sumathi Ramaswamy, "The Work of Vision in the Age of European Empires," in *Empires of Vision: A Reader*, ed. Martin Jay and Sumathi Ramaswamy (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 11–14.

scholarship routinely occludes the other senses. This dissertation may rightly be accused of this very flaw; however, I hope to chart a somewhat different path.

Cristina Grasseni positions her work as a challenge and antidote to the profound uneasiness with vision that exists across the social sciences and humanities, offering an opportunity to rehabilitate vision (and the study of vision) without jettisoning a commitment to the broader political context of that uneasiness. Her desire is to “recontextualize and possibly rephrase the debate on ocularcentrism ... taking into account the critique of panoptic vision, by opposing skilled visions, in the plural, to it.” Grasseni argues that when we investigate vision at the level of situated practice, the notion of “the gaze as per se dominating, and of vision as per se abstracting and formalising, finds an experiential check.”⁴⁶ In her own ethnographic work, Grasseni considers how dairy farmers and cattle breeders in the Italian Alps learn to look at cows to assess their functional “beauty,” and how these local skills are being transmitted and transformed in relation to the shifting political and economic contexts of twenty-first-century Europe.⁴⁷ Among the herders she studied, vision was essential to their identities and livelihoods, “not as a disembodied ‘overview’ from nowhere, but as a capacity to look in a certain way as a result of training.”⁴⁸

By disaggregating vision, breaking it down into local practices and contexts, we re-humanize it. Foremost, skilled visions are performances of local knowledge. Such an approach also opens a space to explore locally-situated histories of vision from other

⁴⁶ Grasseni, introduction to *Skilled Visions*, 5, 3.

⁴⁷ Grasseni, *Developing Skill, Developing Vision*; Cristina Grasseni, “Designer Cows: The Practice of Cattle Breeding Between Skill and Standardization,” *Society & Animals* 13, no. 1 (2005): 33–50; Cristina Grasseni, “Disciplining Vision in Animal Biotechnology,” *Anthropology in Action* 12, no. 2 (2005): 44–55.

⁴⁸ Grasseni, *Developing Skill, Developing Vision*, 1.

perspectives, moving our conversation from abstract sensory ratios, scopic regimes, or complexes of visibility to embodied sensory practices and culturally-specific patterns of significance: individual acts of visual discernment at the Yarmouth exhibition, unique performances of blind identity in the Musquodoboit Valley, public encounters with illumination in Barrington Harbour.

The history of blindness, in particular, does not fit comfortably in a history of visual culture that prioritizes images, nor does the history of disability more broadly tend to figure into sensory history (when it does, it is often as a trope or rhetorical device).⁴⁹ But if we interrogate vision at the level of human bodies, as diversified practices and experiences specific to certain constituencies, we can easily place people with visual impairments into our narratives of vision. This is consistent with Lennard Davis's assertion that disability must be theorized as "part of a historically constructed discourse, an ideology of thinking about the body under certain historical circumstances."⁵⁰ Georgina Kleege suggests that "what visual studies can bring to these discussions is an interrogation of the binary opposition between blindness and sight. Clearly, it is more useful to think in terms of a spectrum of variation in visual acuity, as well as a spectrum of variation in terms of visual awareness or skill."⁵¹ Kleege's recommendation to consider variations in perception due to differences in visual acuity adds a material layer to a model of vision as culturally constructed through individualized experience and training. As this dissertation reveals, the way that humans see has never been universal.

⁴⁹ See Georgina Kleege, "Blindness and Visual Culture: An Eyewitness Account," *Journal of Visual Culture* 4, no. 2 (2005): 179–90.

⁵⁰ Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (London; New York: Verso, 1995), 2.

⁵¹ Kleege, "Blindness and Visual Culture," 188. Kleege was responding to W. J. T. Mitchell's assertion that the project of visual culture studies must include "a meditation on blindness." Mitchell, "Showing Seeing," 170.

The most well-known and influential works on “vision and its historical construction” are two monographs by art historian Jonathan Crary. *Techniques of the Observer* charts the early nineteenth-century rise to dominance of models of subjective vision, which located vision in the fallible human body. *Suspensions of Perception* builds upon this, revealing some of the consequences of this shift.⁵² Crary brings science, philosophy, and art into conversation, noting similar concerns across a wide range of fields; he also broadens his purview from vision alone to the more expansive, multisensory category of *attention*. Crary argues that “attention became a decisively new kind of problem in the nineteenth century” across a range of social, political, and aesthetic formations, and that individuals increasingly came to be defined by their capacity for paying attention. Crary’s insights about how perception came to be normalized, and therefore made available to training and refinement, and how a capacity for attentiveness came to be placed at the centre of modern subjectivity are essential to my understanding of how rural schoolchildren, farmers, spectacle-wearers, sailors, blind musicians, and others were positioned, and positioned themselves, in relation to a normative modern subject through their engagements with vision—how ideas about vision were also ideas about modernity.

Other major histories of vision have focused on specific conditions of visibility, including two very different studies of Victorian Britain. In *Victorians and the Visual*

⁵² Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 1; Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999). Crary’s work has been very influential. Among recent monographs that build on Crary’s insights about the historicity of vision and attention are Orit Halpern, *Beautiful Data: A History of Vision and Reason since 1945* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014); Caroline A. Jones, *Eyesight Alone: Clement Greenberg’s Modernism and the Bureaucratization of the Senses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

Imagination, which originated as a history of art criticism, Kate Flint explores the “Victorian fascination with the relationship between the visible and the invisible,” and how this dual interest was articulated in the writing and cultural production of scientists, art critics, authors, painters, and cultural commentators.⁵³ *The Victorian Eye* by Chris Otter is a political history of illumination, visibility, and liberal subjectivity in nineteenth-century British cities, narrated through a close engagement with the infrastructure and technologies of municipal planning.⁵⁴ The history of scientific observation is another area where vision has been meaningfully historicized, including work by Lorraine Daston, Daniela Bleichmar, and others, which highlights the training of scientific vision, the creation of communities of reciprocal observers, and the ambiguities of visual evidence.⁵⁵

⁵³ Kate Flint, *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 37. See also Gillian Beer, “‘Authentic Tidings of Invisible Things’: Vision and the Invisible in the Later Nineteenth Century,” in *Vision in Context: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Sight*, ed. Teresa Brennan and Martin Jay (New York: Routledge, 1996), 83–98.

⁵⁴ Chris Otter, *The Victorian Eye: A Political History of Light and Vision in Britain, 1800-1910* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008). The history of illumination has produced a substantial body of scholarship. See Brian Bowers, *Lengthening the Day: A History of Lighting Technology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Mikkel Bille and Tim Flohr Sørensen, “An Anthropology of Luminosity,” *Journal of Material Culture* 12, no. 3 (November 2007): 263–84; Maureen Dillon, *Artificial Sunshine: A Social History of Domestic Lighting* (London: National Trust, 2002); John A. Jakle, *City Lights: Illuminating the American Night* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Disenchanted Night: The Industrialization of Light in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

⁵⁵ Lorraine Daston, “On Scientific Observation,” *Isis* 99, no. 1 (2008): 97–110; Lorraine Daston and Elizabeth Lunbeck, eds., *Histories of Scientific Observation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Daniela Bleichmar, “Learning to Look: Visual Expertise across Art and Science in Eighteenth-Century France,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 46, no. 1 (2012): 85–111; Daniela Bleichmar, “Training the Naturalist’s Eye in the Eighteenth Century: Perfect Global Visions and Local Blind Spots,” in *Skilled Visions: Between Apprenticeship and Standards*, ed. Cristina Grasseni (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007), 166–90; Daniela Bleichmar, *Visible Empire: Botanical Expeditions and Visual Culture in the Hispanic Enlightenment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Katharine Anderson, “Looking at the Sky: The Visual Context of Victorian Meteorology,” *British Journal for the History of Science* 36, no. 3 (2003): 301–32; Evelyn Fox Keller, “The Finishing Touch,” in *The Practice of Cultural Analysis: Exposing Interdisciplinary Interpretation*, ed. Mieke Bal (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 29–43; Helen Macdonald, “‘What Makes You a Scientist Is the Way You Look at Things’: Ornithology and the Observer 1930–1955,” *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part C* 33, no. 1 (2002): 53–77; Mara Mills, “Trained Judgment, Intervention, and the Biological Gaze: How Charles Sedgwick Minot Saw Senescence,” in *The Educated Eye: Visual Culture and Pedagogy in the Life Sciences*, ed. Nancy Anderson and Michael R. Dietrich (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2012), 14–43; Anne Secord, “Pressed into Service: Specimens, Space, and Seeing in Botanical Practice,” in *Geographies of Nineteenth-Century Science*, ed. David N. Livingstone and Charles W. J. Withers (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,

Taken together, all of these historical studies of vision demonstrate decisively that in the nineteenth century there was an extensive and prolific realm in which scientists, philosophers, artists, inventors, politicians, and cultural critics were discussing, debating, and developing ideas and technologies related to vision, ocular physiology, illumination, representation, spectatorship, the unseen, objectivity, and more. The vantage point of this dissertation—to use a visual metaphor, neither the first nor the last—is intentionally closer to the ground, its purview deliberately framed. Rather than the articulations of elite culture and politics explored in these other works, this dissertation engages with the everyday practices and encounters with vision that would have been familiar to rural people in late nineteenth-century Nova Scotia. The existing literature on the history of vision demonstrates that a focus on looking and seeing offers an opportunity to understand aspects of modern subjectivity, and reveals that such studies may be productively centred on a broad range of discourses and artifacts. This dissertation explores what vision looked like from the countryside.

This is not to say that the concerns examined here are entirely different from those that might have been encountered in cities; rather, this dissertation explores some of the ways that transnational formations of modernity circulated and were registered by people in rural Canada. Still, a different set of topics does emerge from attention to rural visibility, technologies, and spaces. For example, Otter's urban focus means that lighthouses receive a page of generic discussion in his book, but my interest in the coastal

2011), 283–310. Other studies explore the role of representations and imaging technologies in science. See, for example, Nancy Anderson and Michael R. Dietrich, eds., *The Educated Eye: Visual Culture and Pedagogy in the Life Sciences* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2012); Jutta Schickore, *The Microscope and the Eye: A History of Reflections, 1740-1870* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

rural communities of Nova Scotia brings them to the foreground. Likewise, his emphasis on urban technology and infrastructure also limits his interest in the natural sciences, which have a prominent place in my project in relation to visual engagement with both wild spaces and agriculture. While Crary and Flint do discuss natural science and Flint explores artistic engagement with rural and wild spaces, the perspectives they replicate are not rural ones.⁵⁶ Nor does the scholarship on scientific observation tend to foreground rural perspectives. In relation to these other works, it is worth noting that Grasseni came to her ideas about the importance of disaggregating vision through a study of rural places. Likewise, this dissertation offers a historical rural counterpoint to the more common urban studies of vision

Rural Modernity

In his well-known exegesis of Western modernity, Marshall Berman develops a model that draws together modernism and modernization from the previously disparate realms of culture and politics to describe the experience of living with the contradictions of modernity's possibilities and perils. Modernity is characterized as a "maelstrom," an experience of "ambiguity and anguish," which promises improvements in all aspects of life at the same time that it threatens to destroy everything held dear. He notes that though each group feels their experience of upheaval to be unique, this has been a perpetual condition for centuries.⁵⁷ Berman specifies, however, that the experience of modernity in the nineteenth century, in particular, was characterized by a "sense of living

⁵⁶ On a distinctive rural visual engagement with landscape, see Judith Okely, "Visualism and Landscape: Looking and Seeing in Normandy," *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology* 66, no. 1 (2001): 99–120.

⁵⁷ Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), 15–16.

in two worlds simultaneously,” having experienced first-hand significant transformations in social and political life and therefore able to “remember what it is like to live, materially and spiritually, in worlds that are not modern at all.”⁵⁸

Berman’s overall periodization is too simple, and his occlusion of the world beyond the West diminishes the broader utility of his analysis, but his notion of living in two worlds is nevertheless useful for thinking about rural experiences of modernity. People in late nineteenth-century rural Nova Scotia encountered, resisted, encouraged, challenged, transformed, and embraced innumerable “formations of modernity,” to use Lynn Thomas’s phrase, at the same time that other aspects of their daily routines and cultural worlds remained similar to those of their great-grandparents.⁵⁹ Berman’s long, though certainly not exhaustive, list of the “sources” that “fed” modern life is instructive for thinking about the many nodes at which modernity was encountered and articulated in rural places. He mentions scientific discoveries, industrialization, new technologies, mass migrations and dislocations, urbanization, mass communications, the expansion of the bureaucratic nation state, mass protest movements, and, fundamental to all of these “an ever-expanding, drastically fluctuating capitalist world market.”⁶⁰ This is consistent with Thomas’s list of some of the “core formations,” which tend to make up the scholarly understanding of modernity. She calls for studies that foreground these “intermediate analytical concepts” rather than “the more distant abstraction of modernity” by “tracking the circuitous routes and jagged political terrains through which they travel, and

⁵⁸ Berman, *All That Is Solid*, 17.

⁵⁹ Thomas, “Modernity’s Failings.” For the majority European-descended population of rural Nova Scotia, this doubling was of course neither the same, nor indeed as culturally significant, as the notion of “double consciousness” (from W. E. B. DuBois) that Paul Gilroy uses to explore modernity and transnational Black culture. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

⁶⁰ Berman, *All That Is Solid*, 16.

reconstructing their contradictory and ambivalent afterlives.”⁶¹ Such studies also move us away from narratives of *modernization*, as a singular, inevitable process, a paradigm which Royden Loewen has noted underwrote much scholarship in rural history through the twentieth century, in favour of analyses that reveal how modernity is “constructed, invented, and contrived” in a multitude of localized contexts.⁶²

Rural Nova Scotians encountered numerous formations of modernity, just as their counterparts in cities did. It may be helpful to be specific here. In this dissertation, the following are some of the “formations of modernity” encountered by rural Nova Scotians. Compulsory state education, and, more specifically the attitudes and curricula of the New Education form the backdrop for my discussion of a unique nature-study exercise, which itself aspired to an ideal of rational scientific observation. Late nineteenth-century agricultural exhibitions were not intended to be sites of nostalgia; they were underwritten by government funds unambiguously intended to encourage a break with traditional farming practices and the embrace of progressive scientific methods and capitalist marketing. When opticians advertised in rural newspapers, they positioned themselves as experts, part of the professionalization of medicine and the formal codification of knowledge about the body. These advertisements also contributed to the expansion of commodity culture in rural places. Government-owned navigation infrastructure in rural places supported efforts to rationalize increased traffic along the coasts and facilitate the circulation of resources, commodities, and bodies. The work of the Home Teaching Society for the Blind, an extension of the state education system, was

⁶¹ Thomas, “Modernity’s Failings,” 737, 738.

⁶² Royden Loewen, “Beyond the Monolith of Modernity: New Trends in Immigrant and Ethnic Rural History,” *Agricultural History* 81, no. 2 (2007): 212.

guided by an interest in the productivity and self-reliance of blind individuals within the logics of capitalism and liberal individualism. Some of these formations (e.g. state education) connected rural and urban Canadians, while others (e.g. scientific agriculture) are best understood as primarily rural, just as other formations might be primarily urban.

Modernity was and is multi-sited and responses to it have been numerous and diverse. Many scholars of rural places have described their work in terms of “rural modernity” or modernities in the plural. In his study of technological change on early twentieth-century American farms, Ronald Kline argues that farm families readily adopted many technologies, but they also “resisted, modified, and selectively used these technologies to create new rural cultures, new forms of rural modernity—many of which were individual modernities.”⁶³ In his study of government resettlement projects in early twentieth-century British Columbia, James Murton writes that the politicians, developers, and scientists who sought to remake the region believed “this modern countryside would offer an alternative to the version of modernity found in overcrowded, unhealthy cities.”⁶⁴ As mentioned above, this dissertation is not as concerned with defining rural Nova Scotia as modern as it is with understanding some of the ways that rural people engaged with the various formations of modernity that transformed their lives and places. Nevertheless, the concept of “rural modernity” is useful for thinking through how many rural people understood themselves and their aspirations at the time.

⁶³ Ronald R. Kline, *Consumers in the Country: Technology and Social Change in Rural America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 8.

⁶⁴ James Murton, *Creating a Modern Countryside: Liberalism and Land Resettlement in British Columbia* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007), 60. See also Rod Bantjes, *Improved Earth: Prairie Space as Modern Artefact, 1869-1944* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005); Janet Galligani Casey, *A New Heartland: Women, Modernity, and the Agrarian Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Elizabeth B. Jones, *Gender and Rural Modernity: Farm Women and the Politics of Labor in Germany, 1871-1933* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2009).

Much of the most sophisticated scholarship on alternative, plural, or multiple modernities has come from the area of postcolonial studies and I therefore apply its insights to this project about European settler communities with decided caution.⁶⁵ Dipesh Chakrabarty reminds us that “if someone is ‘modern,’ then he or she is so with regard to somebody who is not. That ‘somebody’ may come to be seen as ‘backward’ or ‘premodern’ or non-modern or waiting to be made ‘modern.’”⁶⁶ The European-descended people in Nova Scotia who were targeted by rural reforms were certainly understood in these terms by their interlocutors. But at the heart of those reform initiatives was also a belief in the potential of these people to be “modernized”—and a belief that their place on the land was appropriate and desirable.⁶⁷ This stands at odds with the treatment experienced by the Mi’kmaq, upon whose unceded lands those settlers made their lives.⁶⁸ The province’s Black communities, and to a lesser extent Acadian communities, were also perceived to be unassimilable.

Efforts to remake and modernize rural places were always part of larger processes to consolidate settler authority over Indigenous lands. The forms of disparagement and distrust for their local knowledge experienced by white rural settlers at the hands of

⁶⁵ See, for example, Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity At Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, ed., *Alternative Modernities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).

⁶⁶ Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Muddle of Modernity,” *American Historical Review* 116, no. 3 (2011): 663–64.

⁶⁷ Graeme Wynn, “Exciting a Spirit of Emulation Among the ‘Plodholes’: Agricultural Reform in Pre-Confederation Nova Scotia,” *Acadiensis* 20, no. 1 (1990): 5–51; Ian McKay, *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth Century Nova Scotia* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1994).

⁶⁸ On efforts to “modernize” and assimilate the Mi’kmaq, and successful Mi’kmaw resistance to these efforts, see Martha Walls, *No Need of a Chief for This Band: The Maritime Mi’kmaq and Federal Electoral Legislation, 1899-1951* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010). See also, Daniel N. Paul, *We Were Not the Savages: Collision Between European and Native American Civilizations*, 3rd ed. (Halifax, NS: Fernwood, 2006); William C. Wicken, *The Colonization of Mi’kmaw Memory and History, 1794-1928: The King v. Gabriel Sylliboy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012).

reformers must always be distinguished from the oppression and cultural genocide faced by the Indigenous people who were their neighbours. Indeed, the state-making at work in efforts to modernize rural settler communities was, above all, a process of rationalizing rural spaces and subjectivities, part of the wider effort to formalize non-Indigenous authority over the lands of Canada.⁶⁹ The spread and consolidation of such influence and authority in nineteenth-century Canada has come, following Ian McKay, to be conceptualized primarily through the lens of liberalism, “the project of Canada as a project of liberal rule.”⁷⁰ As McKay has argued, “the containment of these alternative [Indigenous] logics was an ideological imperative of the liberal order, without which it could not exist as a transcontinental project.”⁷¹ McKay evokes “the farmer’s fence post” as an everyday signifier of liberalism, a prosaic counterpart to the National Policy and other formal acts of government, and connected to them by “a common respect for private property and the propertied individual as the foundation of a sociopolitical order ultimately defended by the state’s legitimate violence.”⁷² But historians have also shown rural Canada to be a bastion of alternative logics, which impeded the hegemony of Canadian liberalism. Ruth Sandwell and Catharine Wilson, for example, have each positioned work in conversation with the concept of liberalism and have argued that rural people in various parts of nineteenth-century Canada developed locally-relevant strategies to ensure the well-being of families, communities, and individuals in ways that

⁶⁹ Likewise, Tina Loo writes that the implementation of modern conservation policy and game laws, which sidelined Indigenous and other rural customs, were “part of the colonization of rural Canada.” Tina Loo, *States of Nature: Conserving Canada’s Wildlife in the Twentieth Century* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2006), 6, 41–54.

⁷⁰ McKay, “Liberal Order Framework,” 629. See also, Jean-François Constant and Michel Ducharme, eds., *Liberalism and Hegemony: Debating the Canadian Liberal Revolution* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).

⁷¹ McKay, “Liberal Order Framework,” 640.

⁷² McKay, “Liberal Order Framework,” 638.

did not always fit with the ideals of liberalism, which prioritized individualism and property ownership above all else.⁷³

McKay's conceptualization of Canada as a project of liberal rule has been valuable for many Canadian historians, but others have suggested more analytically generative formulations of both government and liberalism. In particular, Bruce Curtis has produced a body of work that builds on Michel Foucault's notion of governmentality.⁷⁴ For Curtis, "liberalism is not seen first and foremost as an ideology, but as a shifting set of responses to a common set of problems of government: how to organize a self-replicating system of rule Government itself is broadened in this conception to include all actions that seek to structure the actions of others (the 'conduct of conduct')."⁷⁵ Sensory training in elementary schools, lessons in scientific agriculture at exhibitions, and re-education for blind and visually impaired children and adults were all tactics of rule through which productive, moral, modern citizens were made.

Various projects of rural reform were also efforts to remake rural places more broadly, to consolidate the influence and logic of the Canadian state through the

⁷³ R. W. Sandwell, *Contesting Rural Space: Land Policy and Practices of Resettlement on Saltspring Island, 1859-1891* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005); R. W. Sandwell, "Missing Canadians: Reclaiming the A-Liberal Past," in *Liberalism and Hegemony: Debating the Canadian Liberal Revolution*, ed. Jean-François Constant and Michel Ducharme (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 246–73; Catharine Anne Wilson, *Tenants in Time: Family Strategies, Land, and Liberalism in Upper Canada, 1799-1871* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009).

⁷⁴ Michel Foucault, "Governmentality," in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, ed. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 87–103; Bruce Curtis, *True Government by Choice Men?: Inspection, Education, and State Formation in Canada West* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992); Bruce Curtis, *The Politics of Population: State Formation, Statistics, and the Census of Canada, 1840-1875* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000); Bruce Curtis, *Ruling by Schooling Quebec: Conquest to Liberal Governmentality - A Historical Sociology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012). See also Bruce Curtis, "After 'Canada': Liberalisms, Social Theory, and Historical Analysis," in *Liberalism and Hegemony: Debating the Canadian Liberal Revolution*, ed. Jean-François Constant and Michel Ducharme (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 176–200.

⁷⁵ Curtis, *Ruling by Schooling Quebec*, 17.

rationalization of myriad local alternatives. In *Seeing Like a State*, James C. Scott writes about the efforts of various governments to simplify and rationalize spaces, populations, and environments in order to make them orderly and available for management—what he terms *legibility*.⁷⁶ The opposite of this are the various forms of local knowledge and practice, natural diversity, and complexity, for which governments are unable or unwilling to account. Scott argues that many high modernist megaprojects (the monoculture of scientific forestry, Soviet collectivism) have ignored or failed to attend to illegible forms of local knowledge, leading to the ultimate failure of those schemes. The processes of state formation and modern reform described in this dissertation are neither megaprojects nor examples of high modernism. Even the growing network of navigation signals along the coast was still a relatively disorganized undertaking in the late nineteenth century, though evidence of a more orderly future was already apparent. Nevertheless, Scott’s metaphor of legibility is useful for thinking about encounters between local knowledge and the state in rural places. In particular, this metaphor opens a rhetorical space that moves beyond conceptualizing rural people and practices as “resisting” (or “embracing”) modernity to instead highlight the ways that local knowledge and practices were often simply incommensurable with the idealizations of modern state formation.

Rural Nova Scotia in the late nineteenth century was an unevenly multicultural place made up of long-standing communities; new immigration was low and

⁷⁶ James C. Scott, *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998). This concept is further taken up in James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

outmigration distressingly high. Three centuries of colonial resettlement, migration, and forced relocations had left a patchwork of Mi'kmaw, Acadian, and African Nova Scotian communities interwoven among the majority white, British-descended settler population. Significant regional settlement of Gaelic-speaking Scots in Cape Breton and the northern mainland, and of a German-descended community along the South Shore lent a particular character to those areas, but these populations were nevertheless among the white majority of the province, which dominated the political and economic establishment, even as it was itself characterized by social and economic stratification. Since the 1990s, the historiographical consensus has been that nineteenth-century rural Nova Scotia was characterized by “inequality and interdependence,” in which “inequalities in the initial distribution of land resources laid the basis for enduring socioeconomic divisions.”⁷⁷ Some settlers achieved great success thanks to the rich land their ancestors had been granted, particularly in the Annapolis Valley and in fertile parts of Colchester, Cumberland, and Pictou counties, and a rural elite was well established by the late nineteenth century. Later immigrants were less fortunate. Following their dispersal, Acadians were resettled on marginal coastal lands in scattered parts of the province. The Black Loyalist and Black Refugee communities were likewise granted poor tracts of land, dispersed throughout the province. The Mi'kmaq had been encouraged to farm their reserve lands since at least the late eighteenth century; this despite the unsuitability of the land and its continually being usurped and appropriated both informally by squatting settlers and more formally by government action into the

⁷⁷ Rusty Bittermann, Robert A. Mackinnon, and Graeme Wynn, “Of Inequality and Interdependence in the Nova Scotian Countryside, 1850–70,” *Canadian Historical Review* 74, no. 1 (1993): 1–43.

twentieth century.⁷⁸ Members of all of these long-settled communities in rural Nova Scotia pursued agriculture to some extent. Shipbuilding in Yarmouth and along the Minas Basin and coal in Cape Breton and Pictou County created pockets of industry and wealth. The economy of the South Shore was dominated by its fisheries. But overall, the economy of the province was characterized by a pattern of seasonally-determined occupational pluralism, with rural Nova Scotians, men and women, moving seamlessly between forest, field, ocean, and factory, a practice that persisted as a deliberate choice, not a strategy of desperation.⁷⁹ This highly mobile, flexible, and often cooperative landscape of labour was fundamental to the character of the communities and people I study in this dissertation.

Sources

This dissertation charts a pattern of intersecting discourses about vision and modernity across a range of sites and contexts that are not typically discussed together. The sources for this project are therefore intentionally and necessarily diverse, many of them unique, if still mostly conventional to the work of historians. These include published and unpublished state and institutional records, periodicals and memoirs, advertisements and other images, the Canadian census, and rural and regional newspapers. Each chapter is

⁷⁸ Rusty Bittermann, "The Hierarchy of the Soil: Land and Labour in a 19th Century Cape Breton Community," *Acadiensis* 18, no. 1 (1988): 33–55; Andrew Parnaby, "The Cultural Economy of Survival: The Mi'kmaq of Cape Breton in the Mid-19th Century," *Labour/Le Travail* 61 (2008): 69–98; Wicken, *Colonization of Mi'kmaq Memory*.

⁷⁹ See Larry McCann, "'Living a Double Life': Town and Country in the Industrialization of the Maritimes," in *Geographical Perspectives on the Maritime Provinces*, ed. E. E. Douglas Day (Halifax, NS: Saint Mary's University, 1988), 93–113; Daniel Samson, "Dependency and Rural Industry: Inverness, Nova Scotia, 1899-1910," in *Contested Countryside: Rural Workers and Modern Society in Atlantic Canada, 1800-1950*, ed. Daniel Samson (Fredericton, NB: Gorsebrook Research Institute for Atlantic Canada Studies and Acadiensis Press, 1994), 105–49.

centred on a different set of primary sources, which are read to reveal the ways that ideas about vision were articulated in that particular context. While the sources themselves are mostly conventional, engaging in this type of cultural analysis often means interrogating them in ways that are contrary to more traditional approaches, or rather, which emphasize patterns of significance that are not immediately legible, or which might not at first appear to be the most notable.

This is perhaps clearest in chapter 1, in my study of Alexander MacKay's extraordinary ledgers, which record thousands of nature observations from across the province over three decades. Climate scientists have analyzed the data in these ledgers, crunching the numbers to produce a model of historical climate change. But approaching the ledgers from the perspective of cultural history, I largely set aside the numbers, and ask instead about the cultural conditions within which these observations took place and how the vision of rural people was disciplined to meet the standards of this project, part of broader efforts to modernize rural subjectivities. Similarly, agricultural exhibitions have been the subject of extensive cultural analysis, including attention to the role of vision in the "exhibitionary complex"—the prerogative to see and be seen and the power dynamics inherent in this visibility.⁸⁰ However, the fact that vision was not only integral to these events, but was in fact actively targeted for training and refinement is less well understood. My reading in chapter 2 foregrounds the pedagogy of judging and reveals how exhibition organizers sought to modernize farming by cultivating the skilled vision of farmers. Another example of a source read in an innovative way is my use of the Canadian census in chapter 5. The limited utility of the census as a representation of

⁸⁰ On the exhibitionary complex, Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995).

people living with disabilities is well understood. Enumerators in the nineteenth century were sloppy, inconsistent, occasionally reluctant to offend their neighbours, and, moreover, worked without a formal definition of “blindness.” My exploration of blindness in the Canadian census therefore turns this problem on its head, asking instead about the conditions that made blindness legible to enumerators. Given the tendency of enumerators to omit disability, I ask what characteristics made it undeniable. Reading this source to reveal its internal logic, rather than attempting to illuminate its silences and omissions, will not tell us how many people lived with visual impairments in rural Nova Scotia, but it does reveal how enumerators and their rural neighbours conceptualized both blindness and sightedness, and thus vision more broadly.⁸¹

While each chapter centres on a different topic and set of sources, the common thread throughout the dissertation is my use of rural and regional newspapers to explore and characterize the cultural narratives of rural Nova Scotia. Paul Rutherford writes that newspapers were commonplace in the homes and public spaces of Canada in the late nineteenth century and this was equally true in rural Nova Scotia.⁸² My sample draws material from more than four dozen microfilmed newspapers held at the Nova Scotia Archives, with representation in each of the province’s eighteen counties. Some of these papers were sampled consistently across the period 1880–1910 (e.g. *New Glasgow Eastern Chronicle*, *Lunenburg Progress*, *Yarmouth Herald*). Others were not published

⁸¹ This reading of the census is also consistent with Bruce Curtis’s encouragement to approach it as a cultural artifact. Curtis, *The Politics of Population*.

⁸² Paul Rutherford, *A Victorian Authority: The Daily Press in Late Nineteenth-Century Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982). Rutherford’s study is of urban dailies, though he makes broader generalizations. Russell T. Johnson gives a good sense of the numbers and character of daily and weekly newspapers in smaller markets. Russell T. Johnston, *Selling Themselves: The Emergence of Canadian Advertising* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000). See also A. McKim, *Canadian Newspaper Directory* (Toronto: A. McKim & Co., 1892).

during the entire period, but were sampled consistently within their available dates (e.g. *Atlantic Weekly* [Dartmouth], *Berwick Register*, *Hants Journal* [Windsor], *North Sydney Herald*, *Port Hawkesbury Eastern Journal*, *Truro Daily News*). Many more were sampled more sporadically, either because of their limited availability, or as a way to supplement regional coverage. The anecdotes in the opening pages of this introduction only hint at the truly local character of much of the content that appeared in these regional newspapers. Many of these papers were published in small towns but it is clear that their orientation was to their county as a whole. Moreover, as previously noted, these small town were themselves essentially rural in their character and orientation. In addition to the newspapers' own reporting on goings-on in the county, all of these papers published local community notes columns, written by unofficial correspondents from surrounding villages, which provide an exceptional window on rural concerns. Adjacent to this local material were items from syndicated news services, which circulated national and international news and other content to both rural and urban audiences. Though newspapers are necessarily limited as sources in their range of perspectives, they offer a remarkable archive of descriptive material that clearly demonstrates the social, cultural, and political preoccupations of their editors and audiences.

Benedict Anderson describes the newspaper as a “cultural product” of “profound fictiveness,” which is to say that it is both beholden to literary convention and narratively the result of arbitrary juxtaposition by the “calendrical coincidence” of local, regional, and global news.⁸³ Lisa Duggan adds that items are also “arranged on the page according to widely agreed upon hierarchies of significance,” a spatial arrangement which polices

⁸³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Rev. ed. (London: Verso, 2006), 33.

the boundaries between different kinds of information (although this was somewhat more fluid in the nineteenth century).⁸⁴ As my analysis of the anecdotes above demonstrates, my reading of rural and regional newspapers is attuned to their fictions—the cultural narratives between their lines, not only the stories visible in ink. In her own study of late nineteenth-century American newspapers, Duggan models a form of cultural discourse analysis which juxtaposes “customarily disconnected events and stories” to reveal broader patterns of significance.⁸⁵ In late nineteenth-century Nova Scotia, an advertisement for eyeglasses might have appeared on the same page as a promotional piece about the value of the local agricultural exhibition and an item about a large ship going ashore on its passage out of the harbour—as it did in the *North Sydney Herald* on September 7, 1887. My hope is that, by now, the threads of visibility connecting these three items are self-evident to my reader, but they surely would not have been evident to the person who set the type for this page, nor have they been evident to historians in the meantime who have studied these topics separately.

The goal of this analysis—with newspapers as with the project as a whole—is not to claim that there was a singular self-aware, intentional, or unified discourse of vision that mediated the way late nineteenth-century Nova Scotians understood modernity. Rather, my analysis illuminates a pattern that was never evident but was nevertheless very real—a pattern in which ideas about vision in a range of contexts were routinely underpinned by anxieties about modernity—which, when brought to light, offers a new

⁸⁴ Lisa Duggan, *Sapphic Slashers: Sex, Violence, and American Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 1.

⁸⁵ Duggan, *Sapphic Slashers*, 3.

perspective on the ways that rural Nova Scotians were making sense of a world in transition around them.

Chapter 1

Observers in Training: Nature-Study and Rural Vision

Always a watched-for sign of spring, the annual appearance of mayflowers (*Epigaea repens*) was regularly observed in newspapers across Nova Scotia in the late nineteenth century. The province's official floral emblem, these "fragrant little harbingers of Spring" are tiny, sweet-smelling, pink and white forest ephemerals. They grow along the edges of the woods, where the rays of the sun find their earliest purchase in the frozen earth, and often "bloom amid the snow." Gathered in bunches, they brightened the homes, workplaces, and button-holes of Nova Scotians in the earliest days of spring, promising warmer days to come. Their name was shorthand for the end of winter; news of early arrivals might travel across the province, like the notice of mayflowers picked in Aylesford, Kings County, reprinted in the *Cape Breton Advocate* in 1882, or those picked in Shelburne and reported in the Dartmouth-based *Atlantic Weekly* in 1895. From late March through early May, local newspapers could report simply that "Mayflowers have made their appearance" to invoke the whole range of emotions and sensory longings that accompanied the arrival of spring. By late April, "mayflower parties [were] the order of the day," when a walk in the woods might also reveal a number of other early spring wildflowers—violets, goldthread, trout lilies—but these flowers did not make the papers.¹

¹ *Truro Daily News*, May 2, 1899; "bloom amid the snow" is an English translation of Nova Scotia's provincial motto, quoted in *Yarmouth Herald*, April 23, 1890; *Truro Daily News*, May 2, 1899; *Truro Daily News*, May 16, 1899; *Port Hood Referee*, April 30, 1884; *Cape Breton Advocate* (Sydney), March 23, 1882; *Atlantic Weekly* (Dartmouth), March 23, 1895; *Digby Courier*, April 24, 1885; *Lunenburg Progress*, April 28, 1886.

In 1901, Ella Gaetz and her students in the coastal village of West Petpeswick, Halifax County, found their first mayflowers on March 24, among the earliest in the province. In the Acadian community of Meteghan, Digby County, Sister Mary Alexius and her students found mayflowers on April 15 that year, and in Loganville, Pictou County, Christina Baillie and her students first found them on April 20.² While newspapers privileged mayflowers for their symbolic valence, for many teachers and students across the province they were just one of more than one hundred natural and agricultural phenomena recorded each year. Beginning in the late 1890s and continuing through the first quarter of the twentieth century, teachers and students across rural Nova Scotia made phenological observations on their walks to and from school and in their communities more broadly. Phenology charts the timing of seasonal life cycles, so the teachers and students noted phenomena such as the first mayflowers and alder buds in the spring, the first ripe wild strawberries in early summer, the first geese migrating in the fall, the opening and closing of rivers, the planting and harvesting of potatoes, and so on. Rural teachers were required to submit detailed schedules at the end of each school year.³

Phenology was the pet project of Alexander H. MacKay, Nova Scotia's provincial Superintendent of Education from 1891 to 1926, who insisted on its inclusion in rural schools during his tenure. In this chapter I am interested in the cultural work performed by MacKay's project in rural communities, in particular, the apparent attempt to harness and discipline the vision of rural teachers and children, training them to observe their

² A. H. MacKay Ledger Collection, Nova Scotia Museum Library, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Collected Returns, year ending July 1901, West Petpeswick, Meteghan, Loganville.

³ The blank "Local 'Nature' Observations" form was printed in each issue of the *Nova Scotia Journal of Education*, circulated as a loose sheet, and printed at the back of the school registers kept in each school. I have uploaded a copy of the blank form, which may be viewed and downloaded here: <http://thearchive.ca/phenology.pdf>

communities with a “scientific” eye. This pedagogical prerogative was just one of a number of cultural forms and discourses through which vision was linked to ideas about modernity and the modernization of rural lives and places in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Across North America and western Europe, a variety of nature-study lessons—object-based precursors to elementary school science classes—were integrated into the curricula of rural and urban schools.⁴ In rural areas, these initiatives coincided with larger education-centred reform movements intended to overcome the “rural problem” of depopulation, specifically of young people “leaving the farm” for work and life in urban areas.⁵ These initiatives were also consistent with the philosophy of the progressive New Education and its emphasis on training and refining the nascent senses of children through student-centred object lessons.⁶ This chapter highlights an explicit pedagogical discourse that encouraged sensory training and a pervasive belief that particular practices of observation and ways of seeing contributed to the development of moral, productive, modern citizens. This was the broader educational context for MacKay’s unique phenology project.

⁴ On the nature-study movement, see Kevin Armitage, *The Nature Study Movement: The Forgotten Popularizer of America’s Conservation Ethic* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009); E. W. Jenkins, “Science, Sentimentalism or Social Control? The Nature Study Movement in England and Wales, 1899–1914,” *History of Education* 10, no. 1 (1981): 33–43; Sally Kohlstedt, *Teaching Children Science: Hands-On Nature Study in North America, 1890–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010). A Canadian study that covers some aspects of the nature-study movement is Kristen Jane Greene, “The Macdonald Robertson Movement, 1899–1909” (PhD diss, University of British Columbia, 2003).

⁵ On the Country Life Movement and other rural education movements in Canada in the period, see, for example, David B. Danbom, “Rural Education Reform and the Country Life Movement, 1900–1920,” *Agricultural History* 53, no. 2 (1979): 462–74; David Demeritt, “Visions of Agriculture in British Columbia,” *BC Studies*, no. 108 (1995–96): 29–59; Greene, “Macdonald Robertson Movement”; David C. Jones, “‘There Is Some Power About the Land’: The Western Agrarian Press and Country Life Ideology,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 17, no. 3 (1982): 96–108; Margaret Kechnie, *Organizing Rural Women: The Federated Women’s Institutes of Ontario, 1897–1919* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2003).

⁶ On education reform and the New Education in Canada see Paul Axelrod, *The Promise of Schooling: Education in Canada, 1800–1914* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 44–68, 109–26; Neil Sutherland, *Children in English-Canadian Society: Framing the Twentieth-Century Consensus* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976), 155–224.

My analysis here builds on the work of Liane McTavish on efforts by the New Brunswick Natural History Society to train the visual practices of New Brunswickers through nature-study exercises, encouraging a kind of “geographical citizenship,” and pride in the province. McTavish wrote about the aims of the Society, but noted the records to which she had access did not reveal “whether or not the ‘students’ they targeted actually adopted the desired visual practices.”⁷ My study of MacKay’s project in Nova Scotia focuses on the interaction between the project administrators and the rural people who participated, particularly emphasizing the never-ending battle to make participants conform to the parameters of the project. Over the course of a quarter decade, hundreds of rural teachers and thousands of their students participated in MacKay’s project, often with great enthusiasm. But they did so on their own terms, in ways that consistently defied and exasperated MacKay and his colleagues. Reading between the lines of their responses reveals the persistence of local, place-based knowledge in early twentieth-century rural Nova Scotia and a challenge to the constraints of a modern, scientific model of observation.

These locally-situated responses were not an outright rejection of modernity or even necessarily a show of resistance to participating in a scientific endeavour. Rather, in the idiosyncratic nature of their participation, generations of rural teachers made a claim for the legitimacy of local knowledge, and sought to have it acknowledged and included within the bounds of this officially-sanctioned project. This persistence of local perspectives in relation to the universalizing compulsions of science is similar to the

⁷ McTavish encouraged further research into “alternative ways of seeing ... that either contradicted or refused those promoted.” Lianne McTavish, “Learning to See in New Brunswick, 1862-1929,” *Canadian Historical Review* 87, no. 4 (2006): 556.

dynamics Tina Loo has observed between the local knowledge of rural people and state efforts to centralize and formalize wildlife management across Canada beginning in the late nineteenth century. Rural people contributed knowledge that led to the implementation of the first conservation laws and then continued to assert the relevance of local customs even as those laws transformed and circumscribed their relationships with the land and animals they knew.⁸ While scientists, educators, and law-makers insisted on the value of a consistently-applied universal model—of observation, education, conservation—many rural people asserted that the customs of local knowledge and the imperatives of the modern state could coexist. Such assertions were not evidence of resistance to modernity, but a variety of complex, self-aware responses to changes taking place in the world around them.

⁸ Tina Loo, *States of Nature: Conserving Canada's Wildlife in the Twentieth Century* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2006), esp. 39–92.

provinces, which from its inception made nature-study one of its key concerns. MacKay himself was the author of the monthly “Ferndale School” series, offering locally-relevant nature lesson ideas for the region’s teachers. It comes as no surprise then that MacKay was also an accomplished and respected amateur naturalist. Like his late-Victorian counterparts, his interests were diverse, but by far his most impressive undertaking was his elaborate phenology project. MacKay kept extensive ledgers of the data collected by teachers across rural Nova Scotia, attempting to produce a scientific picture of the province’s natural life cycle. Though phenological reporting was a common hobby of naturalists at the time, MacKay has the unique distinction of having mandated thousands of rural teachers and schoolchildren to feed his statistics. Other community members also participated.¹¹ Nothing on a similar scale was implemented anywhere else in North America at the time and MacKay’s assertion in 1903 that “the Nova Scotian Phenological Observations are the most complete ... observations of the kind conducted in any country” appears to have been true throughout the life of the project.¹²

Beginning in 1893, MacKay presented yearly findings of his phenological reports to both the Nova Scotian Institute of Science, of which he was president from 1899 to 1902, and the Royal Society of Canada. In the first year, MacKay had a team of just nine

¹¹ In addition to parents, it was also suggested that teachers might enlist local clergy to report bird sightings. *Nova Scotia Journal of Education*, April 1906, 59. (Hereafter cited as *NSJE*.)

¹² *NSJE*, October 1903, 137. MacKay’s project was often recommended internationally as a meaningful hands-on nature-study activity, though it was never suggested that others should undertake the larger project of collecting and analyzing the data en masse. See Ethel Spalding, *The Problem of Rural Schools and Teachers in North America*, Board of Education Educational Pamphlet, no. 13 (London: H.M.S.O., 1908); James Ralph Jewell, *Agricultural Education Including Nature Study and School Gardens*, Bureau of Education Bulletin, no. 2 (1907), whole number 368 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1907); Liberty Hyde Bailey, *On the Training of Persons to Teach Agriculture in the Public Schools*, Bureau of Education Bulletin, no. 1 (1908), whole number 380 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1908); W. H. Muldrew and S. B. McCready, *Hints on Making Nature Collections in the Public and High Schools*, 2nd, revised ed., Ontario Agricultural College Bulletin 134 (Toronto: Ontario Department of Agriculture, 1906).

associates across mainland Nova Scotia observing twenty-four natural phenomena. These were amateur naturalists like himself, many of them educators, both women and men. The following year he expanded to include New Brunswick, with the addition of four observers, and over the next few years he attempted a national survey with a handful of participants in scattered corners of the country. But the project hit its stride when MacKay scaled back and refocused on Nova Scotia, at the same time realizing that as Superintendent of Education he had a large, free labour force at his command. Noting that the province's rural schoolchildren could easily cover more ground than a small group of amateur naturalists, he wrote with pride that "the eyes of a whole school daily passing over a whole school section will let very little escape notice."¹³

Selecting from among the completed schedules sent in to them by teachers, MacKay and his colleagues amassed detailed ledgers of the collected phenological data, tabulating and averaging dates to develop a sophisticated picture of the natural life cycle of the province.¹⁴ MacKay called these averages *phenocrons* (each phenomenon had its phenocron, or average first date of appearance). But the picture was of course more complex than those tidy provincial averages suggested. MacKay saw the province as divided into twelve distinct regions, which he called *slopes*, each with three *belts*: coast, low inlands, and highlands. "Every locality has a *flora, fauna, climate*, etc., more or less distinctly its own," he wrote in the instructions to observers printed with the blank

¹³ "Local 'Nature' Observations," blank form.

¹⁴ Climate scientists have recently made use of MacKay's data. See, for example, Adam Fenech et al., "Impact of Climate on Changes in the Seasonal Timing of Life Cycle Events of Eastern Canada from 1901 to 1923," in *Integrated Mapping Assessment*, ed. Adam Fenech et al. (Toronto: Environment Canada, 2005), 55–69; Liette Vasseur, Robert L. Guscott, and Peta J. Mudie, "Monitoring of Spring Flower Phenology in Nova Scotia: Comparison over the Last Century," *Northeastern Naturalist* 8, no. 4 (January 2001): 393–402.

schedule.¹⁵ MacKay even saw the inhabitants of various environmental micro-regions as pitted against each other in a friendly bit of climatic rivalry. Reporting on his 1895 findings, just before the project began to include schoolchildren, MacKay felt compelled to reassure the members of the Institute of Science about the appropriate objectivity of his project. Noting that the averages for some phenomena in northern Nova Scotia had advanced quite considerably over those of the previous year, MacKay suggested that perhaps the observers there were compelled to “be more constantly watchful than usual” so as not to be outdone by their southern counterparts. He explained, “they may have made a greater effort to get the exact facts, which would tend to bring phenomena more promptly to their notice,” but nevertheless insisted that “there need not be the slightest suspicion that any of the observers, who are well known to me, put a single figure down in the ‘interest of any particular climate.’”¹⁶ In later years, observers were reminded that the figures “must be as accurate as possible Very early dates ... do not prejudice the compiler in favour of the observers, but very much the reverse.”¹⁷ Nevertheless, the subjective character of the project was already evident, something that would dog MacKay and his colleagues throughout the life of the project.

Competition or not, MacKay believed the province was in effect made up of micro-regions, which he noted were seldom coterminous with the official boundaries of counties or municipal areas. Instead of only linking coastal communities to their hinterlands, MacKay also linked coastal communities to each other, in both cases crossing municipal and county lines. MacKay also knew that state mapping often could

¹⁵ “Local ‘Nature’ Observations,” blank form. Italics in the original.

¹⁶ A. H. MacKay, “Phenological Observations Made at Several Stations in Canada during the Year 1895,” *Transactions of the Nova Scotian Institute of Science*, 1896, 206.

¹⁷ *NSJE*, October 1903, 136.

not be relied upon in rural areas. Teachers were requested to provide the name of their closest post office to indicate their relative position because “the locations of many school sections are not indicated on any maps.”¹⁸ MacKay’s alternative mapping points to the limits (though certainly not the absence) of state logic in parts of rural Nova Scotia well into the twentieth century. It also acknowledges that environmental differences, not arbitrary state produced mapping, have often defined the identities of many rural communities.

From this perspective, MacKay’s project may be seen as a sympathetic collaboration with rural communities, drawing on and privileging local knowledge and the allegedly sensitive sensory skills of rural people. Positioned along with more recent citizen science projects through the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, we can read MacKay’s project as one that took the knowledge of rural observers seriously, celebrating and formalizing the long-standing observational activity of farmers, sailors, and other rural people who had long been watching the weather and keeping track of environmental changes around them.

However, it is also important to contextualize MacKay’s project in relation to the widespread efforts at rural reform in the period. MacKay was a fervent advocate for rural modernization and he, like many others, saw education as key to this transformation. But the unusually diffuse nature of the education system in Nova Scotia, split into 1700 independent school sections with weak central enforcement well into the post-war period, meant that communities were largely independent to choose the wage to offer for a teacher, whether or not to build and maintain a schoolhouse, and whether or not to

¹⁸ *NSJE*, October 1898, 136.

implement reform initiatives.¹⁹ In this context, where change could only come from within the communities themselves, it was clear MacKay saw his work as a civilizing mission and he regularly voiced his frustrations in writing. For instance, in his 1911 Superintendent's report he complained about vacant schools:

It is a disgrace to our civilization that such a condition should exist without recognition by the wise men of the school section. ... [T]he parental and patriotic intelligence of many of the inhabitants of the vacant school sections is of an order lower than those to whom we send missionaries. [Yet] the churches find that their missionaries prefer to go to the ends of the earth among those who speak another language, than endure the inglorious martyrdom necessary to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children in obscure localities in their own land.²⁰

His greatest vitriol was certainly directed at communities without a school, or without a teacher, but a range of similar comments over the course of many years points to his broader belief in the urgent need for rural reform.

MacKay was in no way exceptional in this regard and this chapter is not intended to be an indictment of a man who was in many ways a broad-minded and enthusiastic advocate of rural life. Rather, it offers an opportunity to think through the ways that the logic and practices of science worked in tandem with the state in contexts well beyond imperial narratives of so-called discovery.²¹ It is important to read MacKay's phenology

¹⁹ Perry, *The Grand Regulator*. On the conditions that tended to make state education seem irrelevant to rural Nova Scotians, see Michael Corbett, "A Protracted Struggle: Rural Resistance and Normalization in Canadian Educational History," *Historical Studies in Education* 13, no. 1 (2001): 19–48.

²⁰ Nova Scotia, *Annual Report of the Superintendent of Education of Nova Scotia for the Year Ended 31st July, 1911* (Halifax, NS: King's Printer, 1911), xvi. MacKay's comments were consistent with a broader impression, confirmed by Rosemary Gagan, that the so-called home missions were staffed by the least-qualified missionaries. Rosemary R. Gagan, *Sensitive Independence: Canadian Methodist Women Missionaries in Canada and the Orient, 1881-1925* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992).

²¹ There is a substantial literature on the complicity of science, including botany, in processes of imperialism and colonialism, much of it focusing on the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. See, for example, Daniela Bleichmar, *Visible Empire: Botanical Expeditions and Visual Culture in the Hispanic Enlightenment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); James Delbourgo and Nicholas Dew, eds., *Science and Empire in the Atlantic World* (New York: Routledge, 2008); Richard Harry Drayton, *Nature's Government: Science, Imperial Britain, and the "Improvement" of the World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000); Fa-ti Fan, *British Naturalists in Qing China: Science, Empire, and Cultural*

project in this context, rather than separate from it. From this perspective, training rural children and teachers to see scientifically—moulding their sensory skills and their attentive capacities—was part of a broader effort intended to transform rural lives and to produce productive, morally upstanding citizens who would modernize rural places and fulfill the demands of the liberal state.

MacKay's annual reports as Superintendent include his running commentary on the phenological observation project, much of it laced with concern about the actual reach of his authority into rural places. The mandatory status of the project did not mean that it was universally followed by rural teachers and children. Fewer than twenty percent of schools ever submitted reports in a single year. Nevertheless, MacKay took the project very seriously and continued to cajole and admonish teachers to participate. He even threatened to revoke the teaching license of anyone caught forging data.²² It is important to note that it was rural teachers, rather than children, who were expected to be the main participants of the project, the vast majority of whom were young rural women with very little, if any, formal training as educators. They were paid among the lowest wages in Canada, typically worked for only a few years, and frequently switched schools from year to year, conditions that mitigated efforts to modernize and standardize education across the province.²³ Beginning in 1902, the *Nova Scotia Journal of Education* typically

Encounter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979); Londa L. Schiebinger, *Plants and Empire: Colonial Bioprospecting in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Londa L. Schiebinger and Claudia Swan, eds., *Colonial Botany: Science, Commerce, and Politics in the Early Modern World* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005); Suzanne Elizabeth Zeller, *Inventing Canada: Early Victorian Science and the Idea of a Transcontinental Nation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987).

²² *NSJE*, October 1905, 206. Before this warning, there were occasionally accusations that numbers may have been copied between teachers. See for example, *NSJE*, April 1903, 97; April 1905, 83.

²³ George Perry, "'A Concession to Circumstances': Nova Scotia's 'Unlimited Supply' of Women Teachers, 1870-1960," *Historical Studies in Education* 15, no. 2 (2003): 327–60; George Perry, *The Grand*

devoted several pages to critical remarks written by the compilers of the previous year's submissions, often admonishing teachers for the poor quality of their submissions. The compilers were mostly amateur naturalists and educators, both women and men; MacKay called them his "staff of phenologists." These remarks form an important primary source collection for this study, alongside MacKay's compiled data ledgers, and the original schedules submitted by teachers, to be discussed in detail below.²⁴

Gateways of Knowledge

While all modes of vision have histories, practices of scientific observation are among the most readily identifiable as having developed under particular cultural conditions and historical circumstances. In scientific practice, as opposed to among the general population, the training of vision is explicit and unambiguous. This does not mean that practitioners have always been self-aware of the extent to which "observation," as a particular form of looking, has a history.²⁵ Nevertheless, the assertion that it is a skill that must be learned places scientific observation apart from modes of vision that are deemed to be "natural" or inherent. Lorraine Daston and Elizabeth Lunbeck write that "if all experience [including sensory experience, e.g. vision] is to some extent refined, framed

Regulator: The Miseducation of Nova Scotia's Teachers, 1838-1997 (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013).

²⁴ The A. H. MacKay Ledger Collection at the Nova Scotia Museum Library, Halifax, contains the collected returns of phenological observations, and MacKay's compiled data ledgers. Hereafter cited respectively as Collected Returns and Data Ledgers.

²⁵ Lorraine Daston and Elizabeth Lunbeck note that while many studies have explored aspects of scientific practice as they relate to observation, observation itself is "almost never ... an object of historical enquiry in its own right. Observation seems at once too ubiquitous, too basic, and altogether too obvious to merit a history." Their edited collection is the first book to attempt a history of scientific observation "conceptualized as an epistemic category in its own right." Lorraine Daston and Elizabeth Lunbeck, "Observation Observed," introduction to *Histories of Scientific Observation*, ed. Lorraine Daston and Elizabeth Lunbeck (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 1, 2. See also Lorraine Daston, "On Scientific Observation," *Isis* 99, no. 1 (2008): 97-110.

by context and circumstance, scientific experience is still more deliberate and cultivated.” Scientific observation “is a highly contrived and disciplined form of experience.”²⁶

Modern practices of scientific observation have lengthy and varied histories, but they were consolidated by late nineteenth-century transformations in education. In their history of objectivity, Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison have described an “explosion in pedagogical innovation [that] blazed a path to scientific formation” in the late nineteenth century. Growing universities with new departments and new methods of training produced new ideals for vision and observation. In this setting, “the trained expert possessed and conveyed to apprentices the means (through the ‘trained’ or ‘seeing’ eye) to classify and manipulate” objects of scientific interest.²⁷ For example, Mara Mills explores the work of Charles Minot, a biologist who taught in the medical faculty at Yale in the years bracketing the turn of the century and who emphasized, like many of his colleagues, the “equation of science with training the eye.” Mills writes that Minot insisted that learning to see scientifically required practice, “similar to the playing of a musical instrument.”²⁸

Alongside these pedagogical innovations at the university level were equally transformative innovations in teaching philosophies for elementary schooling across North America and Western Europe. The decades of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed a major reorganization of elementary instruction under the banner of the New Education, moving away from rote memorization toward a new

²⁶ Daston and Lunbeck, “Observation Observed,” 3.

²⁷ Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 27, 322.

²⁸ Mara Mills, “Trained Judgment, Intervention, and the Biological Gaze: How Charles Sedgwick Minot Saw Senescence,” in *The Educated Eye: Visual Culture and Pedagogy in the Life Sciences*, ed. Nancy Anderson and Michael R. Dietrich (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2012), 19, 18.

emphasis on more relevant practical skills and child-centred learning. Among its prescriptions, the New Education prioritized object lessons and experiential learning in a way that explicitly foregrounded the training of the senses. In an 1892 lecture at Dalhousie University on the place of the senses in learning, philosophy professor James Seth argued: “Knowledge begins in sensation. The external world must first enter the mind of the subject through the senses, which have therefore been called the ‘gateways of knowledge.’ Sensation is the elementary point of contact between the subject and the object. . . . Knowledge is a single or continuous process; it commences in sensation and passes on to perception, conception, judgment, etc.”²⁹ This formulation of the senses as the “gateways of knowledge” reveals an understanding of the senses as fundamental to learning and therefore as eligible for refinement and training. The broader pedagogical implication was that children began life with wide-open, raw senses, and that they required guidance to best develop and enhance their capacity for reason and intellect.

The study of nature was touted as an ideal way to achieve this goal. Though in practice it was frequently combined with vocational agricultural skills training and school gardens, nature-study as an educational philosophy was distinct from either of these. In general, nature-study prioritized children’s direct observation of the natural world in a way that encouraged curiosity, imagination, and individual learning. Lessons were to be drawn from the local environment through excursions and the collection of specimens, rather than from books. In a 1901 segment in the *Nova Scotia Journal of Education* titled “False Nature Lesson Teaching,” the author (likely A. H. MacKay) chastised teachers who gave nature lessons through traditional methods—for instance, “a short essay on the

²⁹ *Educational Review*, July 1892, 32.

‘potato bug’” written on the blackboard “*for the children to copy and learn to recite parrot fashion on the morrow.*” The author insisted, using frequent italics for emphasis, that “*pupils should not be required to memorize notes and facts which they have not, at least, to some extent actually observed or verified for themselves.*” He added, “*Such memorizing is pure cram, injurious instead of being useful. ... The lesson must be direct from nature itself.*”³⁰ On the question of where sources for nature-study lessons might be found, another author in the *Journal* advised, “Every hill has its history. Every brook tells a dozen stories. Every plain is a museum of wonders.”³¹

The senses were regularly and explicitly foregrounded in the literature on nature-study. Among the intentionally open-ended recommendations for lesson plans, it was often an evocation of the senses that served to denote the learning goals for a particular level of study. For instance, the Nova Scotia recommendations for nature-study at the Grade I level read: “Power of accurate observation developed by exercising each of the senses on simple and appropriate objects.” When the course of study was revised in 1910, the provisional recommendations regarding birds at the Grade I level were simply “Birds.—Learn to *see* and *hear* them.”³² The very aims of nature-study were often articulated in terms of awakening, building, and training all the senses as a step toward a fuller capacity for judgement and action. This is made eminently clear in the introduction to a 1902 pamphlet from the Ontario Agricultural College, *Nature-Study, or Stories in Agriculture*. College president James Mills wrote:

Most people look at many things which they do not see, and hear many sounds to which they pay little or no attention. ... The aim of nature study is to interest men and women, and especially boys and girls, in the natural objects which they look

³⁰ *NSJE*, April 1901, 87–88, emphasis in original.

³¹ *NSJE*, April 1912, 103–4.

³² *NSJE*, April 1904, 43; *NSJE*, April 1901, 129, emphasis in original.

at, handle, taste, or smell from day to day, in order that they may acquire the habit of observing closely, and so get all the pleasure possible out of their surroundings in life, and find their daily duties less irksome, and gather information that will be helpful to them in overcoming difficulties and in working for a share of the necessaries, comforts, and luxuries of life. ... The eyes, ears, and other organs of sense in children are wide awake and keenly attentive; and the one thing needed is nature-loving, well trained, competent teachers in the Public Schools, to direct and develop the love for natural objects which is so strong from infancy to twelve or fourteen years of age.³³

The rhetoric here is similar to that used to argue the case of manual training and experiential learning more broadly: children begin with raw sensation and ought to be carefully guided toward reasoned judgement and action.

In the case of nature-study, this was not simply learning for the purpose of abstract intellectual development. As Mills implied, training in scientific observation might contribute to a better, more fulfilling life. Nature-study was an important addition to urban education, but it was also seen as particularly useful for rural children, who would be taught to better appreciate, understand, and harness the world around them, making them more interested in staying on the land. American educator James Jewell suggested the impressionable senses of children might be harnessed to make them caretakers of the natural world, writing, “any child would prefer an apple that is not wormy: let him learn the cause of wormy apples and you have a new force for good in the horticultural world, not to mention his changed attitude toward the birds of the neighborhood.” He added, “the child himself becomes a life-long economic force in nature, as soon as he learns to look at it with understanding eyes.”³⁴

³³ James Mills, “Nature Study,” in *Nature Study or Stories in Agriculture*, Ontario Agricultural College Bulletin 124 (Toronto: Ontario Department of Agriculture, 1902), 3, 4.

³⁴ James Ralph Jewell, “The Place of Nature Study, School Gardens, and Agriculture in Our School System,” *Paedagogical Seminary* 13, no. 3 (1906): 277, 276.

It is not incidental that Jewell suggested taste, considered to be one of the lower senses, as a motivator for children, or that he used a visual metaphor to denote a higher phase of comprehension and action. As pedagogical recommendations moved from the youngest children to older students there was a very clear shift in language that implied a hierarchy of the senses, with vision at the top. Young children were to begin by exploring all of their senses and would eventually grow up into sophisticated, refined “observers.” In the case of one-room rural schools, MacKay suggested that object lessons from nature could “profitably” be given to all grades at once as “the older pupils will see more and think more.”³⁵ Graded prescriptions shifted from references to specific senses, or to the senses in general, toward a more specialized and directed practice of observation accompanied by visual activities, foremost of which was drawing. In his OAC pamphlet, Mills called drawing “the ever-necessary handmaid” of nature-study; it was a mandatory part of the Nova Scotia curriculum throughout the period of this study.³⁶

This implication of the hand/body in practices that are nevertheless characterized as primarily visual is central to what Evelyn Fox Keller has called the “biological gaze.” Rather than the distant or detached medical gaze theorized by Foucault or the objectifying male gaze identified by feminist scholars, the biological gaze, according to Keller, is “seemingly inevitably enmeshed in actual touching, in taking the object into hand, in trespassing on and transforming the very thing we look at.”³⁷ In the case of natural history, this means activities such as drawing, but also the uprooting, preserving, and dissecting of specimens that often precedes drawing, as well as any disturbance to

³⁵ MacKay, “Nature-Study in the Schools of Nova Scotia,” 151.

³⁶ Mills, “Nature Study,” 4.

³⁷ Evelyn Fox Keller, “The Finishing Touch,” in *The Practice of Cultural Analysis: Exposing Interdisciplinary Interpretation*, ed. Mieke Bal (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 30.

habitat caused by the collection. Acknowledging this messy, multi-sensory reality is not intended to soften the reputation of scientific observation, to imply that it is a benign, human practice unlike other politically charged, abstracting ways of looking. Rather, pointing to the disparity between the literal hands-on, interventionist acts of looking fundamental to the work of natural history and the way that observation is idealized as a distant, neutral practice reveals the shaky foundation upon which ideals of scientific objectivity rest.

That vision was idealized in the discourse of nature-study is further demonstrated by the recurrent use of metaphorical language featuring tropes of open and closed eyes. The American nature-study guru Liberty Hyde Bailey described his own awakening to the world around him by recalling a teacher who told him: “You are going through a beautiful world with your eyes shut. You see nothing.”³⁸ A. H. MacKay decried children and teachers “with their eyes open as to their lids, but blindfolded as to their perception.”³⁹ These metaphorical evocations of vision were in line with broader linguistic usage that continues to associate clear vision with knowledge or with religious revelation. However, they are also linked to a material understanding of vision—and the capacity for effective observation—as a real-life skill to be nurtured and refined. MacKay was not writing metaphorically when he argued, in the same paragraph as above, that the “monotonous journey” of children on the way to and from school is actually “crammed with objects of the most surpassing interest to the young people if they were only taught to see them.” The “teacher’s duty . . . is to see that the habit of accurate observation is

³⁸ Quoted in Kohlstedt, *Teaching Children Science*, 85.

³⁹ *Educational Review*, August 1895, 44.

developed.”⁴⁰ This training of vision was not simply for its own sake, nor to reduce monotony on the way to school. While the ideals of scientific practice might insist on the neutrality of observation, in the context of education and rural reform these prescriptions for disciplined looking were associated with an explicit moral outcome.

It is clear that education reformers in the period felt there was a real connection between particular ways of looking and a productive, moral, modern life. Promoting nature-study in 1896, the president of Stanford University, David Starr Jordan, emphasized its “character building” aspects and utility for introducing “right conduct” to children. Jordan foregrounded the place of the senses in learning and emphasized the necessity of training in this regard: “The sensory nerves are the brain’s sole teachers. . . . The un-trained brain learns its lessons poorly and its commands are vacillating and ineffective. In like manner the brain which has been misused shows its defects in ill-chosen action, the action against which nature protests through her whip of misery.”⁴¹ Jordan joined a chorus of voices when he recommended nature-study as a preferred means for preparing children to make their way through the complexities and choices of modern life. He added that nature-study helped to refine “the power of attention” amid the many “impulses to action” confronting the brain each day.⁴²

As the work of Jonathan Crary reveals, Jordan was not alone in his particular concern with “the power of attention.” Educators drew from physiologists, philosophers, and newly professionalizing psychologists, all of whom began to characterize inattention and distraction as a problem and a potential danger in the late nineteenth century. Crary

⁴⁰ *Educational Review*, August 1895, 44.

⁴¹ David Starr Jordan, “Nature Study and Moral Culture,” *Science*, New Series, 4, no. 84 (1896): 151.

⁴² Jordan, “Nature Study and Moral Culture,” 151.

suggests that anxieties surrounding attention centred on “the relative capacity of a subject to selectively isolate certain contents of a sensory field at the expense of others in the interests of maintaining an orderly and productive world.”⁴³ Questions of attention commonly appeared in accounts of modern subjectivity and individuals were increasingly judged and defined by their capacity to pay attention and to interpret and process visual and other sensory codes appropriately. Deviance from established norms came to be pathologized and disciplined, leading to models for training and refinement, “in which attention [was] conceived as an element of subjectivity to be externally shaped and controlled.”⁴⁴ In rural Canada, as elsewhere, the school was a key site of this discipline and nature-study was celebrated for its pedagogical contribution toward the formation of a productive, manageable, and predictable subjectivity. Principal R. H. Cowley of Kingston, Ontario, expressed a common belief when he wrote that by engaging with nature “the pupils’ powers of observation are turned into the orderly channels of cause and effect. His ever widening outlook toward the objects and forces of nature frees his mind from the power of sensory illusions and his moral nature from superstitions.”⁴⁵ An article in the *Educational Review* highlighted the need for effective nature-study lessons that “stimulate the habit of observation and sound inference from observations; otherwise the pupil may develop into the unobservant, inaccurate clown, who even if he becomes a literary man, delivers his own ‘brain-dreams’ as the ‘real facts.’”⁴⁶ In the logic of the

⁴³ Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 17.

⁴⁴ Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*, 63.

⁴⁵ R. H. Cowley, “The Macdonald School Gardens,” *Queen’s Quarterly*, April 1905, 417.

⁴⁶ *Educational Review*, August 1899, 40.

nature-study movement, training in meaningful, directed observation could save children from degenerate, unproductive, even immoral ways of life.

The *Educational Review*'s "brain-dreams" might be read alongside Cowley's "sensory illusions" as analogous to daydreaming: any range of aberrant cognitive states that defy the modes of sensory selection and exclusion characteristic of normative concentrated attentiveness. Crary describes daydreaming as "a site of resistance internal to any system of routinization and coercion"⁴⁷—in this case an unrationalizable challenge to the authority of state education. A. H. MacKay and his contemporaries would have called it wasted time. For his part, MacKay once described a walk to school without purposeful observation as "useless," and when the phenology project was finally underway he remarked that "it was good to see that so much of the leisure time often given to unproductive recreation is now being directed to research. It is a good thing to feel that the search for more truth is in the air."⁴⁸ Nature-study lessons sought to inculcate habits of observation that might be carried into areas of life beyond the classroom, and MacKay's project of phenological reporting was an unambiguous effort to extend the discipline of the school day to include the hours outside of school. A few years after he suggested nature observations as a way to reduce monotony, MacKay amplified his rhetoric, suggesting that participating in compulsory observations would "fill an idle and wearisome hour with interest, and be one of the most valuable forms of educational discipline."⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*, 77.

⁴⁸ *NSJE*, April 1902, 107; *NSJE*, October 1905, 206.

⁴⁹ "Local 'Nature' Observations," blank form. These attitudes toward intellectual and recreational discipline were not anomalous or even unique to nature-study or the realm of education. They were consistent with broader trends in Canadian critical thought and moral philosophy, as well as with the promotion of citizenship through "rational recreation." See Michael Gauvreau, *The Evangelical Century: College and Creed in English Canada from the Great Revival to the Great Depression* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's

MacKay was also confident about the results of this sensory discipline, writing that his program of phenological observations was “no doubt, starting a very many young pupils on the beginning of an observant course which will make them specially useful citizens.”⁵⁰ Elsewhere, with more characteristically gendered language, he added that the program starts pupils “thinking in the way of the men who have done something in the world”; and “such exercises have special power in developing the habit of accurate observation (which is the soundest basis for any career ranging from that of the poet and professional man to the tiller and lord of the soil, the tradesman, the manufacturer and inventor).”⁵¹ The administrators of MacKay’s phenology project articulated the same kinds of messages, one of them complaining that many teachers did not seem to understand how important it was to “train [the children] to go through the world with their eyes open, and to acquire habits of observation which would help to make their lives happier and more useful.”⁵² The ostensible inability of rural people to meet standards of attentiveness and sensory perception meant that they were at a disadvantage in terms of becoming respectable, upstanding, productive citizens. From the perspective of a vigorous rural reform movement, this was a further example of their need for re-education.

University Press, 1991); A. B. McKillop, *A Disciplined Intelligence: Critical Inquiry and Canadian Thought in the Victorian Era* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1979); Nancy B. Bouchier, *For the Love of the Game: Amateur Sport in Small-Town Ontario, 1838-1895* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2003); Bruce Kidd, *The Struggle for Canadian Sport* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996).

⁵⁰ “Local ‘Nature’ Observations,” blank form.

⁵¹ *NSJE*, April 1904, 103; *NSJE*, October 1908, 162.

⁵² *NSJE*, April 1907, 81.

Observers in Training

Rural elementary school students and their young, typically female teachers, were considered to be “observers in training” by MacKay and his colleagues.⁵³ And their refusal to adhere to appropriately scientific modes of looking was a constant frustration to the aims of the phenology project. The collected data was compiled and tabulated by the men and women MacKay called his “staff of phenologists,” a group of fellow educators and naturalists, mostly science teachers and principals at the county academies. The group was made up of people like the young Loran DeWolfe, who would later go on to become the first provincial Director of Rural Science, and others who shared, at least to some extent, MacKay’s passion for nature and its pedagogical potential.⁵⁴ Compilers were assigned the completed schedules of one or more regions and were requested to tabulate and average the data received. They published yearly remarks on their work in the *Journal of Education*.

These remarks filled several pages and were replete with sarcastic admonitions about the inability of rural teachers to recognize even common flora and their propensity for confusing those of similar species. The compilers complained of the “great confusion,” the “many irregularities and errors,” and the “manifest absurdities” that allegedly appeared in the reports before them. On the whole, the remarks reveal a perceived widespread inattention to detail and general failure to adhere to the kind of precision demanded by this scientific experiment. Teachers were regularly called “careless,” or accused of “carelessness.” Misidentifying the arrival of mayflowers was

⁵³ *NSJE*, October 1905, 206.

⁵⁴ On Dewolfe, see Jane Margaret Norman, *Loran Arthur DeWolfe and the Reform of Education in Nova Scotia, 1891-1959* (Truro, NS: Atlantic Early Learning Productions, 1989).

seen as particularly egregious, one compiler writing, “as usual, some mistakes occur, which in the case of the rarer plants can readily be excused, but in the case of such common plants as *Viola blanda* [white violet] and *Epigaea repens* [mayflower], carelessness is the only cause one can ascribe.”⁵⁵ According to the compilers, rural people—children, teachers, and other community members—were simply not looking hard enough, or closely enough, or carefully enough. That is to say, they were not looking with the thoroughness, and with the focused attention and precision that was expected of emerging scientists—or of productive, useful, modern citizens.

One particular thorn in the side of the compilers over the entire life of the project was the ongoing confusion between Pale Laurel, Rhodora, and Lambkill, three purple flowers that all grow in or near bogs. One exasperated compiler was already insisting in 1903 that the three plants were “so generally taken one for the other, that any average of observations is useless,” another noting the same year that at least one teacher even “drew a line through *K. glauca* [Pale Laurel] and wrote Rhodora instead.”⁵⁶ In response to such complaints, MacKay himself made a rare intervention in the *Journal* in 1903 to chastise teachers, suggesting that these plants “can be mistaken only by observers who are shamefully ignorant of botany, for nothing can be easier than to distinguish them apart. It is hoped that the blunder will not occur again.”⁵⁷ Nevertheless, numerous misidentifications were reported by the compilers every year through to the 1920s. Already in 1905 a compiler regretted to “report the now almost stereotyped complaint concerning Rhodora, Pale Laurel, and Sheep Laurel”; by 1917 “it [had] become a rather

⁵⁵ *NSJE*, April 1905, 82.

⁵⁶ *NSJE*, April 1903, 97.

⁵⁷ *NSJE*, April 1903, 98.

trite comment for a compiler to say that the Rhodora and the Kalmias are confused.”⁵⁸
Compilers regularly called for them to be removed from the list.

As a potentially revealing site of contestation between reform imperatives and rural alternatives, it is significant that these and other criticisms, which will be addressed in more detail below, were nearly identical every year for the twenty-five years of the project. The program was phased in over the last years of the 1890s; in 1906 one compiler crossly summarized what had already become a refrain about the same errors appearing year after year: “No new errors appear. Evidently all possible mistakes have been made.”⁵⁹ By 1910, the staff was still referring frequently to the “usual mistakes” and “old time errors.” One fed-up compiler spoke for all when he complained that “irregularities and errors were found, which have been pointed out so often in the Journal, that it seems useless to enumerate these same errors from year to year.”⁶⁰ For the next five years no remarks were published, but when a new group of compilers took over the job in 1916 nothing had changed; they had the very same complaints as their predecessors. By 1920 the staff was still noting that “the Observation schedules had mistakes similar to other years” and exhorting, “Let us all try to improve our Phenological returns. This can be accomplished by keener observation.”⁶¹

Harry Piers, long-time curator of the Nova Scotia Provincial Museum, and a colleague and friend of A. H. MacKay, was certainly a keen observer and he provides an evocative phrase to describe the visual aim of all natural history pursuits. Namely, he

⁵⁸ *NSJE*, April 1905, 83; *NSJE*, April 1917, 67.

⁵⁹ *NSJE*, April 1906, 64.

⁶⁰ *NSJE*, April 1910, 94.

⁶¹ *NSJE*, April 1920, 94.

extolled the virtues of his “very pleasant duty of keeping Nature under police surveillance,”⁶² alluding to the important relationship between vision, knowledge, and power. Similarly, MacKay wrote that training in scientific observation could make a rural boy “a power over his environment, and, therefore, possibly, a great man among his fellow citizens.”⁶³ To see the world with a scientific eye, at least for certain men, was to have dominion over it—and perhaps over others—rather than to be at its mercy.

Extending Piers’s police metaphor, it might seem that MacKay had deputized rural teachers and schoolchildren in a province-wide stakeout of buttercups and robins. But in this particular arrangement, rural people were not necessarily on the side of the law. Rather, they were more often than not treated as unreliable eyewitnesses in the court of capital-S-Science, where their colloquial ways of interacting with the world were put on trial. And indeed, this project placed rural people themselves under scrutiny and surveillance as much as the plants and animals it purported to study. Teachers were publicly congratulated and thanked for submitting excellent observations and the names of all teachers who sent in schedules, along with the number of their observations, were published in the *Journal of Education* each fall. At the same time, however, teachers were also regularly reminded that school inspectors and others in authority were paying close attention to who did and did not fill out the schedules and if they did so neatly and accurately. From the outset teachers were assured that “this work is entirely voluntary: but our Inspectors are observing the differences between the schools in which they are

⁶² Harry Piers, “Notes on Nova Scotian Zoology, No. 2,” *Proceedings of the Nova Scotian Institute of Science* (1891-1892): 175.

⁶³ Nova Scotia, *Annual Report of the Superintendent of Education of Nova Scotia for the Year Ended 31st July, 1906* (Halifax, NS: King’s Printer, 1906), xlii.

made and those in which they are not.”⁶⁴ It was suggested that “the character of the schedule should be an index of teaching. Hence the Inspectors should be familiar with the schedules of each teacher.” A poor quality schedule could put into question a teacher’s “fitness to hold even a permissive license.”⁶⁵ The disciplinary function of the phenology project was manifold. Not only did it train young minds in civic virtue, it also functioned as an additional surface for the surveillance of teachers both in and out of school.

Among his notes in 1904, Loran DeWolfe noted that many dates of flowering were recorded too late, “owing probably to too infrequent walks for observation.” He editorialized, “I fear too many teachers have never learned what pleasure it is each night after school to go for a long walk through the woods and fields, by the brook or the lakeside, and observe for themselves the advance of vegetation and the appearance of the birds,” adding, “a short talk about this trip next day in school may stimulate a few of the pupils to go on similar excursions, until at last the whole school would be a band of enthusiastic observers.”⁶⁶ Teachers were expected to model good observational behaviour outside of school hours, perhaps not a particularly onerous task, but nevertheless an extension of the constant surveillance and demands already placed on them to be morally upstanding members of their communities.⁶⁷

There is no doubt that MacKay, DeWolfe, and others were sincere in their desire for Nova Scotian children and teachers to engage with the world around them and to become enthusiastic nature lovers, or in their faith in the benefits this would bring.

⁶⁴ *NSJE*, October 1897, 144.

⁶⁵ *NSJE*, April 1909, 95; *NSJE*, April 1906, 61.

⁶⁶ *NSJE*, April 1904, 80.

⁶⁷ See, for example, J. Donald Wilson, “‘I Am Ready to Be of Assistance When I Can’: Lottie Brown and Rural Women Teachers in British Columbia,” in *Children, Teachers and Schools in the History of British Columbia*, ed. Jean Barman and Mona Lee Gleason, 2nd ed (Calgary: Detselig Enterprises, 2003), 259–69.

Nevertheless, the aim of all nature-study in the schools was pragmatic, to produce properly trained observers, self-motivated, and disciplined for scientific work and modern life. One compiler was pleased to note in this regard that some “careful, faithful pupils have developed into accurate and painstaking teachers.”⁶⁸ And while the phenology project might conveniently be used as a tool to that end, it was also clear that it was not to be taken lightly or treated simply as a game for the children. Unlike nature-study more generally, it was expected that this project would be treated as serious scientific work. When one compiler found “many irregularities” in reports on “the first and last frost and snow, the closing and opening of lakes and rivers, water in streams, highest or lowest, etc.,” she asked, “would it not be advisable for teachers who cannot conveniently report these from their own observations to ask some reliable pupil or parent who is in a better position to give accurate dates to furnish them with the required information?”⁶⁹ Comments such as these are a good reminder that the primary aim of this project was not the edification of the children, but to extract data (“the required information”) from rural places for use in Superintendent MacKay’s personal project. And there is significant evidence to suggest that teachers and students did not have a good sense of where their data was going, or to what end. As late as 1917, one compiler complained of the small number of schedules sent in and suggested to MacKay, “no doubt most teachers have an idea that these are never used and pile up ‘Somewhere.’ Such is not the case, and an explanatory note in the *Journal of Education* explaining, would no doubt be an eye opener to many.”⁷⁰ Two years later, and more than twenty years after the project began, a

⁶⁸ *NSJE*, April 1902, 59.

⁶⁹ *NSJE*, April 1907, 81.

⁷⁰ *NSJE*, April 1917, 75.

short piece on the utility of the phenological observations for the timing of crops attempted to answer its own rhetorical question: “Are the Phenological Observations, then, that we are asked to keep, after all, useless? Apparently not.”⁷¹

Unlike his naturalist colleagues, whose objectivity and impartial enthusiasm could be counted on in the early years of the project, it is significant to note the lack of trust that MacKay and the compilers clearly had in the rural teachers they were cajoling to participate. MacKay repeatedly declared with pride that the Nova Scotia observations were “more accurate in the great majority of cases than the observations made by individuals of the scientific societies, who often were able to make their observations only once or twice a week, and then only over a comparatively circumscribed ground.”⁷² Nevertheless, the compilers (who were themselves naturalists) were always considered the reliable authorities in the frequent cases of discrepancy. Year after year teachers were told that their observations were inaccurate or outright wrong because the compilers assessed the value of the submitted reports against historical data. Only the “most accurate”—those that conformed to the compilers’ expectations—were included in the final rendering of the data. Each year, teachers were singled out and congratulated for having submitted “correct” and “accurate” observations while those who fell outside the acceptable dates were admonished. The words *accurate* and *inaccurate*, *correct* and *incorrect*, *too early* and *too late* recur persistently throughout the compilers’ remarks. Only the ten “most accurate” schedules for each of MacKay’s thirty-six regions were compiled and averaged.

Drawing parameters around the acceptable dates for observations was appropriate

⁷¹ *NSJE*, October 1919, 239.

⁷² *NSJE*, October 1905, 206.

and its logic becomes clearer if considered as a complement to boundaries around the known locations for particular plants or animals. Observations outside these boundaries would rightly be received with skepticism and require additional support. In my discussion of MacKay's project, I do not mean to imply that the accuracy of the phenological observations did not, or does not, matter, or that the data provided by teachers should simply have been accepted and never questioned. Instead, I am interested in the conditions within which notions of accuracy and relevance were determined by this project and what this reveals about efforts to standardize and modernize rural engagements with the environment. As Tina Loo suggest, we might productively ask in this context how and why certain knowledges come to be labelled as local and others as universal or expert.⁷³ It is clear that the compilers were often overzealous, framing their own personal knowledge as expertise in opposition to the colloquial knowledge of teachers. Highlighting this process reveals the disciplinary work performed by science in rural places.

Even when the compilers acknowledged that they did not have the necessary information to make such determinations, they remained eminently self-confident and skeptical of their rural correspondents. In his remarks on the 1901 schedules, high school principal Burgess McKittrick, the compiler for the South Shore, admitted that he "did not carefully notice" the flowering of various species of buttercup "last summer, and therefore [he] was unable to determine accurately the correctness of the observations from [his] own experience." Nevertheless he added, as many others would time and

⁷³ Tina Loo, "High Modernism, Conflict, and the Nature of Change in Canada: A Look at *Seeing Like a State*," *Canadian Historical Review* 97, no. 1 (2016): 46–47.

again, that he had “grave doubts about the accuracy of several observations.”⁷⁴ Here and elsewhere, the basic reliability of rural observers was frequently called into question. Principal E. J. Lay, the compiler for Halifax County the same year admitted he was very skeptical of the dates given for black currant, lilac, and white clover by teacher Ella Gaetz in West Petpeswick, whose mayflowers opened this chapter, but added that because “Rev. Mr. Rosborough is there and instructs the teachers often in Botany, I accepted them.”⁷⁵ Rosborough was a friend of MacKay’s and one of the original phenologists in the earliest years of the project. He frequently visited area schools to give lessons in botany.⁷⁶ The very same data coming from Gaetz alone would have held no authority and would have been rejected out of hand.

Various compilers were forthcoming that in selecting which schedules to include in their averages, they relied heavily on their own personal knowledge of the teachers. From the earliest years of the project distinctions were made between those known to be “enthusiastic botanists” and the remaining “average observers.”⁷⁷ Compiler and vice-principal Antoinette Forbes added that she also considered the “sex and temperament of the observer” when selecting which schedules to average.⁷⁸ This comment may explain the note she wrote on the 1901 schedule sent in by fifty-nine year old Mary Hilton, teacher in Rockville, Yarmouth County: “[teacher] born in section, yet sheet of little value.” Hilton’s return provides a rare example of a teacher recording the name of the student who made each observation, making it clear that it was not the teacher herself

⁷⁴ *NSJE*, April 1902, 61.

⁷⁵ *NSJE*, April 1902, 62.

⁷⁶ Existing school registers for nearby Lower Lakeville show Rosborough visiting the school, where he “gave a lesson in Botany,” in June of 1902, 1903, 1906, and 1907. Eastern Shore Archives, school registers collection.

⁷⁷ *NSJE*, October 1899, 143.

⁷⁸ *NSJE*, April 1902, 59.

who was doing the looking.⁷⁹ While Hilton clearly used the phenology project as directed—as an opportunity to encourage the study of nature among her students—Forbes’s doubts about the value of Hilton’s schedule again point to the fact that the pedagogical aims of the project were meant only to be incidental to the collection of accurate data by dedicated observers.

The artificiality and disciplinary function of the pre-determined averages and norms was most apparent when it came to recording the timing of agricultural activities. Crop timing is an important undertaking, certainly worthy of study, but it is not clear that this was always the aim of MacKay’s project. The case of spring plowing and potato planting points to the ways that norms were established and shaped by boundary-making and exclusions. In a rare occasion of personal commentary from a teacher, Louise Freeman in West Middle Sable, Shelburne County, added a note to her 1910 schedule to specify and apologize that in her community, plowing, sowing, and potato planting “probably commenced earlier than in some sections on account of the men going away to the ‘Banks.’”⁸⁰ She recorded these activities as underway by early April, a full month ahead of the same in dedicated farming districts such as the Annapolis Valley. This is supported by the Shelburne County compiler’s remarks from 1903, which indicate that in fishing settlements along the coast, potato planting was noticeably earlier than in the inland communities.⁸¹ Likewise, the community notes columnist for Wood’s Harbour in the *Yarmouth Herald* noted that with the early opening of spring in 1892, “some have already finished planting, while a large number will have none planted, having left so

⁷⁹ Collected Returns, year ending July 1901, Rockville.

⁸⁰ Collected Returns, year ending July 1910, West Middle Sable.

⁸¹ *NSJE*, April 1903, 95.

early on their fishing voyages.”⁸² This suggests the dates for planting in that community were in fact widely divergent—both very early and very late according to MacKay’s standards—but this information would not have been conveyed by recording simply the date on which the activity began or was judged to have become common. These comments point to the locally-specific variations in dates that were obscured by MacKay’s project. Rather than acknowledging that potatoes might successfully be sown on a wider range of dates, these coastal communities were positioned as outliers and left out of the averages in favour of the dates for “normal” communities that did not engage in such apparently disruptive occupational pluralism.

In the case of sheep shearing, the compilers complained that the idiosyncrasies of rural practice meant that no average was even possible, that the timing of sheep shearing depended as much as anything “on prejudice, or custom, or ... even on superstition.” One compiler grumbled that “Adjoining sections differ by a month or three weeks, because one waits for mild weather, and the other shears ‘in the light of the moon,’ for shearing in the ‘dark of the moon’ will cause deterioration next year in the quality of the cut.”⁸³ The arbitrariness of the activities MacKay included, the rigidity with which he excluded outlying data, and the commentary that emerged in relation to these categories suggests that in some cases establishing norms or averages for agricultural activities was an aspirational or disciplinary endeavour, in many ways similar to documentary surveys undertaken by reformers: an opportunity for surveillance and social commentary.⁸⁴ Like mapping, the natural history survey was a way to extend the logic of the state and of

⁸² Wood’s Harbour community notes, *Yarmouth Herald*, April 26, 1892.

⁸³ *NSJE*, April 1904, 78; *NSJE*, April 1902, 61-62.

⁸⁴ See Mariana Valverde, *The Age of Light, Soap, and Water: Moral Reform in English Canada, 1885-1925* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1991).

science—of modernity—into rural and otherwise marginal areas. The phenology project was not a survey of so-called discovery—the flora and fauna of the province had long ago been rendered European and schematized in published volumes.⁸⁵ Instead, MacKay’s project sought, as Harry Piers suggested, to keep those species under surveillance, while at the same time formalizing and spreading the logic of modernity and of the state throughout rural places.

Seeing Collectives

Though natural history observation has always been a collective, cumulative process, positioning MacKay’s project in relation to histories of scientific observation is complicated by the coerced involvement of thousands of rural observers. Daniela Bleichmar’s comments about the eighteenth century are also relevant to the communities of amateur naturalists practicing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. She writes that botanists and other naturalists have often been represented as solitary workers, but in fact they participated in broad networks of exchange across time and space: “Natural history observation did not occur in a single session or location, but rather over extended periods of time, sequentially, and in various settings. It implied a series of comparisons and conversations, as naturalists attempted to see something that had not been seen before, to correct what someone else had seen, and to describe so that others

⁸⁵ The first flora of Nova Scotia was famously produced by Titus Smith and less famously illustrated by Maria Morris Miller. See Richard H. Field, “Colonizing Nature: Titus Smith Jr. and the Making of Nova Scotia, 1800-1850,” in *Land & Sea: Environmental History in Atlantic Canada* (Fredericton, NB: Acadiensis Press, 2013), 45–59; Janet Guildford, “Maria Morris Miller: The Many Functions of Her Art,” *Atlantis* 20, no. 1 (1995): 113–23. On early botany in Nova Scotia, see also Suzanne Zeller, “George Lawson: Victorian Botany, the Origin of Species and the Case of Nova Scotian Heather,” in *Profiles of Science and Society in the Maritimes prior to 1914*, ed. Paul A. Bogaard (Fredericton, NB: Acadiensis Press, 1990), 51–62.

could see what they had.”⁸⁶ Characterized as a conversation, these interactions between naturalists were dependent on shared standards and on mutual faith in the commensurability of their observations—what Lorraine Daston calls “the reciprocal calibration of observers.”⁸⁷ The ideals of collective empiricism did not always hold up, leading to confusion, disputes, and antagonism. These conflicts notwithstanding, the guiding presumption was that these “comparisons and conversations” were taking place between peers qualified (or at least aspiring) to the standards of the day.⁸⁸

With his accumulated data in hand, MacKay was in conversation with other amateur naturalists across the province, as well as nationally and internationally. And his “staff of phenologists” were enthusiastic naturalists interested in the mutual exchange of botanical information as well. It is less clear where the majority of MacKay’s rural participants fit into this conversation. While certainly not voiceless, it would be inappropriate to suggest they were considered peers in the project. Contemporary citizen science projects are generally voluntary, made up of enthusiastic amateurs, rather than people being coerced into participating. The editors of a volume on recent citizen science describe it as undertaken by “people who have chosen to use their free time to engage in the scientific process” and suggest that participants tend to become involved for altruistic

⁸⁶ Daniela Bleichmar, “The Geography of Observation: Distance and Visibility in Eighteenth-Century Botanical Travel,” in *Histories of Scientific Observation*, ed. Lorraine Daston and Elizabeth Lunbeck (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 375.

⁸⁷ Daston, “On Scientific Observation,” 102.

⁸⁸ One example of a community of observers that has received scholarly attention is birdwatchers. See Kirsten Greer and Laura Cameron, “‘Swee-Ee-et Cán-a-Da, Cán-a-Da, Cán-a-Da’: Sensuous Landscapes of Birdwatching in the Eastern Provinces, 1900–1939,” *Material Culture Review* 62 (2005): 35–48; John Law and Michael Lynch, “Lists, Field Guides, and the Descriptive Organization of Seeing: Birdwatching as an Exemplary Observational Activity,” *Human Studies* 11, no. 2/3 (1988): 271–303; Helen Macdonald, “‘What Makes You a Scientist Is the Way You Look at Things’: Ornithology and the Observer 1930–1955,” *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part C* 33, no. 1 (2002): 53–77; Spencer Schaffner, *Binocular Vision: The Politics of Representation in Birdwatching Field Guides* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011).

reasons (such as concern for the environment), or to gain knowledge and resources to apply to their own hobbies and interests. While the editors reveal that scientists continue to perceive the public with a “deficit view” of their potential for scientific understanding, the combination of compulsion and criticism in MacKay’s project seems to put it at odds with other citizen science efforts, recent and past.⁸⁹

Targeting the alleged objectivity of the scientific gaze in *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault argued that what was visible and therefore knowable to natural science was severely constrained, writing, “To observe ... is to be content with seeing—with seeing a few things systematically.”⁹⁰ Likewise, Lorraine Daston writes that scientific training “convergence is indispensable. Novices must be taught to see things and to see the *same* things, a world held in common. But it is not the common world that they learn to see.”⁹¹ Highlighting the prominence of vision in scientific practice, Daston extends philosopher Ludwik Fleck’s notion that scientific training and experience induct members into “thought collectives,” suggesting that these might equally be construed as “seeing collectives.”⁹² The cultivation of a scientific self, through training and experience, means learning to see not as an individual but as a member of a community.

The creation of a “seeing collective” is a fitting description for what A. H. MacKay was trying to do in rural Nova Scotia, encouraging ways of looking and patterns of attention that adhered to a standardized model of modern subjectivity. But evidence suggests that this was only marginally successful. The rural people who participated in

⁸⁹ Janis L. Dickinson and Rick Bonney, “Why Citizen Science?,” in *Citizen Science: Public Participation in Environmental Research*, ed. Janis L. Dickinson and Rick Bonney (Ithaca, NY: Comstock, 2012), 1, 7, 11.

⁹⁰ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1970; New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 134.

⁹¹ Daston, “On Scientific Observation,” 107.

⁹² Daston, “On Scientific Observation,” 106–7.

MacKay's project challenged the ideals of scientific practice and collective empiricism, revealing the persistent relevance of local, place-based knowledge in rural Nova Scotia. Its intertwining of scientific research with rural reform imperatives makes MacKay's project a unique case study for investigating the limits of the consolidation of scientific practice alongside processes of state formation in rural Canada. Rather than taking at face value the apparent inability of rural people to adhere to the demands of MacKay's scientific experiment, rereading the relevant sources reveals a self-aware, ambivalent response to this covert reform project. Daston writes that since the sixteenth century, the work of botanical description and illustration has been characterized by "concerted attempts to represent a universal, not a particular." This "atlas image of record," which becomes a figure of authority, pits "the universalized plants of scientific ontology" against the "the particular plants of everyday experience."⁹³ In response to the attempted imposition of a standardized scientific way of seeing in rural Nova Scotia, teachers and other community members pushed back, asserting the legitimacy and value of the "particulars" of local knowledge.

A common grievance of the phenological staff was the use of colloquial or regional names for plants and birds. The teachers who interchanged the names of Lambkill and Rhodora were following a naming convention common throughout the province; elsewhere a compiler complained, "Our boys and girls doubtless hear the Rhodora called 'Lamb-kill,' and the name sticks."⁹⁴ The persistence and use of colloquial names was most obvious when teachers added additional notes to the end of their forms,

⁹³ Daston, "On Scientific Observation," 103.

⁹⁴ *NSJE*, April 1907, 84.

as many did. These extra entries were encouraged by the administrators for the sake of general interest, but they were not averaged or tabulated. Nevertheless, it was expected that they would adhere to scientific method and nomenclature. A compiler in 1910 repeated a common refrain when he asked that teachers, when “reporting additional observations, give the scientific name in preference to some local name, such as ‘Bird’s Eye Primrose.’”⁹⁵ Most teachers included just a handful of extra entries. Ella Gaetz in West Petpeswick, whose reliability was questioned, save for her relationship with Rev. Rosborough, added seven items that year: Daisy, Butterfly, Swallows, Elder flowering, Robin’s nest seen, Peas planted, and peas blooming. Mary Hilton of Rockville, whose schedule was rejected as “of little value” by the compiler, added twenty-five.⁹⁶ It is common to find dozens of additional items, and occasionally more than one hundred, either scribbled into the margins of a schedule or listed in tidy handwriting on extra sheets of paper attached it.

MacKay and many of his colleagues believed that the use of colloquial names led to inaccurate and incomplete data. As teachers only knew the local names of plants and birds, they did not recognize the “correct” names listed on their forms, and consequently they left many entries blank, or mistook certain species for others. It is notable, however, that the compilers frequently acknowledged they were familiar with the colloquial names of plants and birds, and therefore their work was often not hindered by their use. The phenological staff regularly chastised teachers for adding the “common daisy” as an extra observation, as both Ella Gaetz and Mary Hilton did, when it should have been noted on the schedule under ox-tail daisy. Similarly, a compiler complained, “one teacher

⁹⁵ *NSJE*, April 1910, 92.

⁹⁶ Collected Returns, year ending July 1901, West Petpeswick, Rockville.

particularly had several spaces filled in with blanks in the schedule, yet in a supplementary list had those same flowers and birds represented by local names that I happened to recognize.”⁹⁷ Frustrated, and occasionally sympathetic, compilers included local and informal names in their comments in the *Journal*. A compiler for Shelburne County offered local names for Rhodora (Rosebay, Azalea) and Lambkill (Sheep Laurel).⁹⁸ A notable example of this practice was a compiler in Cape Breton who included the Gaelic names of several plants and birds in his report.⁹⁹ Some suggested common names should be provided on the schedules themselves, a suggestion that was never implemented. It is clear that some (though certainly not all) of the compilers acted as intermediaries between local knowledge and scientific formalities. Many of them were enthusiastic local observers who shared a vocabulary with the teachers in their counties, acknowledging that colloquial names were not in fact the opposite of scientific objectivity, but could coexist with it. This was not, however, the policy of the project.

Truly scientific observation in MacKay’s project as elsewhere was not only the bodily act of purposeful, attentive looking. It was an intellectual process that included the ability to effectively connect received visual information with a relevant body of scientific knowledge. It was participation in a seeing collective, all members of which connected “the same words to the same things.”¹⁰⁰ Underlying the insistence on the use of scientific vocabulary was a broader implication that its absence denoted an immature relationship with the natural world. One compiler unintentionally made this explicit when he helpfully offered a list of common names for his region, noting, “this was my own

⁹⁷ *NSJE* April 1917, 71.

⁹⁸ *NSJE*, April 1917, 67.

⁹⁹ *NSJE*, October 1921, 152.

¹⁰⁰ Daston, “On Scientific Observation,” 107, 104.

boyish nomenclature, so it may prevail in many parts of the country still.” Elsewhere colloquial names were referred to as “local or childhood names.”¹⁰¹ A note on nature-study in the *Journal of Education* in 1904 illustrates the same implication from a different perspective. Encouraging teachers who might not have extensive training in science to take up nature-study, the author insisted, “no teacher is expected to know every thing the little boy picks up in the country. ... The teacher and pupils should therefore be encouraged to observe, study, and give simple names of their own to every thing until they happen to discover the correct, common or scientific name. ... A person can thus be a scientific authority before he knows the scientific tongue.”¹⁰² While a great motivation to unfettered curiosity, the language here is nevertheless revealing of reform imperatives. It does not say that a scientific vocabulary is unnecessary, or that alternative ways of making sense of the world are acceptable, only that a certain amount of science-thinking (even some scientific “authority”) is possible at an early stage of intellectual development, “until” or “before” the student continues their education along modern, progressive lines.

Particularly when they are few, the extra entries added to schedules were often very sweet—such as noticing the first butterflies, bees, and pussy willows, very common entries that certainly seem to reflect what may have been of interest to schoolchildren. A compiler in 1906 suggested that swallows, butterflies, fireflies, and bees were the most common additions and “should find a place on the [official schedule] as they are watched for by parents and pupils.”¹⁰³ The inclusion of extra entries such as these suggests that

¹⁰¹ *NSJE*, April 1904, 78; *NSJE*, April 1906, 62.

¹⁰² *NSJE*, April 1904, 105.

¹⁰³ *NSJE*, April 1906, 64.

many rural teachers embraced MacKay's project, but they did so in a way that broadened and complicated the boundaries of his scientific agenda, bringing the local priorities and preferences of their communities and classrooms into the conversation.

MacKay and his staff certainly acknowledged that the rural people participating in the phenology project often had specialized knowledge and access to the phenomena around them. Indeed, this is why they were sought out. But the idiosyncratic and variable character of their experience was often a direct challenge to the uniformity demanded by MacKay's scientific project. A compiler for Queens County in 1907 offered the kind of backhanded encouragement common to the phenology project when she wrote:

Many show the deep interest they take in this work by making a number of additional observations. May I suggest that, in reporting these, they use the scientific names of the plants, or the common ones recognized by botanists. Such names as 'wild corn,' 'tame gooseberries,' 'garden lilies,' 'water-berries,' 'sleeping Johnnies,' etc., while intelligible in their own districts, are rather out of place in scientific records.¹⁰⁴

These items were submitted by three young women in well-filled schedules that demonstrate an extraordinary knowledge of local flora. Teacher Myra Matthews in Port Joli submitted an extremely tidy schedule with twenty additional entries where colloquially-named water berry, garden lily, June roses, and wood daisy appear alongside the more familiar bluets, cinquefoil, chickweed, and harebells. Effie Munroe in Summerville Centre included twenty-six additional entries, including sleeping johnnies and wild corn, alongside cranberry and choke cherry. Buelah Gross in St. Catherine's River added eleven entries, wild corn and tame gooseberries among them, along with Labrador tea and wood sorrel. All three women added pussy willows, swallows, and

¹⁰⁴ *NSJE*, April 1907, 81.

butterflies.¹⁰⁵

While the administrators of the project continued to believe in the power of science to create a consistent and coherent picture of the world, rural teachers knew otherwise. By asserting these local variants rural teachers may have been demonstrating their ignorance of scientific language and practices, and they were certainly declaring their ambivalence for the rules of MacKay's project, but year after year for more than twenty-five years, generations of rural teachers were also affirming locally-meaningful knowledge, and arguing for the legitimacy of this knowledge—arguing that it was in fact *not* out of place in official records. These extra notes express a desire for their local observations and experiences to be recorded, in spite of repeated efforts to overwrite them.

Crary's definition of normative attentiveness as “the relative capacity of a subject to selectively isolate certain contents of a sensory field at the expense of others”¹⁰⁶ is useful for thinking through the ways that the inclusion of these extra entries not only broadened the parameters of MacKay's project, but also challenged the imperative of directed, concentrated vision. From the perspective of scientific observation, more looking was not necessarily better looking, particularly if it was scattered, undisciplined, and focused on objects irrelevant to the task at hand. While nature-study exercises ostensibly offered training in the “power of attention”—shaping the capacity to determine not only how to look, but also what to ignore—rural Nova Scotians instead approached the observation of their environment with a roving, promiscuous, inclusive gaze. Many of the extra observations and notes fell well beyond the boundaries of MacKay's project,

¹⁰⁵ Collected Returns, year ended July 1906, Port Joli, Summerville Centre, St. Catharine's River.

¹⁰⁶ Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*, 17.

making reference to meaningful events of significance to particular communities. On December 5, 1900, Florence Fultz in Lower Ship Harbour, Halifax County, noted what she called the “highest tide for years.” The following spring, seventeen-year-old John Millar, schoolteacher in Pleasant Lake, Yarmouth County, noted the arrival of the herring in the Tusket River on April 3. Aspects of local economies were also made apparent in these notes, for example, Louise Freeman’s note about the relationship between potato planting and the local fishery. And in 1908, A. McPherson in Charlo’s Cove, Guysborough County, recorded the dates for the first local catches of lobster, mackerel, haddock, and herring. Myra Ross in Brule, Colchester County, noted the day that the harbour froze one winter (December 12, 1905) and the day that it was first crossed on foot (January 8, 1906), while Olive Lewis in Upper Economy, Colchester County, noted the first lighting of the Burntcoat lighthouse on March 15, 1924, the same day the first vessel came into the bay that spring.¹⁰⁷ It is no coincidence that all of these examples make reference to a close relationship with the ocean, something MacKay’s list did not call for. These extra notes are similar to the observations that rural people would have been making in private, affirming the public relevance of knowledge that would otherwise have been tucked away in daybooks and diaries. In this way, they were very much like the community notes columns that appeared in local newspapers. As much as they illustrate the keen interest and enthusiasm that many teachers had for MacKay’s project, the extra notes are also an assertion of the continuing value of local knowledge—a kind of rural place-making.

¹⁰⁷ Collected Returns, year ending July 1901, Lower Ship Harbour, Pleasant Lake; year ending July 1908, Charlo’s Cove; year ending July 1906, Point Brule; year ending July 1910, West Middle Sable; NSA, RG 14, vol. 111, school papers, Colchester County 1895-1960, file: Upper Economy.

Like the ideal botanical illustration that sought to depict a universal specimen over the individual plant, every aspect of MacKay's elaborate project of phenological reporting promoted aspects of this type of universalization: in its approach to natural phenomena and the rejection of outlying data; in its advocacy of universal education rather than local iterations; and in its approach to vision, encouraging a collective scientific way of seeing rather than individual perspectives. This peculiar project is therefore more than just an interesting footnote in educational and environmental history. Instead, it offers an opportunity to consider the role of science in the negotiated and contested processes of state formation in rural Nova Scotia.

MacKay's project was also part of a broader pedagogical landscape that explicitly targeted the senses of rural children—particularly their sense of sight—encouraging specific practices of observation and attentiveness with the aim of producing moral, modern citizens. As they grew up, the eyes of those children would be targeted by a range of other cultural forms and discourses—though rarely so explicitly—some of which will be explored in the pages that follow. In all cases, discussions about vision would be interlaced with ideas and anxieties about the transformations of modernity in rural places.

Chapter 2

Sights Worth Looking At: Vision and Visual Culture at Agriculture Exhibitions

Praising the 1881 Dominion exhibition in Halifax in an era before the rapid circulation of images, the *Lunenburg Progress* suggested “the sight of some hundreds of thoroughbred cattle ... was one that would have done good to every farmer in the Province, if it were only possible to bring it before every farmer’s eyes.”¹ The implication was that being confronted with such edifying sights would encourage emulation and therefore reform among rural communities. As the *New Glasgow Eastern Chronicle* explained in 1895, underwriting the logic of all exhibitions was a belief in “the educational effect of seeing the best of everything.”² Looking was understood to be beneficial in and of itself, but just as importantly, exhibitions were training opportunities wherein farmers and others would be taught *how* to see. Well-bred animals, like carefully grown fruits and vegetables, ingenious machinery, or impeccably stitched quilts, were, as the *Eastern Chronicle* put it, “sights worth looking at.”³

Rural people came to exhibitions with visual skills, aptitudes, and priorities that shaped their experiences of these events. And there was plenty to see. It is also clear that the sights of the fair held very little meaning without the sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations with which they were interlaced, and which together evoked memories, emotions, and longings. The roving, promiscuous, intersensorial gaze of an exhibition visitor is exemplified in the following description from the *Yarmouth Telegram* in 1890:

¹ *Lunenburg Progress*, October 4, 1881.

² *New Glasgow Eastern Chronicle*, September 26, 1895.

³ *New Glasgow Eastern Chronicle*, October 19, 1882.

The visitors to the exhibition would first become interested in the sounds and sights around the corners of the streets adjoining the Rink and cattle grounds, where the travelling fakir had set up his tent and the festive whirligig man shouted cheering items of information to the crowds. Here the restaurant men had displayed in booths of all sizes and shapes their seductive supplies of fruit, pie and sausage, of rosy cheeked apples and the festive raspberry syrup flanked by jars of highly colored candies and bunches of tempting bananas. The six legged sheep, the improvised bowling alley and the eloquent corn doctor claimed a temporary attention, detaining their admirers for a moment before they were called upon to contemplate the Durhams, Jerseys and Cotswolds inside the gates of the enclosure and before their minds should be occupied with thoughts upon the big potatoes, mammoth beets, bloated squash and monster pumpkins arrayed in magnificent profusion within the rink itself.⁴

Festive, bustling, colourful, odorous, noisy—moving through the official and unofficial spaces of the exhibition was an immersive experience of attraction and distraction.

This chapter replicates the roving gaze of the typical exhibition goer by exploring the visual and sensory cultures of Nova Scotian exhibitions from a number of different perspectives. It introduces the crowd of participants that both constituted and consumed the spectacle before considering the visual, material, and textual culture of exhibitions through a close reading of two representations of the same event: a photograph and a newspaper report of the 1882 Western District exhibition held in Yarmouth. Following this more general roving and gazing, the chapter focuses its attention on the specialized vision of exhibition judges and the highly unstable objects of agricultural improvement they were called upon to assess. Throughout, the chapter reveals the many divergent perspectives about what was “worth looking at” and concludes with some reflections on the very modern character of the visual practices at local exhibitions, including concerns about the distracted gaze of exhibition audiences. As we will see, articulations of rural modernity in late nineteenth-century Nova Scotia are revealed through all of these

⁴ *Yarmouth Telegram*, October 10, 1890.

discussions about vision at exhibitions: in jokes about Oscar Wilde's aesthetics, in debates about breed standards and improved vegetables, and in consistent anxieties about appropriate practices of looking and attentiveness.

Exhibitions—from international World's Fairs to small local agricultural exhibitions— epitomized nineteenth-century mass cultural practices of display and spectatorship. They were also important sites for the reproduction of rural cultural hegemony, venues for the dissemination of dominant values.⁵ In late nineteenth-century Nova Scotia, the agricultural societies that organized exhibitions drew their membership from a broad base of farmers of different economic standings, but their agendas were nevertheless set by rural elites: white, primarily Anglophone men, who wished to remake their allegedly backward rural neighbours into modern, scientific farmers, and to bring rural economies in line with the models of productivity, efficiency, and specialization demanded by a capitalist market.⁶ Exhibitions had been held sporadically across Nova Scotia since the late eighteenth century, but they also took on new resonance starting in the early 1880s as the provincial government transformed and renewed its involvement in the promotion of agriculture.⁷ Exhibitions served as promotional venues for all of the

⁵ E. A. Heaman, *The Inglorious Arts of Peace: Exhibitions in Canadian Society During the Nineteenth Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 20–21; Keith Walden, *Becoming Modern in Toronto: The Industrial Exhibition and the Shaping of a Late Victorian Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), xiv, 15–16.

⁶ On an even more stratified version of this dynamic in an earlier period, see Daniel Samson, *The Spirit of Industry and Improvement: Liberal Government and Rural-Industrial Society, Nova Scotia, 1790–1862* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008), esp. 187–224; Graeme Wynn, "Exciting a Spirit of Emulation Among the 'Plodholes': Agricultural Reform in Pre-Confederation Nova Scotia," *Acadiensis* 20, no. 1 (1990): 5–51.

⁷ Through the late 1870s and early 1880s there was a renewed demand for formal, publicly-funded agricultural education in the province. In 1885, government responsibility for agriculture was centralized with the new Secretary of Agriculture, replacing the previous Central Board of Agriculture made up of regional representatives. The same year, the Legislature passed the Act to Encourage Agricultural Education, leading to the founding of the provincial agricultural college. Through the 1890s the government continued to increase its financial support for agriculture, particularly in the areas of horticulture and dairying. This included the establishment of a Horticultural School in Wolfville in 1893

government's areas of investment, as well as opportunities for farmers and others to display their successes. It is important to note that particularly in the early years of this study, many exhibitions were not yet showcases for the products of mature agricultural communities; they were intended instead to be opportunities for edification and the encouragement of reform, including the advocacy of "improvement" in all aspects of agriculture.

There is an extensive scholarly literature on exhibitions and fairs, most of it focusing on World's Fairs and other large urban events, such as American state fairs and Canadian provincial and national exhibitions. While there is a significant popular literature on American county fairs and other smaller regional exhibitions, there has been a much more limited scholarly engagement with these events.⁸ In Canada, scholarship on

run by the Nova Scotia Fruit Growers Association and an Act in 1894 to encourage creameries and the establishment in 1901 of the popular Travelling Dairy Schools. These transformations followed federal trends: the Experimental Farms branch of the Canadian Department of Agriculture was established in 1886, including a station in Nappan, Nova Scotia, and the influential J. W. Robertson was appointed federal Dairy Commissioner in 1891. Richard Jarrell, "Science and Public Policy in Nineteenth-Century Canada: Nova Scotia Promotes Agriculture," in *Profiles of Science and Society in the Maritimes prior to 1914*, ed. Paul A. Bogaard (Fredericton, NB: Acadiensis Press, 1990); J. S. Martell, "From Central Board to Secretary of Agriculture, 1826-1885," *Bulletin of the Public Archives of Nova Scotia* 2, no. 3 (1940): 3–30. On the apple industry in Nova Scotia, see Margaret Conrad, "Apple Blossom Time in the Annapolis Valley 1880-1957," *Acadiensis* 9, no. 2 (1980): 14–39. On federal initiatives see T. H. Anstey, *One Hundred Harvests: Research Branch Agriculture Canada, 1886-1986*, Historical Series 27 (Ottawa: Research Branch, Agriculture Canada, 1986); Julie Harris and Jennifer Mueller, "Making Science Beautiful: The Central Experimental Farm, 1886-1939," *Ontario History* 84, no. 2 (1997): 103–23; Harold Adams Innis, ed., *The Dairy Industry in Canada* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1937).

⁸ For examples of scholarship on county and local fairs and exhibitions, see Rob Edwards, "Colonialism and the Role of the Local Show: A Case Study of the Gympie District Show, 1877-1940," *Queensland Review* 16, no. 2 (2009): 29–41; Heaman, *Inglorious Arts of Peace*; David C. Jones, *Midways, Judges, and Smooth-Tongued Fakirs: The Illustrated Story of Country Fairs in the Prairie West* (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1983); Catherine E. Kelly, "'The Consummation of Rural Prosperity and Happiness': New England Agricultural Fairs and the Construction of Class and Gender, 1810-1860," *American Quarterly* 49, no. 3 (1997): 574–602; Michael T. Marsden, "The County Fair as Celebration and Cultural Text," *The Journal of American Culture* 33, no. 1 (2010): 24–29; David Mizener, "Furrows and Fairgrounds: Agriculture, Identity, and Authority in Twentieth-Century Rural Ontario" (PhD diss, York University, 2009); Jodey Nurse, "Reaching Rural Ontario: The County of Peel Agricultural Society and the Peel County Fall Fair, 1853-1883" (Masters thesis, University of Guelph, 2011); Leslie Mina Prosterman, *Ordinary Life, Festival Days: Aesthetics in the Midwestern County Fair* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995).

agricultural exhibitions has been dominated by work on Ontario and the West, perspectives that do not represent the unique experiences of agriculture and rural life in Atlantic Canada.⁹ The focus of this chapter is on the local, county, and district events organized by rural and small-town agricultural societies in Nova Scotia, with occasional reference to the provincial and so-called Dominion exhibitions held in Halifax.

Local and county exhibitions are invaluable sites from which to understand the interplay of culture and politics in rural communities. Typically described as “agricultural and industrial” exhibitions, these events featured agricultural produce, livestock, and domestic goods—“Products of the Farm, Field and Fireside” as one newspaper put it¹⁰—alongside exhibits of artwork, fish, small-scale manufacture, promotional displays of local businesses, and those of larger companies. By the late nineteenth century, sideshow attractions increasingly drew visitors away from these official exhibits. These events, usually held over two or three days in the early fall, were understood to be an indication of the progressive spirit and industriousness of a community in general. Unlike their connotations today, nineteenth-century rural exhibitions were not primarily intended to be sites of nostalgia. Rather, the emphasis was “progress” and rural modernization explicitly. These events were intended to “stir up ... backward sections.” Promoters argued an exhibition was “an advertisement of the capabilities of the County,” and that they “serve as milestones to mark the progress of the country and the progressiveness of

⁹ An exception is Lorna Williams, “From Agricultural Improvement to Industrial Affirmation: The Evolution of the New Brunswick Provincial Exhibitions, 1852-1883” (Masters thesis, University of New Brunswick, 2003). Heaman’s study includes some eastern Canadian examples but is primarily about central Canada. Work by Samson and Wynn on agricultural societies mentions exhibitions. Heaman, *Inglorious Arts of Peace*; Samson, *The Spirit of Industry and Improvement*; Wynn, “Exciting a Spirit of Emulation.”

¹⁰ *Cape Sable Advertiser* (Barrington), September 29, 1887.

the people.” A successful exhibition was evidence that a rural area was “keeping pace with the progressive movement of the age.”¹¹

From the perspective of a study of vision at exhibitions, the content published in local newspapers is exceptionally revealing.¹² Newspaper editors regularly provided their own “eye-witness” reports of the events, sometimes just a few paragraphs, but often lengthy and detailed first-person accounts of their own experiences at the fair. These accounts offer an impression of what it might have been like to stroll around a Nova Scotian exhibition with a roving eye, alternately taking in long views of the entire scene, glancing at exhibits, looking intently at some object, animal, or person for a time before moving along to examine the next sight that drew one’s attention. These reports reveal the many diverse forms of observation that were performed at exhibitions by different groups of people and also demonstrate how the same person might engage in different kinds of looking over the course of the same event. The ways that the many diverse and distinctive gazes of the exhibition were reiterated, described, and translated into text offer a key for understanding how their differences were understood at the time, providing a wealth of material for critical analysis.

¹¹ *New Glasgow Eastern Chronicle*, October 13, 1881; *Liverpool Advance*, July 23, 1884; *Hants Journal* (Windsor), n.d., 1889 (newsclipping in scrapbook at West Hants Historical Society Museum; hereafter *Hants Journal* newsclipping 1889); *Cape Sable Advertiser*, September 29, 1887.

¹² In his study of the Toronto Industrial Exhibition, Keith Walden likewise found newspapers to be “the single detailed source of information about what happened on and off the fairground.” Walden, *Becoming Modern in Toronto*, 27, 27–29. Newspaper editors were often active community boosters and vocal advocates for exhibitions, devoting extensive page space to these events. Content regularly included: promotional pieces ahead of time, detailed event coverage, lists of prizes awarded, reports of the organizing committees and judges, the speeches of dignitaries, impassioned editorials, and commentary from local correspondents and letter writers. General bits of news about exhibitions also appeared throughout the year.

Roving and Gazing

In the midst of a lengthy description of the 1907 regional exhibition in Windsor, a writer in the *Windsor Tribune* paused, acknowledging that “to attempt to describe and do justice to the various collections of fruit, vegetables, dairy produce, grain and fowls, would be impossible. They must be seen to be fully appreciated.”¹³ While this and other reports tended to rhetorically privilege vision, the multi-sensory nature of a visit to any exhibition is also clear, and this intersensoriality is the context within which all acts of looking took place. In Liverpool in 1884, exhibition-goers enjoyed the food and drink provided by the ladies of the Methodist Church. In Yarmouth in 1890, the “fragrant saccharine odors” from a confectionery display “powerfully competed for juvenile attention with the peaches, apples and grapes.” In Pictou in 1905, “above the chatter of the many people and the patter of their feet arose a persistent ‘cluck, cluck,’ which ... drew attention to the many coops of poultry.” After the 1908 exhibition in Middle Musquodoboit, a correspondent’s “right hand [was] rather sore from the many hard squeezes it got” as he was reacquainted old friends.¹⁴ And everywhere, eyes were drawn to splendid or poor displays, spectators “critically examined” items, took a “hurried survey of the exhibits,” or were among “a crowd of admiring gazers.” Some “visitors seemed to fully enjoy themselves in viewing the many excellent exhibits,” while others also took in a “view of the surrounding country.” And very often spectators had more mundane visual experiences. In Antigonish in 1882, a reporter related that “we elbowed

¹³ *Windsor Tribune*, October 11, 1907.

¹⁴ *Liverpool Advance*, October 8, 1884; *Yarmouth Telegram*, October 10, 1890; *New Glasgow Eastern Chronicle*, October 6, 1905; *Truro Daily News*, September 30, 1908.

our way with difficulty through the building and observed a pretty good display of such articles as are usually seen at exhibitions.”¹⁵

Reports also revealed a perceived hierarchy of gazes. Writing about the 1887 Colchester County exhibition in Middle Stewiacke, a reporter for the *Colchester Sun* observed, “As soon as the opening addresses were over the judges commenced their work and the visitors commenced their sight seeing.”¹⁶ The difference noted here, between the sensory practices of the judges and the viewing public, is significant as it reveals a belief in the legitimacy of trained visual expertise and authority on the exhibition grounds. (Although, as we will see, this does not mean the decisions of the judges were always respected.) While some judges may have been recognizable figures in the community, they were all made visible and distinguishable from the crowd, for instance by



Fig. 2.1 Judge’s ribbon, Western Counties Divisional Exhibition, Yarmouth, 1896. Nova Scotia Archives, AG 180.80.

wearing bold ribbons, such as the bright red one worn by a judge at the Western Counties divisional exhibition in Yarmouth in 1896 (fig. 2.1). Judges were not the only people to receive such treatment. On another occasion in Pictou County an “anxious faced Committee man who wore a blue ribbon in his button hole” was identifiable amid the jostling crowd, and in Windsor the various “officers connected with the exhibition, (wearing their red and blue badges)” were visible to observers of the busy scene on

¹⁵ *North Sydney Herald*, October 15, 1884; *Hants Journal* newsclipping 1889; *New Glasgow Eastern Chronicle*, October 13, 1887; *Shelburne Budget*, October 5, 1894; *Lunenburg Progress*, October 13, 1886; *New Glasgow Eastern Chronicle*, October 19, 1882.

¹⁶ *Colchester Sun*, October 10, 1887.

opening day.¹⁷ Judges were highly visible among the crowd and their work was scrutinized by many eyes.

It is no accident that in all the exhibition coverage I have read, the most detailed description of a judge at work was that of a woman. Bella Miller acted as a judge of dairy exhibits at the Pictou County exhibition in 1905 where a reporter noted, “it was interesting ... to watch Miss Miller judge the butter and it was the wonder of all beholders how she had the patience to go so carefully over each exhibit and mark every point.”¹⁸ Miller was well known throughout the province as an instructor with the popular Travelling Dairy School run by the provincial Department of Agriculture. Women frequently participated as exhibition judges of “ladies’ work,” but Miller’s work outside of that context would have been notable and she therefore drew the careful scrutiny of the crowd. However, in her methodical performance of skilled vision, Miller demonstrated the same kinds of sensory expertise that provided legitimacy to all serious exhibitions.

Miller was momentarily at the centre of a prism of gazes and sensory longings. She visually inspected the butter with a meticulous eye, while the crowd of “beholders” visually inspected her. The reporter observed Miller, but just as importantly he watched the crowd as they watched her. Everyone looked at the butter: “all of it very tempting and the more one gazed, the more one’s inner man cried for a slice of the bread that mother used to make and a knife.”¹⁹ But Miller’s expertise meant she was the only person permitted to taste it. Butter was one of the only exhibits where vision was explicitly supplemented by another sense, though in all judging, smells, sounds, and tactile

¹⁷ *New Glasgow Eastern Chronicle*, October 13, 1881; *Hants Journal*, n.d., 1887 (newsclipping in scrapbook at West Hants Historical Society Museum; hereafter *Hants Journal* newsclipping 1887).

¹⁸ *New Glasgow Eastern Chronicle*, October 6, 1905.

¹⁹ *New Glasgow Eastern Chronicle*, October 6, 1905.

sensations were interlaced with a judge's visual perceptions. Within an instant, the gazes on and around Miller that were captured by the reporter would have scattered, landing elsewhere on a constellation of sights—the display of tomatoes, a pyramid of canned goods, a familiar face, the exit door.

Of course judges were not the only people being watched at exhibitions. Exhibitions large and small were places to both *see* and *be seen* and the politics of this visibility were central to the work of exhibitions as vehicles of reform in rural communities. Cultural theorist Tony Bennett has argued that the nineteenth-century “exhibitionary complex” of museums, exhibitions, and fairs acted as institutions of social discipline that contributed to the production of orderly, self-regulating publics. Bennett writes that the Great Exhibitions of the late nineteenth century “simultaneously helped to form a new public and inscribe it in new relations of sight and vision” as well as “in new relations of power and knowledge.” This was accomplished by making the crowd “visible to itself, by making the crowd itself the ultimate spectacle.” However, the exhibition was not an oppressive site of invisible power or surveillance. Rather, the public exhibition was “a site of sight accessible to all. It was in thus democratizing the eye of power that the expositions realized” the ability to produce “a society regulated through self-observation.”²⁰ Elsbeth Heaman likewise notes the function of visual surveillance at local agricultural exhibitions in Canada, where “each farmer would step forward ... to be truly judged by his neighbours” and “farmers policed one another.” She writes, “in putting themselves on display,” both literally with their exhibits and more expansively as members of the crowd, “exhibitors advertised their submission to cultural and social

²⁰ Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995), 74, 68, 69.

norms.”²¹ Local exhibitions contributed to the constitution and regulation of rural and agricultural subjectivities.

The relatively low price of admission meant that local exhibitions were accessible to most people—the pedagogical aims of these events encouraged this to remain the case. Ahead of the 1884 Cape Breton Island exhibition in Baddeck, the *North Sydney Herald* declared that while the exhibits were very important, the “bringing together of people is the life of any fair.”²² Scholars have noted that the space and time of the exhibition created an artificial world, providing an uncharacteristic opportunity for many kinds of people to rove and gaze freely. In his influential study of French Renaissance writer François Rabelais, Mikhail Bakhtin described early modern fairs and festivals as a “world inside out,” in which social hierarchies were temporarily suspended. He writes that during carnival time, “a special form of free and familiar contact reigned among people who were usually divided by the barriers of caste, property, profession, and age.”²³ Of course late nineteenth-century Canada was not Renaissance France. In his study of the Toronto Industrial Exhibition, Keith Walden characterized the event as accessible to a wide range of people who did mix on the fairgrounds, but argued that the exhibition ultimately reinforced middle-class hegemony rather than upending it.²⁴

Likewise in Nova Scotia, yearly exhibitions did undoubtedly offer opportunities for atypical forms of sociability, but the same hierarchies and forces of exclusion that characterized the rest of Nova Scotian society were also replicated there. Indeed,

²¹ Heaman, *Inglorious Arts of Peace*, 18, 74.

²² *North Sydney Herald*, September 24, 1884.

²³ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984), 11, 10.

²⁴ See Walden, *Becoming Modern in Toronto*, 21–25, passim.

nineteenth-century exhibitions were places where rural social hierarchies were reinforced and perpetuated. It is fair to assume that the public at late nineteenth-century exhibitions mirrored the make-up and organization of rural Nova Scotia more broadly. That is to say, they were likely a majority, though certainly not exclusively, Anglophone and white, with wealthy white men in positions of power influencing the conditions within which other people would move and gaze. Members of Mi'kmaq, Acadian, African Nova Scotian, and other settler communities, as well as the poorest of white farmers, would have attended local, regional, and provincial exhibitions in varied numbers according to regional residential patterns. They were likely excluded from full participation in various ways, both explicit and structural, but they were certainly among the exhibitors, the workers, the performers, and the crowds of spectators, both gazing at and being gazed upon by others.

Acadian names appear among the lists of prize-winners in Digby County and to a lesser extent in other regions with Acadian populations.²⁵ George Cooper, a Black sailor, took second place in the broad jump during the field sports event at the Shelburne County exhibition in 1894, suggesting that the Black community in and around Shelburne may have been participating in the exhibition more broadly.²⁶ The names of exhibition prize-winners were regularly published in newspapers across the province, but these account

²⁵ Embroiled in a dispute about which district of Digby County should hold the annual exhibition, the secretary of the Weymouth Agricultural Society responded to an accusation that the “French Acadiens in and around Weymouth ... take but little interest in Agriculture” by insisting that “Some of the best farms in this vicinity, and also in the county, are owned by French Acadiens.” Letter to the Editor from N. E. Butler, *Digby Weekly Courier*, April 6, 1888.

²⁶ *Shelburne Budget*, October 5, 1894. Cooper’s racial identity was not mentioned in the newspaper; I cross-referenced the names on the list of prize winners with the 1891 and 1901 censuses. The utility of the census as a tool for determining so-called race and other aspects of identity is limited and inconsistent (for a discussion of the census, see chapter 5); however, in the absence of other meaningful documentation, it can sometimes provide useful clues, though never definitive answers. I chose to spot sample Shelburne because of the significant African Nova Scotian and Mi’kmaw communities in the area.

for only a fraction of the participants. The extent to which the members of any particular community might have been participating in their local exhibitions without winning prizes is impossible to know.

On the same day in Shelburne, Mary Labrador, a Mi'kmaw woman, competed in the canoe race, "proved herself to be an old hand" and captured first place "by several lengths."²⁷ Mi'kmaw participation more broadly was encouraged at some exhibitions with separate categories for "Indian Work." Historians have described the participation of Indigenous farmers as exhibitors at fairs in central and western Canada, often as part of the assimilationist campaign to enforce peasant agriculture among Indigenous communities.²⁸ This is one of the many ways that exhibitions in Nova Scotia differed from those in other parts of the country. Although Department of Indian Affairs agents in Nova Scotia also sought to enforce agriculture among the Mi'kmaq, the marginal quality of reserve lands in the province, and their continued usurpation by settlers and governments, frustrated efforts to farm. Rather than agricultural products, the "Indian Work" categories throughout Nova Scotia encouraged Mi'kmaw men and women to compete for prizes for their handcrafts, including baskets, canoes, moccasins, bead and quill work, axe handles, and mast hoops—all important goods in the Mi'kmaw economy—but not agricultural products.²⁹ These goods appeared alongside a range of

²⁷ *Shelburne Budget*, October 5, 1894. Labrador is a common Mi'kmaw surname in Shelburne County.

²⁸ See Sarah Carter, *Lost Harvests: Prairie Indian Reserve Farmers and Government Policy* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990), 174–76; Heaman, *Inglorious Arts of Peace*, 286–96; Allison McDonald, "The 'Civilized Indian' and the 'Modern Farmer' at the Fair: Making and Re-Making Identities in Regina, 1895" (Masters research essay, Carleton University, 2006); Mizener, "Furrows and Fairgrounds," 264–98.

²⁹ Heaman suggests that this was true throughout much of eastern and northern Canada, as well as parts of British Columbia, where "there was little scope for agricultural exhibitions." See Heaman, *Inglorious Arts of Peace*, 288. On handcrafts and agriculture in Mi'kmaw economies in the mid- to late nineteenth century, see Andrew Parnaby, "The Cultural Economy of Survival: The Mi'kmaq of Cape Breton in the Mid-19th Century," *Labour/Le Travail* 61 (2008): 69–98; Martha Walls, *No Need of a Chief for This Band: The*

domestic handcrafts in open competition, against which Mi'kmaw exhibitors occasionally competed directly. At the exhibition in Baddeck in 1884, Pierre Climo of Margaree won prizes for four types of baskets in the Indian Work categories, as well as for his softwood butter tubs in the open competition.³⁰

The provincial exhibitions in Halifax, like similar events across the West, presented ethnographic displays including a so-called Indian Village among their attractions, but I have not found evidence to suggest that these were part of the smaller county and regional exhibitions that are the subject of this chapter.³¹ Nevertheless, whatever the participation of actual Mi'kaw men, women, and children at local exhibitions might have been, the events themselves were always part of a larger ongoing process of consolidating the power of settler colonialism in rural Nova Scotia. Writing about rural exhibitions in Australia, Rob Edwards argues that these events “locali[zed] broader colonial aspirations” and “the norms of white civilisation” by celebrating agriculture and the forms of land ownership that it implied at the community level.³² All exhibition organizers understood their events as promotional efforts on behalf of the continued and permanent resettlement of their region. In the particular context of the late nineteenth-century Maritimes, these efforts were framed specifically in terms of stemming the exodus of white families to the West, and encouraging new immigrants

Maritime Mi'kmaq and Federal Electoral Legislation, 1899-1951 (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010), 21–25. See also Bunny McBride, *Our Lives in Our Hands : Micmac Indian Basketmakers* (Halifax, NS: Nimbus, 1990); Ruth B. Phillips, *Trading Identities: The Souvenir in Native North American Art from the Northeast, 1700-1900* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998); Ruth Whitehead, *Micmac Quillwork : Micmac Indian Techniques of Porcupine Quill Decoration, 1600-1950* (Halifax, NS: Nova Scotia Museum, 1982).

³⁰ *North Sydney Herald*, October 22, 1884.

³¹ The literature on ethnographic displays, particularly of colonized peoples, is extensive. In Canada, the best work on this subject remains Paige Raibmon, *Authentic Indians: Episodes of Encounter from the Late-Nineteenth-Century Northwest Coast* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

³² Edwards, “Colonialism and the Role of the Local Show,” 29, 39.

from Europe to settle in the provinces. One observer in 1887 noted with pride, while looking over the “fine exhibit” of roots and vegetables at the Hants County exhibition, “If emigrants [*sic*] to this country could see this, as well as the other exhibits, they would have little hesitation in locating in Nova Scotia.”³³

The absence of explicitly ethnographic displays also did not mean that the spectacle of race was absent from local exhibitions. After a local man was hired to work on the grounds of the Pictou County exhibition in New Glasgow in 1881, commentary in the newspaper indicated the high visibility and scrutiny of racialized bodies: “Some person who has a very vulgar and grotesque idea of what fun is dressed up a half-witted negro in an indescribable costume and sent him to roam about the Exhibition grounds yesterday afternoon with a crowd of noisy boys in his train. We were astonished that some of those in charge of the grounds did not put a stop to the brutal performance.”³⁴ While it is impossible to know what the intention behind this “performance” might have been, the tone of this comment suggests the ways that racism contributed to dominant notions of both personal agency and appropriate behaviour on the fairgrounds—and by extension in Nova Scotian society more broadly. The unrestrained “roam[ing] about” of this man, the disruptive noise of the scene, and the allegedly vulgar costume, all speak to an uncontrollable, unbounded body suggestive of those in Rabelais’s “world inside out.” Racialized bodies were more acceptable when they literally got in line: there is a faint possibility that the “troop of Zulus in full war-paint, with spears and shields” in the costume parade at the 1887 exhibition in Windsor was a performance by members of the local Black community (who were, nevertheless, not “Zulus”). Unfortunately it is more

³³ *Hants Journal* newsclipping 1887.

³⁴ *New Glasgow Eastern Chronicle*, October 13, 1881.

likely that this was blackface. As this likelihood suggests, late nineteenth-century exhibitions were most prominently displays of whiteness, with the limited participation of racialized Nova Scotians only highlighting the extent to which the normative values of rural reform aspired to a white, middle-class ideal.

Alongside white men, white women were major participants of late nineteenth-century exhibitions. Heaman argues that exhibiting their work provided many of these women with opportunities to assert themselves socially and politically in public and concludes that “exhibitions provided women with a back door into the public sphere.”³⁵ One corollary of this public presence is that white women at exhibitions were also the objects of many gazes. A promotional piece for the 1887 Cape Breton exhibition in Mabou in the *North Sydney Herald* promised (implicitly white) “dashing damsels” as one of its main attractions.³⁶ The same year, the *Wolfville Acadian* and the *Western Chronicle* in Kentville engaged in friendly banter about the attributes of the young ladies of neighbouring Hants County following what they called the “Windsor beauty show,” also known as the Hants and Kings County exhibition.³⁷ For its part, the *Hants Journal* that year reported Cupid would be at work among the crowd and that “many a shaft will be

³⁵ Heaman, *Inglorious Arts of Peace*, 259, 259–84; E. A. Heaman, “Taking the World by Show: Canadian Women as Exhibitors to 1900,” *Canadian Historical Review* 78, no. 4 (1997): 599–631. On women at exhibitions see also Tracey Jean Boisseau and Abigail M. Markwyn, eds., *Gendering the Fair: Histories of Women and Gender at World’s Fairs* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2010); Linda J. Borish, “A Fair, Without the Fair, Is No Fair at All’: Women at the New England Agricultural Fair in the Mid-Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of Sport History* 24, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 155–76; Mizener, “Furrows and Fairgrounds,” 238–52.

³⁶ *North Sydney Herald*, September 7, 1887. See also “the pretty girls” serving refreshments at the Colchester County exhibition in Middle Stewiacke in 1887, or the “young ladies” advertising the merits of Household brand flour at the provincial horticultural exhibition in Kentville in 1908. *Colchester Sun*, October 5, 1887; *Truro Daily News*, October 10, 1908.

³⁷ *Wolfville Acadian*, October 7, 1887. The commentary from the Kentville *Western Chronicle* was quoted in the *Acadian*. The relevant issues of the *Western Chronicle* are unavailable.

aimed from his bow, not always at random.”³⁸ It is clear that women’s bodies were a main attraction, not an incidental sight, at all exhibitions.

Image/Text

The people who made up an exhibition’s public were one of its most valuable sights, so it is no surprise that these visions were also commodified. Photographic portrait booths were a regular feature of exhibitions. At the provincial exhibition in 1904, a reporter noted “the always-present tintype gallery ... doing a rushing business,” and photography was also common at local fairs. During the 1886 Lunenburg County exhibition in Mahone Bay, “there were no less than five photograph saloons within two miles of the Bay,” suggesting that itinerant photographers travelled to the event, supplementing any studios already set up in the area.³⁹ Indeed, photographers transformed all of the sights of the exhibition into commodities. Like other businesspeople, they were well aware that many families travelled to exhibitions with disposable income and the inclination to purchase goods. The enterprising photographer Lewis Rice in Windsor knew his target audience when he placed this ad for innovative photos of animals “in motion,” as well as trees, fruit, and regular portraiture in the prize list circulated in advance of the 1887 Hants and Kings County Exhibition (fig. 2.2). The report of the exhibition published in the *Hants Journal* describes Rice’s exhibit

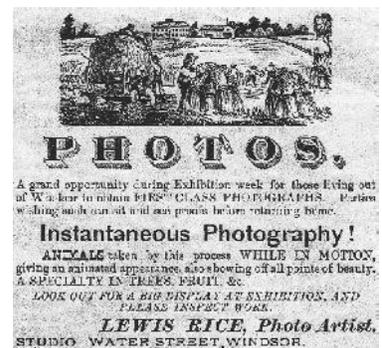


Fig 2.2 Advertisement, Lewis Rice, Photo Artist. *Regulations and Prize List of the Hants and Kings Agricultural and Industrial County Exhibition* (Windsor: Exhibition Committee, 1887). Private collection of the Hants County Exhibition, Windsor, NS.

³⁸ *Hants Journal* newsclipping 1887.

³⁹ *Halifax Herald*, September 10, 1904; *Lunenburg Progress*, October 20, 1886.

as “a fine display of photos and life size portraits, and out-door scenes, the exhibit evidencing the fact that as an artist he is equalled by few in the maritime provinces, we may say the Dominion, and excelled by none.”⁴⁰ Local photographers were regular exhibitors at exhibitions across the province, where they sold prints and took commissions for portraits and other work. They also competed in the photography competitions at exhibitions until gradually these were closed to professionals. Rice won \$1.50 in prize money for his photographs that year.⁴¹



Fig. 2.3 L. G. Swain, photograph, District Exhibition held at Yarmouth, 1882. Yarmouth County Museum and Archives, PH-20-30. (Frame cropped.)

⁴⁰ *Hants Journal* newsclipping 1887.

⁴¹ *Hants Journal* newsclipping 1887.

Despite the considerable involvement of photographers at exhibitions it is surprising that so few photographs of Nova Scotian exhibitions from the nineteenth century appear to have been archived.⁴² I have found only a handful of photographs in archives across the province. This commemorative high-angle survey view of the 1882 district exhibition in Yarmouth made by commercial photographer L. G. Swain is one of the best and provides a sense of the interior of the building and the organization of the exhibits (fig. 2.3). The image is the size of a cabinet card photograph, but it is pasted onto a larger, cream-coloured cardboard frame with text commemorating the event. The extraordinary depth of field characteristic of this era's large-format cameras and glass-plate negatives means that a wide range of details are in sharp focus, only blown out in places at the back by light streaming in through windows over the long exposure. Long tables freighted with fruit, baked goods, and bottled preserves dominate the bottom half of the image, along with a large empty portion of the floor, soon to be filled with visitors. Quilts hung throughout the room and bits of text in large white letters draw the eye up to the gallery level where more exhibits are displayed. Architectural plans of the exhibition hall, which opened in 1880 and functioned as a rink in the winter, show an octagonal structure, suggesting that this photograph depicts only a small portion of the building.⁴³ One curious detail about the production of this photograph is that although he made this and other souvenir images, and was a fixture in Yarmouth, Swain was not an exhibitor at

⁴² My observations about the relative lack of photographs of nineteenth-century exhibitions is corroborated by Jodey Nurse, who has noted the same in her doctoral research on Ontario exhibitions. In both provinces, many more photographs are available of exhibitions in the twentieth century. (Personal conversation.)

⁴³ Architectural plan, Public Exhibition Hall and Rink, Yarmouth, Nova Scotia. Yarmouth County Museum and Archives, YHS3-7, Yarmouth County Exhibition file.

the exhibition that year. Another local photographer, George Parker, advertised in the prize list and had a popular exhibit that won prizes.⁴⁴

Indelibly marked by the photographer's choices, preferences, and aptitudes, this is a professional (which is not to say "objective") rendering of the exhibition in its unblemished state, made before the event was opened to the public. That the photographer himself appears to have been absent from the exhibition after this time further suggests the intentionally idealized, indexical character of this photograph. But contrary to the text printed below the image, this is not an exhibition. Rather, this image represents the idealized potential of the exhibition—the potential for education and edification, for reform and improvement, for future profits and prosperity. It represents an intake of breath, held for the duration of a lengthy exposure, before the organizers of the event lost control over its meanings.

The full-page exhibition report written and published by Alexander Lawson, the editor of the *Yarmouth Herald*, was a different kind of representation of the same event (fig. 2.4). On the morning of the exhibition, Lawson "hastened to gain admission in order to quietly inspect the exhibits before the crowd got in" and he was self-aware about this privileged access and the particular professional gaze he brought to the occasion. Entering the exhibition building on opening morning he was delighted, writing, "No doubt about it, we confronted a grand show. Whichever way we looked we were captivated." But he quickly reigned himself in, noting that reporters must be "unimpassioned" in their investigations.⁴⁵ Lawson's contemporary the same year (in fact

⁴⁴ *Prize List of the Annual District Exhibition for the Counties of Digby, Yarmouth, and Shelburne* (Yarmouth: Exhibition Committee, 1882), n.p. NSA, Micro: 90961; *Yarmouth Herald*, October 19, 1882.

⁴⁵ *Yarmouth Herald*, October 19, 1882. Subsequent quotations from Lawson's writing all refer to this full page report.

the very same day) at the district exhibition in Antigonish similarly apologized early in his report for an emotional response to a visual experience—in his case it was the poor quality of the view while pulling into town by train, which he described in some detail—reminding himself that “as we left home to see and not to criticize, we must forbear giving expression to our feelings.”⁴⁶ As in other accounts, the choice by both of these men to write in the first-person plural contributed to the air of professional distance they sought to portray, at least in principle. With a wink to his audience, Lawson informed the reader that this full-page report was to be a critical, clear-eyed survey of the event.

Lawson’s “investigations” and his initial impressions were formed before the exhibition was opened to the public and would have corresponded to the idealized view that Swain presents in his photograph. But Lawson continues to roam and gaze as the crowd fills the hall and he incorporates these sights and experiences into his report. Lawson describes many of the sights we can recognize in Swain’s photograph: an “imitation of equine entity” displaying harnesses made by George T. Grant; “104 entries” of apples; “patch-work quilts hanging everywhere.” He also “glanced up and noticed variegated banners hung about the building, bunting pendent and festooned tastefully in different localities, and mottoes in white letters on a red ground running clear around the gallery and encircling the band stand. These were—‘Thy purpose firm is equal to the deed. / Who does the best his circumstance allows / Does well, acts nobly.’/ ‘Accuse not nature, she hath done her part; do thou but thine.’”⁴⁷

⁴⁶ *New Glasgow Eastern Chronicle*, October 19, 1882.

⁴⁷ The “mottoes” are both passages from major British poets. The first is from Edward Young’s *Night-Thoughts* (1742–1745); the second is from John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667).

Just as Lawson fills in the blanks of the fragmented text represented in the photograph, his representation of the exhibition also fills in some of the emotions and the sensory experiences of being in the space. Lawson smells odors and gets distracted and pushes through the crowd and overhears conversations and feels the excitement of being there on the day. Strolling through the dairy display, while “poking our nose around among the most tempting lots, trying to call up the innocent odors of other days,” Lawson overhears “some practical looking women ... questioning the ability of the judges.” A moment later he is exclaiming, “Holloa! what’s this? Modeling in butter!”⁴⁸ Swain’s photograph is devoid of the hustle and bustle of Lawson’s messy textual description, but at the same time it is also a more cluttered version of it. It offers a denser visual field that includes details Lawson did not or could not include: the rough, unfinished wood construction of the display tables, the particular patterns of the quilts hung about the building, a sense of the space itself, such as the distance between adjacent exhibits or the height of the ceiling.

It is fairly remarkable to have access to these two forms of expressive representation of the same nineteenth-century rural event. We might think of Swain’s photograph of the 1882 exhibition as a visual elaboration of the professional gaze that Lawson never really intended for his report. Indeed, it is tempting to position these two representations as a kind of photo essay, presaging the way that photographs and text would soon come together in newspapers. Reflecting on the relationship between photographs and text, W. J. T. Mitchell notes that in a traditional reading of the photographic essay, “texts explain, narrate, describe, label, speak for (and to) the

⁴⁸ On “modeling in butter,” see Pamela H. Simpson, *Corn Palaces and Butter Queens: A History of Crop Art and Dairy Sculpture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

photographs; photographs illustrate, exemplify, clarify, ground, and document the text.”⁴⁹ It would be easy enough to allow these two representations to function in this way, to let Lawson’s text narrativize what Swain’s photograph illustrates. But Mitchell encourages us to resist a reading that implies a simplified relationship of “fluid exchange”—that makes photography “an adjunct or supplement to language”—and instead attend to the “mutual ‘resistance’ of photography and writing” that must be overcome in order for us to feel as though we can “read” images, or see a text illustrated in them. Moreover, Mitchell cautions against “the trap of comparison.” He suggests that “the real question to ask when confronted with these kinds of image-text relations is not ‘what is the difference (or similarity) between the words and the images?’ but ‘what difference do the differences (and similarities) make?’”⁵⁰ What is at stake in the use of one or the other of these forms of representation? In a study of the 1880s the real significance of these questions is somewhat muted by the technical conditions of reproduction in the period. To write and publish a lengthy newspaper account was to communicate with a much wider audience than those who might have purchased a copy of a photograph, had it shared with them, or who might have seen the image on display somewhere. As the opening passage of this chapter suggests, to bring the sights of the exhibition before the eyes of an audience beyond it was not always a simple matter. This is certainly not to suggest that photographs did not circulate widely in the late nineteenth century, only that images such as Swain’s, of local interest, would have moved within a relatively circumscribed network.

⁴⁹ W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 94.

⁵⁰ Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 285, 324, 89, 91.

We cannot know if Swain and Lawson “saw” the same things, but it is nevertheless clear that their intentions were the same. Beyond the many differences we might identify between these two representations, or how we might judge one or the other to be a “better” historical source, ultimately it is their similarity that really matters, that has the most political valence, and that tells us the most about the moment at which they both emerged. They were both created by white, middle-class tradesmen who gave consideration foremost to their purchasing publics.⁵¹ At the same time, both of these representations were also guided by the same ideology of boosterism and progressive reform. They are both celebrations and promotional efforts on behalf of the reform agenda that underwrote all exhibitions. They are both advertisements, just as the exhibition itself was an advertisement. Indeed, there are really three forms of representation here.⁵² The exhibition was fashioned as a representation of the progressive spirit of Yarmouth, Digby, and Shelburne Counties in 1882. The photograph and text are representations/re-presentations of that original assemblage. Their apparent differences—the differences between the power of text and image—point not to different messages, but to the audiences that the two re-presentations were intended to impress with the *same*

⁵¹ On the ways that commercial considerations influenced the work of both trade photographers and, beginning in the late nineteenth century, newspaper editors, see Minko Sotiron, *From Politics to Profit: The Commercialization of Canadian Daily Newspapers, 1890-1920* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1997); Allan Sekula, “Photography Between Labour and Capital,” in *Mining Photographs and Other Pictures, 1948-1968: A Selection from the Negative Archives of Shedden Studio, Glace Bay, Cape Breton*, ed. B. H. D. Buchloh and Robert Wilkie (Halifax, NS: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and the University College of Cape Breton Press, 1983), 193–202; Sara Spike, “Picturing Rural Education: School Photographs and Contested Reform in Early Twentieth-Century Rural Nova Scotia,” *Historical Studies in Education* 24, no. 1 (2012): 49–71.

⁵² In his classic work, Wayne Neely described American exhibitions in the late nineteenth century as “one of the media” that the various participants used to reach their audiences. Wayne Caldwell Neely, *The Agricultural Fair* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1935), 104. Exhibition reports such as Lawson’s also regularly incorporated actual advertising copy into their descriptions of particular companies and their products. The line between newspaper editorial and advertising was a permeable one in the late nineteenth century.

message about the virtues of progressive reform, rural modernity, and consumer capitalism.

Swain's image seems to present an unencumbered view of the exhibition so that one might see and judge it for oneself. In what appears to be the absence of a guide, the viewer is free to assess the scene and consider it in relation to others like it that they might have seen before. Anne Maxwell writes that photography appears to bury the subjectivity of vision "beneath the seamless surface of purely mechanistic technique."⁵³ This has the effect of both eliding the photographer's own role, choices, and priorities in the creation of an image, while also positioning the photograph as a transparent rendering of an objective past reality. But far from objective, Swain's image guides our gaze, just as Lawson's report does. Some of the formal choices of the photographer can be discerned when we consider the utter stillness of this photograph and how it contrasts with Lewis Rice's advertisement promising to capture animals "while in motion, giving an animated appearance, also showing off all points of beauty."⁵⁴ Lynn Hunt and Vanessa Schwartz write that images appear "to freeze, capture, and memorialize time," but this is of course a fallacy.⁵⁵ Like the still life paintings echoed by the plates of fruits on display, this photograph is a representation, not a reality, and it is one that is meant for contemplation. The overview created by Swain's high-angle survey of the premises establishes a singular, authoritative perspective that replicates the elite gaze of those who might render

⁵³ Anne Maxwell, *Colonial Photography and Exhibitions: Representations of the "Native" and the Making of European Identities* (London: Leicester University Press, 1999), 12.

⁵⁴ *Regulations and Prize List of the Hants and Kings Agricultural and Industrial County Exhibition* (Windsor: Exhibition Committee, 1887). Private collection of the Hants County Exhibition, Windsor, NS.

⁵⁵ Lynn Hunt and Vanessa R. Schwartz, "Capturing the Moment: Images and Eyewitnessing in History," *Journal of Visual Culture* 9, no. 3 (2010): 259.

judgement upon the event and the relative industriousness and progressiveness of the community that created it.

Quite differently, Lawson's description of his roving gaze intentionally conveys the impression of an on-the-ground, eye-witness account. His newsy details, humour, and local colour establish him as a jovial and trustworthy guide to the event. His narrative style suggests a bustling room full of sights and an eye flitting from one to the next. In just one short paragraph he ogles his way past "a tempting pyramid of grocers' stock [and] boxes of raisins that reminded us of Christmas stockings," "a tasty decoration of flowers and ferns," and "a handsome wheel and ship's tiller," when next, his "eye had just lighted on a mammoth squash, and we were moving in the direction of the roots and vegetables when we glanced up and noticed" the banners and mottoes described earlier. And after pausing for a moment to compliment the decorators he is off again to inspect "his squashship," before catching "the eyes" of the potatoes, which "fairly winked at each other in comic complacency." The cauliflowers opposite were "poking their white heads out of their green Elizabethan ruffles as much as to say—'Are we not as aesthetic as the Sunflower, and do you think Oscar [Wilde] should have a first mortgage on all the ruffles?'"

As mentioned above, Lawson was upfront about his particular professional gaze, including his ability to access the building ahead of the public. But more generally he presents himself as one of the crowd, roving enthusiastically through the exhibition, and he was self-aware that his was not an expert's gaze. While here he animates the vegetables rather than critically assessing them, elsewhere, while looking over what he felt to be an excellent display of apples, he admitted that he had an "unpracticed eye" and

he sought advice from one of the judges to help him understand why others had deemed it “hardly up to previous displays.” His first-name-only reference here to Oscar Wilde might appear to set Lawson apart from the crowd as someone with relatively specialized cultural knowledge, but this assumes that the rural audience of the *Yarmouth Herald* would not have caught the reference. Wilde was currently on tour in North America and had been in Nova Scotia earlier that month.⁵⁶ His name was circulating as a fashionable cultural reference, and often as a joke. The reporter at the Antigonish exhibition that year also invoked “the apostle of modern aesthetics” when he described splendid views from the train that “produce emotions of which perhaps Oscar Wilde would not be ashamed.”⁵⁷

Lawson refers to Wilde a second time, more seriously, when admiring “a bouquet of flowers in wax, with several butterflies in wax hovering over them, the workmanship of Henry Adams, the wool sorter at the Mill.” Lawson writes, “This is just as it should be, and Oscar Wilde says a sensible thing when he claims that to run the aesthetic thread all through the fabric of common life, the working people must thread the needle; in other words, the artisans must be artists.” Moving beyond simple humour or name dropping, Lawson draws for his rural audience a meaningful connection between Wilde’s ideas about the importance of aestheticism in daily life and the value derived from the sights of the exhibition. This is a wonderful example of modern cultural capital on display in a rural context.

⁵⁶ On Wilde in Canada, see Kevin O’Brien, *Oscar Wilde in Canada: An Apostle for the Arts* (Rexdale, ON: J. Wiley, 1982).

⁵⁷ *New Glasgow Eastern Chronicle*, October 19, 1882. Already mentioned above, the reporter bemoans the view of the exhibition building as the train pulls into Antigonish, which he suggests “would raise a storm of indignation in the righteous soul of the apostle of modern aesthetics.”

Further reflecting on the relationship between images and texts, the verbal and the visual, it is worth pausing to note that Swain's photograph reproduces much of the same text on display at the exhibition that also briefly drew Lawson's gaze. The composite or mixed image/text is central to much of Mitchell's *Picture Theory*, an extended reflection on what constitutes the visual in visual representation. Mitchell, among others, would also note that text, when written down or printed, is fundamentally visual, so that all three of these forms of representation are in fact composite image/texts, further troubling any borders that we might wish to draw around them.⁵⁸ From a different scholarly perspective, David Henkin has noted that "publicly posted words" were a fundamental part of the visual culture of nineteenth-century modernity.⁵⁹ While Henkin's argument is that public textuality (including billboards, advertising signs, newspapers, and paper money) is a particularly urban phenomenon, agricultural exhibitions offer a point of entry to think about the ways that this phenomenon also manifested in rural places and small towns.

Exhibitions in nineteenth-century Nova Scotia were filled with visible words. To begin, this included promotional and aspirational materials such as the posters, prize lists, and postcards circulated ahead of time. In 1881, the Bridgewater Agricultural Society had a thousand prize-list pamphlets printed ahead of their exhibition.⁶⁰ It is likely that about seventy-five copies of this typeset poster for the Windsor Agricultural Society's local exhibition in 1884 were made (fig. 2.5).⁶¹

⁵⁸ Mitchell, *Picture Theory*. On the visibility of text, see especially 95, 111–150.

⁵⁹ David M. Henkin, *City Reading: Written Words and Public Spaces in Antebellum New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

⁶⁰ Minute book of Bridgewater Agricultural Society, August 30, 1881. Desbrisay Museum, Accession # U653.

⁶¹ In 1885 the society printed seventy-five posters; in 1888 they printed one hundred. Nova Scotia Archives, MG6, Windsor Agricultural Society collection, vol. 3 #4, poster, 1884; receipt for seventy-five

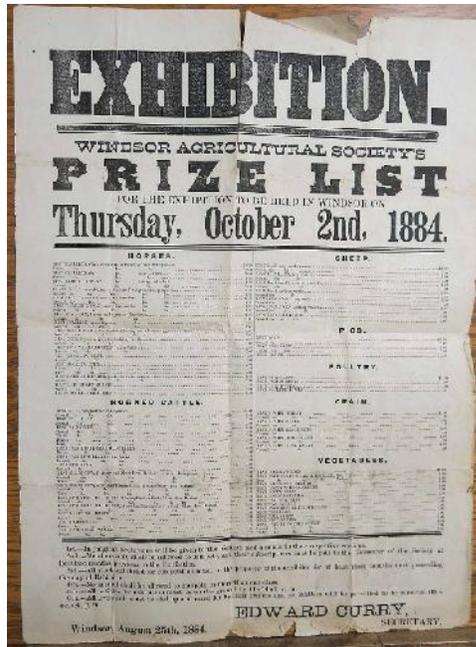


Fig. 2.5 Poster, Windsor Agricultural Society Exhibition, 1884. Nova Scotia Archives, MG6, Windsor Agricultural Society collection, vol. 3 #4.

Lithographs for the provincial exhibition were distributed throughout the province—in 1900 they were noticed in Berwick before the end of August.⁶² An absence of posters could be a point of conflict, such as when the Weymouth Agricultural Society was accused of excluding the rest of Digby County when they did not circulate posters ahead of their exhibition in 1888.⁶³ These visual texts joined a range of other advertising materials pasted up at post offices, grocers’ stores, and other public locations in rural communities.

Come the day of the exhibition, the events chattered with directional signage, labelling and prize tickets, advertisements and brand names, and sometimes

“printed notices,” 1885. Papers in the private collection of the Hants County Exhibition, Windsor, NS, include receipts of the Windsor Agricultural Society for printing posters, postcards, and prize lists in 1880, 1887, 1888, 1893, and 1894.

⁶² *Berwick Register*, August 30, 1900.

⁶³ *Digby Weekly Courier*, October 12, 1888.

ideologically-freighted mottoes, all of which made these spaces intelligible (literally legible) to those in attendance. In addition to describing the motto at the Yarmouth exhibition, Lawson also remarked upon the signage over several booths. The signboard of Spinney, Eakins, and Co. “was a curiosity itself, the name of the firm being spelled out with galvanized deck spikes and boat nails.” And he noted (also visible in Swain’s photograph) that “‘Perry’ was all over the wall [and] seemed to be nothing but a cognominal exhibition of ‘Perry,’” before, on closer inspection, he found that it was an advertisement for a vendor of sewing machines. Advertising was the major contributor of words in public, and exhibitions were perhaps the site where this tendency found its fullest expression in rural areas. Indeed, all text at exhibitions was effectively advertising something, whether a product or an idea. The 1887 exhibition in Windsor was festooned with text:

The walls and rafters are hung with inscriptions and bannerettes, which give a very attractive appearance to the whole. Looking from the gallery, the most prominent sight is the inscription ... ‘The Earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness thereof,’ which about this in the arch are the words, ‘Peace and Plenty.’ Between these, is the sign of the official title, ‘Hants and Kings Agricultural and Industrial Exhibition.’ ... From the rafters in the main part of the building are hung the inscriptions ‘Agriculture and Commerce’ and ‘Manufacture and Trade.’ ... Bannerettes of various colors, suspended in different parts of the exhibition bear names of deities of ancient mythology.⁶⁴

This is the visual equivalent of shouting, perhaps not remiss given the clamour that arose from the assembled spectators. Lawson noted that when the visiting Lieutenant Governor attempted to give his probably very edifying address, an official “made a vigorous attempt to call the vast moving throng to order [but] it was folly to expect the people to be quiet enough to hear with ease His Honor’s remarks.”

⁶⁴ *Hants Journal* newsclipping 1887.



Fig. 2.6 Ticket stub, Nova Scotia Provincial Exhibition, 1904. Collection of the Farm Equipment Museum, Truro, NS.

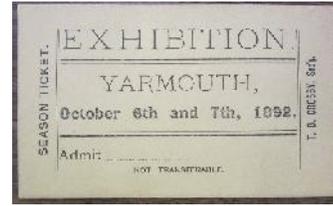


Fig. 2.7 Season Ticket, Yarmouth Exhibition, 1892. Yarmouth County Museum and Archives, Yarmouth County Exhibition file, YMS3-7 P1.

Visitors at exhibitions also had more intimate encounters with words. The bit of text printed on an entrance ticket was a metonym—a tactile, if ephemeral, link between the aspirational text of the posters and prize lists, the body of the ticket holder, and the texts they would be called upon to interpret on the day of the exhibition, inviting its holder to join the larger conversation. The stub for a single entrance ticket at the 1904 provincial exhibition in Halifax was both an advertisement and a souvenir of the day, featuring an image of the exhibition building alongside promotional text (fig. 2.6). A season ticket for the 1892 exhibition in Yarmouth was far simpler and more personal, but no less a souvenir, with a space for the bearer’s own name to be added, perhaps in his or her own handwriting (fig. 2.7).⁶⁵

The *Lunenburg Progress* in 1881 encouraged “young people” going to the exhibition “to take a notebook with them, and when they meet anything worthy of preservation for future reference, jot it down. The memory is treacherous, but as the Latin proverb has it, ‘*Litera scripta manet*’ what is written remains.”⁶⁶ Whether or not anyone took this advice is unclear, but we do know there were other kinds of notebooks and note-

⁶⁵ A “season ticket” was a ticket for unlimited admission over the period of the exhibition. In 1892 it cost fifty cents. A single admission was twenty-five cents, ten cents for those under twelve. Advertisement, *Yarmouth Herald*, October 4, 1892.

⁶⁶ *Lunenburg Progress*, October 11, 1881.

taking going on at exhibitions. The secretary for the exhibitions in Stewiacke in 1885 and 1887 used the same small black notebook on both occasions, in which he recorded the names of all exhibitors, their entries, and prizes awarded. He also wrote down the vocabulary lists for the spelling competitions: Abecedarian, Daguerreotype, Escritoire.⁶⁷

Visible words also tethered the sights of the exhibition to the meanings that the organizers sought to assign. At the Pictou County exhibition in 1880, where labelling was apparently lacking, “people were to be seen wandering around, asking everybody where those cauliflowers were grown, or these pieces of cloth manufactured, and receiving a different reply on each occasion.” The reporter suggested that anyone who failed to properly label their display “must have very crude ideas regarding the practical benefit of these shows.”⁶⁸ The importance of labelling to the intelligibility of the exhibition meant that it was also therefore a site of subversion. The *Wolfville Acadian* reported that at the 1894 provincial exhibition in Halifax, “some very practical joker, who having a weakness for the tempting display of Gravensteins exhibited by the N.S. Fruit Growers’ Association, procured a card, on which he labelled, ‘Please take one,’ ... and, as a result the pile was soon diminished.”⁶⁹ The sensory transgression in this act of surreptitiously eating/tasting the exhibits—something that even judges were not permitted to do—in addition to disrupting hierarchies of access, is also a good reminder that, for most people, vision is not the preferred sense for engaging with the products of field and hearth.

⁶⁷ Notebook, Colchester County Exhibition, 1887. Stewiacke Valley Museum, 91-19-07.

⁶⁸ *New Glasgow Eastern Chronicle*, October 14, 1880.

⁶⁹ *Wolfville Acadian*, October 5, 1894.



Fig. 2.8 Second Prize ticket, Men's Wool Mitts (Fringed), Mrs. Banford Johnson. Nova Scotia Provincial Exhibition, Halifax, 1891. Collection of the Farm Equipment Museum, Truro, NS.

In addition to the general labelling of exhibits, prize tickets (more common than ribbons in the period) also directed the gaze of the crowd by acting as a visual/textual extension of the work of the judges. Like an entrance ticket, a prize ticket was also an ephemeral bit of text and paper that linked a participant to the larger exhibition project. An entrance ticket stayed on the body of the visitor, and travelled with them around the grounds of the event. A prize ticket, such as this one won by Agnes (Mrs. Banford) Johnson of Onslow for her men's fringed knitted mitts at the 1891 provincial exhibition in Halifax (fig. 2.8) remained for a time on display so that others might learn from it, before coming into the possession of the exhibitor. Unlike an entrance ticket, which had a price, a prize ticket had a value—Johnson received one dollar for her mitts.⁷⁰ Later at home, it continued to signify her accomplishment, taking on the status of a souvenir, before eventually making its way to a community museum.

⁷⁰ *List of Premiums, Rules and Regulations, Nova Scotia Provincial Exhibition* (Halifax, NS: Board of Commissioners, 1891), 98. NSA: micro.

At the 1890 Yarmouth County exhibition, “the glittering red, blue and yellow badges, betokening respectively a first, second or third prize, might [be] seen proclaiming the official opinions of comparative excellence, in every direction.” At the 1886 Lunenburg County exhibition in Mahone Bay, the reporter knew that “the stock exhibited was up to the mark [because] several first-class prize tickets were seen dangling from the cattle’s horns.” The reporter at the 1892 United Counties exhibition in New Glasgow advised that “Friday morning will be the best time for a visit to the Exhibition by those who wish to examine the exhibits carefully. By that time all the prize tickets will be awarded.”⁷¹ This reporter acknowledged reluctantly that many people, in fact, did not “wish to examine the exhibits carefully,” but also stressed that to receive the full benefits of looking, prize tickets functioned as a guide so that visitors might see the exhibits through the judges’ eyes. This was not, however, as straightforward as it might have seemed.

Skilled Visions

The first matter of business for the organizing committee in the days following the 1891 Nova Scotia provincial exhibition in Halifax was an ambiguous vegetable.⁷² Adding the marginal note “Pumpkin or Squash,” the secretary recorded the following item in his

⁷¹ *Yarmouth Telegram*, October 10, 1890; *Lunenburg Progress*, October 13, 1886; *New Glasgow Eastern Chronicle*, September 22, 1892.

⁷² Biologically, pumpkins and squashes are fruit, but culturally they are regularly considered to be vegetables, an ambiguity that also characterizes several other food plants. I use *vegetable* because this is the way pumpkins, etc., were categorized in the exhibitions in this study, both in prize lists and in the organization of displays. This is a long-standing debate, which was already well underway in 1893 when the US Supreme Court ruled on whether a tomato was a fruit or a vegetable (biologically fruit, vegetable for taxation purposes.) My thanks to Jane Freeland for explaining that the names and distinctions between pumpkins and squashes are significantly different in Australia than they are in North America, which makes my argument about their cultural instability all the more pointed.

minute book: “Mr Harris brought up the question of a pumpkin exhibited by Geo McIntosh which the Judges looked upon as a squash. Mr H said he was satisfied the exhibit was a pumpkin and the prize of \$1 was ordered to be paid.”⁷³ The same problem was reported at a pumpkin weigh-off in Truro in 1895 where “a suspicious looking specimen of the ‘Squash-pumpkin’ variety, ugly as could be made” was, to the dismay of many observers, entered into competition, nearly tying for third place.⁷⁴ These might at first appear to be simply anomalies, but in fact they reveal a central problem threatening the legitimacy of all agricultural exhibitions in the period: it was difficult in the 1890s to say what any vegetable was with any measure of certainty. Distinguishing between a potato and a pea was easy, but the distinctions were murkier between closely related species. Pumpkins and squashes were among a range of vegetables whose physical criteria were in the process of being invented or formalized in the late nineteenth century. Over time, seed selection has led to a range of differences in squash cultivars, but even today the physical boundaries between pumpkin and squash, and between the various types of squash, remain fuzzy. As historian Cindy Ott has noted, a pumpkin, indeed any fruit or vegetable, is “as much an idea as a plant type.”⁷⁵

The conflicting opinions of the provincial exhibition committee, the local judges, and the farmers who entered these vegetables as pumpkins, not to mention the diverse opinions of the viewing public on the relative beauty of particular specimens, reveal the arbitrariness and instability of any nineteenth-century efforts to establish boundaries

⁷³ Nova Scotia Archives, MG6 series A, vol. 1, #3, Minutes, Provincial Exhibition Committee, October 7, 1891.

⁷⁴ *Truro Daily News*, October 5, 1895.

⁷⁵ Cindy Ott’s study is a close reading of the giant pumpkin, but she also discusses the history and ongoing instability of biological distinctions between squash cultivars. Cindy Ott, “Object Analysis of the Giant Pumpkin,” *Environmental History* 15, no. 4 (2010): 747.

around new, “improved” varieties of fruits and vegetables—and the same was certainly true of breeds of livestock. Breed and cultivar standards are profoundly unstable, both biologically and culturally. Reforming nature to suit human needs and desires has therefore also meant reforming human minds and bodies—their sensory capacities, aptitudes, and preferences—to perceive these changes. In this case, formalizing the objects of agricultural improvement meant, among other things, teaching people how to see them.

Anthropologist Cristina Grasseni’s concept of “skilled visions” offers a useful framework for understanding the specialized gazes of nineteenth-century agricultural improvement.⁷⁶ In this chapter, the concept provides an opportunity to think about how farmers who raised, displayed, and assessed improved livestock and agricultural produce learned to distinguish between similar varieties and to recognize the best examples within an individual variety. Grasseni’s work on contemporary cattle breeders in the Italian Alps reveals the importance of these skills for livestock farmers, no less so in the nineteenth century than in the twenty-first: an 1881 column reprinted in the *New Glasgow Eastern Chronicle* insisted that “the successful breeder ... must necessarily be keen of sight to observe the good and bad points” of an animal.⁷⁷ In the nineteenth-century vegetable field or orchard, similarly-specialized visual skills, once learned, were used to determine the best plants to be saved for seed, and which others should be marketed, kept for home use, made into products such as cider, or used as animal fodder. Visual appearance was also used to assess the health of crops, including the presence of blight or other diseases.

⁷⁶ Cristina Grasseni, *Developing Skill, Developing Vision: Practices of Locality at the Foot of the Alps* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009); Cristina Grasseni, ed., *Skilled Visions: Between Apprenticeship and Standards* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007).

⁷⁷ *New Glasgow Eastern Chronicle*, January 13, 1881.

These were significant economic considerations based on highly specialized visual skills, marks of a progressive farmer.

In the late nineteenth century, agricultural exhibitions were important sites where these skills were taught, both to farmers and to the general public. Through practices of display and the performance of expert judging, exhibition organizers sought to instil the visual skills necessary to recognize the very artificial and arbitrary boundaries between and among the many new, “improved” varieties of fruits and vegetables and specially-bred livestock. However, reports of Nova Scotia exhibitions in the rural and regional press reveal the divergent gazes of reform-minded agricultural experts and the general public about what made for a splendid cabbage or a magnificent sheep—indeed about what, in general, was “worth looking at.”⁷⁸

To begin with, entities do not become visible, that is, visually recognizable as something in particular and distinct from something else—pumpkins rather than squashes, Belgian White carrots rather than New Short White carrots—until their identities have been first invented and then given meaning. Livestock and agricultural produce are manifestations of history and culture as much as of biology; they are living things, but they are also ideas, discursive objects. Central to their intelligibility is the act of naming—and here again language inserts itself into the visual field of the exhibition. As Harriet Ritvo argues, “the conviction that species were somehow real—that in labelling a group of organisms, ... taxonomists were identifying an entity that had an

⁷⁸ Harriet Ritvo notes that publics at exhibitions and similar kinds of shows, including the people who wrote about them in the press, were made up of some people who were interested in the scientific (and agricultural) innovations on display, while many others just wanted to see an interesting show. Harriet Ritvo, “Understanding Audiences and Misunderstanding Audiences: Some Publics for Science,” in *Science Serialized: Representation of the Sciences in Nineteenth-Century Periodicals*, ed. G. N. Cantor and Sally Shuttleworth (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 331–49.

existence independent of that naming process—flourished in spite of a striking lack of consensus about the nature of the entity in question.”⁷⁹ Naming was essentially arbitrary (though not random) and also appropriative, a way of establishing an entity within a particular network of knowledge. Like biological palimpsests, plant and animal varieties named by European science overwrote the Indigenous names given to their ancestors, each layer a matter of situated meaning-making, rather than a description of the world.

If this was true of the plants and animals that developed through natural selection, it was even more the case for those produced through genetic manipulation such as seed selection and specialized breeding. In a discussion of livestock breeders, Ritvo refers to the “constitutive effect of naming” as a starting point for the cultural legitimization of new breeds, a process that may also be applied to botanical innovations. Naming, and taxonomic nomenclature in particular, were used to “define, enhance, and celebrate the act of domestication” and improvement, and to “emphasize the often subtle distinctions that separated one breed from another.”⁸⁰ Such naming established the identity of new breeds or cultivars within the arena of scientific agriculture, moving them beyond the realm of imagination and into a broader discursive formation that made possible their intelligibility to a wider public.

Many of the improved plants and animals on display at late nineteenth-century exhibitions had been named into scientific existence in an earlier period, but the communication of their identities remained an ongoing process. Distinctions between innovative cultivars and breeds, while perhaps established in science, required a social

⁷⁹ Harriet Ritvo, *The Platypus and the Mermaid, and Other Figments of the Classifying Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 85–86.

⁸⁰ Ritvo, *The Platypus and the Mermaid*, 75.

context to be given broader meaning. Michel Foucault's visual and botanical metaphors in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* may be read literally here: "it is not enough for us to open our eyes, to pay attention, or to be aware, for new objects suddenly to light up and emerge out of the ground."⁸¹ In order for the arbitrary characteristics of a perfectly formed Beauty of Hebron potato or thoroughbred Shropshire ewe to be visually intelligible, those characteristics had to matter in some way. If there was no imperative to differentiate, the characteristics would remain meaningless and therefore largely unintelligible.

As with all agricultural innovations, it was economic imperatives—often intertwined with aesthetic ones—that made these distinctions meaningful, and that in effect constituted the intelligibility and visibility of new varieties. For example, historical disputes and assertions about the visual characteristics of biologically similar vegetables may reveal a point of conflict at which one crop displaced another. In 1893, the Wolfville *Acadian Orchardist* reprinted a piece reflecting on the relationship between pumpkins and squashes. The article suggested that "one reason for the passing of the pumpkin is the introduction of improved varieties of squashes, fine in grain, choice in flavor, and with long keeping qualities. Another reason may be that the vines of the pumpkin, which is a rampant runner, interfere considerably with the later cultivation of any crop with which it is planted."⁸² In short, newer varieties of squashes were preferred because they were modern: more amenable to the long-distance transportation essential to capitalist

⁸¹ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (1972; London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 49. Similarly, in the *The Order of Things*, Foucault writes that the emergence of natural history in the eighteenth century "was not an age-old inattentiveness being suddenly dissipated, but a new field of visibility being constituted in all its density. Natural history did not become possible because men looked harder and more closely." Foucault, *Order of Things*, 132.

⁸² *Acadian Orchardist* (Wolfville), October 10, 1893.

marketing due to their “long keeping qualities,” more efficient and disciplined in terms of space and therefore in terms of profitability, and better suited aesthetically to an increasingly refined palette.

Though they may have been arbitrary and unstable, matters of visual delineation were not irrelevant; they had an influence on the economics of agriculture on (and in) the ground. Policing the boundaries around the particular visual character of pumpkin-ness, as distinct from the broader category of squashes, was therefore either an act of nostalgia, or, seen from the perspective of a twenty-first-century resurgent interest in heritage crops, a small act of agricultural resistance. Disputes such as those that troubled the organizing committee of the 1891 Halifax exhibition point to the economic and aesthetic imperatives that made such distinctions meaningful in the late nineteenth century. It is not surprising that the pumpkin continues to be marketed as a niche or novelty product, with heavy emphasis on its appearance (colour, size), while squashes have gone on to dominate the food market.⁸³

Agricultural exhibitions, with their emphasis on reform, and celebration of improvement, sought to convince recalcitrant farmers, and the public more generally, that the improvement of their livestock and crops, and therefore the visual differences between the relevant varieties, mattered—economically, aesthetically, and morally. One of the ways that this was accomplished was through the performance of judging. Elsbeth Heaman describes judging at nineteenth-century Canadian exhibitions as “very poor,”

⁸³ While pumpkins and squashes have never been major market crops in Nova Scotia, the recent history of the pumpkin has a significant Nova Scotia connection. The Atlantic Giant pumpkin variety was created and patented in the 1960s by Howard Dill in Windsor, NS, the seeds of which continue to produce all the giant pumpkins in North America. See Al Kingsbury, *The Pumpkin King: Four-Time World Champion Howard Dill and the Atlantic Giant* (Hantsport, NS: Lancelot Press, 1996); Ott, “Object Analysis of the Giant Pumpkin.”

noting that judges often lacked expertise and were partial.⁸⁴ It is true that most events continued to be judged by locals throughout the period of this study. But by the end of the nineteenth century the qualifications of judges were regularly advertised in advance as a way to establish the legitimacy of an event and to encourage participation. In Nova Scotia, judges often included professionals like Bella Miller, instructors from the provincial agricultural college, or established stock dealers. More prominent exhibitions brought in judges from Ontario or the United States, who were believed to be less partial than local judges. Manuals for exhibition judges appeared internationally, offering standardized descriptions on which to base decisions, and points systems had long been in place for livestock, particularly horses.⁸⁵ Nevertheless, even as it professionalized, judging remained essentially subjective.

Alongside the specialization and modernization of agriculture itself came demands for more specialized judging categories at exhibitions and a deepening acknowledgement of the importance of trained visual expertise to the project of agricultural improvement. Around the same time that the distinction between pumpkin and squash was being debated, a writer in the *New Glasgow Eastern Chronicle* asked with some annoyance, “What is meant by a cow?” This was in response to what he felt was an insufficient breadth of specialized categories on the provincial exhibition prize list. “We would understand that all cows giving milk, no matter what age, must compete

⁸⁴ Heaman, *Inglorious Arts of Peace*, 125. On the quality of judging at Canadian exhibitions, see also Jones, *Midways, Judges, and Smooth-Tongued Fakirs*, 18–29.

⁸⁵ In the case of vegetables there is little evidence to suggest that judging manuals were in use in Nova Scotia in the late nineteenth century, though points systems for livestock were definitely used. A manual for judging vegetables and exhibitions published as an Ontario Department of Agriculture bulletin in 1919 opens: “For some time it has been felt that a more definite idea of the type of each vegetable should be published in order that judges may be enabled the more easily to give their decisions.” ODA bulletins were widely disseminated among agricultural educators and reformers in Canada, including in Nova Scotia. A. H. McLennan, *Judging Vegetables*, Bulletin 270 (Toronto: Ontario Department of Agriculture, 1919), 3.

together, or that a two-year old dry heifer must compete with a two-year old heifer in milk. In either case it is not fair to the exhibitors or the judges.”⁸⁶ Like the difference between squash and pumpkin, distinctions that once held little meaning became, in the context of agricultural modernity, subjects of scrutiny and debate.

And it was understood explicitly that specialized visual skills were required to navigate this modern environment. In a subsequent issue, the *Eastern Chronicle* continued, “There are few men capable of judging all classes of cow kind. For instance: The Durham man can only see through the beef producing spectacles. Hence the milk and butter producing breeds suffer at his hand, and *vice versa*.”⁸⁷ Here the issue was not simply inadequate categorization, but insufficiently specialized judging itself, with specific visual skills foremost in demand. The notion that people might wear culturally-specific “spectacles” that predetermined and to an extent limited the possibilities of their visual perception, or that highly specialized training and knowledge was necessary to simply recognize a good cow from a bad one, challenged any notion of vision as an objective authority or neutral form of perception.

In this context it became increasingly important that the practice of skilled vision by exhibition judges should not simply be a mysterious performance of visual virtuosity. As judging was formalized, the reasons for decisions were meant to be increasingly transparent and replicable, even as they became more specialized. By the end of the century, the Canadian Department of Agriculture was encouraging expert judges to give public addresses to explain the reasoning behind their decisions, so that the public might see the exhibits through their eyes. At the Farmers’ Meeting in Berwick in April 1907, an

⁸⁶ *New Glasgow Eastern Chronicle*, August 16, 1888.

⁸⁷ *New Glasgow Eastern Chronicle*, October 4, 1888.

“entire afternoon was taken up in judging the stock [and] Prof. Cumming explaining his method of judging and his reasons for the awards given.”⁸⁸ While anyone, such as Alexander Lawson in Yarmouth, might observe and appreciate a display of apples with an “untrained eye,” only those with the proper skilled vision could discern by sight the distinctions between the dozen varieties on display, and which among them might be worthy of a prize. And in the logic of the nineteenth-century exhibition, it was hoped that this visual education and edification—this raised consciousness we might call it—would lead to emulation and reform. The cultivation of skilled vision means learning to see not as an individual but as a member of a community with a specialized set of visual priorities. Grasseni argues that the value of studies of skilled vision is that they allow us to “highlight the processes by which consensus on notions of beauty, propriety, and exactness is achieved socially.”⁸⁹ In rural Nova Scotia in the late nineteenth century, agricultural exhibitions were one place where we can see this process at work. Though it was novel, this practice was not mere novelty. As previously mentioned, back home in a farmer’s field, the judgement informed by this skilled vision would contribute to decisions that would have an influence on the viability and profitability of livestock or crops.

And according to nineteenth-century commentators, the consequences of non-adherence to these visual standards could be dire. Following the 1887 Pictou County

⁸⁸ *Berwick Register*, April 25, 1907. See also the circular from the Department of Agriculture reprinted in the *Yarmouth Herald*, September 20, 1904. At the provincial exhibition in Halifax in 1899, the horticultural show “besides being beautiful, [was] of an educational nature” with a series of daily lectures by Professor Craig of the Iowa State Horticultural College and Professor Stairs of the Provincial Agriculture School. *Hants Journal*, September 27, 1899.

⁸⁹ Cristina Grasseni, “Skilled Visions: Toward an Ecology of Visual Inscriptions,” in *Made to Be Seen: Perspectives on the History of Visual Anthropology*, ed. Marcus Banks and Jay Ruby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 22.

exhibition, a stock expert and special correspondent to the *Eastern Chronicle* was furious about the judges' decision to give first prize to a stallion born of a grade Clydesdale mare over a thoroughbred stallion: "What the judges could have been thinking of in this instance puzzles not only [this] writer ..., but hundreds of others who saw the three year old classes being shown. ... Our judges should keep read up so that they may keep pace with the improvement in breeding, and not show to the world by their decisions how ridiculous they are when deciding questions that have to do with the future improvement of our stock."⁹⁰ For this writer, the judge's decision was not a trivial matter. This was not a question of fairness or an accusation of bias or partiality. And it was not just about the internal dynamic of this particular contest. This was an incident that could potentially impede the progress of agricultural improvement the county over. While he claimed that *he* was able to appropriately assess these animals, he was concerned that other onlookers who were less knowledgeable would follow the example set by the judges as they sought to improve their own stock. The response of this writer reveals, first, that many visitors came to exhibitions with highly trained visual expertise. Second, it suggests that it was those who already had the requisite skilled vision who believed most ardently in the pedagogical effect of such displays, including the power to inculcate bad habits should the judges not do their job appropriately.

In the same vein, the writer added his concerns about animals without individual merit being awarded prizes, noting that often because of a small number of entries, "the judges award prizes to the best they find on the ground, independent of real merit. This is wrong and misleading, and does immense harm to the breeds." He noted that most of the

⁹⁰ *New Glasgow Eastern Chronicle*, October 13, 1887.

sheep that year “were hardly middling” yet received prizes, while the Berkshire hogs, “the poorest lot [he] ever remember[ed] seeing on exhibition ... secured prizes all the same, for the simple reason that they had no competition.” It is worth noting that the *Eastern Chronicle*’s own reporter described the same show of sheep as “not large, but the quality was excellent.”⁹¹ Indeed, we have already seen above how the visibility of prize tickets guided the public apprehension of value at exhibitions. Yet the granting of awards to animals without individual merit was common practice, particularly in the early years of the period. At the Yarmouth County exhibition in 1881 the poultry exhibit “was exceedingly poor, if not altogether a failure. ... most of the fowls shown were not pure bred and not worthy of premiums, and in many instances want of competition was almost the only reason why premiums were awarded.” Here again text constituted the visibility of these exhibits: “In some cases the only indication of the particular breeds which the fowls were intended to represent were labels on the coops.”⁹²

Beyond excluding animals without individual merit, as exhibitions modernized, many observers called for the exclusion of all but thoroughbred animals from the grounds. In 1888, a correspondent in the *Eastern Chronicle*, perhaps the same stock expert quoted above, this time reporting on the horse show at the provincial exhibition in Halifax, argued that “it is most unfair and *pernicious* to offer prizes at all for males of any kind intended for stock purposes, who are not thoroughbred of their kind. ... Grades from one cross are very often dangerous rivals in a show ring to their thoroughbred sires” but their progeny will revert “back to the side of the scrubs.” These non-thoroughbred animals were not only dangerous because they might win prizes, like the stallion in

⁹¹ *New Glasgow Eastern Chronicle*, October 13, 1887.

⁹² *Yarmouth Herald*, October 20, 1881.

Pictou did the previous year, but because if they did win, all the progress of improvement could come unravelled.

It is important to pause here to note that this writer was not discussing actually breeding these animals in his lengthy, furious newspaper column, and my analysis here should not be construed to imply that improved breeding in livestock was unimportant or insignificant.⁹³ Instead, I am interested in the ways that vision and visuality were implicated in the debates around agricultural modernity. This columnist was writing about the act of simply displaying these animals to the public. Simply displaying these animals was perceived to be “*pernicious*.” The italics were his. The belief in the power of vision as an educator—for both good and ill—was explicit. “The sight of some hundreds of thoroughbred cattle” was, as mentioned in the opening of this chapter “one that would have done good to every farmer in the Province,” and by the same token, the very sight of non-thoroughbred animals could be “dangerous.”

The fruit and vegetable equivalent of these debates were, as with the suspicious squash-pumpkins, expressed in concerns about improper categorization. Following the Colchester County exhibition at Stewiacke in 1887, a reporter declared the “mangolds only fair,” but added that “the sugar beets, wrongly entered as mangolds, were good.”⁹⁴ Cultivars of the same plant, beets and mangolds (or mangelwurzels, primarily a fodder crop) could have easily been mistaken by an untrained eye. However, according to late

⁹³ On the history of livestock breeding, see the exhaustive work of Margaret Derry. Margaret E. Derry, *Art and Science in Breeding: Creating Better Chickens* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012); Margaret E. Derry, *Bred for Perfection: Shorthorn Cattle, Collies, and Arabian Horses since 1800* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); Margaret E. Derry, *Horses in Society: A Story of Animal Breeding and Marketing, 1800-1920* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006); Margaret E. Derry, *Masterminding Nature: The Breeding of Animals, 1750-2010* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015); Margaret E. Derry, *Ontario's Cattle Kingdom: Purebred Breeders and Their World, 1870-1920* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001).

⁹⁴ *Colchester Sun*, October 5, 1887.

nineteenth-century sensibilities they were also expected to be highly differentiated. The culturally and historically specific visual skills of farmers in the late nineteenth century are brought into focus by the extensive lists of fruits and vegetables that they showed and were expected to recognize and appreciate at exhibitions, some varieties of which have all but disappeared. The published list of awards in Stewiacke that year gives the names of first and second prize winners for turnip blood beets, long blood beets, long red mangolds, and mangold any other kind, with John Dickie of Branch taking first prize in all but the long red mangolds. By contrast, there was only a single prize category each for cabbages, cucumbers, and tomatoes. Only potatoes and apples were differentiated into more prize categories, a total of six each. The number and range of prize categories for fruits and vegetables varied widely across different regions of the province. Potatoes, described by an exhibition reporter in Bridgetown as “the most important” vegetable,⁹⁵ were occasionally divided into ten or more named varieties. Apple competitions regularly included more than a dozen named varieties, exceeding two dozen in major fruit-growing areas in the Annapolis Valley. The open, “any other kind,” categories also drew unanticipated varieties. The reporter in Bridgetown also noted “thirty-one distinct varieties” of tomatoes entered as a collection by C. Hoyt.⁹⁶

But it is also clear that all of these entities were unstable and regularly spilled the bounds of their categories. Consensus was nothing more than an ideal. The list of prize-winners reveals that the “wrongly entered” beets in Stewiacke were most likely a bit of editorializing on the part of the reporter, rather than the opinion of the exhibition

⁹⁵ *Bridgetown Monitor*, October 11, 1882.

⁹⁶ The varieties named on the pre-circulated prize list would not all have been exhibited each year, but they give a sense of what a local exhibition committee felt could reasonably be expected to make an appearance. Published lists of prize winners give a sense of what was actually exhibited in a given year.

organizers, and we can imagine the conversations that took place around the table, judges or other spectators shaking their heads slowly, others correcting them. While such conflicts were unlikely to produce impassioned newspaper columns, as was the case with livestock, it is clear that opinions varied as to the identity and visual identifiers of many fruits and vegetables and that the decisions of the judges were by no means final as far as the public was concerned.

Although sights such as unlabelled poultry and mislabelled mangels were characterized by critics as not visually intelligible, in fact their un-visibility was a result of the same discursive formation that established the visibility of other entities. The exclusion of non-thoroughbred animals and the creation of ever more specialized judging categories—itsself a kind of exclusion through boundary-making—were efforts to stabilize the boundaries of intelligibility around the objects on display. And the ability to identify and gradually exclude non-ideal plants and animals were also efforts to bolster the legitimacy and credibility of exhibitions themselves. In this way, these dangerous animals and suspicious vegetables, far from being the *problems* that reformers cast them to be, were in fact *essential* to the rural reform project that exhibitions espoused. Non-ideal exhibits were the Others necessary to establish the ideal at agricultural exhibitions. These entries allowed exhibition visitors to practice their new visual skills and their own discernment, taking pleasure in assessing and recognizing the space between good and bad.

All of these cases also reveal the divergent interests of improvement promoters and the public about what was worth looking at. It is clear that these farmers—particularly those who went to the not-insignificant trouble of bringing their livestock to

exhibition—felt that their exhibits had merit. And it is apparent that some judges also felt this way (though as we have seen, merit was not always a requirement for a prize). In the same period that judging was ostensibly being standardized, it was also becoming more specialized, so that the decisions of the judges often did not coincide with the opinions or preferences of the general viewing public.⁹⁷ As suggested above, rural people came to exhibitions with a range of visual skills, aptitudes, and priorities that shaped their experiences of these events and their assessment of the exhibits, whether or not they were interested in improving the quality of their crops and livestock.

When it came to vegetables, above all, popular opinion favoured giants. Alexander Lawson was no exception; reports in the press consistently celebrated the impressive size of vegetables: huge squashes, monster cabbages, massive cauliflowers—these were the entries that caught the public’s attention. At the 1881 Lunenburg County exhibition, as elsewhere, “what seemed to most attract and astonish the crowd was the array of giant squashes,” while in Yarmouth in 1890, visitors delighted at “the big potatoes, mammoth beets, bloated squash and monster pumpkins arrayed in magnificent profusion within the rink.”⁹⁸ However, these giants increasingly lost out as judges sought to instruct spectators on another set of visual priorities, awarding prizes to fruits and vegetables that were the least blemished, best formed, and most uniform according to the standards for their variety. In 1878, the pre-circulated prize list for the provincial exhibition began to include a caveat under the “Roots and Vegetables” heading that “judges must take into consideration the perfection of the growth of Roots, and not size

⁹⁷ Elsbeth Heaman draws a similar conclusion. *Inglorious Arts of Peace*, 126.

⁹⁸ *Yarmouth Telegram*, October 10, 1890.

alone.”⁹⁹ Judges indicated a preference for smooth skin and even growth. In Yarmouth in 1885, the judges reported that “table beets were much better than for several years, being of good shape and smooth skin” and “turnips made a good show and were smooth and clean grown.”¹⁰⁰

The most obvious reading of the public preference for enormity was simply that audiences enjoyed the novelty of these displays, just as they enjoyed the sideshows and other attractions that increased in prominence at exhibitions through the late nineteenth century. While this was certainly this case, we should also read these expressions as an alternative, popular celebration for the advances of agricultural science. This was not the way that reformers wanted people to look at or appreciate fruits and vegetables, but it was nevertheless a meaningful engagement with the products of agricultural improvement. The subtle, often minute, distinctions between a good and bad exhibit were revealed under the scrutiny of the specialized gaze of a progressive farmer—Alexander Lawson joked that one “would need a horticultural microscope to detect” the differences between two excellent exhibits of grapes.¹⁰¹ But the huge size of any fruit or vegetable was perceived by many in attendance to be an unambiguous index of the successes of agricultural improvement, visible and legible by all.

In *On Longing*, Susan Stewart suggests that the exaggerations of the gigantic have been used to represent “the overly natural,” while the miniature has represented “the overly cultural.” She continues, “The gigantic becomes an explanation for the

⁹⁹ *General Regulations and Prize List for the Agricultural and Industrial Exhibition to Be Held at Truro, September 30-October 4* (Truro, NS: Exhibition Committee, 1878), 18. NSA, V/F vol 91, #1. It is curious that this stipulation applied only to roots.

¹⁰⁰ *Yarmouth Herald*, October 21, 1885.

¹⁰¹ *Yarmouth Herald*, October 19, 1882.

environment, a figure on the interface between the natural and the human.”¹⁰² Here she is writing particularly about the frequent allusions to giants in the origin stories of landscapes, and later she draws on Bakhtin’s analysis of Rabelais and his discussion of the prominence of human giants at medieval fairs and feasts. Bakhtin writes that these human giants “were closely connected with the popular conception of material-bodily wealth and abundance.”¹⁰³ Likewise, we might apply Stewart’s insight about the gigantic as “an explanation for the environment” to the ways that nineteenth-century observers used giant vegetables to narrate their understandings of the abundance of the land itself and the fertility of the soil. Giant vegetables made the invisible visible. Reporters frequently presented large vegetables as explicit embodiments or symbols of the productivity of the land and the industriousness of its cultivators: in Digby in 1886, “monstrous” mangolds and squashes did “credit to the growers” of the county. In Kentville in 1889, “the ‘Egyptians’ [Egyptian beets] looked as if they had flourished in the land of Canaan.” In Pictou County in 1892, “the huge beets, cabbages, potatoes, turnips, etc., testif[ied] to the great fertility of our soil.”¹⁰⁴ By contrast, the absence of oversize vegetables was lamented, more realistically, as evidence of a poor growing season, rather than evidence of a lack of effort or soil productivity. At the Annapolis County exhibition in 1882, the reporter noted that “the exhibit of squash, pumpkin, melons and such vines are small and inferior. The season has been evidently against them.” At the Queens County exhibition in 1884, the “poor season” was the reason that

¹⁰² Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1984), 70, 71.

¹⁰³ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, 344. For Stewart’s reading of Bakhtin and giants, *On Longing*, 80–81.

¹⁰⁴ *New Glasgow Eastern Chronicle*, September 22, 1892.

there were “no mammoth cabbages, squash or pumpkins,” and other vegetables were also “considerably shrunken from their former proportions.”¹⁰⁵

Large vegetables were also celebrated as an aid to household efficiency. The reporter at the 1886 Lunenburg County exhibition tied the large cabbages on display to a staple food of the county’s large ethnic German population, noting that “of cabbages, for which this county is famed, there were a good many, and their proportions were such that two or three would be sufficient for the usual family supply of sauer kraut for the winter.”¹⁰⁶ These cabbages notwithstanding, the trouble with the majority of oversized vegetables was that they were often unpalatable, even inedible except by livestock, and notably impractical as marketable produce. Cindy Ott writes that the giant pumpkin “is a show crop rather than a utilitarian crop, a visual wonder more than a meaty morsel.”¹⁰⁷ Alongside the impressive beets in Kentville in 1889, the pumpkins and squashes “were large—most of which would not go in a barrel,” rhetorically denoting their failure as a viable cash crop even as their great size was celebrated for its novelty.¹⁰⁸

The judge of vegetables at the 1885 Yarmouth County exhibition addressed the problematic status of oversized vegetables in his published report, offering a compromise that acknowledged the impressiveness of these achievements. On the subject of potatoes he suggested that it was “a pity that competition in sorts raised for stock feeding purposes is no longer encouraged. ... [M]ost of those exhibited this year were so big as not to be fit for anything else. Nobody wants potatoes as big as a bear’s foot for table use, and yet

¹⁰⁵ *New Glasgow Eastern Chronicle*, September 22, 1892; *Hants Journal* newsclipping 1889; *Bridgetown Monitor*, October 11, 1882; *Liverpool Advance* October 8, 1884.

¹⁰⁶ *Lunenburg Progress*, October 13, 1886.

¹⁰⁷ Ott, “Object Analysis of the Giant Pumpkin,” 755.

¹⁰⁸ *Hants Journal* newsclipping 1889.

farmers who can and do raise such should have some sort of recognition of the fact.”¹⁰⁹

But palatable or not, more than anything, gigantic vegetables were a source of local pride.

Following the 1881 Lunenburg County exhibition in Bridgewater, the reporter for the *Lunenburg Progress* noted “Six Squashes taken from town to the exhibition, weighed together 1000 lbs. Mr. Dauphinee’s, which took first prize, weighed 214 lbs., and measured 97 inches round lengthways; 80 inches round centre; and was 45 inches in length.” Following these and other extensive statistics, the *Progress* challenged all comers: “Can the Dominion beat this?”¹¹⁰

Attraction/Distraction

Oversized vegetables created a quandary for agricultural reformers who sought to direct the gaze of exhibition visitors in a particular way. But they still remained within the realm of what were considered to be appropriate sights. However, despite what reformers might have wished to believe, the agricultural displays at exhibitions were not the only attractions that drew the gaze of visitors. In the late nineteenth century, novelties and entertainments such as circus performances, horse-races, and midways became a fixture of exhibitions, and by the 1890s a clear refrain was emanating from the rural press in Nova Scotia about the trouble with these “distractions.” Much of this criticism was aimed at the provincial exhibition, which was perceived, with good reason, to be syphoning off funds allotted to agriculture to pay for a deficit-incurring event that had increasingly little

¹⁰⁹ *Yarmouth Herald*, October 21, 1885. Some commentators suggested a similar solution—additional, separate judging categories—for non-thoroughbred animals.

¹¹⁰ *Lunenburg Progress*, October 18, 1881. The “Dominion” in this case referred to the Dominion Exhibition, which was in Halifax that year.

to do with agriculture.¹¹¹ After the 1899 provincial exhibition was revealed to have been a financial failure, the *Berwick Register* argued, “The proper remedy is to bring back the exhibitions to the country towns where people will take an interest in something besides freaks, and balloon ascensions, and military shows, and one legged men riding bicycles down stairs, and women walking on the ceiling, and other displays of that nature.”¹¹² But these concerns also extended to the changes happening at rural exhibitions. A lengthy editorial in the *New Glasgow Eastern Chronicle* in 1901 was a lament for a never-existent, simpler time, when agricultural displays “occupied the attention of the observer almost exclusively”:

There was a time when the country fair was an agricultural show, pure and simple. Once a year the farmers gathered, each bringing his best stock and his best produce. The farmers’ wives and the farmers’ daughters were there too with exhibits of their handiwork. It was a farmer’s show, and any educational influence it had was directed solely to the farmer. A few side shows of more or less merit were there to satisfy the more frivolous and the younger members of the community, but the general interest was confined to the contributions of the farmer and his family. They formed the topic of discussion and occupied the attention of the observer almost exclusively. But things are different nowadays. The country fair has degenerated into a collection of shows of anything but an agricultural nature, and they receive the attention formerly devoted to the prize hog and the prize quilt. The farmer’s contribution is no longer the great centre of interest.¹¹³

¹¹¹ Various government funding arrangements were attempted through the 1880s that provided funds for county, district, and provincial exhibitions in alternating years. In the early 1890s it was decided that the provincial exhibition would be held every year and that it would be held in Halifax every year, as opposed to an earlier model that saw it move around to make it more accessible to a greater number of people. This decision was made amid the protests of many commentators in rural Nova Scotia. When the topic flared up in 1894, the *Atlantic Weekly* summarized, “every country paper that has spoken is against the city.” In addition to being located permanently in Halifax, the provincial exhibition was also held increasingly early in the season, to the point that farmers were no longer able to send fully-developed produce or in some cases to participate at all. This only encouraged the impression held by many in the counties that the Halifax organizers and their political backers were motivated by “contempt for the people of the country.” If rural commentators lashed out at the trivial or “demoralizing” nature of the attractions this was certainly misplaced anger, but it was rooted in a well-founded feeling of injustice that their interests were being poorly served by these yearly events, which were ostensibly being held in their name and with their money. *Atlantic Weekly* (Dartmouth), October 20, 1894; *Berwick Register*, February 20, 1908; *Berwick Register*, October 17, 1907.

¹¹² *Berwick Register*, October 4, 1899.

¹¹³ *New Glasgow Eastern Chronicle*, August 15, 1901.

Coloured by nostalgia, this lament embraces a particular form of rural modernity (the “educational influence” of the fair) while hand-wringing over the spectacle of modern life that threatened to transform rural places in ways that were not farmer-led.

After about a decade in decline, small local exhibitions began to see a resurgence after the turn of the century and their organization reflected these concerns. A local correspondent in the *Truro Daily News* summarized the 1908 exhibition in Middle Musquodoboit, concluding, “Our Exhibition was quite a success, and the show was excellent. There was no vaudeville performance to take people’s attention from the main object, and the people were far better satisfied than if there had been a lot of such nonsensical performances. A little music would not have been amiss, but it was not thought of in time.”¹¹⁴

In all of these examples, as elsewhere, concerns about the shifting priorities of exhibitions were frequently articulated through an anxiety about vision: about the distracted gaze and attention of the audience. People continued to come to exhibitions, but critics charged that they were no longer looking at the right things, in the right ways. Reflecting on transformations that had taken place in the late nineteenth century, Walter Benjamin famously characterized the experience of modern mass culture as “reception in a state of distraction,” which he concluded “was symptomatic of profound changes in apperception,” the way that the mind makes sense of and assimilates experiences.¹¹⁵ One

¹¹⁴ *Truro Daily News*, September 30, 1908. It perhaps goes without saying that the efforts of rural agriculturalists to turn the tide of distractions and to return exhibitions to an imaginary golden age would prove futile, though there was certainly a resurgence of interest in smaller local events after the turn of the century, and numerous scholars have documented the continuing relevance of agricultural exhibitions into and beyond the first quarter of the twentieth century.

¹¹⁵ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. John Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 240.

site where this new form of consciousness was made explicit, according to Benjamin, was world exhibitions, which, he wrote, “provide access to a phantasmagoria which a person enters in order to be distracted.”¹¹⁶ It would be a significant exaggeration to imply that small rural exhibitions were really “phantasmogoric” (a state of ever-shifting, dreamlike illusion), but they were certainly expressions of the commodity fetishism and spectacularization of capitalism that concerned Benjamin. Likewise, they were sites of modern distraction. Exhibition reports make this clear, including Alexander Lawson’s intersensorial roving, with his eye skipping from advertisements to giant squashes, smelling butter and overhearing conversations, all while making critical and emotional assessments of his surroundings.

In his work on the pathologization of attention, Jonathan Crary complicates and refines the work of Benjamin and others, who described the fragmentation of perception and attention in modernity as decayed versions of more holistic premodern forms.¹¹⁷ Crary argues that “modern distraction was *not* a disruption of stable or ‘natural’ kinds of sustained, value-laden perception that had existed for centuries but was an *effect*, and in many cases a constitutive element, of the many attempts to produce attentiveness in human subjects. If distraction emerges as a problem in the late nineteenth century, it is inseparable from the parallel construction of an attentive observer in various domains.”¹¹⁸ In this essentially Foucauldian analysis, Crary argues that the transformations of

¹¹⁶ Walter Benjamin, “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century (Exposé of 1939),” in *The Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 18.

¹¹⁷ Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999); Benjamin, “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century”; Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.”

¹¹⁸ Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*, 48–49. Emphasis in the original.

capitalism produced the problem of distraction through the same discursive formation that established the notion of normative attention as a target of its gaze.

By the 1890s, in both urban and rural places, distraction was understood to be a self-evidently negative quality and was under attack by reformers who sought to train standardized attentiveness and to direct gazes and other sensory perceptions. Complaints in rural Nova Scotia about the increasing attractions/distractions of exhibitions offer a rural example of these broader concerns about attention in relation to the dislocations of modern life. To characterize or discredit this criticism as simply an anti-modern rural reaction against the spectacle of modernity ignores this broader cultural context and also overlooks the explicit embrace of modernity and the promotion of modernization that was central to all agricultural exhibitions throughout the province. It also ignores the ongoing enthusiasm for sideshow attractions among rural exhibition-goers that these more conservative commentators were reacting against. The week after the *Eastern Chronicle* published its lament for simpler times, it ran a half column promotional piece on its front page titled “Colossal Attractions for Halifax Exhibition.”¹¹⁹

Like the oversized vegetables, some of the troubling distractions at rural exhibitions were in fact the products of local farms. Chief among these were mutant animals, such as one or more two-headed calves that made the rounds at exhibitions in the period. Here is one on display at the Colchester County exhibition in Middle Stewiacke in 1887:

In the front and to the left of the building was a bell tent with a fluttering flag announcing that ‘great wonder, the six-legged, two-headed, double-tailed calf!’ Ten cents admission showed you the strangest *lusus naturae* that you possibly

¹¹⁹ *New Glasgow Eastern Chronicle*, August 22, 1901.

could wish to see. There was a veritable calf, exceedingly well stuffed and mounted by Mr. W. G. Winton, Lower Stewiacke, decorated with pink ribbons, with two perfect heads, four fore legs apparently, only two hind legs, two spinal columns and two perfect caudal appendages with which, in life, to switch away unruly flies. This abortion of an animal life was dropped on the farm of Mr. Moore, Shubenacadie, and is one of the best paying productions of that farm for many years.¹²⁰

On first glance, this calf was simply another foil against which the idealized sights of the exhibition could be positioned. This freak, gaudily decorated and trussed up, was surely the opposite of the carefully bred animals and morally uplifting agricultural sights that reformers sought to place before the eyes of rural Nova Scotia. This calf actively challenged the reform imperatives of the exhibition system in a number of ways. It certainly challenged the idealized aesthetics of the exhibition project, in league with the non-thoroughbred animals and suspicious squash-pumpkins. But it went beyond this. The calf challenged the assertion that animals that met those ideal criteria were necessary for prosperity. More importantly, the calf was also symbolic of the failure of the educational mandate of exhibitions to maintain its hold on the popular imagination. Instead of the disciplined, skilled, rational vision that the judges sought to inculcate, the calf encouraged passionate, emotional, unruly gawking—and monetized this experience.

However, with its text shouting at visitors from a fluttering flag, its “exceedingly well stuffed” body, its “two perfect heads,” and “two perfect” tails, the calf also came dangerously close to overlapping with the legitimate displays of the exhibition.

¹²⁰ *Colchester Sun*, October 5, 1887. The same calf was on display in New Glasgow earlier that year. See *New Glasgow Eastern Chronicle*, April 18, 1887. Could the otherwise undescribed “Wonderful Freak of Nature” on display at the 1886 exhibition in Mahone Bay have also been this calf? See *Lunenburg Progress*, October 20, 1886. The “wonderful calf” that appeared at the Pictou County exhibition in 1905 was surely not the same one that had been on display since the 1880s. See *New Glasgow Eastern Chronicle*, October 6, 1905. The Creamery Square Museum and North Shore Archives in Tatamagouche, NS, has two two-headed calves on permanent display, but neither of them fits the description of this calf from 1887.

Moreover, the gawking that the calf encouraged was in fact a very modern form of looking. In his study of P. T. Barnum, James Cook argues that the persistent popularity of Barnum's frauds was due to the opportunity they offered audiences to publicly display their own power of discernment and critical perception. Audiences flocked to see Barnum's famous "humbugs" not because they necessarily believed that he really had a mermaid or a chess-playing automaton, but often because they did *not* believe him. This was not passive gazing at a spectacle, but an act of engaged cultural criticism and visual discernment.¹²¹ And just as they did for Barnum's shows, audiences at rural exhibitions arrived to "see and judge for themselves,"¹²² whether the object of their gaze was a giant cabbage, a thoroughbred stallion, or a two-headed taxidermized calf. Indeed, this type of critical observation was very much the same type of active looking that was encouraged by exhibition organizers. The differences came down to the moral codes inscribed upon different sights.

Exhibitions were sites where rural men, women, and children engaged with and negotiated new practices of display and visibility that were also being celebrated in cities at larger exhibitions, as well as at new department stores and other sites of consumption. Rural communities in the late nineteenth century were not isolated from these cultural forms. People in both urban and rural places visually navigated exhibitions, evaluating products of consumer culture, assessing qualities of authenticity, interpreting advertising, reading signs, visually distinguishing between different kinds of people, seeking out and

¹²¹ James W. Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001). On this aspect of Barnum's appeal, see also Andie Tucher, *Froth & Scum: Truth, Beauty, Goodness, and the Ax Murder in America's First Mass Medium* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 55–61; Louis S. Warren, *Buffalo Bill's America: William Cody and the Wild West Show* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2006), 68–69.

¹²² *New Glasgow Eastern Chronicle*, September 29, 1892.

actively appreciating aesthetic experiences, and performing specialized, context-specific forms of observation. These skills are evident in all the reports written about exhibitions in Nova Scotia.

Not everyone had these skills in equal measure and certainly rural exhibitions were not always incredible experiences, but observers in rural Nova Scotia, just like those in cities, were self-aware of being underwhelmed when exhibitions were not extensive or impressive. According to the *Colchester Sun*, the 1889 Cumberland County exhibition “was neither a financial success, nor was it a success in any department as an Agricultural Show”; “the interior of the building really had no exhibits of any account.” The *Bridgetown Monitor* began its report of the 1882 district exhibition by “confess[ing] to a feeling of disappointment and regret” at the “comparative failure” of the event, noting that “in no class were the entries as numerous as they should have been.” With an ironic nod to the notion that seeing was of educational benefit, the reporter at the 1882 Antigonish County exhibition remarked that many of the horses were “evidently sent to let the public see what horses ought not to be.”¹²³

By the late nineteenth century, many rural observers knew exactly what they were looking at and how it related to other events. Some had visited large exhibitions in Boston, Toronto, Montreal, or even the World’s Fair in Chicago, and many more had read reports of them in their newspapers. One could be thoroughly impressed by the modest show of a local exhibition while still recognizing it as a modest local show. It was not simply the size of an exhibition that characterized a modern experience, but the kinds of critical perception and analysis that a viewer brought to bear upon it. Contrary to the

¹²³ *Colchester Sun*, October 2, 1889; *Bridgetown Monitor*, October 18, 1882; *New Glasgow Eastern Chronicle* October 19, 1882.

prevalent urban bias of much of the literature in visual culture studies and sensory history, which implies a particularly urban modern erudition, I want to suggest that similar types of critical visual analysis were being performed in rural and urban places at the same time. And more importantly, the historical meaning of this looking was similar, which is to say that it positioned the viewer as a modern subject, even if the objects gazed upon were modern in different ways.

Although late nineteenth-century cattle and apples have not been characterized as modern in urban-centred discourses that emphasize the continuities of rural culture rather than its transformations, they were in fact profoundly modern artifacts—undoubtedly the products of scientific intervention and capitalist logic. The training of specialized agricultural visions at exhibitions was likewise a fundamentally modern project. These skills were explicitly intended to encourage a break with traditional farming practices, and the embrace of progressive, scientific reform and capitalist marketing. This was rural modernity, but it was modernity nonetheless. This study of rural exhibitions reveals a broader conversation about vision and a crisis of attention in late nineteenth-century Canada; these were not only rural issues, but are articulated here in a rural form.

Chapter 3

Buying Eyes: Opticians, Eyeglasses, and the Popular Culture of Vision

Illustrating his advertisement with a cut of a large human eye to emphasize his point, optician R. B. Dakin implored readers of the *Hants Journal* in 1900 to attend to their eyesight (fig. 3.1). “Of All The Senses,” he began, “that of sight is the most precious and most valued. Of all afflictions blindness is the most grievous. Of all the organs of sense none are more abused or neglected than the eye, yet none are so sensitive or require such care.” Headaches and squinting while reading were “unmistakable evidence of imperfect vision,” yet, claimed Dakin, too many people ignored these and other symptoms at the peril of their future eyesight. Dakin was among a new generation of professionalizing opticians at the turn of the century who hoped to convince the people of rural and small-town Nova Scotia to trust them to care for their eyes.

Increases in literacy, new forms of illumination, and the growth of white-collar work, such as printing and bookkeeping, in the early nineteenth century brought differences in visual acuity more readily to attention than had previously been the case,

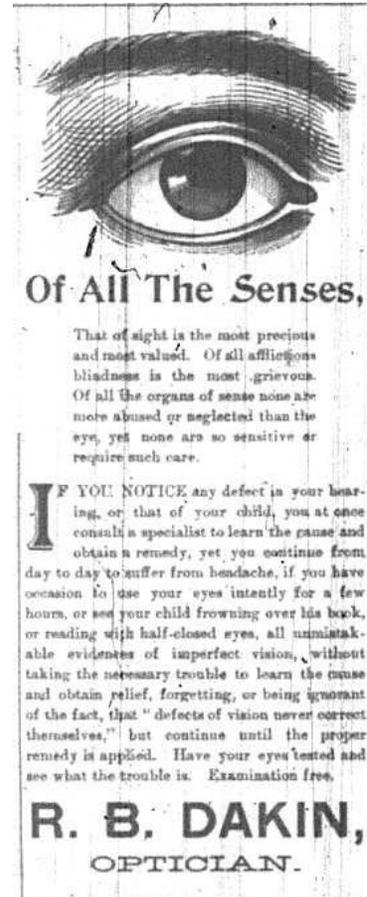


Fig. 3.1 Advertisement, R.B. Dakin, *Hants Journal*, December 5, 1900

sparkling what Peter John Brownlee has called a “market revolution in vision.”¹ These demands only intensified in the second half of the century, in both rural and urban places, particularly with the extension of compulsory state education and the further entrenchment of the values of productivity demanded by capitalist markets. Set in this context, this chapter is interested in what I will call the popular culture of vision. It explores the commodification of eyesight in late nineteenth-century rural Nova Scotia through an analysis of the advertising of eyeglasses and opticians. The period between 1880 and the first years of the twentieth century witnessed the professionalization of both optometry and advertising, as well as a boom in the number of local newspapers across Nova Scotia, and in eastern Canada more generally. As such, it is a significant moment in which to consider the shifting ways that vision and notions about the value and preservation of eyesight were being represented to the newspaper reading public of Nova Scotia.

This study is based on a sample of 275 advertisements published in forty-four regional newspapers with significant rural readership across the province’s eighteen counties between 1880 and 1910.² Just as the mass shared ritual of newspaper reading contributed to the creation of an imagined national community, so the placement of advertisements in those same newspapers, writes Roland Marchand, “contributed to the shaping of a ‘community of discourse,’ an integrative common language shared by an

¹ Peter John Brownlee, “Ophthalmology, Popular Physiology, and the Market Revolution in Vision, 1800–1850,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 28, no. 4 (2008): 597–626. See also Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990). On the emphasis placed on reading, see William J. Gilmore, *Reading Becomes a Necessity of Life: Material and Cultural Life in Rural New England, 1780-1835* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992).

² In addition to this main sample of 275 advertisements, eight additional ads were drawn from newspapers prior to 1880, and thirteen ads were drawn from exhibition prize lists, for a total of 296.

otherwise diverse audience.”³ The advertisements discussed in this chapter were not simply selling eyeglasses and optical services, nor are they merely quaint ephemera. They contributed to the circulation and entrenchment of a common vocabulary and a visual repertoire of imagery for thinking about vision in the late nineteenth century. These advertisements were part of a popular discourse of vision, alongside advice columns and other articles about eye care that appeared in the same newspapers, drawn from and tapping into broader conversations across the English-speaking world. This popular discourse contrasted with the medicalization of eyesight that was concurrently taking place with the formalization of ophthalmology as a clinical specialization. Like other paramedical trades, opticians found themselves in conflict with the medical profession as each attempted to secure a sphere of influence over the care of the eye. This chapter begins by introducing these two contexts as the backdrop upon which spectacles were sold and opticians examined eyes in late nineteenth-century Nova Scotia.

Bringing together advertisements from across the province, it becomes possible to identify trends in the commodification of vision. The field of optometry was transformed in the period of this study and with it the way that vision aids were advertised. Eyeglasses shifted from being sold primarily as mass-market goods by general merchants, jewellers, and druggists, to being sold primarily by trained opticians, who performed scientific eye exams and positioned themselves as expert practitioners in a competitive and increasingly lucrative field. Earlier ads publicized the sale of goods: they sold spectacles. Later ads marketed a service: they sold expertise. This transition in the advertising of eyeglasses

³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Rev. ed. (London: Verso, 2006); Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), xx.

has not previously received scholarly attention, nor, indeed, has the history of optometry more generally.⁴ However, the advertisements and other representations of vision that appeared in small Nova Scotian newspapers in this period were consistent with the messaging that appeared at the same time in urban and rural places across North America. This study is situated in a rural context, but its conclusions are applicable more broadly. As they modernized their marketing repertoire, branded eyeglass manufacturers partnered with local merchants to provide optical services to rural communities. Later, as opticians professionalized, they tapped into a broader discourse about expertise and the ailments and stresses of modern life, exemplified by the emergence of eyestrain as a keyword of modern vision care and the gendering of advertising copy. In their interactions with these advertisements and the products and services on sale, rural Nova Scotian newspaper readers were participants in an international conversation about the modernization of eye care and the growing perils of imperfect vision in a modern world.

“The art of being short-sighted”

Public opinion across North America and Europe in the late nineteenth century was divided over the increasingly prevalent use of eyeglasses. For many, they were frivolous, symbols of cultural decadence and physical degeneration, and appropriate only for occasional use by the elderly. Wearing them regularly was akin to putting on airs—

⁴ The few scholars who have written about the history of optometry have tended to blur the important distinction—indeed, the antagonism—between ophthalmology and optometry in the history of vision science. See Brownlee, “Ophthalmology, Popular Physiology”; Chris Otter, *The Victorian Eye: A Political History of Light and Vision in Britain, 1800-1910* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 28–46. One exception is Rosemary Stevens, *American Medicine and the Public Interest: A History of Specialization*, Updated ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 98–114. There is an active field of popular history on optometry, much of it written by optometrists, including the articles in *Hindsight: Journal of Optometry History*. Even within this popular literature, transitions in the marketing of eyeglasses have not received attention.

eyeglasses gave the appearance of seriousness, respectability, piety—while also distorting the face into an unpleasant grimace. Yet eyeglasses were also increasingly understood by many to be necessary corrective devices that would make many activities, most notably reading, accessible to those previously excluded.

Several short items reprinted in Nova Scotian newspapers from international urban publications illustrate the character of this debate across the English-speaking world. In September of 1880, the *Halifax Morning Herald* reprinted a satirical piece from the *Saturday Review* (London, UK) titled “A Study of Spectacles: Disquisition of Interest to all Spectacle Bearing Animals.” Its subject was “habitual, chronic and incurable spectacle wearers,” especially those for whom spectacles were their most prominent feature—“cases in which the glasses are more conspicuous than their wearers.” The author gently mocked the facial expressions of those who “throw their heads back to look at one” and others who “drop their heads, or slowly raise them on one side like ducks in a storm.” While, according to the author, spectacles tended to make a man mildly ridiculous, they did add something to the appearance of a parson, whose “parsonification is intensely parsonified by the addition of spectacles,” and to a schoolmaster, who knew that “there is a way of eyeing small boys through spectacles which is very awe inspiring.” All of this comical description was intended to poke fun at the absurdity of modern spectacle wearing, which the author felt—and he was not alone—was entirely out of hand. He continued: “Like other things spectacles have moved with the times”; spectacles in the past were heavy, cumbersome devices and “in former days little trouble was taken to make glasses becoming, because they were seldom used except for old and dim eyes, for the art of being short-sighted was not discovered until some time after the invention

of spectacles.” He added, as a final illustration of his point, “Among the rural poor, even now, glasses are seldom worn except by the old and dim-sighted.”⁵

One of the criticisms of wearing eyeglasses was that they in fact further damaged the eyes, which may well have been true of many of the cheap pairs for sale at the time. Nevertheless, a growing refrain sought to convince the public that well-fitted glasses were not only beneficial but in fact necessary in many cases. This was one of the main lessons of Robert Brudenell Carter’s *Eyesight, Good & Bad* (1880), excerpted in the *Boston Transcript* and then reprinted in the *New Glasgow Eastern Chronicle* in October 1881. Beyond advocating for the use of glasses, Carter also argued the eyes, like other parts of the body, required exercise. According to the excerpted passage, the eyes were “best treated by an amount of systematic use which preserves the tone of their blood supply. The acuteness of sight, moreover, is in great degree dependent upon the mental attention habitually paid to visual impressions I have no doubt that idleness of the eyes, if I may use such an expression, is in every way hurtful to them, and that proper and varied employment is eminently conducive to their preservation in beauty and efficiency.” Like the author in the *Saturday Review*, Carter, too, chose to illustrate his argument with reference to rural practices: “I have often observed [visual] acuteness to be below the natural average in agricultural laborers who, if able in some sense to read, were not in the habit of reading, and who were not accustomed to look carefully at any small objects. I have even had reason to think that the wives of such men were indebted to their

⁵ *Halifax Morning Herald*, September 27, 1880.

household needlework for the maintenance of a higher standard of vision than that of their husbands.”⁶

Two decades later, the debate persisted. An article from the *Independent* (New York) reprinted in the *Yarmouth Herald* in January 1898 sought to convince readers of the legitimacy of corrective eyeglasses. The writer noted it was common to hear people complaining, “Is it not dreadful to see such numbers of young children going about the streets with glasses on? Are everybody’s eyes degenerating?” His reply, “Not at all. The child who, fifty years ago, would have been unable to learn to read from sheer inability to see the letters, is now able to keep up with his fellows.”⁷ But many remained unconvinced. An unattributed piece reprinted in the *Berwick Register* in October 1899 scoffed at the notion that so many schoolchildren should need glasses and implied it was all a racket cooked up by oculists and opticians to make money. The article discusses a school district in Maine, which had determined that “disinclination to study comes from defects in the eyes,” and had hired an oculist to examine all the children. The author rejected this proposition and countered that “disinclination to study” should be resolved by better lighting in classrooms, more interesting lessons, and avoiding overwork.⁸ These were sound recommendations, in line with the principles of the New Education, but would have been best applied as a complement to addressing real visual impairments. The author’s final recommendations were entirely specious, but clearly represented the popular view of many people well into the twentieth century about the “art of being short-sighted”:

⁶ *New Glasgow Eastern Chronicle*, October 6, 1881; Robert Brudenell Carter, *Eyesight, Good & Bad; a Treatise on the Exercise and Preservation of Vision* (London: Macmillan, 1880), 229.

⁷ *Yarmouth Herald*, January 18, 1898.

⁸ *Berwick Register*, October 4, 1899.

the child who is saddled with spectacles, in nine cases out of ten, becomes their slave for life. If study becomes irksome to the eyes of a child the better way would be to divorce him from his books, send him into the country, let him go fishing, botanizing; let him loaf under the trees, breathe the pure air and live in God's pure sunlight after awhile he will return with no more use for spectacles than for a speaking trumpet.⁹

The slippage here from relatively gender-neutral comments about classroom conditions to pointed remarks about explicitly masculine-gendered children is consistent with broader anxieties about the debility of the modern man, who had allegedly been made overly delicate by the conditions of late nineteenth-century life, implications that also had significant racial overtones.¹⁰ In this context, and given the comments above, both mocking and deriding the wearing of glasses, it is unsurprising that one optical college informed potential students that an optician's "patrons are mostly ladies."¹¹ This gendering of eye care was also apparent in advertising.

In all of this newspaper coverage, the eyes under discussion were implied to be those of a white middle-class man or boy, but also specifically an *urban* man or boy—a person for whom "botanizing" might be a leisurely activity or an effort to regain lost manhood, rather than a mandatory object lesson in scientific methods. For the nostalgic *Saturday Review*, the apparent lack of spectacle-wearing by rural people was a sign of their unpretentious, wholesome character, unfettered by silly modern contrivances. For the writer reprinted in the *Berwick Register*, the essentially therapeutic character of rural environments seemed to further explain the apparent lack of eyeglasses in the

⁹ *Berwick Register*, October 4, 1899.

¹⁰ See Gail Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); John F. Kasson, *Houdini, Tarzan, and the Perfect Man: The White Male Body and the Challenge of Modernity in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001).

¹¹ Catalogue of the Klein School of Optics, c.1904, New England School of Optometry Archives, Digitized Collections, <https://archive.org/details/catalogueofklein1900klei>.

countryside. For Carter, however, the purported absence of glasses in rural places was not due to a high quality of vision, but to an antiquated way of life, which, for men at least, allegedly did not demand the close, focused work and attention of urban environments and occupations. The implication of “idleness of the eyes” was not simply a description but a moral judgement. For Carter, the apparently poor eyesight of rural men represented the worst case scenario in his prescriptions for healthy modern vision and the kinds of meaningful lives that would accompany it.

For all of these authors, the trope of rural difference—rural belatedness or anti-modernity, whether positioned as a positive or negative quality—served their narrative ends, allowing them to position vision and visual acuity as a topic of *modern* concern by discursively placing rural people beyond its purview.¹² The ways that an imagined rurality are rhetorically deployed in these discussions suggest that rural people were not themselves engaged in these international conversations about the modernization of visual standards. Yet, as the previous two chapters have shown, rural people—men, women, and children—were also being encouraged to look closely at the world around them and to develop skills of modern discernment that required normative visual acuity, even if the sights they saw were very different from those in a city. Moreover, all of these extracts were printed in newspapers with significant rural readership and these same newspapers and their counterparts across Nova Scotia regularly ran ads for spectacles and later for opticians, who hoped to sell perfect modern vision to rural customers.

¹² On the pervasiveness of this construction, see Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

Eye Experts

Throughout the late nineteenth century, the eye was a site of engagement for a growing number of experts and practitioners, all of whom claimed specialized knowledge and competing authority over its function, care, and remunerative potential. Historians have written extensively about the process of medical specialization alongside the rise of clinical research in the nineteenth century, noting that ophthalmology was one of the first widely acknowledged specializations.¹³ Early ophthalmologists sought to establish themselves as eye experts by claiming authority over a field that had previously been dominated by so-called quacks. For centuries, eye surgery had been the domain of itinerant oculists with various levels of skill and proficiency. Some had a measure of success treating conditions such as cataracts and inflammation, while many more were medicine-show charlatans who preyed on a helpless public facing incurable and debilitating eye diseases.¹⁴ Such was the association of eye surgery with these disreputable practitioners that respectable doctors and surgeons were discouraged from specializing in eye care.¹⁵ Even as medical research advanced, public opinion about eye care continued to be coloured by suspicion and skepticism into the twentieth century.

Specialized clinical interest in the eye developed through the early nineteenth century with the growth of eye hospitals and dedicated scientific research. The introduction of the ophthalmoscope by the German physicist Hermann von Helmholtz in

¹³ See George Rosen, *The Specialization of Medicine with Particular Reference to Ophthalmology* (New York: Arno Press, 1972); Stevens, *American Medicine*; George Weisz, *Divide and Conquer: A Comparative History of Medical Specialization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

¹⁴ Brownlee, "Ophthalmology, Popular Physiology"; Helen Corlett, "'No Small Uncertainty': Eye Treatments in Eighteenth-Century England and France," *Medical History* 42, no. 2 (1998): 217–234; Luke Davidson, "'Identities Ascertained': British Ophthalmology in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century," *Social History of Medicine* 9, no. 3 (1996): 313–33; Roy Porter, *Health for Sale: Quackery in England, 1660-1850* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 65–82; Rosen, *Specialization of Medicine*, 50–59.

¹⁵ Rosen, *Specialization of Medicine*, 58; Stevens, *American Medicine*, 101.

1851 gave ophthalmologists “an instrumental focus for their specialty” and the 1860s saw the consolidation of ophthalmology as a professional identity with the founding of its first professional society and journal in English.¹⁶ An abundant scientific literature emerged and the growing understanding of ocular physiology led to diagnostics and treatments for many diseases of the eye. However, the absence of formalized credentials until the 1910s meant that the claims to expertise of individual specialists, while compelling, were hardly authoritative. Likely to the initial chagrin of professionalizing ophthalmologists, the title *oculist* was applied to all eye doctors in popular discourse (the title *ophthalmologist* was reserved for medical literature). This rhetorical construction signals, among other things, that on the ground, the distinctions between specially-trained practitioners, traditional healers, general physicians who treated the eye, and “quacks” was never altogether clear. In ocular medicine, as in most fields, the late nineteenth century was characterized by tension and conflict between diverse approaches and practices that would only gradually lead to the dominance of formal Western medicine in the twentieth century to the exclusion of other ways of knowing and engaging with the body. The formalization of ophthalmology did not mean that itinerant oculists simply disappeared. Nor, indeed, were the relationships between mobility, expertise, and respectability clear ones, particularly in rural areas where a wide range of peripatetic professionals provided any number of invaluable services well into the twentieth century.

¹⁶ Stevens, *American Medicine*, 100. The ophthalmoscope is a device that illuminates and magnifies a view of the interior of the eye. Its early use enabled the establishment of medical norms and standards, which in turn facilitated its use as a diagnostic tool for the health of the eye. On the professionalization of ophthalmology, see also Brownlee, “Ophthalmology, Popular Physiology”; Davidson, ““Identities Ascertained””; Rosen, *Specialization of Medicine*, 23–24, 36–37. The story of the ophthalmoscope is not one of technological determinism; the device was created because of scientific interest in the eye, not vice versa. Simon Ings describes precursors to Helmholtz’s ophthalmoscope, its limitations, and notes that its popular use was not immediate. Simon Ings, *The Eye: A Natural History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), 185–92.

The process of medical specialization coincided with broader efforts to professionalize the field of medicine as a whole. The establishment of standardized curricula, credential-granting bodies, and professional associations after mid-century were key to internal disciplinary definition. Historians have written extensively about the efforts of the medical profession to establish authority over the field of medicine and to claim the right to define and control medical expertise.¹⁷ The derision and expulsion of irregular practitioners was key to this process, but so was a great deal of antagonism toward allied trades such as pharmacy, nursing, and optometry, which were themselves in the process of professionalizing. In his study of the professionalization of Ontario pharmacists, Dan Malleck notes, “doctors sought to enforce a power structure that placed them at the top with all the other health care occupations beneath them, dependent on the activities of the physicians to maintain their livelihoods.”¹⁸ Pharmacists fought back against these efforts by asserting their specialized skills and knowledge, in contrast to that of the general medical practitioner. Opticians would engage in a similar battle.

Separately from oculists, opticians also developed as an occupational group with significant knowledge of the eye in the nineteenth century, but their interest was the correction of errors of refraction and accommodation¹⁹ and the manufacture of lenses,

¹⁷ The classic work is Paul Starr, *The Social Transformation of American Medicine* (New York: Basic Books, 1982). On the professionalization of medicine in Nova Scotia, see Colin D. Howell, “Reform and the Monopolistic Impulse: The Professionalization of Medicine in the Maritimes,” *Acadiensis* 11, no. 1 (1981): 3–22; Colin D. Howell, “Medical Professionalization and Social Transformation of the Maritimes, 1850–1950,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 27, no. 1 (1986): 5–21; Sasha Mullally, “Unpacking the Black Bag: Rural Medicine in the Maritime Provinces and the Northern New England States, 1900–1950” (PhD diss, University of Toronto, 2005); Peter Twohig, *Labour in the Laboratory: Medical Laboratory Workers in the Maritimes, 1900–1950* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2005).

¹⁸ Daniel J. Malleck, “Professionalism and the Boundaries of Control: Pharmacists, Physicians and Dangerous Substances in Canada, 1840–1908,” *Medical History* 48, no. 2 (2004): 175. See also Howell, “Reform and the Monopolistic Impulse.”

¹⁹ Errors of refraction refer to the inability of the eye to bring light into clear focus on the retina, causing what are popularly known as short- and near-sightedness. Such errors are related to the shape of the eye and occur at all ages. Errors of accommodation refer to the inability of the eye to adjust its focus to objects of

rather than the treatment of disease or medical intervention. Quite like the itinerant oculists in both practice and reputation, opticians were grinding lenses and dispensing eyeglasses of varying quality long before medicine took a formal interest in the topic. As it did for ophthalmology, the introduction of the ophthalmoscope in 1851 gave opticians a scientific foundation for their practice. Dutch ophthalmologist Herman Snellen's creation of standard charts for assessing visual acuity in 1862 and the 1864 publication in English of Dutch physiologist Frans Cornelis Donders's *The Anomalies of Refraction and Accommodation*, on the diagnosis and correction of errors, provided the organizing principles for a normalized practice. However, also like the oculists, a range of practitioners continued to sell glasses throughout the late nineteenth century, most of whom made no claim to ocular expertise. Many people who did call themselves opticians had significant specialized knowledge, but as a professional title, *optician* did not begin to imply credentials, formalized training, or standards until the 1890s. Into the early twentieth century it was a moniker that might be self-applied by anyone with the inclination to perform eye tests and supply vision aids to the public. For most, *optician* was an addendum to an already-established occupational title: jeweller and optician, watchmaker and optician, druggist and optician.

The process of professionalizing optometry included the founding of optical colleges, which emerged in the eastern United States and central Canada in the 1890s, attracting a number of young men, and at least one young woman, from Nova Scotia. These schools granted diplomas following short courses (usually a few weeks) on the science of optics. Jeweller J. F. Herbin, of Wolfville, Kings County, attended the Optical

varying distance. These errors may occur at all ages, but ocular accommodation also diminishes naturally with age leading to the inability to see very near objects, such as when reading.

Institute of Canada, the first of its kind in Canada. Opened in Toronto in 1892, the institute offered “instruction in the fitting of glasses for the correction of defective sight due to Errors of Refraction, Accommodation and Convergence, enabling those taking a course to become Practical and Skilful Opticians.”²⁰ Howard M. Harris of Margaretsville, Annapolis County, attended the Klein School of Optics in Boston in 1902. Established in 1894, the Klein School (now the New England School of Optometry) offered a ten-week course in Anatomy, Physics, Physiology, Ophthalmology, and Mechanical Optics and granted diplomas, encouraging graduates to call themselves “Graduate Opticians.”²¹

In the late nineteenth century, there were two general occupational categories of opticians. The first were dispensing opticians, who ground lenses and filled prescriptions for others, chiefly doctors. The second were often known as refracting opticians or practical opticians (but most often simply as opticians); since the early twentieth century they have been known as optometrists. “Graduate” opticians were part of this latter group, as was anyone else who tested the eyes for errors of refraction and accommodation and then prescribed lenses, which they prepared and supplied to their clients directly. It had long been acknowledged among respectable opticians that should any anomaly or disease of the eye be discovered in their examination, the patient should be referred to a doctor—among the lessons at the Klein School was “Relation of Optician to Physician.”²² Despite this informal agreement, refracting opticians increasingly came under fire from the medical profession, which began to assert that any form of eye test

²⁰ Advertisement for the Canadian Optical Institute, *Canadian Druggist*, August 1892, 15. J. F. Herbin included his credentials as Honor Graduate, Canadian Optical Institute in an advertisement, *Acadian Orchardist* (Wolfville), April 5, 1898.

²¹ Catalogue of the Klein School of Optics. Howard M. Harris is listed among the past graduates of the school.

²² Catalogue of the Klein School of Optics.

fell within the province of medicine and that the prescription of lenses by anyone but a medical doctor constituted fraud.

Such boundary disputes were often presented by both sides as having the best interests of the public at heart—aiming to determine who was best equipped to control certain aspects of care for the public good. Doctors’ associations asserted that their medical training gave them a unique moral responsibility and that they should therefore be the final authority on all aspects of care. Specialized practitioners, such as pharmacists and opticians, argued on behalf of their knowledge and respectability as tradespeople within a dedicated arena of practice. More forthrightly, these were economic disputes centred on the remunerative potential of these fields. Doctors sought to marginalize and subjugate the work of practitioners with whom they competed for fees, and tradespeople resented the encroachment of medicine into the affairs of their longstanding occupations.²³

Popular commentators discussing eyeglasses in the 1890s routinely recommended that patients visit an oculist (that is, a medical professional rather than an optician). Reprinted in the *Yarmouth Herald* in 1894, a column from the *San Francisco Call* on recent advances in ocular research advised that a wide range of “defects can be detected by the modern oculist, and treated by the knife or counteracted by suitable glasses. But it is plain that this is work for which the skill of the oculist is required and which cannot be entrusted to an optician, however well trained he may be.” The writer noted, with some interest, “there are in European and Eastern cities opticians who do nothing but fill ...

²³ Rosemary Stevens notes that newer paramedical occupations, such as radiology and pathology, did not endure similar conflicts, “presumably because they developed firmly under the physician’s thumb.” Pharmacy, nursing, optometry, and occupations such as physical therapy and anesthesiology, however, “provided active competition in lucrative fields of practice.” Stevens, *American Medicine*, 99.

prescriptions” written by oculists.²⁴ The irony of this situation, as Stevens points out, is that medical students were not routinely taught refraction, and specialists in clinical ophthalmology focused their attention on the pathology of eye disease, not on the correction of visual acuity.²⁵ An optician with a diploma from an optical college was, by and large, better prepared than a general physician to diagnose and treat errors of visual acuity, and trained oculists were few and far between.

Opticians filled a publicly supported niche in an unregulated and increasingly lucrative industry. Their role was all the more significant outside of urban centres. While professional associations and elite practitioners bickered, it is clear that “rank and file” doctors and opticians were far less antagonistic.²⁶ For example, optician Howard M. Harris of Margaretsville advised on “difficult eye cases” at the medical office of Dr. Croaker in Berwick, and advertisements for optician R. H. Trapnell in Windsor carried a testimonial and recommendation from Dr. C. I. Margeson of Hantsport.²⁷ Major trade periodicals such as the *Canadian Druggist* and the *Jewelers’ Circular and Horological Review* included Optical Departments and regular content on optical science and news about opticians and optical colleges, suggesting that nonmedical training in optics and the fitting of glasses was a profitable undertaking for pharmacists, jewellers, and other practitioners, in both rural and urban places. This wealth of content also underlines the public support for this aspect of their work.²⁸

²⁴ *Yarmouth Herald*, November 20, 1894.

²⁵ Stevens, *American Medicine*, 102–3.

²⁶ Colin Howell notes “the impulse towards professional reorganization was strongest among the elite members of the profession ... and weakest among the rank and file. ... [T]he professionalization movement was intended not merely to advance the quality of medical treatment, but to solidify the dominance of the elite within the profession as well.” Howell, “Reform and the Monopolistic Impulse,” 5.

²⁷ *Berwick Register*, November 5, 1908; *Hants Journal* (Windsor) October 18, 1897.

²⁸ From its founding in 1889, the monthly *Canadian Druggist* (Toronto) consistently included content about optometry and its editorial position was strongly in favour of druggists as opticians, encouraging

The conflict between doctors and opticians came to a head in the late 1890s, first in New York, and then throughout North America, when the opticians of the New York Optical Society presented a bill to the state legislature in 1896 to regulate their industry, exclude untrained practitioners, and formalize optometry's relationship to medicine. The bill was denounced by the medical profession on the grounds that it would legitimize medical fraud, and defeated, but it began a process that would see the formalization and regulation of optometry across North America through the first quarter of the twentieth century. The basis of the opticians' position was that their work was physics not medicine, the refraction of light not the treatment of disease, summed up in slogans such as "A lens is not a pill."²⁹ Optometry was formalized as a profession in Nova Scotia through the passage of the Optometry Act in 1921.

The professionalization of ophthalmology and oculists in the late nineteenth century led to a growing popular understanding of ocular physiology and diseases of the eye. People across rural Nova Scotia called upon medical professionals to cure them of serious impairments and ailments, but still with a great deal of skepticism about the nature of medical expertise. Rural Nova Scotians had options when it came to eye care and it is important to recall that throughout Nova Scotia, access to different tiers of

training and professional practices. Founded in 1873, the tone and content of the weekly *Jewelers' Circular and Horological Review*, n.d. (New York; hereafter *JC&HR*) was somewhat more casual and its editorial position was less clear, but it, too, consistently ran content related to the optical trade. Each of these magazines was the major trade periodical of its kind in Canada and North America, respectively, and each occasionally published content related to Nova Scotia (the *JC&HR* ran quite a bit of content about Canada in general), including reports on meetings and professional news. This content, and the absence of relevant regional publications at the time, suggests at least some readership in the province. In any case, the trends discussed in these periodicals are also apparent in the advertising of vision aids and optical services in Nova Scotia.

²⁹ Stevens, *American Medicine*, 105–7; Charles F. Prentice, *Legalized Optometry and the Memoirs of Its Founder* (Seattle: Casperin Fletcher Press, 1926).

medical service was primarily a question of privilege rather than geography. While it is true that rural communities were unlikely to have a resident specialist eye doctor, people of relatively modest financial means could and did travel to obtain these services.

Meanwhile, poorer and marginalized members of rural communities, just like poorer and marginalized segments of urban populations, did not have meaningful access to these same services.

Rural Nova Scotians with the means could choose to access health care in the United States: in September 1887, the Presbyterian minister of Mahone Bay, Rev. D. S. Fraser, travelled to New York to “undergo another operation on his eyes,” and in January 1892, Mrs. J. W. Harvie of Avondale, “left her home ... to enter the Massachusetts General Hospital, a serious trouble with one of her eyes needing the best skill to be obtained. An important though dangerous operation was performed,” the results of which had not yet been made available at time of publication.³⁰ Others stayed closer to home. In November 1899, when the Spry Bay correspondent to the *Atlantic Weekly* reported the news from neighbouring communities, both Mrs. Isabella Burnett of Upper Musquodoboit and Miss C. B. Boutilier of Mushaboom were “away to the city” (meaning Halifax) for reasons related to eye care.³¹ From her home on the rural Eastern Shore of Halifax County, Boutilier’s was a trip of about one hundred kilometres, less than a day’s travel by coastal schooner or steamer. Burnett’s home was inland by fifty kilometres; she may have cut across the province to Halifax by road, but more likely would have travelled out to the coast and then continued by ship to the city. These were not voyages

³⁰ Mahone Bay community notes, *Lunenburg Progress*, September 28, 1887; Avondale community notes, *Hants Journal*, February 3, 1892.

³¹ Spry Bay community notes, *Atlantic Weekly* (Dartmouth), November 25, 1899.

undertaken on a regular basis, but even from locations further from the city they were certainly not unheard of. The correspondent reported that Mrs. Burnett was in the capital “to have her baby girl treated for threatened blindness. A film has grown over one of its eyes.” Fewer details were shared about Miss Boutilier; the reader was told only that she was “sojourning with her aunt” and “intends having her sore eye treated.” A month later, the correspondent was happy to report “the successful operation and removal of the diseased eye of Miss C. B. Boutilier, and the insertion of an artificial one by the doctors at the Victoria General Hospital, Halifax.”³² Finally, some medical eye care was increasingly available locally, even in very small communities. In September 1896, the West Arichat correspondent to the *Bras d’Or Gazette* reported that Mrs. De Roche “who had been totally blind for upwards of six years, had her sight restored ... by the removal of a cataract. This skilful operation was performed by Drs. Fixott, of Arichat, and Bissett, of St. Peters.”³³

Additionally, travelling professionals provided a wide range of socially valuable services to rural communities. In the case of eye care, throughout the 1880s and 1890s, Dr. J. R. McLean of Halifax and later Truro advertised his services as an eye, ear, and throat specialist across the province, encouraging patients to travel to visit him. But by the late 1880s he had also begun travelling regularly himself, staying for a week or more at a time in locations including Amherst, Kentville, St. Peters, and North Sydney.³⁴ While he was in Londonderry in 1889, the *Londonderry Arc-Light* ran a half-column piece titled

³² No news was reported about Mrs. Burnett’s baby. Spry Bay community notes, *Atlantic Weekly*, December 23, 1899.

³³ West Arichat community notes, *Bras d’Or Gazette* (St. Peters), September 30, 1896.

³⁴ See the notices in *Bridgetown Weekly Monitor*, November 4, 1882; *Hants Journal*, February 5, 1889; *Port Hawkesbury Eastern Journal*, January 13, 1892; *Truro Daily News*, October 7, 1895; *Bras d’Or Gazette*, June 28, 1896.

“An Interview with Dr. McLean, Specialist,” consisting of six questions about common ailments, with brief answers from the doctor. Following questions about catarrh, discharging ears, and nose polyps, the doctor was asked two questions about the eyes:

Q. When the tear duct is closed giving one a weeping eye, can that be cured or relieved.

A. Yes it can be relieved [sic], then cured by the gradual passage of flexible silver probes with little pain or inconvenience [sic] we now-a-day only leave them in a few minutes.

Q. Can crossed or squint eyes be made perfectly straight and natural looking.

A. Yes, Perfectly so, with a slight operation on one or both eyes, you can make them “straight as two strings.”³⁵

These questions might have been prepared for publication by McLean himself, or they might genuinely have been posed by the newspaper editor; in either case they address a sphere of medical expertise separate from the ostensible concerns of opticians. The apparent relevance of opticians alongside the work of these medical professionals signalled a public awareness of the distinction between disease and more prosaic ocular ailments. These included a weakness of visual acuity that was a result of age and, of increasing concern, discomfort due to the “improper” use of the eyes.

Everyday tips for the preservation of eyesight republished in Nova Scotian newspapers were akin to etiquette columns: dos and don'ts for the modern eye. Most commentators warned that close work was harmful if not undertaken in appropriate conditions and they counselled against excessive “use” of the eyes. Reading was a foremost topic of concern. Don't read in “jolting cars.” Don't read in dim light to save on the gas bill. “Never read by twilight or moonlight or on dark, cloudy days.” “Don't read, study or sew lying down.” More generally, “avoid all sudden changes between light and darkness.” “Never rub your eyes, nor allow your children to do so from their cradles.”

³⁵ *Londonderry Arc-Light*, June 14, 1889.

And “if the eyes are glued together on waking up, do not forcibly open them, but apply saliva with the finger.” Do look up regularly from close work. Do “let the light fall from above obliquely over the left shoulder” while reading or working. If concentrating on a printed or written page, do rest the eyes by looking at something “full of color, the brighter the colors and the more brilliantly variegated the greater the rest.” “Be most careful to live in a dry house on dry soil.” Do bathe the eyes “with water as hot as you can bear your elbow in,” or, better still, with a “boric acid solution,” which “contracts the congested blood vessels and sends the blood in its natural channels.” And do attend to the physiological implications of one’s sartorial choices: “tight shoes, tight collars and tight waists are detrimental to eyesight, by causing undue pressure on the brain; but of all the destroyers of this precious possession of perfect vision, veils are the worst.” Alongside controversial recommendations to forgo corsets and other restrictive dress, late nineteenth-century women were also advised to “eschew veils ... or wear the softest, clearest net when obliged to do so” to avoid taxing the eyes.³⁶ While some of these suggestions may have repurposed contemporary medical knowledge for a popular audience, by and large these recommendations addressed a public interest in normative visual acuity and healthful, “sparkling” eyes, distinct from concerns about more serious eye diseases or the formal medicalization of eye care.

³⁶ Advice for the preservation of the eyes is from *Yarmouth Herald*, November 19, 1890; *Yarmouth Herald*, January 18, 1898; *Bridgetown Weekly Monitor*, January 6, 1886; *Berwick Register*, January 26, 1898; *New Glasgow Eastern Chronicle*, July 17, 1902; *New Glasgow Eastern Chronicle*, May 26, 1892; *Bras d’Or Gazette*, April 1, 1896; *Yarmouth Herald*, January 29, 1907; *Yarmouth Herald*, October 31, 1893. On women’s dress reform in Canada, see Barbara E. Kelcey, “Dress Reform in Nineteenth-Century Canada,” in *Fashion: A Canadian Perspective*, ed. Alexandra Palmer (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 229–48.

Selling Spectacles

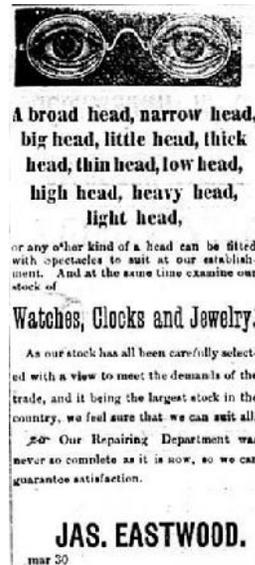


Fig. 3.2 Advertisement, James Eastwood, *New Glasgow Eastern Chronicle*, April 7, 1881



Fig. 3.3 Advertisement, J. E. Sancton, *Bridgetown Weekly Monitor*, October 18, 1881

Likely intended to be humorous, the advertisement placed in the *New Glasgow Eastern Chronicle* in 1881 by jeweller and watchmaker James Eastwood epitomizes the character of advertising for eyeglasses in the early 1880s (fig. 3.2).³⁷ It proclaims, “A broad head, narrow head big head, little head, thick head, thin head, low head, high head, heavy head, light head, or any other kind of head can be fitted with Spectacles to suit at our establishment.” The ad makes no mention of eyesight or the correction of individual visual acuity, but vision is invoked instead in reference to the examination of commodities. While in the shop, consumers were invited to cast their eyes upon the stock

³⁷ Unless otherwise noted, the advertisements discussed in this chapter all ran unchanged (or very little changed) for weeks or months at a time. The given date (in the caption, or in a footnote when no image is reproduced) is an ad’s earliest appearance in the sample. This style of unchanging advertising was characteristic of newspapers in the period; Paul Rutherford identifies it with “a more leisurely marketplace which did not require the constant seduction of a horde of buyers.” Paul Rutherford, *A Victorian Authority: The Daily Press in Late Nineteenth-Century Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), 121.

of watches, clocks, and jewelry, Eastwood's primary area of business. Eastwood's list of heads was a simile for the diverse personalities, dispositions, and inclinations of his customers: he offered something for everyone. But his emphasis on the head, rather than the eye, in his sales pitch for spectacles, was also an intentionally comical exaggeration of the reality of the spectacle trade. Glasses were typically sold by watchmakers and jewellers as part of their diverse commercial stock. They were offered for sale pre-made, in a limited range of set strengths.³⁸ With this limited selection, customers were as likely to prioritize finding glasses that simply sat comfortably and securely on the head as glasses that might actually improve their eyesight. The same year, jeweller J. E. Sancton in Bridgetown placed a similar ad (fig. 3.3). Though its proclamation of "Good News for the Blind!" does draw direct attention to vision, spectacles are again offered for "anybody," in this case "old or young," rather than to address unique visual impairments. The similarity between the image in this ad and the one placed by Eastwood also reveals the limited range of styles available for spectacle frames, if not also the limited repertoire of imagery available to small newspaper typesetters.

Sancton's ad also located eyeglasses in a competitive rural economy of consumer goods. On offer were spectacles "such as are sold by pedlars," but for a significantly reduced price. Professional jewellers and watchmakers in rural Nova Scotia may have had skills with crystal, fine metal, and moving parts, but in the early 1880s it is unlikely they were crafting and selling their own eyeglasses. By this time, eyeglasses had long

³⁸ British optician William Ackland described the typical process for selecting spectacles in 1885: "A customer enters, requiring a pair of spectacles, and the shop man, having ascertained the quality required, proceeds to lay, say a dozen pairs, on his counter, from which the customer is expected to select a suitable pair." William Ackland, *Hints on Spectacles: When Required and How to Select Them*, 9th ed. (London: Horne, Thornthwaite & Wood, 1885), 23.

been mass-produced commodities in international circulation, part of the rural “world of goods” imported for sale by local retailers, or purchased from catalogues. Douglas McCalla notes that spectacles were among the goods occasionally offered for sale in Upper Canadian country stores, including four dozen pairs imported by one merchant in 1808–1809.³⁹

Some watchmakers and jewellers offered specialized assistance with fitting, adjustments, and repairs, but eyeglasses and spectacles also joined watches, clocks, silverware, lamps, plated jewelry, and other luxury and utilitarian goods of metal and glass sold by general merchants and commonly by pedlars. Eyeglasses and spectacles were regularly sold alongside the countless other products in a general retailer’s stock of goods, with no accompanying promises or assertions of expertise.

This 1896 ad for watchmaker and jeweller A. M. Ross in North Sydney (fig. 3.4) is representative of the persistent status of

eyeglasses as mass market commodities, even after they had long since come to be understood as specialized therapeutic devices. The ad informs Ross’s customers that he has for sale “All the latest styles in Rings, Brooches, Pins, Chains, Charms, &c. Spectacles & Eyeglasses, Violins, Autoharps, Accordians, Harmonicas, &c.” Eastwood, Sancton, Ross, and their contemporaries were not so much correcting vision as they were providing (often questionable) vision aids, still mainly intended to be used infrequently.

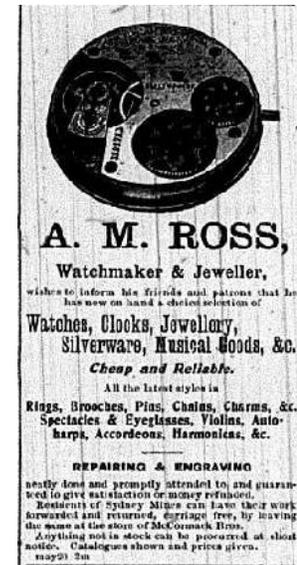


Fig. 3.4 Advertisement, A. M. Ross, *North Sydney Herald*, June 10, 1896

³⁹ Douglas McCalla, *Consumers in the Bush: Shopping in Rural Upper Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2015), 143. On the “rural world of goods,” see also Béatrice Craig, *Backwoods Consumers and Homespun Capitalists: The Rise of a Market Culture in Eastern Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), esp. 199–220.

In the early 1880s, none of these people called themselves opticians, or claimed any specialized knowledge of the eye, though for some this would later change.

These generic local ads characterize the broader commercial landscape for eyeglasses and help to explain the promises and claims to expertise made by the advertisements for brand-name spectacles that ran alongside them in Nova Scotian newspapers. The advertising of two spectacle manufacturers predominated in the period of this study. Lazarus & Morris were the dominant firm in the province at the start of the 1880s, but by the middle of the decade their presence in ink was dwindling and they were largely absent from 1890 on. By 1885 Lazarus had been overtaken by B. Laurance, whose ads continued to appear through the 1890s. By the turn of the century neither company was widely advertised in Nova Scotia, as professionalizing opticians had begun touting their own expertise rather than the special qualities of their imported wares.

Both Lazarus & Morris and Laurance & Co. had been selling spectacles and eyeglasses in Nova Scotia since at least the 1860s. Lazarus & Morris, which was based in Hartford, Connecticut, had glasses for sale in Halifax by 1868 at the shop of jeweller and optician W. H. Newman. They were for sale by watchmaker and jeweller D. R. McElmon in Amherst by 1873 and likely well before then.⁴⁰ Some evidence that the glasses were being purchased and worn appears in the 1875 address of Halifax doctor Stephen Dodge to the Canadian Medical Association. Dodge discussed several “ophthalmic cases” he had treated recently in his practice, including one young man described as “latterly ... wearing a pair of Lazarus and Morris’ glasses,” but requiring more specialized treatment.⁴¹

⁴⁰ *Halifax Morning Chronicle*, June 27, 1868; *Amherst Gazette*, October 10, 1873.

⁴¹ Stephen Dodge, “Ophthalmic Cases,” *Canadian Medical Record*, November 1875, 32.

Laurance & Co. were based in London, England, but company representative Barnett Laurance was already making regular “professional visits” to Nova Scotia in the 1860s. The visit advertised in the *Halifax Morning Chronicle* in the fall of 1864 was apparently his third and boasted testimonials from earlier clients in Bridgetown, Kentville, Liverpool, Lunenburg, and Yarmouth.⁴² Barnett eventually relocated permanently to Montreal, where he set up a branch, and by the 1880s the firm, now advertising as B. Laurance, was actively pursuing business in rural Nova Scotia, including a major advertising push across the province in 1886. In the early 1890s Laurance’s spectacles were available for sale from doctors, opticians, jewellers, watchmakers, druggists, and general merchants in at least thirty-two communities across all of the province’s eighteen counties.⁴³

As they sought to set themselves apart from a market of undifferentiated products, brand-name spectacle manufacturers are best understood as part of the broader history of patent medicines, widely recognized as the first brand-name goods. Ocular medicine shares an infamous background with travelling medicine shows, which pioneered name-recognition techniques in the early nineteenth century to differentiate the unique properties of their patented products from generic versions and household remedies. By mid-century, patent medicine companies had transferred these techniques to print, creating newspaper ads with extravagant claims, testimonials, and eye-catching imagery, which stood out boldly against the rather sedate and mostly text-based columns of other

⁴² *Halifax Morning Chronicle*, November 24, 1864.

⁴³ The list of thirty-two places where Laurance appears in the sample is worth noting, as it includes everything in size from the city of Halifax down to tiny villages: Antigonish, Baddeck, Bear River, Bridgetown, Canso, Dartmouth, Digby, Guysborough, Halifax, Kentville, Liverpool, Lockeport, Londonderry, Lunenburg, Mabou, Mahone Bay, Margaree Harbor, Mulgrave, New Glasgow, North Sydney, Port Hastings, Port Hawkesbury, Port Hood, St. Peters, Sydney, Truro, West Bay, Westport, Weymouth, Whycomomagh, Windsor, Yarmouth.

advertising.⁴⁴ Their ads were also conspicuous because the vast majority of advertising in Canadian newspapers until the late 1880s was local. Even as a range of other brand-name advertising appeared, patent medicines remained the largest group of out-of-town advertisers in newspapers across Canada and the United States to the end of the century.⁴⁵

With their specialized therapeutic promises, Lazarus's and Laurance's ads are similar to the style of patent medicine advertising, even if their claims and imagery were far less fanciful. A more meaningful similarity is that spectacle manufacturers, like patent medicines, built their successes on the widespread public ambivalence toward, even suspicion of, the work of doctors and surgeons and the apparent mysteries of medicine into the twentieth century. Panaceas and cure-alls, including those promising perfect vision, remained popular because doctors' remedies were often just as effective—or ineffective—and were typically much more expensive and often simply inaccessible. This uncertainty about medical expertise, and the attendant continuing appeal of patent medicines, was augmented by what T. J. Jackson Lears describes as “the persistence of magical thinking” among the public, whether in the form of animistic beliefs or later in the conversion narratives of evangelicalism, a disposition that was exploited by all advertisers in their “promise of self-transformation through the ritual of purchase.”⁴⁶ Though they wholly rejected patent medicines and other “human remedies,” the popularity of faith healers in the period was also emblematic of the same climate of

⁴⁴ On the relationship between patent medicines and print advertising, see Russell T. Johnston, *Selling Themselves: The Emergence of Canadian Advertising* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 24; Pamela Walker Laird, *Advertising Progress: American Business and the Rise of Consumer Marketing* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1998), 18–23; T. J. Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 40–46, 141–57; Rutherford, *Victorian Authority*, 119, 121; James Harvey Young, *The Toadstool Millionaires: A Social History of Patent Medicines in America before Federal Regulation* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1961).

⁴⁵ Johnston, *Selling Themselves*, 24; Laird, *Advertising Progress*, 22.

⁴⁶ Lears, *Fables of Abundance*, 43, 139.

ambivalence toward medical authority, as Canadians sought relief from pain, illness, and inconvenience—including sore eyes, headaches, dizziness, and weak eyesight—that nineteenth-century doctors had failed to provide or had never offered.⁴⁷

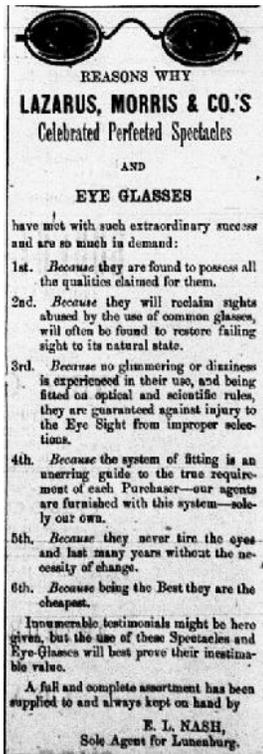


Fig. 3.5 Advertisement, Lazarus, Morris & Co., *Lunenburg Progress*, August 9, 1881

Paul Rutherford notes that as brand-name advertising in Canadian newspapers grew, manufacturers typically sought to “sidestep the middleman by building consumer loyalty to a particular brand which would force retailers to stock the product.”⁴⁸ By contrast, ads for brand-name spectacles all continued an older advertising tradition, in which a local merchant sponsored the ad, adding their name to text and imagery provided by the manufacturer in return for the privilege of being the sole distributor in their area. These sponsored ads functioned as a sort of nominal assurance to the buying public of the quality of the goods, and if the reputation of the brand was a positive one it also looked good for the merchant.⁴⁹ Topped with those ubiquitous disembodied eyes staring straight off the page

through thin wire spectacles, this ad for Lazarus & Morris ran in the *Lunenburg Progress* in 1881 (fig. 3.5). The glasses were sold by prominent merchant, and owner of the

⁴⁷ See James Opp, *The Lord for the Body: Religion, Medicine and Protestant Faith Healing in Canada, 1880-1930* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2005), esp. 48–58. On other unorthodox medical practices see the essays in Arthur Wrobel, ed., *Pseudo-Science and Society in Nineteenth-Century America* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1987).

⁴⁸ Rutherford, *Victorian Authority*, 123.

⁴⁹ This was presumably also a way for out-of-town advertisers to avoid costly and complicated individual dealings with dozens of small newspapers in the era before advertising agents. On the rise of Canadian ad agents and how they streamlined this process, but no discussion of earlier models such as this, see Johnston, *Selling Themselves*.

Progress, E. L. Nash at his “Electric Light Drug Store,” an emporium of modernity befitting these “celebrated perfected spectacles.”

This ad is constructed as an appeal to reason. In plain, unadorned type and a neatly organized list, the ad offers six “reasons why Lazarus, Morris, & Co.’s Celebrated Perfected Spectacles and Eye Glasses have met with such extraordinary success and are so much in demand.” Chief among these reasons are a set of characteristics and claims (both questionable and perhaps reasonable) that distinguish and distance these devices from the “common glasses” and “improper selections” that filled the marketplace and injured the eyes. These include their ability to “reclaim sights abused by the use of common glasses” and to “restore failing sight to its natural state.” The glasses produce “no glimmering or dizziness” and “never tire the eyes.” Rather than a precise depiction of Lazarus’s products, such descriptions give a sense of the complaints and prejudices about eyeglasses that were in the public repertoire at the time, and which advertisers therefore wished to proactively counter.

The major distinction between branded ads and those for generic spectacles, however, was the offer of specialized fitting services. Along with their eyeglasses, Lazarus & Morris boasted that their “system of fitting is an unerring guide to the true requirement of each Purchaser—our agents are furnished with this system—solely our own.” It is never exactly clear—likely intentionally so—what the unique “system” was, or what resources were provided to retailers. It was likely some form of Snellen chart, which allowed visual acuity to be measured, a step up from customers simply trying on glasses and choosing what seemed to be the most suitable pair. These offers for specialized fitting further explain why all branded ads for spectacles were associated with

a specific merchant. Unlike the generic ads, here the spectacles themselves were only one part of the equation. The assertion of expertise in a system of fitting “on optical and scientific rules” was a significant selling point.

After the mid-1880s B. Laurance’s “Celebrated Spectacles” became the most prominent manufactured product advertised for sale in the province. Like their competitors, B. Laurance also sought the sponsorship of local merchants as sales agents, including E. L. Nash in Lunenburg, who was not the only retailer to switch brand allegiances. Among others, James Eastwood in New Glasgow and J. E. Sancton in Bridgetown, who were discussed above selling generic glasses, were also brought onboard. Each of these retailers, Laurance’s advertisements claimed, was “provided with proper optical instruments for correctly gauging the eye.”⁵⁰ Again, Snellen charts would have been part of the equipment and evidence suggests the “instruments” were likely specialized ophthalmoscopes (known today as retinoscopes), which had been simplified in their construction over the preceding years.⁵¹ Placing such devices in rural communities and creating the ability to accurately measure visual acuity surely contributed to shifting attitudes about eyeglasses and eye care more generally. The promotion of scientific “systems” and specialized optical instruments to measure the eyes invited an active engagement with eye care and eyesight more broadly. This was a far cry from the traditional view of eyeglasses as suited only to “old and dim eyes.”⁵²

⁵⁰ *Island Reporter* (Baddeck), April 29, 1886. Unless otherwise noted, text quoted from advertisements for Laurance’s spectacles appeared in multiple ads across the province. Citations will provide just one example, typically the earliest example of that text in the sample.

⁵¹ Retinoscopes in the nineteenth century were modified ophthalmoscopes (today they are considered to be wholly different devices), which enabled users to assess visual acuity by noting the way a beam of light reflected off a patient’s retina. On changes in the construction of ophthalmoscopes, see C. F. Keeler, “A Brief History of the Ophthalmoscope,” *Optometry in Practice* 4 (2003): 137–45.

⁵² *Halifax Morning Herald*, September 27, 1880.

NOW YOU WILL SEE!!



MESSERS. PEPHARD & McDONALD,
 as the "Academy Dico Seal" CROSS THE SLIGHT PERIOD.

Are the only Agents for the sale of the above CELEBRATED PEBBLES and other SPECTACLES and EYE GLASSES in this vicinity. They are the very best to be had, and as attested by the best authorities, and by every one who have used them. Over 100 pairs were sold every working day in the year 1884, among the different agencies in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and the other Provinces. They are ordered by all the principal medical men in the Dominion and in England.

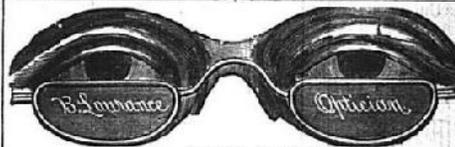
E. J. W. MACDONALD, Vice-Pres. Medical Association of Canada, 217-218, LANSANBURY, N. S., September 11th, 1885.

Dear Sir.—Since the introduction of your GLASSES into this Province, I have had many opportunities of judging of their excellent quality. The results with which they have gained proved a convincing proof of their superiority, and I therefore can give the highest testimonials to them for all the various defects of the vision.

J. W. HAYDON, Vice-Pres. Canada Medical Association, Medical Officer to Royal Co. of Canada, 100, WATER STREET, HALIFAX, N. S., September 11th, 1885.

A handsome number of testimonials from the leading men of the Dominion can be sent. Call upon our agents here, or others, and get them, with the test and verdict in Spectacles and Eye Glasses in the world.

Week's Doings (Londonderry)



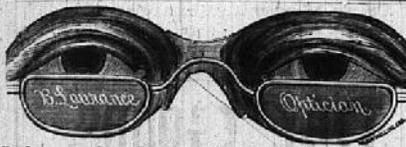
B. LAURANCE'S Spectacles & Eye-Glasses,
 — ARE THE ONLY —
Genuine English Articles in the Canadian Market!

REAL PEBBLES are kept in stock. Tests are given to purchasers to prove GENUINENESS. They are recommended by and testimonials have been received from the President, Vice-President, Ex-President, and Ex-Vice-President of the Medical Association of Canada; the President of the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Quebec; the Dean of the Medical Faculty of Laval University; the President and Ex-Presidents of the Medical Council of Nova Scotia, &c., &c.

These recommendations ought to be sufficient to prove their quality, but if further proof is needed call on

J. E. SANFON, Watchmaker & Jeweller, BRIDGETOWN.

Bridgetown Weekly Monitor



B. Laurance's SPECTACLES & EYE-GLASSES
 ARE THE ONLY GENUINE
ENGLISH ARTICLES
IN THE CANADIAN MARKET.

Real Pebbles are kept in Stock.

For Sale by **JAS. M. HEEN,** Agent, Watchmaker & Jeweller,
DIGBY, N. S.

Digby Weekly Courier



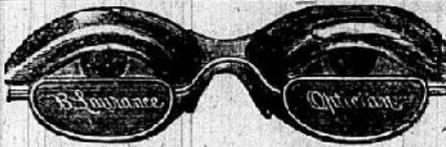
B. LAURANCE'S SPECTACLES AND EYE-GLASSES

Are the only genuine English Articles in the Canadian Market.

Mr. James Eastwood, Jeweller and Optician, New Glasgow, has been appointed Agent for the sale of the above celebrated Glasses. All persons wishing Spectacles or Eye-Glasses can rely on being perfectly fitted by calling on Mr. Eastwood, or communicating with him by mail. Satisfaction guaranteed in all cases.

July 23rd, 1885.

New Glasgow Eastern Chronicle



35 HATTEN GARDEN, London, Eng. **246 ST. JAMES ST., Montreal.**

LAURANCE'S SPECTACLES AND EYE GLASSES are the only genuine English products in the Canadian market. General recognition from every one of the leading medical authorities has been obtained for the purpose, they are, without exception, the best to be had, and are recommended by the most eminent medical men in the Dominion and in England.

They are recommended by and testimonials can be sent from the President, Vice-President, Ex-President, and Ex-Vice-President of the Medical Association of Canada; the President and Ex-Presidents of the Medical Council of Nova Scotia, &c., &c.

These testimonials ought to be sufficient to prove their quality, but if further proof is needed call on

Can only be obtained from the following merchants: Langham J. Hart, Waterborough A. C. The Post Office, 5th St. N. S. Halifax, N. S. New Brunswick, &c.

Island Reporter (Port Hawkesbury)



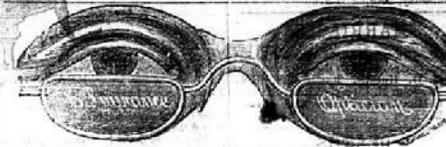
Pebbles and other Spectacles
 — AND —
EYE GLASSES,

Are winning public approval. They are altogether the best and the most comfortable to wear than the common glasses which injure the eye.

Testimonials to their superiority for cure of the most obstinate public men can be seen by calling on the sole agent for the sale in Kings County.

CHAS. F. OCHOHRAN, DRUGGIST,
WEBSTER STREET, - - KENTVILLE.

Kentville Wedge



B. LAURANCE'S Spectacles and Eye-Glasses
 ARE THE ONLY GENUINE ENGLISH ARTICLES IN THE CANADIAN MARKET.
REAL PEBBLES ARE KEPT IN STOCK. TESTS ARE GIVEN TO PURCHASERS TO PROVE GENUINENESS!

They are recommended by and testimonials have been received from the President, Vice-President, Ex-President and Ex-Vice-President of the Medical Association of Canada; the President of the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Quebec; the Dean of the Medical Faculty of Laval University; the President and Ex-Presidents of the Medical Council of Nova Scotia, &c., &c.

These recommendations ought to be sufficient to prove their quality, but if further proof is needed, call on

E. L. NASH, Druggist, Agent for Lunenburg and Mahone Bay, N. S.
 July 19

Lunenburg Progress



B. LAURANCE'S GENUINE PEBBLES,
 and other fine Spectacles and Eye Glasses, are to be purchased only from the undersigned, and to meet the competition of the times will be sold from \$1 per pair. As the Spectacles are recommended by the President of the College of Physicians and Surgeons, the President of the Medical Association of Canada and all the leading authorities of the faculty, it will be wisdom to purchase only such Lenses as can be worn without real.

Sold by
C. O. RICHARDS, Druggist, Yarmouth, N. S.
 July 25th

Yarmouth Herald

Fig. 3.6 Selection of advertisements for B. Laurance's spectacles in Nova Scotia newspapers in 1886

The dominant feature of Laurance's advertisements was their logo, often taking up as much as half the ad space (see a selection of ads in fig. 3.6). A pair of dark eyes peers over the top rim of wire spectacles with the words *B. Laurance Optician* written across their lenses in a cursive script. This strangely detailed illustration includes the bits of the face that surround the eyes, rendered in a style that is perhaps intended to convey the musculature beneath the lids and brows. Oddly, the spectacle lenses are opaque and the eyes have been averted over them to meet the reader's gaze, rather than looking through them to take advantage of the correction that is offered in the ad. But peculiar though this image might be on close inspection, it functions efficiently as a recognizable icon for the brand, clearly distinguishable from the generic spectacles added to locally-designed ads by printers. The image also fills a significant portion of white page space with dark ink that stands out against the lighter colours on the page surrounding it; it catches the eye. And importantly, the placement of Laurance's name and credentials directly on the image, rather than adjacent to it, means the graphic plate could not be pilfered by local printers for other uses.

In addition to a plate of their logo, it is evident that Laurance provided their retailers with promotional text and ad copy. Each local retailer then chose which parts of this copy to use in their sponsored ads, depending on the message they felt would best reach customers in their area (and how much they wanted to pay to place the ad). The result is a range of similar ads that share a basic vocabulary, though they do not always convey identical messages. Scholarship on the history of advertising tends to distinguish a shift between the "casual requests" of local merchants for the production of local ads and the "exacting demands" of outside advertisers that insisted ad copy be reproduced

and formatted precisely, if it wasn't already set in its own plate.⁵³ A comparison of Laurance's ads from across the province reveals an unusual compromise. These ads demonstrate the creative and subjective input of local retailers and especially of local printers, who chose the typefaces, sizes, and layouts for the various components of the ads. These are effectively local advertisements for an international brand.

There are several important conventions that cut across all of the ads. The first is a notable absence. Boasts about the therapeutic qualities of Laurance's glasses seldom appeared, other than the general claim that they "preserve the eye-sight." On the rare occasion when such claims were made, they were similar to those made about other brands, acknowledging and rebuffing the era's standard complaints about spectacles: Laurance's glasses "are delightfully easy and pleasant to wear. There is no Glimmering—Wavering—Dizziness, or other distressing sensations produced by their use. They Comfort, Strengthen & Preserve the Sight."⁵⁴

Instead of puffed-up claims about the effectiveness of his products, Laurance's ads emphasized his claims to expertise as an optician—the professional identity emblazoned on his logo. In the absence of any ocular knowledge on the part of the merchants selling his spectacles, it was B. Laurance's own remote claim to professional status that set his branded products apart. Rather than specific promises about how well his products worked, Laurance made broader assurances to consumers on the basis of his authority as an expert in the field. This signalling of professional identity presaged a significant shift in the advertising of vision aids and ocular care that would take place in the 1890s, to be discussed below. The ad copy further specified "that by the Laurance

⁵³ Johnston, *Selling Themselves*, 28; 25–28.

⁵⁴ *New Glasgow Eastern Chronicle*, February 11, 1886.

process of fitting the eye where there is no actual disease, perfect sight is obtained.”⁵⁵

This reference to disease situated Laurance in the realm of respectable opticians selling their expertise in refraction, not dabbling in medicine, while also foreclosing potential complaints from unsatisfied customers whose vision troubles could not be fixed by glasses. Unlike the generic ads, and unlike Lazarus’s earlier ads, Laurance did not claim to have something for everyone, nor to be able to cure all eye troubles, but all the same these ads participated in the commodification of “perfect sight,” advocating for the value of this concept to newspaper readers across the province.

Laurance’s professionalism was also underscored by claims about the authenticity of their products. The most commonly repeated phrase from the standard ad copy was “B. Laurance’s Spectacles and Eye-Glasses are the only genuine English articles in the Canadian market.”⁵⁶ Additionally, many retailers highlighted that “Real Pebbles are kept in stock.” Laurance’s “genuine” glasses and “real pebbles” were contrasted in their ads with “cheap glasses which blind the eye” and “common glasses which injure the eyes.”⁵⁷ In the nineteenth century, eyeglass lenses were ground from two types of material, each with its own particular qualities and recommended uses. Laurance sold both kinds. His glasses were advertised as “Ground scientifically from clear, pure Pebble, or from Optical Glass especially manufactured for the purpose.”⁵⁸ Optical-grade glass could be ground into high quality lenses and was sometimes preferred for certain highly specialized prescriptions. However, it was also extremely fragile and prone to scratching.

⁵⁵ *Island Reporter*, April 29, 1886.

⁵⁶ *Yarmouth Herald*, October 7, 1885. The optical industry in England was well advanced and English-made glasses were considered to be of high quality. This reference to England may also have been an encouragement to patriotic consumption, in contrast to Lazarus’s American-made spectacles.

⁵⁷ *Bridgetown Weekly Monitor*, March 10, 1886; *Yarmouth Herald*, October 7, 1885; *Digby Courier*, August 7, 1885.

⁵⁸ *Island Reporter*, April 26, 1888.

Inexpensive eyeglasses were often made of lower quality glass, which might contain ripples or bubbles and which also tended to lose its polish and transparency over time. All of these qualities made glass lenses somewhat temporary in their usefulness, requiring regular replacement if damage to the eyes was to be avoided. They were, however, cheaper and more widely available than the alternative, which was pebble.

This was the common name given to natural rock crystal, a variety of quartz, which had been used for centuries for optical purposes. With improvements in glassmaking in the twentieth century, glass eventually overtook it, but in the late nineteenth century pebble was considered to be the premiere material for eyeglass lenses. The preferred variety was an exceptionally clear mineral mined in South America. (Laurance's glasses were often referred to as Brazilian Pebbles.) Other crystals were also in use; glasses with lenses of Adamantine were for sale in Nova Scotia in the same period. For the production of pebble lenses, thin slices were cut from a larger crystal with a diamond dusted blade, the only tool that was able to cut the rock. The remarkable hardness of the mineral meant that the lenses were nearly impossible to break or scratch and that they retained a high level of polish and transparency. However, like glass, the quality of individual pebble lenses depended on the care with which they were manufactured. Lenses had to be cut from the original rock in a certain direction in order to reproduce the angle of the crystal's natural refractive properties. Failure to attend to these angles resulted in lenses that would never produce clear vision.⁵⁹

Customers might be deceived by improperly cut pebbles or simply by fake pebbles. In 1897, an itinerant optician going by the name of "Prof." Chamberlain was

⁵⁹ Ackland, *Hints on Spectacles*, 20–22; Carter, *Eyesight, Good & Bad*, 47–48.

charged with fraud in Ontario for selling glass spectacles he claimed were pebbles. The Crown attorney “said he had received many complaints of a similar nature against Chamberlain,” but the man absconded before his trial, forfeiting his bond.⁶⁰ In his *Eyesight, Good & Bad*, Carter noted, “a pebble lens may be readily distinguished from a glass one by its greater coldness to the tongue, pebble being a better conductor of heat than glass.”⁶¹ This observation is a reminder that the skill of discernment in the assessment of commodities was routinely a multi-sensory endeavor, and that the alleged authority of vision was frequently outstripped by other senses—even in the selection of vision aids. Carter also noted that the conscientious optician, firstly, sold only properly cut lenses, and secondly, kept a device on hand by which customers might test them (by sight) to ensure that the crystal refracted light as intended.⁶² Many of Laurance’s retailers noted in their ads that “Tests are given to purchasers to prove Genuineness,”⁶³ a public staging of modern technology that was in fact a throwback to an earlier era of medicine show marketing and showmanship. Between the performance of scientific measurement with the ophthalmoscope and the testing of lenses, it is clear that the sale of spectacles was often a spectacle.

The meaning of *pebble*, or why it, or Brazilian pebble in particular, might be a desirable product were never explained in Laurance’s ads, suggesting that knowledge about optical technology circulated independently of branded advertising. The use of pebble crystal was not new, but knowledge of its relative value as a material in mass-marketed optical goods would have required some consumer education. But as the

⁶⁰ *Canadian Druggist*, September 1897, 195.

⁶¹ Carter, *Eyesight, Good & Bad*, 47–48.

⁶² Carter, *Eyesight, Good & Bad*, 48.

⁶³ *Bridgetown Weekly Monitor*, March 10, 1886.

newspaper extracts above suggest, discussion of vision aids was part of a broader popular discourse about vision and visual acuity. Rather than simply promoting pebbles, it was their authenticity and their status as prestige items that was the selling point in these ads. Here, finally, for sale in villages like Mabou and Lockeport and Bear River, were “Real Pebbles.” Laurance’s retailers in both urban and rural places counted on a portion of the public to have tired of generic glasses and the specious claims of pedlars and uninformed retailers. While hardly luxury goods, pebble spectacles were more expensive than glass ones, and retailers courted an informed clientele, which, having already heard of these higher quality materials, might be interested in paying top dollar for the real thing from a trustworthy source.

As they had in the 1860s, Laurance continued to send representatives on professional trips through Nova Scotia, bringing their expertise directly to their customers. A set of ads in 1886 notified the public of the imminent arrival of “Mr. Morris, from the establishment of B. Laurance, [who] will be here for the purpose of adjusting the B. Laurance Pebble and other Spectacles and Eye-Glasses to any difficult or unusual cases of defective sight.”⁶⁴ The ad copy also mentions his “successes during his former visit and the satisfaction expressed by all of those whom he fitted on that occasion.”⁶⁵ The nature of these visits and the way they were advertised conveyed a number of messages to the public about the physiology of visual acuity and about the professionalization of eye care. Primarily, these visits supported and reinforced the growing belief that professional expertise was an important part of eye care—but only for those with “difficult or unusual cases.” The public was assured that they could purchase

⁶⁴ *Antigonish Casket*, February 21, 1895.

⁶⁵ *New Glasgow Eastern Chronicle*, February 11, 1886.

eyeglasses with confidence from merchants with no training for the rest of the year because these regular visits attended to the needs of customers with special requirements. The imprecise description of Mr. Morris's expertise also points to the vague delineations between oculists and opticians—and the lack of clarity about what made either of them novice or expert—in the public imagination. Mr. Morris's professional credentials were not given, beyond his association with B. Laurance, nor did this seem much to matter.

Another group of ads nearly a decade later in 1895 suggests that this situation had not changed dramatically as they continue to position Laurance's products as responsible alternatives to "common spectacles." In particular, these ads attempted to differentiate the ostensibly respectable, market-integrated mobility of Laurance's products and representatives from the irregular and unregulated mobility of pedlars. Historians have described the late nineteenth-century process of professionalization for travelling salesmen, who were reinvented as respectable "commercial travellers," associated with modern sales techniques and large reputable companies. These new sales agents attempted to distinguish themselves from the remaining old-fashioned pedlars, who were characterized as untrustworthy and unsavory, but with whom they nevertheless continued to share the road—and the market for many goods.⁶⁶ These advertisements reveal this tension in action in rural Nova Scotia. They report that "Mr. Laurance has fitted over 7,000 persons in the Lower Provinces within the last five years As Mr. Laurance makes regular visits to his agents, there should be no need of persons who value their

⁶⁶ Walter A. Friedman, *Birth of a Salesman: The Transformation of Selling in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Timothy B. Spears, *100 Years on the Road: The Traveling Salesman in American Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); Susan Strasser, "'The Smile That Pays': The Culture of Traveling Salesmen, 1880-1920," in *The Mythmaking Frame of Mind: Social Imagination and American Culture*, ed. James Burkhart Gilbert (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1993), 155–78.

sight to buy their spectacles of [sic] peddlers or those who know nothing of the eye or of fitting the same properly. ... The B. Laurance Spectacles are never sold by peddlers, nor does Mr. Laurance or anyone in his employ ever peddle.” In Guysborough, the ad placed by newly appointed retailer, jeweller H. V. Condon, announced “there will be no need after this for people to buy their spectacles of [sic] so-called professors, or pedlars, who charge exorbitant [sic] prices for inferior articles.”⁶⁷ Similarly, in 1898, Mark Farrell, “jeweller, &c.” in Barrington, advised, “Beware of Extortionist Pedlars when in need of spectacles. Have your eyes properly tested by the Ophthalmoscopic [sic] Test.”⁶⁸

Laurance’s products were of high quality and it is likely that his representatives were legitimately knowledgeable opticians; their touring performance of optical expertise was not simply a medicine show ruse. Barnett Laurance’s younger brother, Lionel Laurance, was the first principal of the Canadian Optical Institute in Toronto and, following his return to England at the end of the century, he would go on to make notable contributions to research and teaching on optics, including authoring a major textbook.⁶⁹ It seems safe to assume that B. Laurance was sending knowledgeable, trained opticians to communities across Eastern Canada, who were providing meaningful, helpful eye care. These visits supplemented the work of local doctors and provided expert support to emerging local opticians, all of whom were selling Laurance’s glasses. At the same time, however, these visits also justified the continued sale of those same glasses by untrained merchants elsewhere.

⁶⁷ *Guysborough Gazette*, July 26, 1895.

⁶⁸ *Coast-Guard* (Clark’s Harbour), May 5, 1898.

⁶⁹ He was also a regular author of the “Optical Science” column in *Canadian Druggist*. Lionel Laurance, *Visual Optics and Sight Testing* (London: L. Laurance, 1912). Optometrist Edward J. Fisher notes that this was a standard textbook in the English-speaking world into the 1940s, going through four editions. Edward J. Fisher, “Lionel Laurance: A Pioneer Teacher,” *Optometry and Vision Science* 66, no. 7 (1989): 484–86.

Through to the end of the century, Laurance's branded spectacles filled an intermediate position in an optical marketplace of contradictions and competition, one that was flooded with products of questionable quality and effectiveness even as it also included the involvement of professionalizing oculists and opticians. Whatever their relative quality in comparison to the much maligned "common spectacles," these pre-made standardized glasses were still less effective than glasses ground uniquely for a patient on the basis of an expert eye examination. One can only speculate about the quality of fittings performed with Laurance's "optical instrument" at the Westport Fishermans Co-operative Co., or by general merchants Whitman & Son in Canso,⁷⁰ but Laurance's glasses were also being sold in cities, including Halifax and Montreal, where their business was located, at the same time that they were being advertised throughout rural Nova Scotia and in much of the rest of Canada.

Whatever actual proficiency Laurance's "optical instruments" may have provided to their new owners, it is clear that several of them, including James Eastwood in New Glasgow, felt confident enough to don the mantle of "optician" in this period, always as an addendum to their previously held titles. Newly dubbed "jeweller and optician" C. E. Balham in Weymouth, Digby County, was pleased to tout his "New Optical Instrument" in his sponsored ad for Laurance in 1885.⁷¹ As Laurance's spectacles and their accompanying instruments made their way around the province, they coincided with (or, evidence suggests, brought about) the emergence of a cohort of newly-minted opticians, some of whom would go on to receive formal training, while others would simply retire

⁷⁰ See advertisements in *Digby Courier*, November 8, 1888; *Port Hawkesbury Eastern Journal*, June 18, 1894.

⁷¹ *Digby Courier*, August 7, 1885.

the mantle after a time as the sale of spectacles became more specialized. Most of the merchants who sold Laurance's spectacles, however, never adopted the title, relying instead on his branded products to carry the authority of professional identity.

Students of the Eye

The spread of optical colleges was central to the professionalization of optometry. The field was unregulated until the early twentieth century and each college had its own sense of an appropriate curriculum and definition of *optician*—some were highly focused on the practical work of manufacturing lenses and frames; others offered courses that interloped on medical education; most fell somewhere in between. Nevertheless, all of these colleges disseminated knowledge and skills necessary for more than basic proficiency at correcting errors of visual acuity. In doing so, they facilitated the consolidation of a normalized practice and the establishment of disciplinary boundaries, allowing for the exclusion of irregular practitioners from the ranks of respectability, if not from the marketplace altogether.

Opticians in Nova Scotia advertised credentials from at least six institutions (fig. 3.7): in Toronto, the Canadian Optical Institute (J. F. Herbin, Wolfville), the Canadian Ophthalmic College (A. J. Munn, Sydney; W. A. Aston, Truro), and the Ontario Optical Institute (J. C. Robertson, North Sydney); in New York, the Spencer Optical Institute (S. Eastwood, New Glasgow) and the New York School of Optometry (T. C. Grant, New Glasgow); and in Boston, the Klein School of Optics (J. R. Webster, Kentville). Samuel C. Hood and Stanley Hood, of Yarmouth, advertised their graduations from unspecified

The S. C. HOOD CO.
Mechanical & Refracting
OPTICIANS.
 S. C. Hood, New York, '92.
 Stanley Hood, Boston, '97.
 Hundreds of testimonials. Spectacles carefully fitted.

Yarmouth Herald, 1898

What are you Doing
 about your eyes? Why do you put off having your eyes tested when you know that every week makes your eyes more serious?
 Myopia, and Astigmatism, one or all three may cause your trouble. I correct them all

J. F. HERBIN Optician and Jeweler
 Honor Graduate Canadian Optical Institute.

Acadian Orchardist (Wolfville), 1898

JUST A WORD ABOUT YOUR EYES.

Hundreds of people will read this advertisement today and refuse to be convinced that the waiting contained herein applies to them.

If you could know the exact condition of your eyesight, and realize that by wearing the proper glasses NOW you might save yourself much suffering and inconvenience in years to come, would you prefer to have your eyes examined?

We will gladly examine your eyes and tell you their TRUE condition without any cost whatever.



W. A. ASTON, McKays Block, Inglis Street.
 Expert Optician Graduate of the Canadian Ophthalmic College.

Truro Daily News, 1899



Eyes Tested Free

J. S. McDONALD,
 A REGULAR GRADUATE IN OPTICS.
 A large variety of Glasses and Spectacles always on hand.
 J. S. McDONALD, Optician,
 Springhill, June 25th - Near Post Office

Springhill Advertiser, 1899



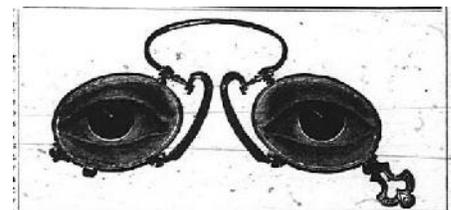
Look at It This Way.

You come and see our expert - he examines your eyes and if your eyes are good he tells you so - if there is anything the matter he will tell you - he will fit glasses accurately in the way there is no chance for seeing and seeing.

Mr. A. M. Ross, graduate of the Canadian Ophthalmic College, Toronto, has charge of our optical department, and guarantees satisfaction. Charges moderate.

A. M. ROSS North Sydney
 255-5-256-5

Sydney Daily Record, 1902



Come in! We would like to demonstrate to you that we can give you something to assist your Weak or Failing Eyesight. We have the Theoretical Knowledge (Graduate of the Spencer Optical Institute of New York). We have the Practical Experience of Ten Years Fitting Thousands of Cases. We have one of the Finest Sets of Instruments Made, costing us many hundreds of dollars. We have one of the Largest Stocks of Spectacles in Canada, and our Factory is always running to MAKE TO ORDER anything special that may be required.

EASTWOOD The OPTICIAN,
 NEW GLASGOW, N. S.

New Glasgow Eastern Chronicle, 1904

Our Optical Department

It now opened and is in charge of T. C. Grant, a graduate of the New York School of Optometry. He has received practical experience in the University of Toronto College, Dispensary and Postgraduate Hospital. We have fitted up part of our New Glasgow store to be absolutely ready to his touch. In connection with the latest appliances and instruments used in testing the eyes by reading New York opticians. We now supply you with glasses to enable you to read work to comfort.

Grant Bros
 Opticians.

New Glasgow Eastern Chronicle, 1904

YOUR EYES.
March is a Hard Month
 on your eyes!
 Do they trouble you?
 Does the print blur?
 Does your head ache?
 If so, consult

J. R. WEBSTER,
 GRADUATE OPTICIAN.
 Berwick every Monday and Tuesday

Berwick Register, 1907

Fig. 3.7 Selection of ads for opticians providing credentials in Nova Scotia newspapers, 1898–1907

schools in New York and Boston; others published no particulars but gave titles such as “graduate optician.” Such credentials typically disappeared from an individual’s ads after a time, replaced with simply the title of Optician.

The credentials offered by these colleges encouraged dabblers to professionalize and also offered employment opportunities for family members to expand within the existing businesses of jewellers or druggists. Samuel Eastwood, the younger brother of New Glasgow jeweller James Eastwood, who had sold Laurance’s glasses, became a credentialed optician. Promotional copy for the Optical Institute of Canada in early 1899 also encouraged jewellers and druggists to recommend optical work to their wives and daughters. The *Canadian Druggist* suggested “the study of optics and the fitting of spectacles is peculiarly adapted for ladies and druggists cannot do better than advise their wives and daughters to take it up.” The *Jewelers’ Circular* agreed, noting that optics “presents an inviting field for the intelligent wives or daughters of jewelers, who can carry it on to advantage as an adjunct to the jewelry store.”⁷² Emma E. Ernst was among the women who followed this advice. She provided optical services at the jewelry store of her father Simeon Ernst in Bridgewater beginning in the early 1890s.

The promotional copy in these trade periodicals does not elaborate on what particular characteristics made optometry suitable for women, but if the Klein School of Optics was correct that women made up the majority of an optician’s clients, this may have been one reason why it was recommended.⁷³ Optometry also shared characteristics with many of the old and new professions considered appropriate for respectable middle-class women in the late nineteenth century. Like nursing, it was among the caring

⁷² *Canadian Druggist*, February 1899, 50; *JC&HR*, February 1, 1899, 42.

⁷³ Catalogue of the Klein School of Optics.

professions, while as a paramedical practice with scientific principles it was similar in some ways to medical laboratory work.⁷⁴ By encouraging women to work within a family environment, optometry may have also offered an alternative to clerical work and other white-collar office jobs, which were taken up by women in such numbers in this period.⁷⁵ It is significant that the promotional copy implies the supervision of a male family member, but Ernst, at least, was not restricted by this proscription. She worked at her father's store in Bridgewater, but she also had a peripatetic practice, which took her to Berwick in 1897, where she was available to "advise all those requiring anything in the optical line" and "also prepared to fit anyone requiring a glass eye." She also practiced in Charlottetown and Summerside, PEI.⁷⁶

Along with the credentials offered by colleges came a major shift in optical advertising. While eyeglasses and spectacles continued to be advertised for sale, a new form of advertising appeared in the late 1890s, in which the product on offer was primarily the service of an expert local optician. W. G. Maybee, president of the Canadian Association of Opticians, published his thoughts on advertising in the *Canadian Druggist* in 1901. Maybee argued that when placing an ad, an optician was not only advertising for himself, but for the profession as a whole—part of a concerted public awareness campaign. "A person has not to be educated that the M. D. is the person to go

⁷⁴ Kathryn McPherson, *Beside Matters: The Transformation of Canadian Nursing, 1900-1990* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1996); Twohig, *Labour in the Laboratory*.

⁷⁵ Kim England and Kate Boyer, "Women's Work: The Feminization and Shifting Meanings of Clerical Work," *Journal of Social History* 43, no. 2 (2009): 307–40. On various forms of white-collar work available to middle-class women, see Ruth A. Frager and Carmela Patrias, *Discounted Labour: Women Workers in Canada, 1870-1939* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 54–74.

⁷⁶ *Berwick Register*, April 7, 1897; *Charlottetown Guardian*, July 7, 1898. Ernst was not the only unconventional woman in her family; both her aunt Victoria Ernst and her father's cousin Alice Ernst were medical doctors. See obituary of Simeon Ernst, 1933, newsclipping, Ref file: Ernst, Simeon, DesBrisay Museum, Bridgewater.

to in case of illness, or the dentist when the teeth ache, or the lawyer when they are unfortunately embroiled in legal affairs,” he reminded readers, noting that opticians sought to be “placed on a similar professional basis with them.” Advertising would help to achieve this goal, educating the public “to the fact that the eyes are most delicate organs and that it is dangerous to use glasses on them that have not been fitted by a competent refractionist.” Good optical advertising should reveal “the dangers of neglected eye troubles and improperly fitted eyeglasses, and [convince the public] that the optician is as capable of handling and correcting cases of defective refraction as the oculist.” Above all, the author insisted, “show your callers that you are no common spectacle seller, but a student of the eye and its defects, and are equipped to correct them.”⁷⁷

While Laurance ostensibly gave local retailers the ability to test and correct visual acuity, by the 1890s the message of advertisers was clear that the practice of optometry required training; a real optician was a student of the eye. Among other qualifications, the proper use of the ophthalmoscope/retinoscope—the ability to visually interpret the illuminated eyeball—was a form of skilled vision. Here again we find the vision of Nova Scotians being shaped and disciplined, by new vision aids for many, and by formal training for a few. The context of this training—in an institution in a distant city and acquired for a price—was very different from nature-study teaching or the inculcation of agricultural aesthetics. But again, in the proliferation of optical advertising and the assertion of specialized credentials, we can see how attention to vision was inextricable from the project of modernity. The professionalization of Nova Scotian opticians in the

⁷⁷ *Canadian Druggist*, October 1901, 271–72.

years bracketing the turn of the century is clearly evident in the shifting character of their advertising—from spectacle sellers to students of the eye. And the entrenchment of the title of *optician* in popular discourse, however vague its meaning in professional terms, denoted a shifting dialogue about the status of vision and ocular expertise in these communities.

Buying Eyes!

It isn't an easy matter. The best oculists and opticians are not magicians, they cannot restore sight to the blind.

Don't wait to consult until you can't see, now is the time. Those little headaches and burning sensations are warnings that should be heeded. It is better too early than too late. Careful testing of your eyes by our optician free. Don't trust your eyes to strangers.

EASTWOOD, - - The Optician
New Glasgow, Nova Scotia.

Fig. 3.8 Advertisement, James Eastwood, *New Glasgow Eastern Chronicle*, January 20, 1898

Astigmatism or Irregular Sight

Is at once the most common, as well as the most troublesome, of eye defects.

Persons who are Astigmatic

See more clearly lines running in one direction than those running in the opposite direction.

Sometimes Objects are Distorted,

and seeing is only effected by a great exertion. In many cases not only are the muscles of accommodation strained, but also those which rotate the eyeballs in the various directions.

Guard your health by saving all unnecessary drain on your nerve energy. Eyes examined day or night.

R. B. Dakin,
OPTICIAN.

Fig. 3.9 Advertisement, R. B. Dakin, *Hants Journal*, February 20, 1901

Maybee's comments reflected a trend that was already underway; from the late 1890s, optical advertising in Nova Scotia was often constructed as a form of consumer education about eye care. Maybee suggested opticians should secure a prominent place in their local papers, change their ads regularly, and “take a subject every time and fill [the] space with an attractive talk on it.” These two advertisements provide a good illustration of this period of transition (figs. 3.8, 3.9). Beginning with a striking headline, this 1898

ad from Eastwood in New Glasgow is presented as a friendly advisory to the public about the dangers of delaying eye care. Acquiring replacement eyes “isn’t an easy matter,” it begins, with a reminder that even the best oculists and opticians “cannot restore sight to the blind.” Eastwood appeals to the public: “Don’t wait” to have the eyes tested; “those little headaches and burning sensations are warnings that should be heeded.” The ad concludes by informing the reader that eye tests are performed free of charge, and warns, “Don’t trust your eyes to strangers.” This advertisement placed in 1901 by optician R. B. Dakin in Windsor is topped with the same detailed eye he included in all of his ads that year—it is a cut that was used in optical advertising across the province (see an example from Yarmouth in fig. 3.7). The ad offers a “talk” on the subject of “astigmatism or irregular sight.” Dakin informs the reader that this condition “is at once the most common, as well as the most troublesome, of eye defects.” He provides a few words on symptoms and briefly explains the mechanics of the eye and how astigmatism causes strain on its various muscles, noting that for “persons who are astigmatic ... seeing is only effected by a great exertion.” “Guard your health,” he warns in conclusion, “by saving all unnecessary drain on your nerve energy.” Dakin offers eye exams “day or night.”

Informative though they might have been, the aim of these advertisement was of course still to entice the public into having their eyes tested and ultimately into purchasing glasses to address their defective eyesight. Though advertising opticians regularly insisted that glasses were only prescribed when needed, this would have been nearly always the outcome of eye exams performed on patients experiencing “burning sensations” or distorted vision. But while the desired result was the same—the sale of

glasses—these texts are rhetorically very different from those of earlier ads, for which the product for sale was eyeglasses explicitly. Most significantly, neither of these ads mentions eyeglasses or spectacles at all. Opticians did continue to advertise the sale of vision aids, but their total omission from these (and other) examples reflects a significant shift in the construction of value within the consumer economy of vision. These opticians and others like them across the province were positioning themselves as purveyors of eye care, not eyeglasses.

A number of other commenters in the *Canadian Druggist* wrote about the importance of quality advertising to the optical trade in this period. American optician R. N. Clark began by drawing attention to common problems:

We all know the value of newspaper advertising, but it seems to me many of the optical advertisements lack dignity worthy of the calling. Harping on the exceptional merits of Afghanistan crystal lenses, the possibility of curing every disease under the sun by means of glasses, or the permanent adaptation of the lenses to every change of accommodation (examples we are all familiar with), brings the advertiser too close to the realm of the quack doctor to win general favor and also brings the optician into disfavor with the local physicians, whose good-will he can usually secure if he tries, but cannot afford to lose.⁷⁸

This description of what to avoid in optical advertising is a checklist of the ads that had previously appeared in Nova Scotian newspapers. By contrast, Clark continued, “explanations of the general principles of ophthalmology [*sic*], illustration of new apparatus in use by the optician or descriptions of new frames, and difference between perfect and imperfect lenses, will interest and attract the public. Above all things, hit at some one thing in the advertisement, for a single idea well brought out is worth a dozen generalities.” Professional optical advertising was to be truthful, interesting, and, whenever possible, educational.

⁷⁸ *Canadian Druggist*, December 1899, 290.

Pioneering Toronto advertising agent J. P. McConnell also offered his thoughts on the question of optical advertising, concurring with the perspectives of those in the trade. “The publicity of an optician,” he wrote, “should be entirely educational. It should tend to enable people to know when they need glasses. Many people suffer from one ailment or another which can be traced directly to some defect of the sight. Yet the true cause is about the last one they think of. Parents should have the importance of their children’s sight impressed upon them” and “there are many people wearing glasses whose changing eye trouble requires change of glasses.” McConnell suggested “a good plan would be to prepare a series of optical ads. which should be consecutive in their educational purport. The local papers should be used freely, and, if possible, good cuts should be obtained to illustrate these ads.”⁷⁹

All of this commentary reveals the parallel professionalization of both optometry and advertising, a development that is exemplified by the proliferation of generic optical advertisements in use by local opticians. In the late 1890s, some opticians began running advertisements that, seen on their own, appear to be unique to a local business. Here are three examples from R. H. Trapnell in Windsor, E. E. Ernst in Bridgewater, and J. B. Pattillo in Sydney (fig. 3.10). These ads all follow the latest recommendations about professional messaging: an interesting cut, a bold title, and a simple, educational text about the importance of eye care and how a qualified optician might help. The reader is informed about the relationship between twitching eyelids and eyestrain, the importance of “modern optical appliances” for accurate provision of “eye aid,” and what should be done about “unequal eyes.” The ads appear to make reference to the unique

⁷⁹ *Canadian Druggist*, June 1901, 156.

services provided by the optician named. But brought together, their similarities in size, style, fonts, and vocabulary reveal they are generic advertising cuts.



Hants Journal, 1899

Bridgewater Bulletin, 1901

Sydney Daily Record, 1900

Fig. 3.10 Generic syndicated advertisements for opticians in Nova Scotian newspapers

These ads epitomize the growing influence of advertising as an industry and its transformative effect on newspapers, large and small. Booklets and samples of ads such as these were created by syndicated ad designers and sold to advertisers across North America through mail-order or through the same channels that they obtained their wholesale goods.⁸⁰ With these ads in mind, it must be assumed that any of the other ads discussed in this chapter are also the product of such outside influences. However, these ads also point to the standardization of optometry as a practice, which allowed mass-produced ads such as these to be meaningful locally. Like Laurance’s ads, the

⁸⁰ *Printers’ Ink* (New York), the primary trade periodical for the advertising industry in North America, ran advertisements for syndicated ad designers. They also included a monthly feature, “Ready-Made Advertisements,” which offered a few pages of sample texts and layout suggestions for ads for a wide range of products and services, including opticians.

advertisements in this section are the result of both local and outside influences; these are local articulations of an international trend. These ads are far from the bold claims of medicine shows, which sought to convince their audiences of the unique qualities of their products in contrast to those of their competitors. For opticians at the beginning of the new century, their commercial power was increasingly derived from the standardization and norms of their professional practice.

All of these advertisements joined forces with the popular advice literature discussed above in the columns of Nova Scotian newspapers. In his study of advertising in the 1930s, Roland Marchand notes that advertisers “discovered a vacuum of advice,” which gave them “the opportunity to dispense the needed counsel in conjunction with their product.”⁸¹ Advertisers did not create this culture, but exploited it. Marchand notes that alongside the proliferation of advice columns, “advertising advice offered consumers an increasingly desired feeling of competence,” particularly with reference to new technology, but also with matters of health and social etiquette.⁸² The context of these turn-of-the-century advertisements for local opticians is somewhat different, but here, too, is an effort to create a link in the consumer’s mind between helpful expert knowledge and the services of a particular advertiser. One commentator on optical advertising stressed that the advertiser “must cause the people to associate his name with good glasses so firmly that when glasses are needed his name comes to their mind at once.”⁸³ Advertising executives would later characterize this as a “premade decision.”⁸⁴

⁸¹ Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, 344.

⁸² Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, 352.

⁸³ *Canadian Druggist*, October 1899, 246.

⁸⁴ Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, 348.

This transition was also consistent with the rise of experts in many areas of Canadian life more generally. Medically-trained oculists and ophthalmologists, like other doctors, attempted to insert themselves as experts into expanding government bureaucracies, including public health and education policy. Opticians, who were increasingly well-trained but still unlicensed as a profession, as well as being the object of official scorn by the medical associations, were unlikely to receive such public appointments. Instead, they asserted their expertise locally, drawing support—and revenue—from their home communities by positioning themselves as experts in the relief of the very ordinary, and rather modern, ailment of “eye strain.”

The advertisements of opticians contributed to a broader popular conversation about the conditions of modern life that tended to weaken the eyes—and the whole bodily constitution along with it. “Eye strain should be the first thought suggested by any complaint of headache,” began one advice column in the *Yarmouth Herald*,

for in our day and civilization it is by far the most common cause of that symptom. ... Often it comes on whenever the eyes are used, and is absent when the eyes have had a proper season of rest. The occasions of most severe requirement in the direction of eye work are the doing of anything requiring accurate near vision, ... or traveling, shopping, attendance at public gatherings, which entail more use of the eyes than the patient is at the time conscious of.⁸⁵

The many diverse forms of gazing, inspecting, and looking at agricultural exhibitions described in chapter 2 were a rural context for these concerns. Modern eyes were being taxed, strained, and overwhelmed and consumers were increasingly informed that the solution was not simply the purchase of high-quality goods, but the service of a local eye expert. While this writer gave examples from their own personal experience, optical advertising from the period suggests that across Nova Scotia, the relief of eyestrain was

⁸⁵ *Yarmouth Herald*, November 19, 1890.

perceived to be a marketable service. Opticians responded—and contributed—to a growing public awareness and concern about eyestrain with ads that explained and offered relief for its holistic physiological implications.

Marchand notes that advertising agents preferred to avoid overly-technical and scientific explanations and language in favour of slogans that offered the consumer a comprehensible “formula for talking and thinking about the product.”⁸⁶ Similarly, Pamela Laird describes early twentieth-century “reason-why” advertising copy, which “encourag[ed] consumers to trust new products in a nearly unregulated marketplace,” in part by providing “a language and framework within which to think and talk about the products.”⁸⁷ One writer on optical advertising told readers, “Make your advertising convincing and truthful. When you make a statement, tell the why, show why the optician is necessary, show why cases of eye strain cause headache and if not taken care of cause nervous breakdown.”⁸⁸ While assuring consumers about the benefits of a product or service, these reason-why advertisements also gave the public “a manageable lexicon with which to feel expert and conversant” about them.⁸⁹ In the world of turn-of-the-century opticians, *eye strain* functioned as an advertising shorthand of this kind.

This was a significant development in the advertising of optical services. Beginning in the late 1890s, in addition to (and often rather than) improved visual acuity, optical consumers were regularly being sold pain relief.⁹⁰ And while explicitly medical terminology was occasionally used (as in Dakin’s astigmatism ad above), most ads

⁸⁶ Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, 350.

⁸⁷ Laird, *Advertising Progress*, 295.

⁸⁸ *Canadian Druggist*, February 1905, 91.

⁸⁹ Laird, *Advertising Progress*, 296–97.

⁹⁰ The first reference to eyestrain in the sample appears in 1897.

employed a more accessible—and therefore medically ambiguous—vocabulary that was consistent with popular discourse: eye strain, sore eyes, tired eyes, and headaches were regularly invoked. These were symptoms that anyone could recognize and which newspaper readers were commonly told to anticipate in a culture that frequently taxed the eyes. Advertisers attempted to connect the relief of these symptoms in the minds of the public to the purchase of services from a trained optician.

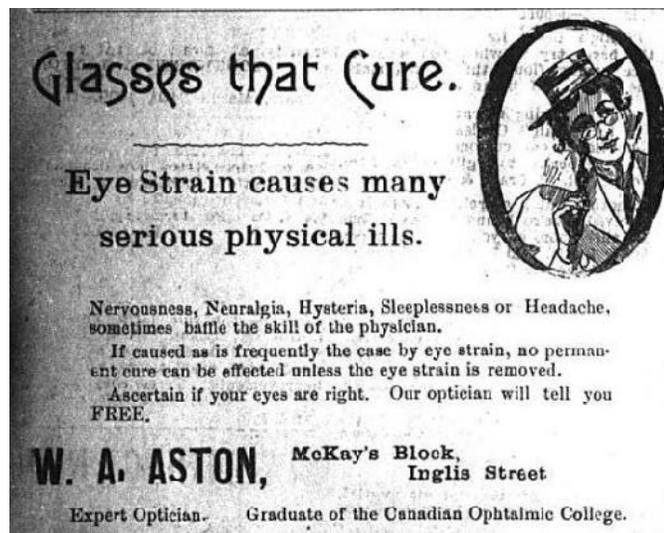


Fig. 3.11 Advertisement, W. A. Aston, *Truro Daily News*, June 29, 1899

W. A. Aston of Truro incorporated discussion of eye strain into his sequential advertising campaign in the summer of 1899 (fig. 3.11). “Glasses that Cure” are announced alongside a cut of a happy and fashionable young woman in handheld eyeglasses, a necktie, and a boater hat. The reader is reminded that “eye strain causes many serious physical ills. Nervousness, Neuralgia, Hysteria, Sleeplessness or Headache, sometimes baffle the skill of the physician” because they are frequently caused by eyestrain. Only an eye exam would do, performed free of charge by Aston, the “Expert

Optician.” Consistent with recommendations for optical advertising, Aston’s ads changed every week or so over the course of the summer, but maintained their location and the illustration of the woman. Throughout, Aston emphasized his “reputation [for] careful, conscientious eye-testing,” including recommending clients to a physician when appropriate. Topics included the importance of properly fitted frames, the importance of having the eyes examined early in order to save “much suffering and inconvenience in years to come,” and how undiagnosed eye defects “persistently tax ... the muscles of the eye.”⁹¹

Aston’s reference to hysteria and the illustration of the stylish young woman were not incidental. Indeed, many ads for opticians fit comfortably on the page with Lydia Pinkham and other remedies for “women’s complaints,” sharing much of the same vocabulary.⁹² As many of the comments above reveal, by the end of the century, concerns about the function of the eye were enmeshed in a broader discourse about the ailments of modern life, most notably forms of nervous exhaustion. The overstimulation of modernity, including new and increasing demands on visual acuity and attention, was perceived to be draining the “nerve energy” of Canadians, leading to a range of newly-diagnosed illnesses. Men were not immune and indeed their vulnerability to these conditions was central to the critiques of turn-of-the-century masculinity mentioned

⁹¹ *Truro Daily News*, July 8, 1899; *Truro Daily News*, July 13, 1899; *Truro Daily News*, July 10, 1899.

⁹² Denyse Baillargeon, “Medicine Advertising, Women’s Work, and Women’s Bodies in Montreal Newspapers, 1919-39,” in *Consuming Modernity: Gendered Behaviour and Consumerism before the Baby Boom*, ed. Cheryl Krasnick Warsh and Dan Malleck (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2013), 77–100; Elizabeth V. Burt, “From ‘True Woman’ to ‘New Woman’: An Analysis of the Lydia Pinkham ‘Animated Ads’ of 1890,” *Journalism History* 37, no. 4 (2012): 207–17; Sarah Stage, *Female Complaints: Lydia Pinkham and the Business of Women’s Medicine* (New York: Norton, 1979); Ann Douglas Wood, “‘The Fashionable Diseases’: Women’s Complaints and Their Treatment in Nineteenth-Century America,” *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 4, no. 1 (1973): 25–52.

above.⁹³ This ad was placed in 1905 by T. C. Grant in New Glasgow (fig. 3.12), one of a series of sequential ads he ran through 1904 and 1905, the most fully realized example of modern optical advertising in my sample.⁹⁴ In this particular ad, an anguished man in a collar and cuffed shirtsleeves presses his hand to his forehead adjacent to the headline “Help for Victims of Eyestrain.” The reader is told about the relationship between eyestrain and “headache, nervousness and insomnia” and warned that “drugs afford only temporary relief.” Again, an eye exam and “scientifically-adjusted glasses” were the solution.

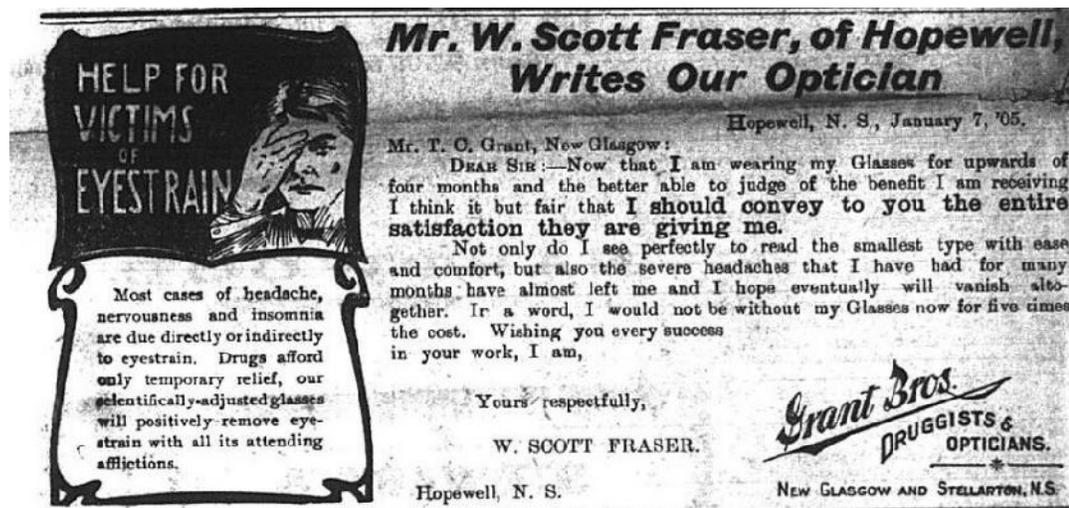


Fig. 3.12 Advertisement, T. C. Grant, *New Glasgow Eastern Chronicle*, January 24, 1905

This emphasis on connecting eyestrain to a range of other modern ailments in optical advertising must be contextualized within the culture of widespread skepticism about wearing eyeglasses described above. Was characterizing poor eyesight as an illness an attempt to make wearing glasses seem more acceptable, less like a matter of frivolous

⁹³ Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization*; Kasson, *Houdini, Tarzan, and the Perfect Man*; Mark S. Micale, *Hysterical Men: The Hidden History of Male Nervous Illness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

⁹⁴ Grant’s ads ran in the *New Glasgow Eastern Chronicle*, in direct competition with Samuel Eastwood, whose company’s ads had been running in the same newspaper since the early 1880s.

vanity? Or would this invocation of illness simply have provided additional fodder for those who believed wearing glasses was a sign of weakness in both body and character? It is difficult from this sample to draw conclusions about how opticians may have worked to challenge or mitigate such prejudices, but it is clear that the invocation of nervousness, headache, insomnia, and so on was an effort to attract a clientele beyond the traditional aging customers with their dimming eyesight. Eyeglasses might correct not only errors of visual acuity, but a range of other health problems. The sidebar in Grant's ad is a generic cut, further confirming the widespread use of eyestrain as a marketing shorthand for opticians.

Earlier ads for eyeglasses were not explicitly gendered and were frequently illustrated with eyes or eyeglasses, a trend that continued throughout the period of this study. Indeed, my overall newspaper sample suggests that the eye was one of the most commonly represented disembodied parts of the human body in turn-of-the-century newspapers. But modern ads for opticians also often included illustrations of either a man or a woman and ad copy that targeted concerns assumed to be unique to one group or the other.⁹⁵ It is clear that by segmenting their advertising audiences in this way, opticians were again targeting new demographics that might not previously have been inclined to

⁹⁵ There is only one advertisement in the sample that includes an image of a man and woman together. It is a generic cut, used by K. Bezanson, jeweller and optician, in Sydney. *Sydney Daily Record*, July 23, 1902. The gendering of advertising, and the broader category of consumer culture, has produced a substantial literature. For just a few representative titles, see Victoria De Grazia and Ellen Furlough, eds., *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Chris Dummitt, "Finding a Place for Father: Selling the Barbecue in Postwar Canada," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 9, no. 1 (1998): 209–23; Joy Parr, "What Makes Washday Less Blue? Gender, Nation, and Technology Choice in Postwar Canada," *Technology and Culture* 38, no. 1 (1997): 153–86; Jennifer Scanlon, ed., *The Gender and Consumer Culture Reader* (New York: NYU Press, 2000); Jennifer Scanlon, *Inarticulate Longings: The Ladies' Home Journal, Gender, and the Promises of Consumer Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Cheryl Krasnick Warsh and Dan Malleck, eds., *Consuming Modernity: Gendered Behaviour and Consumerism before the Baby Boom* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2013).

EYE GLASSES THAT BEAUTIFY



Eye-glasses may not always be becoming. Neither are headaches, bloodshot eyes, wrinkled eyebrows and half-closed lids. For any or all of them this may be the alternative. We adapt the style of glasses best suited to the face of each patron.

When Your Eyes Ache and Annoy You

That is the time to come and consult our expert. You'll find rest and relaxation for your tired eyes in the Glasses he will supply.

People fitted here send their friends to him.

Rather good evidence that they have been suited, isn't it? Poor Glasses are worse than none. They do positive injury to the eyes. It's easy to see good reasons then, for coming to a tried and proven expert. Why don't you.

See Him To-day and See Better.

Grant Bros. DRUGGISTS & OPTICIANS.
NEW GLASGOW AND STELLARTON, N.S.

THE FITTING OF GLASSES IS OF IMPORTANCE.



Some of the modern mountings would actually add to your personal appearance.

In the selection of Glasses,
Elegant appearance should not be ignored.

Is there anything you wear that is NOTICED MORE than your Glasses! This being so, don't wear an antiquated, out-of-date pair. Come here, where NEWER and BETTER methods prevail. Get fitted with STYLISH and ATTRACTIVE LOOKING frames. The LENSES will be RIGHT too. Our Optician is an expert—we know he is—other people know it too.

The people say: . . .

See Him To-day and See Better.

Grant Bros. DRUGGISTS & OPTICIANS.
NEW GLASGOW AND STELLARTON, N.S.

NO LOOSE SCREW ANNOYANCE



No loose screws annoyance experienced with the Royal Ajax Eye-glasses. All parts are firmly riveted. They are made partly in solid gold and partly in gold filled and guaranteed to wear ten years. The lenses rest on patent concave caps, which minimize breakage.

THOSE EYES OF YOURS!

Don't NEGLECT THEM! You owe it to yourself to have them examined periodically. Clear sight is necessary to your health and success. Our expert tests your vision without charge or fee of any kind. When Glasses are required he will supply them to suit your own particular needs. All work guaranteed.

This testimonial from Mrs. A. F. Grant, of Riverton, is interesting, dated March 9, 1906:

"The Glasses Mr. Grant has made for me are a great relief to my eyes. Mr. Grant was fitted by a Toronto firm of opticians, but HE IS FAR BETTER PLEASED WITH YOURS AND WISE BETTER."

Take Our Advice. Take Other People's Advice.

See Him To-day and See Better.

Grant Bros. DRUGGISTS & OPTICIANS.
NEW GLASGOW AND STELLARTON, N.S.

A YOUNG MAN'S SIGHT

is one of his most precious possessions. The fact that he was born with it sometimes makes him careless of its value. It is a great error which he will regret as he grows older.

If you have any trouble with your sight.

ATTEND TO IT NOW

Let our expert give your eyes a thorough examination—free of charge. If you need Glasses he will tell you so.

If you can do without them, he will tell you so, too.

Can you see anything but benefit in such a proposition.

Then—

See Him To-day and See Better.



Grant Bros. DRUGGISTS & OPTICIANS.
NEW GLASGOW AND STELLARTON, N.S.

Fig. 3.13 Advertisements, T. C. Grant, *New Glasgow Eastern Chronicle*, 1905

purchases eyeglasses. Further examples from Grant's series illustrate the distinctive ways that women and men were targeted by professional opticians (fig. 3.13).

The first features a headline with conventional concerns, "When Your Eyes Ache and Annoy You," beside a cut of a stylish woman and the text "Eye Glasses That Beautify." The text acknowledges that "Eyeglasses may not always be becoming," but women who might avoid glasses for this reason are chastised with the reminder "Neither are headaches, bloodshot eyes, wrinkled eyebrows and half closed lids." The next includes an illustration of a young woman in oversize glasses; the dark rectangle behind her suggests she is perhaps a teacher standing in front of a blackboard. Despite this positioning as a professional woman, the text of this ad is concerned foremost with her appearance. "Some of the modern mountings would actually add to your personal appearance," she is told, followed by the bolded text, "Elegant appearance should not be ignored." She is encouraged to "Get fitted with Stylish and Attractive Looking frames," and told, nearly as an afterthought, "The Lenses will be Right too." In both cases, these ads appeal to the ostensible vanity of young women, who might have avoided wearing glasses because of concerns for their appearance.

Men were targeted quite differently. In its emphasis on eyeglass frames, the first example may be read as a counterpart to the previous ad, but there is no mention of elegant appearance here. Instead, an annoyed-looking man holding a pair of glasses addresses the trouble with such devices from a technical standpoint. Rather than being ugly, eyeglasses here are acknowledged to be frequently of poor construction, leading to "loose screw annoyance." The high quality construction of Grant's glasses is explained: "all parts are firmly riveted" and they are made of gold and gold fill with "patent concave

caps.” In the text of the ad, men are reminded not to neglect their eyes due to the inconvenience of wearing shoddy glasses, and reminded that “Clear sight is necessary to your health and success.” In this formulation, eyeglasses were a piece of modern technology that would help a man get ahead in the world. By contrast, eyeglasses might help a woman look attractive. Another ad targeting men is somewhat more ambiguous. It features the headline “A Young Man’s Sight,” which the reader is told, “is one of his most precious possessions.” The illustration of a handsome young man in glasses glancing up from some papers gives the impression of someone doing important work, but also someone who is perhaps attentive to his own appearance as well. In the logic of modern advertising, men were not immune to vanity either. This gendering of advertising copy, both its proliferation in the generic cuts and its reproduction in Nova Scotian newspapers, is consistent with trends in advertising more broadly that stratified audiences into ever more specific markets, trends which would continue into the twentieth century. Optometry was no exception and indeed its incorporation of this type of messaging points again to the ways that optometry and the advertising industry emerged and professionalized together in the late nineteenth century.

Another important aspect of Grant’s series of ads—particularly for this study of rural vision—is the local content he added to the generic cuts and copy (see fig. 3.12). Grant occasionally ran testimonials from satisfied customers, including those in Pictou and New Glasgow, but also those in villages including Hopewell, Riverton, and Westville, Pictou County; St. Joseph’s, Antigonish County; and West Bay, Inverness County. Given the way that Grant was attempting to position himself as a respectable professional businessman within a tight-knit region of communities, there is very little

reason to suspect these testimonials were fabricated. The first testimonial in the series, from Rev. Robert Cumming of Westville, was most certainly real; Cumming was a well-known clergyman in Pictou County. All of the other testimonials seem to have been attributed to real people as well.⁹⁶ These testimonials therefore provide rare, if certainly imperfect, first-person evidence of rural Nova Scotians detailing their experiences with eyeglasses.

W. Scott Fraser of Hopewell reported, “Not only do I see perfectly to read the smallest type with ease and comfort, but also the severe headaches that I have had for many months have almost left me.” Other rural customers offered similar accounts. In their construction as endorsements for Grant, these testimonials made reference to prior experiences with glasses, including ongoing problems or frustrations in the past. Rev. Cumming recalled that while wearing his previous glasses, “when I read for any considerable length of time my eyes grew tired and sore. Now I can read as long as I please with ease and comfort without my eyes becoming tired.” Anna McDonald of St. Joseph’s complained, “Before I had my eyes tested by you they used to pain me a great deal, especially when I would take my glasses off at night.” Since wearing Grant’s glasses, McDonald found “a great improvement, not only in the seeing power of the glasses,” she also found some of her lost eyesight had been restored.⁹⁷ The commentary in these testimonials is consistent with the language and concerns of popular advice literature on the preservation of eyesight, in particular the attention to reading as a key preoccupation. These ads also confirm the local relevance of the attentions of optical

⁹⁶ There are a number of W. Scott Frasers in the area in the 1901 and 1911 censuses. I was able to confidently identify all of the others.

⁹⁷ Mr. and Mrs. A. F. Grant of Riverton and Alex McPhee of West Bay also wrote in to voice their satisfaction, without specific descriptive commentary.

advertising: clients might have sought improved visual acuity through the use of glasses, but they also sought pain relief. These testimonials suggest that at least some rural Nova Scotians were experiencing headaches, eye pain, and tired eyes, modern conditions that, advertisers claimed, could be improved through the expert prescription of glasses. These testimonials are mere fragments, but they nevertheless help to situate rural Nova Scotians in the broader international economy of vision.

By the turn of the century, opticians also produced a unified refrain carrying the message that everyone—men, women, and children—should have their eyes checked, and regularly, whether or not they recognized any defect in their vision. Spectacle sellers a decade before sought to convince newspaper readers who were considering the purchase of glasses to buy their unique products. Now advertising opticians were attempting to open new markets among those who might not have readily identified themselves with such products or services. Advertisements frequently suggested that many people either did not realize they were in need of eye care, or simply refused to acknowledge it, oversights that might mean the peril of their future vision. “Hundreds of people will read this advertisement today,” began Aston in 1899, “and refuse to be convinced that the warning contained herein applies to them.”

From 1880 to 1910, the advertisements and other representations of vision that appeared in small Nova Scotian newspapers were consistent with the messaging that appeared at the same time in urban and rural places across North America. The range of claims expressed in advertisements for vision aids and eye care services—claims to efficacy, authenticity, expertise, modernity—offers a clear illustration of a period of

transition, in which older models and ideas about vision and the preservation and care of eyesight existed alongside newer notions about vision science and modern life.

Professional opticians used their formally acquired skilled vision to discipline the eyes of their fellow Nova Scotians, shaping the eyesight of those who chose to wear glasses, while also shaping a shifting discourse about the meaning and value of vision and ocular expertise in rural communities. Optical advertising both built on and contributed to the inextricable connections between vision and the project of modernity.

Chapter 4

Seeing at Sea: Lighthouses, Sailors, and the Politics of Vision

In October 1897, the *Liverpool Advance*, a small regional newspaper in southwestern Nova Scotia, ran the following joke, titled “Reading the Signals,” reprinted from the *Washington Post*. Like those of so many others in the period, the butt of this joke was an Irishman, characterized as simple-minded and heavily accented. In this case, it was his identity as a landlubber in particular that was satirized.

The captain of one of the big schooners that bring ice from the Kennebec to Washington, tells a story of an Irishman he shipped. Pat wanted to get from Washington to Norfolk and had no money. His story excited the sympathy of the shipmaster, who finally agreed to let him work his passage.

Pat was willing, but densely ignorant of anything maritime and no real sea duty fell to him until the vessel was sailing down Chesapeake Bay with a fair wind and plenty of searoom. The captain then told Pat to take a turn at the lookout forward and instructed him to report promptly anything he might see. It was a clear night, and soon after the lookout took his position he sang out:

‘Ah, captain.’

‘Well, Pat.’

‘There is something out here before the boat.’

‘What is it?’ said the captain to test Pat’s seafaring knowledge, the lights of an approaching steamer being visible.

‘I rally couldn’t say for shure, sur,’ says Pat, ‘but there’s a red an a grane light, so I sushpect it’s a drugstore.’¹

On first pass, this joke is largely inscrutable and decidedly not funny. It therefore offers a good opportunity to consider the unfamiliarity of cultural signifiers and practices of the past. The fact that jokes might be incomprehensible to audiences beyond their original cultural context has been discussed by numerous historians, perhaps most notably by Robert Darnton in his attempt to unravel the humour in a cat massacre in eighteenth-

¹ *Liverpool Advance*, October 20, 1897.

century France.² But the unfamiliarity of the cultural practices in this joke extends beyond its humour. Reading this joke in the twenty-first century clearly reveals the existence of visual skills and signifiers particular to a specific late nineteenth-century cultural context.

To begin, there is Pat's association of red and green lights with a drugstore. Until the early twentieth century, pharmacists and apothecaries in North America and the UK displayed "show globes" in their front windows, or on either side of their front doors. These were glass balls filled with coloured liquids made by mixing chemicals kept on the premises; red and green was a typical combination, so was red and blue, single colours, and other combinations. Show globes were the pharmacy equivalent of a barber's striped pole: a widely recognized symbol advertising their location to anyone with the appropriate visual training to see it. This was a learned visual signifier specific to a particular time and place, one that has been largely lost.

The other form of specialized vision represented in this joke is of course the skilled vision of sailors: the ability of the captain, at a distance, to recognize and identify a ship *and* the direction in which it was travelling—he knew it was a steamer rather than a sailing ship, and that it was an *approaching* steamer—simply by the particular arrangement of the lights it carried at night. This was a skill the captain took for granted as a basic element of "seafaring knowledge." When Pat was asked "What is it?," this wasn't an open-ended question; he was being asked whether the approaching ship

² Robert Darnton, "Workers Revolt: The Great Cat Massacre of the Rue Saint-Séverin," in *The Great Cat Massacre: And Other Episodes in French Cultural History*, by Robert Darnton (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 75–106.

travelled under canvas or steam. The punchline rested on the revelation of Pat's lack of appropriately skilled vision, marking him as ridiculous and an outsider.

If we understand vision as cultural, as learned and changing and specific to context, we can also think about it as open to contestation, as political. In this chapter, "the politics of vision" includes political wrangling about the eyesight of sailors, their skilled practices of vision, and the maintenance and regulation of the illuminated, coloured, and acoustic infrastructure that they used to make their way through the waters along and off the coast of Nova Scotia. The late nineteenth century saw an ever-increasing rate of steamship traffic on the Atlantic coast of Canada, as elsewhere in the world, and along with the greater speed, size, and number of vessels came an increased potential for accidents. Having taken over responsibility for existing navigation infrastructure at Confederation, the Canadian government continued in an unsystematic way to update and expand the network, installing and standardizing lighthouses, buoys, foghorns, and other devices in mostly remote, rural locations along the coasts. Canadian sailors also followed shifting British and international regulations regarding onboard navigation signals, such as the red and green lights the captain identified in his anecdote.

The history of seafaring is a transnational story, and while there was certainly a great deal of transoceanic shipping going on in Nova Scotia in the late nineteenth century, the majority of movement was always along the coast and to the offshore banks, between the communities where infrastructure such as lighthouses and buoys was installed, and which were home to many sailors and fishermen. Recent scholarship in maritime history has highlighted the interrelation between land and sea in cultures of seafaring, with particular emphasis on the concept of the port town and what historian

Isaac Land has called “coastal history.”³ This chapter contributes a rural dimension to this revisioning of boundaries in maritime history and at the same time it encourages a more capacious understanding of rurality in Canada, moving beyond histories that prioritize agricultural lives and places. Moreover, it foregrounds the place of vision in the history of seafaring.

This chapter locates rural Nova Scotians and their communities in the very modern world of seafaring and state formation in the late nineteenth century. Navigation signals installed and maintained by the Canadian government were a key locus of interaction between rural communities and federal politicians and bureaucrats. Local people petitioned the government for new lighthouses, pestered their elected officials to do something about the poor maintenance of buoys, gave testimony at government inquiries, and in general participated in conversations about the changing state of shipping and seafaring that was transforming their communities. Many were sailors themselves, who found their eyesight increasingly under the scrutiny of the state. The politics of vision therefore saw people from rural coastal communities drawn into transnational currents and encountering the effects of modernity in a variety of locally-specific ways. This was not an urban story of modernity that made its way to the countryside.

³ Brad Beaven, Karl Bell, and Robert James, eds., *Port Towns and Urban Cultures: International Histories of the Waterfront, c.1700—2000* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); John R. Gillis, *The Human Shore: Seacoasts in History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Isaac Land, “Tidal Waves: The New Coastal History,” *Journal of Social History* 40, no. 3 (2007): 731–43. The classic work on this topic is Judith Fingard, *Jack in Port: Sailortowns of Eastern Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982).

Visibility at Sea

The eyesight of sailors has long been celebrated for its extraordinary acuity over long distances.⁴ A form of skilled vision, the ability to see objects on a distant horizon is acquired and developed through the regular practice of careful watching and looking. For experienced sailors in late nineteenth-century Nova Scotia, these unique visual skills were part of a holistic, multi-sensory embodiment of seafaring knowledge and awareness that heightened certain aspects of their perception. Joy Parr highlights the ways that bodies are oriented by particular environments and routines through “the tuning of the senses and the honing of habit and reflex” and the development of “specific modes of bodily attention and perception.”⁵ Cristina Grasseni’s notion of skilled visions is likewise conceptualized as “the action of a body in an environment, ... as a form of practical, emotional, and sensual knowledge.”⁶ In his study of the Atlantic Canadian merchant marine, Eric Sager writes, “knowledge of the vessel and its working parts was so deeply ingrained in the experienced seaman as to be part of the unconscious mind.” Sager notes that sailors had remarkable vision, including night vision, but emphasizes that “sailors also worked without the benefit of sight, when the weather [such as dense fog] made vision the least useful of human senses.” In his daily tasks aboard ship, “the experienced seaman relied on his sense of touch (one rarely found gloves among a seaman’s personal

⁴ Classic works that refer to the famed vision of sailors include Richard Henry Dana, *Two Years Before the Mast* (1840; New York: Modern Library, 2001), 94–95; Charles Darwin, *The Voyage of the Beagle* (1839; New York: Modern Library, 2001), 185–86. Alain Corbin writes that in nineteenth-century France, “sailors were admitted to be keen-eyed.” Alain Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odor and the French Social Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 147.

⁵ Joy Parr, *Sensing Changes: Technologies, Environments, and the Everyday, 1953-2003* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010), 2, 4.

⁶ Cristina Grasseni, “Skilled Visions: Toward an Ecology of Visual Inscriptions,” in *Made to Be Seen: Perspectives on the History of Visual Anthropology*, ed. Marcus Banks and Jay Ruby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 20.

effects) and on a highly developed tactile memory, and these were parts of his knowledge and skill.”⁷ Fishermen likewise used tactile perception to assess the many invisible aspects of their work. Journalist Frederick William Wallace, who wrote extensively about his experiences shipping on Nova Scotian fishing schooners in the early twentieth century, noted the heightened tactile awareness of dory fishermen on the offshore banks: “Though their eyes gave them no tangible evidence, yet in the setting and hauling of their trawls they ascertained certain facts. The feel transmitted from below through the sensitive lines to their hands, arms and physical senses, gave them an uncanny insight as to what was the nature of things in the watery void and on the bottom.”⁸ When steering a sailing ship, a sailor used a range of perceptions, including visually observing the motion and luff of the sails, watching the adjacent compass, feeling the wind and the weight of the helm pulling or slackening, and listening for the sounds of the ship and the wind.

The requirement for ships to carry lights at night, brought about by the emergence of steam travel, fundamentally altered the visibility of seafaring. Before the second quarter of the nineteenth century, ships did not carry lights, and it was not until the middle of the century that it became mandatory for all British ships, whether under canvas or steam, to carry particular arrangements of red, green, and white coloured lights. For sailing ships, the priority of nighttime navigation had always been to keep a clear-eyed lookout for natural dangers along the coast—to see rather than to be seen. Lights on the deck were detrimental to the night vision of the watch and were thus avoided. This prioritization of “lookout over lights” is justified by John Wilde Crosbie’s analysis of

⁷ Eric W. Sager, *Seafaring Labour: The Merchant Marine of Atlantic Canada, 1820-1914* (Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1989), 127.

⁸ Wallace quoted in M. Brook Taylor, *A Camera on the Banks: Frederick William Wallace and the Fishermen of Nova Scotia* (Fredericton, NB: Goose Lane Editions, 2006), 61–62.

nineteenth-century *Lloyds* returns, which shows that collisions at sea accounted for only one percent of all wrecks in 1818–19.⁹ It was far more important for sailing ships to create conditions that facilitated and enabled the famed long-distance vision of sailors, than it was to make themselves visible to others on the sea. However, by the 1830s, the number of collisions had risen significantly.¹⁰ While sailing ships were all beholden to the same winds and tides, the ability of steamships to plot courses at will and to overtake becalmed sailing ships made their movements unpredictable and frequently dangerous to those around them. The visual priorities of maritime navigation slowly shifted to emphasize visibility rather than onboard vision.

By the last decades of the nineteenth century, that ships would carry lights at night was taken for granted, but the rules regarding their arrangement and display continued to be refined as traffic increased in both speed and volume. The regulation of shipping in the coastal and offshore waters around Canada remained under the jurisdiction of British maritime law, set out in the Merchant Shipping Acts.¹¹ The standards for lights and acoustic signals were part of a broader set of regulations for avoiding collisions, known collectively and internationally as the Rules of the Road.¹² Pat's captain was able to read a particular arrangement of lights—distant specks of colour against the darkness—feel confident he was seeing an approaching steamship, and adjust

⁹ John Wilde Crosbie, "Lookout Versus Lights: Some Sidelights on the Dark History of Navigation Lights," *Journal of Navigation* 59, no. 1 (2006): 2.

¹⁰ Crosbie, "Lookout Versus Lights," 2.

¹¹ This began to shift with the first *Canada Shipping Act* in 1906, which still largely replicated British law but nevertheless tentatively asserted Canadian jurisdiction over the regulation of coastal waters.

¹² The first of such rules were established in British law in 1848. They were subsequently adopted by the United States and disseminated internationally. In 1867, Thomas Gray published his well-known pamphlet of mnemonics titled "The Rule of the Road" or "The Rules in Rhyme," later republished with extended commentary as Thomas Gray, *Observations on the Rule of the Road at Sea* (London: J.D. Potter, C. Wilson, Kent & Co., Pewtress & Co., 1878).

his schooner's behaviour accordingly. Likewise, looking out from the deck of that steamer, an experienced seaman would have recognized the lights he saw in the distance as a ship under sail, been able to ascertain its tack, and made any adjustments necessary to follow the steering rules for passing ships set out in the Rules of the Road. At least this was the ideal.

Although the long-distance eyesight of many sailors was no doubt excellent and well trained, much about seafaring in the late nineteenth century was in fact a battle against invisibility. The eyes of even the most experienced sailor were at a loss to perceive the many dangers that lurked below the surface of the ocean, or those that hid behind veils of thick fog. The ironbound coasts of Nova Scotia are rocky and often irregular, composed of jagged fingers of land and coastal archipelagos; their offshore waters conceal reefs, submerged rocks, sand bars, shoals, and other unexpected shallow features. The entrances of many harbours are narrow and tricky and, once inside them, tight, often-shifting channels lead through shallow passages requiring careful steering before opening to deeper waters and safe anchorages. These are some of the obstacles to navigation on a clear day with moderate weather. In storms, during particularly high or low tides, in rough seas or icy waters, or on moonless nights the visibility of the entire coast is compromised. In dense fog, the coast is invisible.

Nineteenth-century sailors described thick, visually impenetrable banks of fog engulfing them. Joshua Slocum was not a typical sailor, but his description of sailing east from the coast of Nova Scotia into the fogs around Sable Island in 1895 would have been familiar to many of his contemporaries:

[July 3] There are many beacon lights along the coast. ... I watched light after light sink astern as I sailed into the unbounded sea, till Sambro, the last of them all, was below the horizon.

[July 4] At 9:40 P. M. I raised the sheen only of the light on the west end of Sable Island, which may also be called the Island of Tragedies. The fog, which till this moment had held off, now lowered over the sea like a pall. I was in a world of fog, shut off from the universe. I did not see any more of the light.

[July 5] About midnight the fog shut down again denser than ever before. One could almost “stand on it.” It continued so for a number of days [I]n the dismal fog I felt myself drifting into loneliness, an insect on a straw in the midst of the elements.¹³

Given that Slocum was setting out to sail alone around the world, his reference here to loneliness underscores the extent to which thick fog—the feeling of being “shut off from the universe” through the inability to see beyond the edges of his boat—had a profound affective resonance for him.

The extent to which fog could completely obscure the vision of even the keenest-eyed sailor was frequently revealed when it suddenly lifted to expose obstructions—or other ships—dangerously close at hand. When Frederick Wallace joined the crew of the Digby schooner A. J. Lutz for a halibutting trip to Anticosti Island in the spring of 1913, they approached the Magdalen Islands in fog “thick as mud”:

[At 5 a.m.] we found the schooner driving through a dense fog in a fresh breeze All hands on deck skinning their eyes for the Islands. 7 a.m. Someone reported hearing the breakers, and with startling suddenness, Grand Entry Island—a huge block of rock 530 feet high—loomed out of the smother a scant cable’s length away. ... 10.30 a.m. The fog lifted as suddenly as a curtain and disclosed the land of Amherst Island about 3 miles away. Around us lay thirty vessels at anchor—all waiting for the fog to lift in order that they may get inshore to the herring traps.¹⁴

¹³ Joshua Slocum, *Sailing Alone Around the World* (1900; Dobbs Ferry, NY: Sheridan House, 1954), 24, 26. Slocum, who was from Nova Scotia, is famous as the first person to circumnavigate the globe alone. His memoir was an international bestseller.

¹⁴ F. William Wallace, “The Log of a High Line Halibuter,” *Canadian Fisherman*, January 1914, 22–23. The date of the trip is provided by Taylor, *A Camera on the Banks*, 38.

Shoals and rocks and blankets of fog. Coastal navigation in the late nineteenth century was the daily task of inscribing a system of visibility upon the many invisible dangers that put lives and capital at risk on the ocean. Although there were certainly exceptions, coastal shipwrecks and groundings were far more likely to cost money (through loss of cargo, repairs to vessels, and shipping delays) than they were to cost lives. Seafarers in late nineteenth-century Nova Scotia, as elsewhere in the world, went to sea with a variety of navigational tools to aid their perception, including compasses, sextants, chronometers, lead sounders (weighted lines for determining the depth of water), and other onboard devices, all of which helped to determine a ship's course and location. Observations were recorded in the ship's log at regular intervals. Thomas Gray's 1878 *Observations on the Rule of the Road at Sea* included the mnemonic *L. L. L. L.* "for four things which I must never neglect; and these things are Lead, Log, Latitude, and Look-out." He summarized, "the Lead warns me against dangers invisible, the Log warns me against false distances, the Latitude helps to define my position, and the Look-out warns me against dangers visible."¹⁵ These tools were used in conjunction with increasingly-detailed Admiralty charts, which claimed to make the coasts legible and predictable from a distance. Essential to this system, and to the safe circulation of coastal traffic, was a network of illuminated, coloured, and acoustic navigation aids, including lighthouses, buoys, and foghorns. All of these technologies were responses to the vagaries and limitations of human vision—limitations that had always existed, but which were made more urgent by the modernization of shipping and the networks of capital it supported.

¹⁵ Gray, *Observations on the Rule of the Road at Sea*, 20.

Lighthouses and Local Knowledge

Following James Scott's notion of "seeing like a state," Eric Tagliacozzo describes how the installation of a network of lighthouses in Southeast Asia contributed to the imperial state's ability to guide and shape the traffic and capital that flowed through its waters, while also acting as tangible markers of colonial state presence.¹⁶ Likewise, lighthouses in rural Nova Scotia were technologies of state making, staking a physical and visible claim to the coast. But like the imperial governments that Tagliacozzo describes, Canadian politicians and bureaucrats displayed a marked ambivalence for actually spending the money that was required to install this infrastructure. The coasts of Nova Scotia in the late nineteenth century were far from the "grid of colonial vision" proposed by Tagliacozzo.¹⁷ Instead, they were a patchwork of old and new technologies—of light and darkness, both literally and metaphorically. Lighthouses were not projects of high modernism, but they were technologies of government, technologies of rule. Records of the Department of Marine regarding lighthouses for the period were not well archived, but the documentation that is available reveals a series of complicated interactions between local knowledge, government bureaucracy, and the demands of industry and international shipping to make coastlines safe by making them legible. Within this context, lighthouses and other navigation aids could also be pawns in political maneuvering.

¹⁶ Eric Tagliacozzo, "The Lit Archipelago: Coast Lighting and the Imperial Optic in Insular Southeast Asia, 1860-1910," *Technology and Culture* 46, no. 2 (2005): 306–28; James C. Scott, *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

¹⁷ Tagliacozzo, "The Lit Archipelago," 308. On the politics of lighthouses, see also Roy Macleod, "Science and Government in Victorian England: Lighthouse Illumination and the Board of Trade, 1866-1886," *Isis* 60 (1969): 4–38; Michael Brian Schiffer, "The Electric Lighthouse in the Nineteenth Century: Aid to Navigation and Political Technology," *Technology and Culture* 46, no. 2 (2005): 275–305.

On June 16, 1887, Hon. Thomas Robertson, Liberal MP for Shelburne, stood in the House of Commons to request that Prime Minister Macdonald's Conservative government, and the Minister of Marine and Fisheries, Hon. George Foster, attend to the poor state of navigation signals in his riding in southwestern Nova Scotia. He began by noting that Shelburne lighthouse was not "in the condition it should be" and "seafaring men" had asked him to bring the matter to the attention of the minister.¹⁸ Robertson's frustrations were palpable and his comments on the Shelburne lighthouse prefaced more extensive remarks on government inaction, laced through with unambiguous accusations of partisanship and political chicanery.

Robertson next brought up the subject of the long-sought automatic buoy for Lockeport: "As far back as 1881, I directed the attention of the department to this, and forwarded to it a petition numerous signed by the residents of the county, and by leading merchants in Halifax interested in the trade of Lockeport." Lockeport, he explained, was a busy port, "one of the most important outside of Lunenburg, in western Nova Scotia ... frequented by a large number of fishing vessels, schooners and brigs." But so far no action had been taken on the subject. Likewise, the same year, "in 1881, a petition was presented to the department for [a lighthouse at West Head, Barrington Passage] and that petition was signed by the master mariners, ship owners, and people who know something about the locality." Unfortunately, Robertson noted, "these gentlemen had no weight or influence with [the Conservative government]," which had been in place since 1878. He also mentioned subsequent efforts on his part to have the lighthouse built, including discussions with sitting ministers in 1882 and 1884.¹⁹ The

¹⁸ Canada, *House of Commons Debates*, June 16, 1887.

¹⁹ Canada, *House of Commons Debates*, June 16, 1887.

previous week, on June 6, Robertson (in absentia) had raised the topic in the House once more, and was not the only person surprised to learn that construction of the West Head lighthouse was to begin later that year. Unsolicited, the Minister offered by way of explanation that the issue had been “earnestly pressed by Major Laurie,” the Conservative candidate whom Robertson had defeated in the general election the past winter. No mention was made of the previous petitions or Robertson’s own efforts.²⁰

The election had returned Macdonald’s Conservatives to power with their fourth majority. Robertson was re-elected to the seat he had held since 1878, but the results in the riding had been contested and a by-election was called; Robertson and Laurie were set to face off again later that year. With this situation in mind, on June 11, the Liberal MP for Halifax, Hon. Archibald Jones, returned to the subject of the West Head lighthouse, accusing the minister not only of partisanship, but of impropriety in the House. Foster’s comments were, he argued, an “improper, highly improper, answer” to Robertson’s question about the lighthouse. “I think he will search in vain the annals of Parliament . . . to find any such announcement ever made by a Minister of the Crown in this House, that, on the recommendation of a person who had contested a county and been defeated, they were going to make an appropriation for a public work in the county which he could not represent.” Hon. James Lister, Liberal MP for Lambton West, continued the criticism, arguing that the Conservatives knew “the answer made by the Minister [would] have an effect upon the electors of that county” and “the motive and object for which it was made are perfectly obvious to every person.” The answer “insulted [Robertson], insulted the constituency.” The remainder of the day was spent in

²⁰ Canada, *House of Commons Debates*, June 6, 1887.

raucous debate about appropriate limits on patronage in public works, with members airing a litany of complaints about opposition ridings passed over for post offices and other public buildings.²¹

The local *Cape Sable Advertiser*, which regularly reported on the ongoing neglect of navigation signals in the area, supported Robertson and ran a two column extract of his comments from *Hansard* under the title “Shelburne Slighted; How a Paternal Government Punishes an Opposition County by Ignoring its Petitions.”²² Robertson was nevertheless defeated by Laurie in the December by-election by a margin of eight votes (1083 to 1075). Both the West Head lighthouse and the automatic buoy for Lockeport were put into operation the following spring; the Shelburne lighthouse also received its necessary repairs.²³ Lighthouses and other navigation aids were political. On the coasts of late nineteenth-century Nova Scotia, vision was political.

Unlike post offices and many other federal buildings, which were built in the larger population centres of a region, lighthouses and buoys were substantial public works projects installed in mostly remote, rural locations. They were therefore a key site of interaction between coastal rural communities and the federal government, and fundamental to the process of state formation in those places. As Robertson argued, these locations were not isolated from or irrelevant to Canadian politics: “Situated as it [is] on the south-west shore of Nova Scotia, on a rocky and dangerous coast, the wants of the constituency, especially as come under the Department of Marine are not so much those

²¹ Canada, *House of Commons Debates*, June 11, 1887.

²² *Cape Sable Advertiser* (Barrington), July 7, 1887.

²³ Canada, Department of Marine and Fisheries, *Annual Report for the Year Ended June 30, 1888* (Ottawa: Queen’s Printer, 1889), 8, 13, 12.

of my own constituents as those of the marine of Canada and of the world.”²⁴ Rural places and their navigation infrastructure were essential nodes in national and international networks.

The exchanges about the West Head lighthouse offer clues to the political process by which navigation aids were, gradually and unsystematically, installed and maintained in rural communities along all of Canada’s coasts in the late nineteenth century. In 1904, a Lighthouse Board made up of civil servants was created within the Department of Marine to streamline and ostensibly reduce partisanship in the system. But the process remained essentially the same. As shipping increased or changed in character, either in terms of the types of vessels or their purpose, local “seafaring men”—“people who know something about the locality”—petitioned their elected officials (and later the relevant bureaucrats) for government intervention and often waited in vain for action while public safety and, more commonly, private capital, were put at risk.

Longstanding local conditions became unacceptable with changes to shipping. In 1910, the Department of Marine and Fisheries received a letter “in which it is stated that the inside range lights at Cheticamp, N.S., built long ago when traffic was less important, and vessels going in and out of less dimensions, have been placed with a big barn standing between the two lights and right in range.” Range lights are located in pairs along dangerous waterways and, when aligned from the deck of a vessel, provide a bearing to guide traffic through narrow channels. For smaller vessels and local navigators, the barn was of little concern, but “with a boat 240 ft. long, both day and night, they have to be guided by the range lights as well as the buoys, and particularly

²⁴ Canada, *House of Commons Debates*, June 16, 1887.

going out,” they were “said to be practically unworkable.”²⁵ Two months later, the department received another letter, this one from Capt. W. A. Murphy of Halifax, reporting “a new house being built in front of the lower range light ... in to Cheticamp Harbor. This is a very particular light for a few feet either way will put a vessel on the Rocks.”²⁶ A letter was also received from the owner of the house, requesting compensation if he had to alter his plans to accommodate the lights, and implying an ambivalence about the function of these navigation aids that complicates how we might read the zeal evinced by most other commentators.²⁷ It is clear that not everyone felt visual aids for non-local traffic should be a foremost priority of their communities. There is no evidence that the lights were moved (all changes to lights were well-documented and reported in official Notices to Mariners), which suggests that the barn and house were required to make way, but it is unclear if compensation was offered for this.

While individuals were perhaps unlikely to be accommodated, industry was a different matter. When an improved lighthouse was requested for Port Hood in 1908, it was to facilitate the movement of the booming coal industry in Inverness County, as well as a response to changes that the industry had wrought upon the waterfront of Port Hood. Captain P. C. Johnson, Superintendent of Lights for Nova Scotia under the new Lighthouse Board, wrote in his report that “the building and lantern were erected 54 years ago” and “the shipping at Port Hood has greatly increased since the coal mines were opened” and changes to the light “would be in the interest of navigation.” In this case,

²⁵ Library and Archives Canada, Halifax, Lighthouse Collection, RG12, H93-GA08-00, Box 16, 8010-481, East Harbour Light, letter to Agent, Marine and Fisheries, Halifax, from G. J. Desbarats, Deputy Minister of Marine and Fisheries, Ottawa, March 12, 1910. (Hereafter LAC Lighthouse Collection.)

²⁶ LAC Lighthouse Collection, Box 16, 8010-481, East Harbour Light, letter to Chas. H. Harvey, Halifax, from Capt. W. A. Murphy, Halifax, May 31, 1910.

²⁷ LAC Lighthouse Collection, Box 16, 8010-481, East Harbour Light, letter to Agents, Department of Marine and Fisheries, Ottawa, from Paul W. Deveau, Cheticamp, June 10, 1910.

Johnson recommended the installation of a more powerful, occulting (intermittent) light, to replace the fixed light currently in place, as well as the installation of an updated lantern to house the light. This was a fairly straightforward example of infrastructure modernization, but the local conditions which demanded it in this case were somewhat unusual. The new lantern and brighter light were needed because “within 300 yards of the light there is a bank of dust coal, continually smoking; the dust from which turns the silvered parts of the reflectors black.”²⁸ The busy local mining industry both necessitated improved navigation infrastructure and also complicated its use. Johnson made this remark without comment and there is no evidence in the limited documentation that an effort was made to have the smoking pile removed, or that relocating the lighthouse was considered. In early twentieth-century Inverness County, coal was king.

The importance of the Inverness coal industry was indisputable, but it is clear that local negotiations were not always so straightforward and that departmental staff did not always agree with the assessments of local mariners regarding the need for improved navigation aids, even where industry was the leading motivation. In the village of Wallace, Cumberland County, it was sandstone that was king; quarries were established early in the nineteenth century and increasingly professionalized in the later part of the century, with an attendant increase in shipping from the village. In 1901, the Department of Marine and Fisheries received a petition signed by local master mariners, requesting a new set of range lights “at a place known locally as the Middle ground,” a “dangerous place ... not at all safe-guarded” by the current set of range lights at the entrance of the harbour. The petitioners insisted this was “a matter which for the safety of vessels

²⁸ LAC Lighthouse Collection, Box 185, 8010-496, Port Hood, NS, letter to Agent, Marine and Fisheries, Halifax, from P. C. Johnson, Superintendent of Lights, July 24, 1908.

incoming and outgoing to Wallace is of the utmost importance.” The new lights “would ensure safety to navigation” and “would be of much benefit to the port of Wallace.”²⁹ No mention of the stone quarries was made, but this was undoubtedly the impetus for the petition.

Superintendent of Lights, C. A. Hutchins, was not entirely convinced. Asked to report on the issue, he acknowledged, “doubtless, the establishment of two Range Lights ... would be a valuable aid to strangers desirous of proceeding up the channel to the Middle Shoal, but I understand that nearly all the vessels frequenting this port are run by people who are familiar with its navigation, and no accident, as far as I can learn, has occurred. If it can be shown to be otherwise, then the additional Range Lights asked for would afford efficient guides.” He continued, “I am informed that at present, quite a number of small vessels are engaged freighting stone from Wallace to Souris [Prince Edward Island] for the construction of a breakwater ... but the nominal amount of shipping at this port is not large.”³⁰ Evidently it was “shown otherwise,” as two years later, Hutchins visited Wallace, conferred with local merchants, the harbour master, and “several local captains,” and submitted a report recommending the location and character of the new range lights.³¹ They were put into operation in the fall of 1904.

This correspondence about the range lights in Wallace Harbour, however limited, offers interesting examples of some of the ways that the local knowledge of rural coastal communities was engaged in complicated conversations with the state via its agents.

²⁹ LAC Lighthouse Collection, Box 186, 8010-520, Wallace Harbour, NS, petition addressed to the Minister of Marine &c, Ottawa, signed by master mariners of Wallace, Nova Scotia, February 15, 1901.

³⁰ LAC Lighthouse Collection, Box 186, 8010-520, Wallace Harbour, NS, letter to Department of Marine and Fisheries from C. A. Hutchins, Superintendent of Lights, SS *Newfoundland*, Northumberland Strait, August 5, 1901.

³¹ LAC Lighthouse Collection, Box 186, 8010-520, Wallace Harbour, NS, letter to Agent, Department of Marine and Fisheries, Halifax, from C. A. Hutchins, Superintendent of Lights, Halifax, August 28, 1903.

Local mariners in Wallace insisted on the need for external visual aids to facilitate navigation of the Middle ground, using the colloquial name for this invisible, officially-unnamed feature of their neighbourhood seascape. But Hutchins was reluctant to take them on their word. In his initial report, he refused to use the local name of the place, referring instead alternately to “the Middle Bar” and “the Middle Shoal.” He included a tracing of the relevant nautical chart, specifying that the area in question was “marked ‘Red Clay and Weed.’”³² His report gave a detailed account of the buoys in the harbour and explained how a ship was ideally intended to navigate its waters. Disputing the opinions of local captains, Hutchins asserted the authority of official knowledge and its paper idealizations. However, he also insisted it was local knowledge that made the additional lights unnecessary. If vessels in the harbour were to be commanded chiefly by “people who are familiar with its navigation,” people for whom local knowledge of the invisible dangers of the place went hand in hand with their colloquial names, no government expenditure was necessary. In effect, the requested infrastructure was not *for* the local population, but was to facilitate the circulation of capital across wider networks in which Wallace was just one node. When it was decided that the lights were to be installed, local people were again called upon for their knowledge of the area, though the final decision about where to locate the lights remained with Hutchins. It is perhaps notable that after visiting Wallace, he used the name Middle Ground to describe the location under discussion.³³ The name was also given something of an official sanction in

³² Hutchins letter, August 5, 1901.

³³ Hutchins letter, August 28, 1903.

the Notice to Mariners issued by the department when the new lights were put into operation.³⁴

The establishment of the Lighthouse Board in 1904 may, perhaps, have reduced the influence of patronage on the administration of navigation signals, but it also added new layers of bureaucracy that further complicated the relationship between local communities and the state. The installation of new range lights on Mabou Harbour in 1908 led to a dispute between the Chief Engineer of Public Works, E. C. Millidge, and the Nova Scotia Superintendent of Lights, P. C. Johnson, in which the latter seems to have acted as an advocate for the local community in order to oppose his colleague's plans. Meanwhile, the use of dredging machines by Public Works to widen, deepen, and straighten difficult channels and remove underwater obstructions had the potential to negate local knowledge gained through years of experience and the observation of a particular environment, by literally remaking that environment through technological intervention.

In late May 1908, Johnson was called to Mabou, where "some of the people of that place protested against placing the Range Lights on the sites chosen by Mr. Millidge." He conferred with local mariners, harbour pilots, and "different people," about the use of the harbour, in particular its limited use at night. With the help of local sailors, Johnson located the harbour channel and found he agreed that the sites for the planned range lights had been improperly located. He claimed that following the plan submitted by Millidge "would be very dangerous," that it "would not lead over the bar in the deepest water," and that "a Vessel following the range lights would go on shore on the

³⁴ LAC Lighthouse Collection, Box 186, 8010-520, Wallace Harbour, NS, Dominion of Canada, Notice to Mariners, no. 87 of 1904, October 12, 1904.

Southern Side of the Channel.” He made the necessary adjustments on the spot, as the contractor was already on the ground with his men.³⁵ Building proceeded in Mabou according to Johnson’s adjusted plans, and by August, when these changes came to Millidge’s attention, the new buildings were nearly complete.

The trouble with this was that Millidge had ordered the channel to be moved by dredging, and the specifications he had given for the new range lights were to accommodate this change.³⁶ These details evidently had not been shared with local people, who, according to Johnson, were baffled by the proposed location of the lights. While it is likely that Millidge and Johnson may have spoken to different parties, such information, if shared, would have travelled quickly through the village, just as the proposed location of the lights had done. Local mariners’ knowledge of their home harbour—the movement and location of its currents, the way that “the Channel changes some every Winter”³⁷—was, evidently, to be overwritten without their input. Whether or not the people of Mabou welcomed the modernization of their harbour, this bureaucratization of decision-making signalled a shift in the relationship between local knowledge and the administration of navigation infrastructure. It was also a change from earlier examples of communities passed over for improvements for decades. This was not a straightforward transition, as the department was dealing with the barn in Cheticamp and the smoldering coal dust in Port Hood at about the same time, but it is clear that the increased involvement of experts and bureaucrats was beginning to transform the

³⁵ LAC Lighthouse Collection, Box 25, 8010-494, Mabou Range Light, NS, letter to Agent, Department of Marine and Fisheries, Halifax, from P. C. Johnson, Superintendent of Lights, Halifax, October 13, 1908.

³⁶ See correspondence relating to this misunderstanding in LAC Lighthouse Collection, Box 25, 8010-494, Mabou Range Light, NS.

³⁷ Johnson letter, October 13, 1908.

relationship between coastal communities and the federal government in ways that would gradually, eventually lead to the standardization and formalization of navigation infrastructure along all the coasts of Canada.

Sailors' Vision

Standardized and formalized though it might be, navigation infrastructure was nevertheless always reliant on the sensory and attentive capacities of the seafarers, whose specialized knowledge and skilled visions were integral to the orderly operation of the system. Reports of collisions and groundings frequently included conflicting accounts of the lights displayed and seen or sounds reported and heard, highlighting the subjectivity inherent in all interactions with visual and acoustic signals. When the coastal steamer *City of St John* went aground in the fog at Hospital Reef off Clark's Harbour on one of her weekly trips in April 1893, it was alleged in a letter to the editor of the *Yarmouth Herald* that the lightkeeper at Bon Portage Island had neglected his duty to sound his fog horn. Moreover, the anonymous letter writer claimed, "this frequently is the case at this station in thick weather" and "the steamboat officers that run from Yarmouth to shore ports complain about the negligence of the keeper of Bon-Portage Light."³⁸ Lightkeeper W. Wrayton responded personally to this letter. He claimed, to the contrary, "not only was the horn blown that morning, but on every other morning when the steamers went down and it was thick. I have men here who were out in their boats who heard the boat blow and the horn answer her."³⁹ Little had changed in the operation of the Bon Portage

³⁸ *Yarmouth Herald*, May 9, 1893. See also, *Yarmouth Herald*, April 18, 1893.

³⁹ *Yarmouth Herald*, May 30, 1893.

fog horn between 1893 and the 1940s, when it was described by Evelyn Richardson in her award-winning memoir, *We Keep a Light*. Richardson recalled

the added strain foggy weather brings to an already crowded day, when one of us must always be within easy reach of the fog-horn, and everyone goes about with one ear cocked for the sound of a boat's horn. Bon Portage has not an automatic fog-alarm as its neighbours Seal Island and Cape Sable have, but depends on a small hand-horn which is blown by the lightkeeper in reply to the horn of passing boats. ... Men have told me of their great relief when they have 'picked up' our horn, or seen against the fog the faint reflection of the beam from our Light.⁴⁰

This description, of the subjective character of listening and watching—of eyes and ears “cocked” both onshore and off as the fog “presses down”—paired with the manual labour required to produce the signal and its potential negligence, is a staunch reminder of the human lives and bodies at the centre of nineteenth-century maritime navigation.

Onboard ship, the physicality involved in standing watch was significant: shifts of hours on deck or aloft in all weather, scanning the horizon and identifying and interpreting any lights, shapes, or sounds that appeared against the blackness or the blinding grey fog. The display and maintenance of appropriate lights onboard ship was an essential part of modern seafaring. Improperly displayed lights could cause collisions at sea, but just as dangerous was the misapprehension of lights by seamen on watch. Conflicting accounts in this regard were common, pointing to the subjectivity of perception and the many conditions that mitigated clear, accurate observation. This was the case when the steamship *Howards* of Sunderland, UK, collided with the brigantine *Emma* of Lunenburg off Sambro, Halifax County, at two o'clock on the morning of April 15, 1881. Both vessels sank with their cargoes but all crew were safely landed. The *Lunenburg Progress* published reports from the captains of both ships. Captain Shotton

⁴⁰ E. M. Richardson, *We Keep A Light* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1945), 46.

of the *Howards* reported that at the time of the collision, the steamer “was within 22 miles S.W. by W. of Sambro, with her regulation lights burning brightly. ... The men on the lookout observed a vessel without any lights on the steamer’s starboard bow. By the stranger not showing any lights, it could not be discerned which way she was steering. The steamer’s helm was then ordered hard a starboard. Immediately after, the brigantine struck the steamer abaft the fore rigging.” The account of Captain Dowling of the *Emma* was somewhat different. He reported that the brigantine was “was 22 miles W. by S. from Sambro ... with side lights burning brightly, when she collided with the steamer.” He added, “just before that time a light was observed on the port bow, which looked like the masthead light of a steamer but no side lights were seen. It was supposed on the brigantine to be a steamer going in the opposite direction.”⁴¹

Each captain insisted, likely with lawyers listening, that their sidelights had been “burning brightly,” yet each also claimed the lights of the other ship were not visible to their lookouts. In the inquiry following the disaster, however, the *Lunenburg Progress* reported, “the crew of the steamer admitted having seen the ‘Emma’s’ lights after the collision.”⁴² Without red and green sidelights, the direction and course of a ship was inscrutable to others and defensive steering manoeuvres following the Rules of the Road were impossible. The *Emma* made no course adjustment when she saw a steamer presumed to be “going in the opposite direction.” Meanwhile, the *Howards*’s helm was “ordered hard a starboard” when the *Emma* was spotted. But rather than taking her out of

⁴¹ *Lunenburg Progress*, November 22, 1881.

⁴² *Lunenburg Progress*, November 22, 1881. Consistent with this observation, the inquiry eventually found the second mate of the *Howards* responsible for the collision, “he being the officer of the watch on board that vessel at the time ... the court did not consider that he took such prompt measures to prevent the collision as the circumstances of the case required.” Canada, Department of Marine and Fisheries, *Annual Report for the Year Ended June 30, 1881* (Ottawa: Queen’s Printer, 1882), 51.

harm, this led the steamer directly into the brigantine's path. It is possible that one or both of the captains in these accounts were dishonest, perhaps worried about liability, but it is more likely that the lights were simply not seen by the lookouts.

Regulations for sidelights were augmented and updated through the 1880s and 1890s, including discussions at a major international conference held in Washington, DC, in 1889, reflected in revised Rules of the Road that came into effect in 1897.⁴³

Adjustments were made to ensure lights were bright, clear, unobstructed, unambiguous—in short, that they were “visible.” All of these regulations sought to foreclose the highly subjective character of visual perception and to encourage the rationalization of seafaring. But the very existence of these rules was evidence against that possibility. This was nowhere more apparent than in the working definition of *visible* used by the Washington conference and later added to the new Rules of the Road in 1897: “The word ‘visible’ in these Rules, when applied to lights, shall mean visible on a dark night with a clear atmosphere.”⁴⁴ This definition acknowledged that human vision was compromised by a variety of weather conditions, but ultimately, it suggested that for law-makers, vision could only be conceptualized as an abstraction or idealization. Aside from the general vagueness of this definition, there was also no capacity for the individual subjectivity of the men whose bodies and minds had to perceive the standardized lights to figure into

⁴³ On late nineteenth-century maritime law, see Sarah Palmer, “Leaders and Followers: The Development of International Maritime Policy in the Nineteenth Century,” *International Journal of Maritime History* 17, no. 2 (2005): 299–309.

⁴⁴ United States of America, *Protocols of Proceedings of the International Marine Conference: Held in Washington, D.C. October 16 to December 31, 1889* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1890), 2:1365; Hubert Stuart Moore, *The Rules of the Road at Sea: Comprising the Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea, 1897, and Rules in Force in Harbours, Rivers and Inland Waters: With Explanatory Notes and Observations*, 3rd ed. (London: J. D. Potter, 1900), 4.

this equation. The notion of visibility was abstracted from actual seeing eyes and rendered as a rational quality, ostensibly replicable and applicable across all waterways.

Against this backdrop of subjective sensation, and efforts to rationalize it, various commentators became increasingly concerned about the eyesight of individual sailors. Indeed, intersecting anxieties about vision and modernity are strikingly revealed in the panic about sailors' vision that emerged in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. As chapter 3 revealed, the eyesight of the general public was undergoing heightened scrutiny by newly professionalizing opticians and ophthalmologists. Likewise, there was a growing realization that some sailors (all of whom stood shifts as lookout) might have defective vision, and that particularly with the speed of the new steamships, this might be contributing to accidents at sea.⁴⁵ Many industrial and white collar jobs increasingly demanded both visual acuity and a capacity for sustained attention and Jonathan Crary has noted the increased scrutiny of attentive and perceptual norms as various forms of labour were rationalized.⁴⁶ Seafaring was another occupation where vision and perception more broadly became a subject of discussion and concern.

Rather than concerns about basic visual acuity, the topic that garnered the most attention in relation to the eyesight of sailors was colour blindness. The centrality of red and green lights to the safe functioning of international navigation was undeniable, yet these colours were indistinguishable by those with common forms of colour blindness. Since the late eighteenth century, the condition had been studied by the British Royal

⁴⁵ Despite the increased use of acoustic signals, there appears to have been far less concern about the hearing of sailors in this period.

⁴⁶ Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).

Society mainly as a point of scientific interest and amusement, but by the 1870s these investigations had taken on a new tenor. As Jordana Bailkin notes in her study of colour blindness in Britain, “the color perception of workers became a major medical and legal concern” as the eyes of sailors in the merchant marine, as well as those of railway workers, came under scientific scrutiny.⁴⁷ The Board of Trade, which regulated shipping in British waters, including those along the coasts of Canada, formally recognized the issue in 1877 when it added a colour-vision test to the examinations for the ranks of Mate and Master, but sailors earlier in their careers were not tested. Critics argued that testing should be done upon entry to life at sea because all seafarers took turns at watch. Moreover, it was argued that it was unfair to allow a man to enter and advance in a career only to eject him years later, too late to begin in a new occupation. Starting in 1880, voluntary colour-vision testing was made available (at the cost of one shilling) to anyone entering the merchant marine, but it was never made a requirement and ship-owners were reluctant to make it a priority.⁴⁸ In 1887, after ten years of compulsory testing for masters and mates, the Board of Trade concluded that 213 out of 40,000 candidates had failed the colour-vision test, or about half of one percent.⁴⁹ Proving that defective colour vision had actually caused accidents at sea was a much more difficult task.

⁴⁷ Jordanna Bailkin, “Color Problems: Work, Pathology, and Perception in Modern Britain,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 68 (October 2005): 94. On the early history of colour blindness in Britain, see Elizabeth Green Musselman, “Local Colour: John Dalton and the Politics of Colour Blindness,” *History of Science* 38 (2000): 401–24.

⁴⁸ For a description of the Board of Trade’s approach to colour-vision testing in these early years, including an explanation of the tests administered, see Thomas Gray, *Report by Assistant Secretary of the Marine Department to the Secretary of the Board of Trade on Tests for Colour Blindness in Examining Candidates for Masters’ and Mates’ Certificates of Competency in British Mercantile Marine*, House of Commons Sessional Papers, Command Papers, C-4353 (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1885).

⁴⁹ Thomas Gray, *Report by Assistant Secretary of the Marine Department to the Secretary of the Board of Trade on Tests for Colour Blindness in Examining Candidates for Masters’ and Mates’ Certificates of Competency in British Mercantile Marine*, House of Commons Sessional Papers, Command Papers, C-5149 (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1887), 4.

Through the 1880s and 1890s the colour vision of sailors remained a significant topic of debate. Bailkin explores the relationship between scientific research and the management and regulation of labour in this context, but it is also evident that placing and keeping the subject in the public eye was part of a concerted effort by professionalizing ophthalmologists to insert themselves into a political conversation, to establish and legitimize their status as experts in the science of vision. Ophthalmologists in North America and Europe wrote countless articles on the dangers of defective colour vision, published primarily in medical journals and specialized monographs, but the topic also entered popular consciousness more broadly. In 1884, *Harper's Magazine* ran a lengthy article on the colour vision of sailors by Dr. B. Joy Jeffries, a leading American expert the topic.⁵⁰ Articles trickled into large and small newspapers, including those in Nova Scotia, and by the 1890s, the topic had so thoroughly entered the realm of popular culture that it could also appear as the punchline of a joke. The *Lunenburg Argus* ran this one in 1894: "A correspondent from Dublin Shore says that a few days ago a clergyman was sitting on a fence at that place conversing with some of the villagers, when a cow came along and, unknown to the preacher, made an apparently good meal off his coat tails." The editor chuckled that "her cowship" could hardly be blamed, "as the coat might have been bottle green" and she might "plead a case of 'mistaken identity,' or 'color blind.'"⁵¹ It is clear that the topic of colour vision was circulating in the port towns and villages of Nova Scotia, even if it was perhaps not particularly well understood.

⁵⁰ B. Joy Jeffries, "Control of the Dangers from Defective Vision," *Harper's Magazine*, May 1884. See also B. Joy Jeffries, *Color-Blindness; Its Dangers and Its Detection* (Boston: Houghton, Osgood, 1879); B. Joy Jeffries, *Our Eyes and Our Industries* (Boston: Franklin Press, 1883).

⁵¹ *Lunenburg Argus*, May 23, 1894.

For professionalizing ophthalmologists, defective colour vision was no laughing matter. They insisted the presence of colour blind sailors in the merchant marine was creating untold dangers. In Canada, Dr. George Sterling Ryerson, professor of ophthalmology at Trinity Medical College, Toronto, and later MPP, was a vocal advocate for reform. In early 1889 Ryerson gave a paper to the Canadian Institute on the topic of colour blindness among railway workers, highlighting insufficient tests and lax enforcement. His speech was printed and circulated as a pamphlet intended to “arouse public interest” and encourage “the formation of an enlightened public opinion” on the subject.⁵² When he presented on colour blindness to the Ontario Medical Association in 1891 he added seafarers to his area of concern, concluding “that danger arises to the public from this cause [and] that it is urgently necessary that this danger be obviated by the proper elimination of the color blind” from these industries.⁵³ The association was evidently moved by Ryerson’s call to action; a resolution was drawn up, noting the “imperfect” methods used in examinations and the belief “that the said methods ... do not absolutely eliminate the color blind from among Railroad or Marine employees, and that serious danger arises to the travelling public from this cause.”⁵⁴ The resolution was forwarded to the relevant ministers, as well as to the presidents of railways.

In the case of the merchant marine, Canadians had to rely on British ophthalmologists to press the case. Dr. Thomas H. Bickerton, ophthalmic surgeon at the Royal Liverpool Infirmary, was among the most ardent campaigners on the topic of

⁵² George Sterling Ryerson, *Color Blindness in Its Relation to Railway Employees and the Public* (Toronto : J. E. Bryant, 1889), http://archive.org/details/cihm_12800.

⁵³ George Sterling Ryerson, “The Practical Bearings of Color Blindness,” *Canada Lancet* 24, no. 5 (January 1892): 134. See also discussion of Ryerson’s warnings about colour blindness in *Globe* (Toronto), February 27, 1895.

⁵⁴ “The Ontario Medical Association, Proceedings of Annual Conference June 3–4, 1891,” *Canada Lancet* 23, no. 11 (July 1891): 333.

sailors and colour blindness and his regular contributions to the *British Medical Journal*, from the late 1880s into the early twentieth century, tracked the progress of ongoing debates and referred readers to other literature, as well as contributing new research.⁵⁵ Like Ryerson, Bickerton and his colleagues were concerned with the effectiveness of the examinations performed by the Board of Trade. Initial complaints argued the Board's test, which required candidates to identify coloured cards and panes of glass, was not consistent with the medical standard of the Holmgren test, wherein patients were required to sort coloured skeins of wool into groups by shade. But even after the Holmgren test was adopted in 1894, complaints continued to plague the Board, including accusations that the tests were not being performed accurately and that numerous men were being expelled whose colour vision was not impaired.⁵⁶

Beyond problems with the test itself, ophthalmologists continued to struggle just to convince ship-owners that colour vision was a problem requiring intense scrutiny and discipline, because they were at pains to prove its relationship to any known accidents. In 1888, Bickerton acknowledged, with some regret, "the difficulties in the way of obtaining evidence of this nature are great."⁵⁷ Chief among these difficulties, investigations into shipping accidents did not include vision testing as part of their reviews. But Bickerton

⁵⁵ See, for example, Thomas H. Bickerton, "Colour Blindness: Its Present Position In The Mercantile Marine Service," *British Medical Journal*, September 3, 1887; Thomas H. Bickerton, "Sailors And Their Eyesight, Including Colour-Blindness," *British Medical Journal*, November 10, 1888; Thomas H. Bickerton, "On The Association Of Shipping Disasters With Colour-Blind And Defective Farsighted Sailors," *British Medical Journal*, September 17, 1892; Thomas H. Bickerton, "On The Utter Neglect Of The Eyesight Question In Board Of Trade Inquiries Into Shipping Disasters," *British Medical Journal*, October 19, 1895; Thomas H. Bickerton, "Colour Blindness And Eyesight In The Mercantile Marine; A Criticism Of The New Rules Of The Board Of Trade," *British Medical Journal*, October 31, 1896; Thomas H. Bickerton, "Colour Blindness And Defective Sight In The Mercantile Marine," *British Medical Journal*, September 23, 1899; Thomas H. Bickerton, "Remarks On The Holmgren Wool Test: Is It Adequate For The Detection Of Colour Blindness?," *British Medical Journal*, March 17, 1900.

⁵⁶ This progression can be seen in Bickerton's contributions to the *British Medical Journal*. Bailkin offers a detailed summary and analysis of this issue into the twentieth century. Bailkin, "Color Problems."

⁵⁷ Bickerton, "Sailors And Their Eyesight, Including Colour-Blindness," 1038.

and his colleagues regularly drew attention to the high number of accidents attributed to “causes unknown” and asked, “May not bad sight have accounted for some of these?”⁵⁸ In this way, ophthalmologists both created a public safety crisis and positioned themselves as the experts who would provide its solution.

Over the course of the 1890s, Bickerton interviewed hundreds of seafarers, amassing anecdotal evidence in support of the contention that colour blindness was an active danger at sea. By 1892 he had identified what he felt were three incontrovertible cases and by the end of the decade several more, but the mysteries of “causes unknown” continued to make up much of the argument on behalf of excluding colour blind sailors from the merchant marine. Bickerton was steadfast, accusing the Board of Trade of a lack of imagination for holding “the official view that the risk from colour blindness and defective sight [was] a mere bogey, raised by the medical profession and believed in by the press.”⁵⁹ For its part, the Board maintained the position that “an exceedingly small number of accidents—[one] might almost say few or no accidents—at sea or on land had been so far traceable to this cause,” to which Bickerton retorted, “with such logic it is evident that the seagoing population is between ‘the —— President of the Board of Trade and the deep blue sea.’”⁶⁰

The Board of Trade continued to pursue colour-vision testing; it supported the notion that defective bodies should be expelled from an increasingly rationalized industry. But it is also possible that those who regulated the shipping industry recognized

⁵⁸ Bickerton, “On The Association Of Shipping Disasters With Colour-Blind And Defective Farsighted Sailors,” 623.

⁵⁹ Bickerton, “On The Utter Neglect Of The Eyesight Question In Board Of Trade Inquiries Into Shipping Disasters,” 960.

⁶⁰ Bickerton, “Colour Blindness And Defective Sight In The Mercantile Marine,” 773.

what these striving ophthalmologists refused to see. The medical model of vision proposed by doctors, and their desire to stabilize vision as a strictly physiological process—either functioning or defective—was in tension with the way that sailors themselves understood their practice of skilled vision. Sailors characterized their engagement with the ocean as a much more holistic, multi-sensory performance of seafaring knowledge: as vision augmented by a lifetime of experience, rather than just a kind of mechanistic looking at things. The coasting masters who navigated the waters of Atlantic Canada were required to pass government licensing exams proving the quality of their vision, their competency in the use of charts and onboard navigation tools, and their familiarity with the Rules of the Road. But they each supplemented this formal competency with intimate, embodied knowledge of their local shoals and seamarks, landmarks and channels, tides, currents, winds, depths, and the character of the sea bottom. Eric Sager notes that in practice many worked without the aid of charts, and writes, “such skill was not something that one master learned unaided in a single career. It resided in accumulated tradition and in inherited experience ... not merely technique but art.”⁶¹

This complicated relationship between local sensory knowledge and official formalities has already been discussed in relation to the installation and maintenance of lighthouses, where evidence suggests these interactions took a variety of forms. The same is also evident in the testimony before an 1895 inquiry into the pilotage system in the Bay of Fundy.⁶² Pilots were experienced local sailors with extensive first-hand knowledge of

⁶¹ Sager, *Seafaring Labour*, 63.

⁶² W. H. Smith, *Report of an Investigation into the Pilotage System at St. John, NB* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1895). The pilotage district under discussion was based in Saint John, NB, but its authority covered the whole area of the Bay of Fundy traversed by ships approaching or leaving that harbour and therefore

an area's waters; they were licensed, but their examinations were not as extensive as the tests for masters and mates and did not include vision tests. Coasting masters were well-acquainted with local conditions, but other ships would engage pilots on their approach into an unfamiliar waterway. In some cases, such as in the Bay of Fundy on approaches to Saint John, New Brunswick, this was compulsory for all ships, or all those over a certain tonnage. The investigation in 1895 was to determine whether or not pilotage should continue to be compulsory in this case, and under what conditions. The commissioners sought to determine if recent improvements in navigation technology had superseded the need for the skilled vision and local knowledge of pilots.

Many ship owners and captains argued that the installation of navigation infrastructure had transformed the coasts and that charts of the bay were increasingly detailed and accurate, so that pilotage was no longer necessary. Unsurprisingly, the many pilots who testified argued that pilotage should continue. They claimed the Bay of Fundy, with its uniquely extreme tides, was dangerous, especially in inclement weather or fog, which were common. In its summary of these two positions, the commission neatly encapsulates the tension between the idealizations of technological progress and the conditions of human embodiment that tend to mitigate the function of those idealizations.

In support of the opinion that compulsory pilotage should be discontinued, the commissioners offered a ringing endorsement of the system of navigation aids installed and maintained by the Canadian government:

the commission took an interest in the coasts of both New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. For example, Brier Island, Digby County, was widely discussed by the commission, as this was where pilots tended to congregate waiting for ships and where it was proposed a permanent pilot station should be erected. The majority of ships (other than those arriving from the United States) arrived at the entrance of the bay alongside the coast of Nova Scotia before steering a course for Saint John.

Of late years, the successive Ministers of Marine have given great attention to the lighting, buoying and beaconing, and of placing fog signals upon various well marked headlands upon the coast line of the Dominion.

Careful study of the excellent charts of the Bay of Fundy . . . , their admitted correctness and also the reliable guide shown by the delineation of the shoals and soundings, combined with the very admirable system for the maintenance of the aforesaid lighthouses and fog signal stations, where the very latest scientific improvements have been introduced, the commission is of opinion that the navigation of the Bay of Fundy, except in very foggy weather, is as free from danger as the approaches to most other ports under similar conditions of weather.⁶³

In favour of pilotage, on the other hand, the commissioners noted not only the local knowledge of the pilots, but the physical and mental exhaustion of seafaring itself, which could not be allayed by lighthouses or buoys, no matter how well maintained:

At the same time, it must be fairly admitted that the services of a licensed pilot having a certain amount of local knowledge and experience of the currents and set of tides when approaching St. John . . . will often give confidence and to some extent relief to the commander of a ship who requires rest and assistance after having made the land in bad or foggy weather. . . . They may have spent many watchful hours on deck night and day, superintending the taking of soundings along the Nova Scotia coast or when crossing over the Sable Island banks or any other of the outlying banks upon the coast. It is therefore impossible for men under these circumstances to deny themselves that physical rest which nature demands.⁶⁴

Even with advances in navigational aids, seafaring was still a rigorous physical and mental activity that took a toll on the body. Indeed, it is likely that the increased sizes and speeds of ships and valuations of cargoes demanded by modern shipping made the services of pilots all the more welcome by some. While ship-owners and bureaucrats insisted that technology had superseded the need for local knowledge, pilots appealed to the limits of the body to assert their continued relevance.

⁶³ Smith, *Pilotage Report*, 7.

⁶⁴ Smith, *Pilotage Report*, 8.

However, it was also the limits of the body that threatened the relevance of pilots. Although it was not necessarily part of the mandate of the investigation, the bodies of the pilots themselves were also scrutinized by the commissioners with particular reference to colour vision. Time and again, pilots testified that they had never been given a vision test and, moreover, saw no reason why they should be made to take one. These exchanges about vision exemplify the complex relationship and between local knowledge and modern state formation that was also apparent in discussions about the installation of lighthouses. This is particularly evident in the testimony of older pilots, such as seventy-year-old Richard Cline, who had been working as a pilot for forty-six years, predating the introduction of federal control over the pilot system in 1886, not to mention Confederation itself and the dissemination of the first Rules of the Road:

Q. There is no test for the pilots with regard to colour blindness?—A. No, I do not think there should be, so long as they have their eyesight, and if their eyesight is bad they do not want to lose themselves and the ship too.

Q. You are aware that all masters and mates have to pass that examination?—A. Yes.

Q. Why should it be any different in a pilot?—A. The pilot will soon tell on himself, and if he is on board ship the people on board would know. I do not think it is necessary for pilots to pass the colour test who have been running without lights or whistles in the bay. When I was there first we had only a little side light.

Q. You mean the pilots have all good eyesight?—A. Yes.⁶⁵

Against efforts to measure and regulate his body and to sideline his profession, Cline asserted the value of a lifetime of experience and pride in his craft. He recalled the time before coloured lights on ships, but failed to acknowledge that shipping speeds and conditions had changed dramatically since then. Neither Cline, nor the other pilots, were “resisting” modernity. They openly welcomed the increased shipping traffic to the Bay of Fundy. Along with this traffic came the larger cargoes of ever-growing ships, imports and

⁶⁵ Testimony of Richard Cline in Smith, *Pilotage Report*, 142.

exports that were transforming the economies of communities along the shore and those connected by rail far inland. Instead, this commission was a site of engagement and negotiation between local knowledge and the modern state. Ultimately the commission recommended that compulsory pilotage be discontinued in the Bay of Fundy, but many pilots continued to work, applying their extensive local knowledge and skilled perception to the waters and winds of the bay on behalf of exhausted or unacquainted captains who wished to hire them. Going forward, however, all future candidates for pilot licenses were tested on their colour vision.

This short exchange about pilotage gives a sense of how discussions about vision functioned as metonyms for broader anxieties about the modernization of navigation—and about changes in society more generally. Likewise, discussions about the placement and maintenance of lighthouses were always tied to broader considerations about the circulation of bodies and capital that would be facilitated by making the coast legible. While late nineteenth-century coastal seafaring remained a patchwork of old and new, dominated by local knowledge and customs, the beginning of a more rationalized and standardized future was already making itself felt. In tiny villages along the coasts, rural Nova Scotians encountered and negotiated their relationships to state infrastructure and technology and the physical and economic demands of modern shipping, and participated in very modern conversations about the medicalization of sailors' bodies. This chapter therefore explores not simply a story of seafaring but one of rural places, blurring the boundaries and interlacing the concerns of those two fields of scholarly inquiry, which are typically explored separately. This discussion of seeing at sea also provides yet

another reminder that nineteenth-century modernity is best understood as a multi-sited condition of cultural transformation. These were not urban iterations of modernity making their way to the countryside, but a series of unique, locally-specific engagements between rural Nova Scotians and a modern world.

Chapter 5

Looking for the Blind: Locating and Performing Blindness

In 1907, Charles Fraser, Superintendent of the Halifax School for the Blind, addressed the annual conference of the American Association of Workers for the Blind with a well-received paper titled “Graduates of Schools for the Blind and Their Needs.”¹ In his paper, Fraser emphasized the importance of continued support for students following their graduation, including small business loans and letters of introduction in new communities. Moreover, he stressed that the choice about where a graduate should settle was a crucial one, arguing it was “a great mistake to allow our graduates to drift to their own homes, where there is little or nothing for them to do. Every effort should be made to induce them to go to work immediately upon leaving school, as the effect of a year of idleness is demoralizing in the extreme, making the boy or girl less self-reliant.”² Fraser argued “populous cities and sparsely settled country districts offer few opportunities of employment to the graduate of average ability. The choice of a locality should generally be made in the smaller cities, towns, and villages,” depending on the particular trade the student hoped to carry on.³ Like other schools in North America and Europe, the main occupations for which students of the Halifax School for the Blind were trained were music performance, music teaching, and piano tuning. Students without a disposition for music were trained in trades such as basket making, chair caning, and broom making for

¹ C. F. Fraser, “Graduates of Schools for the Blind and Their Needs,” in *Proceedings and Addresses Ninth General Convention of the American Association of Workers for the Blind* (Cambridge, MA: Outlook for the Blind, 1907), 9–11. Discussion of Fraser’s paper, 16–23.

² Fraser, “Graduates of Schools for the Blind,” 10.

³ Fraser, “Graduates of Schools for the Blind,” 10.

boys, and sewing, knitting, and fancy work for girls. Beginning in the early twentieth century pupils were also trained in massage and in the basics of business.

Large cities were to be avoided because, Fraser felt, it would be difficult to become known and to make a name for oneself amid so much competition. Rural villages and small towns were better suited to setting up the type of independent, entrepreneurial ventures that Fraser advocated for his students. But while he recommended rural villages, it is clear that Fraser felt a productive, useful life was not to be found in more remote rural places for a person with a visual impairment. This was the case even though a majority of students at the School came from rural families. These recommendations and admonitions for and against certain kinds of rural living for people with visual impairments underline the need to interrogate the meanings and experiences of blindness in these non-urban communities.

Fraser, who was blind himself, perceived few inherent limitations for his graduates; instead, these comments point to a particular attitude toward rural life, and to related ideas about the meaning of productive citizenship. It is worth reflecting in this context on the ways that the efforts of the Halifax School for the Blind—to remove children from rural communities for training that would make them “active, self-supporting citizen[s],”⁴ and to retrain rural adults to achieve normative levels of independence and productivity—dovetailed with larger improvement and reform efforts to address rural depopulation and to modernize rural communities in the same period. On the surface it might seem unlikely to find commentary on rural life in the context of a discussion about visual impairment, but as a progressive reformer Fraser was not alone in

⁴ Halifax School for the Blind, *Report of the Board of Managers of the Halifax School for the Blind* (Halifax: The School, 1905), 7. Hereafter, School, *Report*.

his concerns about the possibilities for productive life in rural communities. Indeed, as previous chapters have demonstrated, this example is just one of many where discussions about vision intersect in unlikely ways with discussions about modernity and the modernization of rural lives and places.

This chapter explores meanings and experiences of blindness and visual impairment in rural Nova Scotia in the late nineteenth century. Of the 288 students who entered the School up to 1900, two thirds came from rural communities and many chose to return there following graduation.⁵ Others settled in rural places that were new to them. And of course far more people than this lived in rural communities with a spectrum of visual impairments without ever attending the School. An absence of meaningful documentary evidence has meant that in Canada, as elsewhere, the history of disability in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has largely been written as the history of institutions for the care, training, or incarceration of people with disabilities.⁶ These are important histories that deserve our attention, but they represent only a small part of the past. Historians such as David Wright have demonstrated that the vast majority of people who interacted with such institutions did so only for part of their lives. The rest of their days, prior to and following institutionalization, were spent in their home communities.⁷

⁵ These numbers are based on the hometowns provided in the School's casebook. Nova Scotia Archives, RG 14, Series S, vol. 174, Student Case Book of the Halifax School for the Blind. (Hereafter Student Case Book.) Students of the School lived in the three Maritime Provinces and Newfoundland. For the purposes of this dissertation, general discussion and any statistics will refer to the entire student body but illustrative examples will be drawn mainly from Nova Scotia.

⁶ See Geoffrey Reaume, "Disability History in Canada: Present Work in the Field and Future Prospects," *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies* 1, no. 1 (2012): 35–81.

⁷ Wright's work, often co-authored, has focused on the history of people with cognitive impairments and intellectual disabilities, but his reminders to look beyond the walls of institutions are relevant to all areas of the history of disability. See, for example, Peter Bartlett and David Wright, "Community Care and Its Antecedents," in *Outside the Walls of the Asylum: The History of Care in the Community, 1750-2000*, ed. Peter Bartlett and David Wright (New Brunswick, NJ: Athlone Press, 1999), 1–18; Jessa Chupik and David Wright, "Treating the 'Idiot' Child in Early 20th-Century Ontario," *Disability & Society* 21, no. 1 (2006):

And many more people with impairments never came into contact with institutions at all. Yet we know very little about the lives that people with disabilities lived outside of institutions before the mid-twentieth century. This chapter remains tethered to Charles Fraser and the Halifax School for the Blind in some respects, but it does not dwell in the city with them. Rather than interrogating the School itself or the experiences of student life there in Halifax, this chapter begins by exploring the work of the Home Teaching Society for the Blind, an extension program established in 1893 that saw teachers visit the homes of blind adults in rural communities and small towns. The chapter also follows some students as they made lives for themselves in rural places following graduation, contributing to both a growing history of disability beyond the walls of institutions and to a more nuanced history of the social and cultural worlds of rural communities.

Rather than a problem to be overcome, this chapter takes as its starting point the absence of a formal or consistent definition of blindness in the late nineteenth century. Following the insights of critical disability studies, this chapter asserts that disability is contextual and that the “social process of disabling” is historically specific.⁸ In the absence of a formal definition, the meaning of blindness—and thus ideas about vision—were constantly being made and remade by various constituencies. This chapter explores the conceptualization of blindness by two groups. The first includes people who were looking for the blind in rural places, specifically the administrators of the Home Teaching Society and rural enumerators of the Canadian census. The second group is made of up

77–90; David Wright, “Getting Out of the Asylum: Understanding the Confinement of the Insane in the Nineteenth Century,” *Social History of Medicine* 10, no. 1 (1997): 137–55.

⁸ Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (London; New York: Verso, 1995), 24. Like Davis, my subject is primarily the “discourse of disability” as a historically-specific formation; however, my analysis also explores the lives of many blind individuals from a biographical perspective in a way that does not necessarily fit with Davis’s model. See Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, 2–4.

some rural Nova Scotians who self-identified as blind and who performed blindness as part of their public identities. Georgina Kleege argues that ideas about vision continue today to be dominated by a false model that posits a “binary opposition between blindness and sight.”⁹ In the nineteenth century, this false binary contributed to prevalent notions of blindness as distinctly at odds with the kinds of lives lived by normatively-sighted people. For both the Home Teaching Society and census enumerators, conventional ideas about independence and productive citizenship guided their definitions of blindness, so that it was infirmity—understood as a lack of independence—that made adults with visual impairments legible to them. An exception to this rule were the people living in rural Nova Scotia who chose actively to self-identify as blind. These people often had a public profile in their communities—most notably as musicians and music teachers. In their public performances of blindness, these men and women also invoked normative ideas about productive citizenship, in this case to challenge stereotypes about blindness and debility. In all of these cases, the making and remaking of blindness was always also a process of defining the meaning, value, and significance of vision in modern life.

Looking for the Blind

Although formal metrics for defining “blindness” did not exist, visual impairments were nevertheless very real and unfortunately common in the late nineteenth century, particularly before treatments became widespread for conditions such as cataracts and the congenital illnesses that led to many childhood cases of impairment. Students entering

⁹ Georgina Kleege, “Blindness and Visual Culture: An Eyewitness Account,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 4, no. 2 (2005): 188.

the Halifax School for the Blind in the late nineteenth century reported numerous causes of impairment under three overlapping headings: disease, congenital, and accident.¹⁰ Disease was the recorded cause of blindness for forty-seven percent of the students, including ailments such as measles, scarlet fever, and whooping cough, in addition to eye-specific conditions such as nystagmus, cataracts, and most prominently “atrophy of the optic nerve”—which likely accounted for both glaucoma and macular degeneration. However, the most common cause given under the heading of disease was inflammation, an ambiguous and capacious designation, and one which tends to suggest environments characterized by dust, dirt, inadequate illumination, and the limitations of contemporary medicine. Conditions listed as congenital accounted for thirty-seven percent of admissions to the School, with nearly half of those blind from birth or infancy. Here again, cataracts and “atrophy of the optic nerve” were prominent. The remaining fifteen percent of students reported accidents as their cause of impairment. Details were often omitted, but those recorded in the School’s casebook include a miscellany of unfortunate events at home, work, and play, involving wood chips, a snowball, head injuries, molten lead, and often gunpowder.

While glaucoma and macular degeneration continue to be leading causes of blindness today, it is now far less likely that an infected eye would lead to permanent impairment. Rates of blindness have always mapped closely to poverty, nutrition, and sanitation, so that changes in living conditions, as well as increased workplace safety, in the past century have substantially reduced the incidence of visual impairment.¹¹

¹⁰ Student Case Book. The statistics and details that follow are based on the information collected about the 288 students who entered the school between 1871 and 1900.

¹¹ George Rosen, *The Specialization of Medicine with Particular Reference to Ophthalmology* (New York: Arno Press, 1972), 35–36. Zina Weygand summarizes that in early nineteenth-century France, “poverty,

However, conditions considered easily treatable or eradicated in much of the West today continue to be prevalent in areas with high rates of poverty and unreliable access to health care. It is also no coincidence that rates of blindness have always been highest in communities with predominantly racialized populations.¹² This was not, however, reflected in the enrolment of the School, which admitted only two African Nova Scotian boys up to 1910.¹³

As this chapter explores the conceptualization of blindness in rural Nova Scotia, it is important to note the ways that such concepts intersect with ideas about race, as well as class and gender. Some of this may be illustrated by comparing the cases of Stephen Jarvis and Reginald West, both of whom entered the Halifax School for the Blind in September of 1897. Their entries appear on facing pages of the School's student casebook. Jarvis was an African Nova Scotian boy from the rural community of Weymouth Falls, in Digby County, where his father was a farmer. He entered the School at the age of ten; however, according to his file, "after one school year's training, it was found that Stephen Jarvis had such a weak intellect that it was not thought advisable to have him remain in the Institution."¹⁴ Reginald West, whose father was a white Halifax gentleman, was only six years old when he entered the School. Like Jarvis, West's

ignorance, lack of hygiene, epidemics, dietary deficiencies, and unsafe work conditions" were the leading causes of visual impairment, in addition to medical ignorance of the true causes of impairment and how to treat them. Many cases of low vision—including that of Superintendent Charles Fraser—were exacerbated by operations intended to cure them. Zina Weygand, *The Blind in French Society from the Middle Ages to the Century of Louis Braille* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 179.

¹² See Terry Rowden, *The Songs of Blind Folk: African American Musicians and the Cultures of Blindness* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009).

¹³ Richard Bowden and Stephen Jarvis were each noted as "colored" in their entries in the casebook. It is possible, though unlikely, that other African Nova Scotian students were enrolled in the School without having their race noted in their files. Student Case Book, 163, 213. There is no evidence that any Mik'maw children, or those from any other racialized communities, attended the School.

¹⁴ Student Case Book, 213.

abilities were found wanting by the standards of the administrators, but he remained a student of the School for thirteen years and “was discharged after years of patient training to develop his intellect.” His file notes that “his training saved him from idiocy. He returned to his father’s home in Halifax.”¹⁵ We do not know how the unique intersection of cognitive and sensory impairments for each of these two boys might have affected their individual suitability for training at the School. But it is nevertheless worth reflecting on the stark disparity in treatment between this poor African Nova Scotian boy from a rural community and this affluent white boy from Halifax. Education at the School was provided free by the province, so that the decision to retain or dismiss a student was also always a decision about the extent to which they were deserving of public resources. It is troubling to speculate about just how “idiocy” may have been assessed in these two cases; however, we do know that in the minds of educational professionals, for a poor black boy this label overshadowed the worthiness of his visual impairment for attention. If he was not to become a self-supporting individual, resources were not to be spent on simply improving his quality of life. Yet for an affluent white boy, the same label granted him “years of patient training,” despite the explicit acknowledgement that he would always remain a dependant. Equivalently impaired bodies (of course there are no such things) are never equivalently disabled by a society characterized by racism, social stratification, and disparity. Jarvis’s experiences with the School, including his status as one of only two African Nova Scotian students, highlight the underrepresentation of people of colour within our limited understanding of the history of blindness and disability in Nova Scotia. Even as this chapter attempts to

¹⁵ Student Case Book, 214.

illuminate some of that history, the story told here remains predominantly one of whiteness.

The Halifax School for the Blind, which served the three Maritime provinces and the British colony of Newfoundland, was the first residential school for the blind in Canada. It promoted a curriculum of practical education and was long considered to be the most progressive institution of its kind in the country. The goals and programs of the Halifax School were largely the work of Charles Fraser, its long-time Superintendent, himself a graduate of the famous Perkins Institute in Boston.¹⁶ Fraser drew students to Halifax but also reached well beyond the walls of his institution. He established and continuously expanded a circulating library of hundreds of Braille books, which were made available for free through the mail. And in 1893, the Home Teaching Society for the Blind (HTSB) was formed as an extension program of the Halifax School. The following year, Una Legge, a graduate of the School, began travelling throughout the Maritime provinces teaching raised print literacy to visually impaired people in rural communities and small towns. One of Legge's jobs was to recruit young people to attend the School in Halifax, mainly by reassuring their parents about the value of such an education. For those as yet too young to attend the School—those under the age of six—she provided parents with what the School's annual report in 1900 called “some practical

¹⁶ The institution was founded as the Halifax Asylum for the Blind and accepted its first students in 1871. It changed its name to the Halifax Institute for the Blind in 1879 and to the Halifax School for the Blind in 1884. On Fraser and the school see Janet Guildford, “Fraser, Sir Charles Frederick,” in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 15 (Toronto and Laval: University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2003–); Joanna L. Pearce, “‘Fighting in the Dark’: Charles Frederick Fraser and the Halifax Asylum for the Blind, 1850-1915” (Masters thesis, Dalhousie University, 2011); Joanna L. Pearce, “Not for Alms but Help: Fund-Raising and Free Education for the Blind,” *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 23, no. 1 (2012): 131–55; Shirley Trites, *Reading Hands: The Halifax School for the Blind* (Halifax, NS: Vision Press, 2003).

tips for how they should be brought up.”¹⁷ These children, too, were being groomed to leave for Halifax when they reached the appropriate age. Crucially, Fraser argued, attending the School would “enable graduates to get jobs, while at the same time relieving the country from the support of a non-working class.”¹⁸ He argued that while a sighted child might make their way in the world and become self-supporting without formal education, “the blind child without education is doomed to live a life of idleness, and to be dependent upon others for his support.”¹⁹ To leave these children in their home communities would, this logic goes, enable a class of dependent, unproductive adults.

Indeed, it was those same unproductive adults who were the primary targets of the extension program. The Home Teaching Society was designed especially to assist those who had become blind later in life and who could not be expected, as children and young adults certainly were, to move to Halifax for specialized training. In his first annual report for the Society, Fraser described their clients as “overwhelmed by the loss of sight [and] powerless to help themselves.”²⁰ The importance of the program was invariably articulated in terms of returning men and women to their former status as valuable, “productive” members of their families and of society at large. In his second annual report, Fraser drew attention to “fathers, with wives and children depending on them for support, mothers, with infants and growing families requiring care, [who] naturally regard the loss of sight as the greatest calamity that could have befallen them, and yet . . . most of these men and women will willingly take up the burden of life anew, and many

¹⁷ School, *Report*, 1900, 34.

¹⁸ School, *Report*, 1878, 13.

¹⁹ School, *Report*, 1905, 7.

²⁰ Home Teaching Society for the Blind, *Report of the Home Teaching Society for the Blind* (Halifax: The Society, 1894), 12. NSA, V/F, vol. 25. Hereafter HTSB, *Report*.

of them will succeed in discharging their daily duties to the satisfaction of those dependent upon them.”²¹ The language in this passage is particularly revealing of the gendered hierarchy of dependency that characterized all thinking about disability in the period, an extension of the notion of the deserving and undeserving poor. “Wives and children” were understood to be legitimately dependent on “fathers,” who ought not to require support themselves. And in the domestic realm it was understood that “infants and growing families” were dependent on mothers who ought to be able to attend to their “daily duties” independently. As Catherine Kudlick observes, blindness “undermined manhood and redefined womanhood in unsettling ways.” Blind men, who were “thought incapable of earning a living sufficient to provide for a family” were discursively feminized by their perceived dependency. Blind women, meanwhile, found “disability compounded the disadvantages already associated with being female—helplessness, dependence, frailty—but without a social payoff, ... it made women *too* feminine.” Kudlick adds, “since few believed that blind women could run a household and provide a home environment for a husband and children, they were deemed unmarriageable.”²² While the HTSB’s aim was to challenge these stereotypes and their inevitability, their report nevertheless effectively replicated them for the benefit of an imagined audience of sighted donors.

Numerous supportive newspaper editorials appeared in 1893 when fundraising efforts for the program were first announced, all emphasizing, as the *Halifax Herald* did,

²¹ HTSB, *Report*, 1895, 4.

²² Catherine J. Kudlick, “The Outlook of *The Problem* and the Problem with *The Outlook*: Two Advocacy Journals Reinvent Blind People in Turn-of-the-Century America,” in *The New Disability History: American Perspectives*, ed. Paul Longmore and Lauri Umansky (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 202.

that the program would “educate [the adult blind] so that they could go about their daily avocations,” rather than becoming “burdens to themselves and to others.” The *Yarmouth Times* noted that “those now helpless and a burden, will be made cheerful, self reliant, and self supporting.”²³ This rhetoric was the same as that used to justify the School itself and other similar institutions in the period, and will be familiar to anyone who has studied the history of disability.²⁴ The aim of the School and its extension program was to produce “active, self-supporting citizen[s]” who could “win for themselves honest and honorable livelihoods” and who could take up or regain their proper place in the liberal order of turn-of-the-century capitalism.²⁵ As will become apparent, this emphasis on normative productivity and independence was also central to the very definition of “blindness” in the period.

Fraser regularly discussed in writing the main obstacles to his work of educating the blind. The most significant of these was of course always the question of funding. But beyond this, the Superintendent regularly complained about the problem of simply *finding* blind individuals. This was particularly difficult in a region like the Maritime provinces, made up mostly of small towns, villages, and sparsely populated rural areas, with only a few significant population centres. In his 1894 annual report for the School, Fraser wrote, “It is with the utmost difficulty that we ascertain the whereabouts of blind children, and, as it is our desire that none of these should be allowed to grow up in

²³ See the numerous newspaper clippings collected in Charles Fraser’s scrapbook. NSA, RG 14, Series S, vol. 1, #1. Quotations from *Halifax Herald*, May 24, 1893 (scrapbook page 18); *Yarmouth Times*, [n.d.] 1893 (scrapbook page 25).

²⁴ See Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon, “‘Dependency’ Demystified: Inscriptions of Power in a Keyword of the Welfare State,” *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society* 1, no. 1 (1994): 4–31.

²⁵ *School Report*, 1905, 7; *School Report*, 1894, 19.

ignorance, we regret that the particulars of the blind in the Canadian census should not [as in the United States] be placed at the disposal of those engaged in their education and training.” Fraser noted that he regularly received the names of blind children in the mail, but he also knew that others eluded him. He added, “This is particularly true of those children who have sufficient sight to see light or even move about freely. Such persons are regarded by the public as sighted children, and, although they have not sufficient sight to enable them to attend the public schools, are not classified as Blind.”²⁶

Fraser made regular public pleas to teachers, clergymen, doctors, and concerned citizens, sending circulars and publishing notices in newspapers, asking people to help him locate blind children and adults in their area. Children were easier than adults for Fraser to “find” because of their increasingly compulsory interaction with the state through the public school system. Teachers were asked to send notice to Fraser in the event that they encountered a child without “sufficient sight to read ordinary print and attend the public schools.”²⁷ This request was often made in conjunction with a similar request regarding children who were hearing impaired, the two groups described together as “young people so afflicted with respect to sight or hearing as not to be able to make proper use of the day school.”²⁸ It was argued that left in their home communities, such children would “probably live miserable, ignorant, and useless lives, being a burden to themselves and others in unhappy homes” and by sending them to Halifax, “they may become intelligent, happy and able to earn a living for themselves, if not for others.”²⁹

²⁶ School, *Report*, 1894, 8.

²⁷ Undated circular letter signed by Charles Fraser. NSA, RG 14, Series S, vol. 2, #19.

²⁸ *Nova Scotia Journal of Education*, April 1900, 71.

²⁹ *Nova Scotia Journal of Education*, April 1898, 69–70.

In his search for potential pupils, Fraser's working definition of blindness was impressively broad: he sought children without "sufficient sight to read ordinary print and attend the public schools." With this definition he attempted to dispel misconceived notions of "total" blindness. Even today, persistent stereotypes that imagine blindness as a total, congenital absence of vision misconstrue and discount the experiences of the vast majority of people with visual impairments, in the nineteenth century as today, who have experienced blindness as a significant reduction in vision, rather than its total absence, as well as those who have lost their sight beyond infancy.³⁰ Instead, Fraser reminded readers that many children who qualified for the School might in fact "see light or move about freely." Nevertheless, he failed to provide meaningful criteria that could be reliably applied. Elsewhere, the School's definition of "ordinary print" was "print an eighth of an inch square," but the distance from which a child was expected to read it was not specified, a crucial element in the assessment of visual acuity.³¹

Teachers were repeatedly reminded that "the province provides for such children in a princely manner; so that it would be an unpardonable wrong were anyone through neglect to deprive a single child" of the advantages offered by the residential school.³² Local teachers were expected not only to vet the children in their own classrooms, but to canvas their communities to uncover any children "hidden from public view by parents who did not know" about the "special training," "comparative luxury," and "splendid modern buildings" awaiting their children in Halifax.³³ These repeated reminders to teachers reveal a population largely outside the reach of this institution. They also suggest

³⁰ Kleege, "Blindness and Visual Culture," 187.

³¹ School Case Book, 124.

³² *Nova Scotia Journal of Education*, April 1900, 71.

³³ *Nova Scotia Journal of Education*, April 1898, 69.

that teachers were often reluctant to spy on their neighbours or to provide names to the authorities. It is also worth noting that a lapse in school attendance would not have been a cause for particular suspicion in the course of a rural school year in a period when many children attended inconsistently for a wide variety of reasons. Like so many of their sighted counterparts, visually impaired children might simply have been taken out of school to work at home with their families, whether or not there was a law against it.

Further trouble for Fraser was that children were and are excellent at masking sensory impairments. Georgina Kleege has described her early aversion to identifying herself as blind and her success “passing” as sighted following her diagnosis as legally blind at age eleven: “I did not use the word. I was not blind. Blind people saw nothing, only darkness. ... That was not how I saw myself.”³⁴ Kleege also reveals that since she began to use the word *blind* to describe herself, she has often been questioned about her right to use it, her sighted interlocutors insisting that she is “not really blind” because she has retained a small amount of vision.³⁵ Likewise, sociologist Rod Michalko has discussed the process of coming to terms with his own blindness and his experiences of passing as sighted from childhood through his teen years. He writes, “Legal as my blindness was, neither my parents nor I thought of me as blind. After all, 10 percent was pretty good sight I could see, even if it was just a little, I *was* sighted. That was *my self*, my identity.” It is particularly notable here that one reason for Michalko’s behaviour was an aversion, by both him and his parents, to the idea of his being sent to “‘blind school’ several hundreds of miles away from home.”³⁶ It is not difficult to imagine that

³⁴ Georgina Kleege, *Sight Unseen* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 17.

³⁵ Kleege, *Sight Unseen*, 14. See also Kleege, “Blindness and Visual Culture,” 187–88.

³⁶ Rod Michalko, *The Difference That Disability Makes* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 9.

children and their parents in nineteenth-century rural communities might have felt and acted similarly.

Placing these contemporary accounts in dialogue with historical sources also underscores the futility of establishing a set of criteria for a trans-historical quality called “blindness.” With his pleas for assistance, Fraser neatly presages what is today a vexing historical problem. The very same ambiguities that made it difficult for late-Victorian educators to locate people with visual impairments in small towns and rural places challenge the historian who wishes to study the experience of blindness in those same communities. However, this quandary also offers an entry point to another avenue of investigation. As Lennard Davis has argued, “the presumption that disability is simply a biological fact, a universal plight of humanity throughout the ages, needs to be challenged.” Instead, disability must be theorized as “part of a historically constructed discourse, an ideology of thinking about the body under certain historical circumstances.”³⁷ Various scholars have argued that previous arrangements of time, space, and value allowed people with impairments to be integrated into their communities much differently than they would be under the exigencies of capitalist modernity. As Davis notes, the “disabled body” is a recent invention.³⁸ The rise of industrialization and the transformation to a capitalist mode of production led to a reorganization of space and time that disqualified and sidelined a range of bodies previously within the bounds of the acceptable. Susan Wendell observes that “when the pace of life in a society increases . . . fewer people can meet expectations of ‘normal’ performance; the physical (and mental) limitations of those who cannot meet the new pace become conspicuous and disabling,

³⁷ Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, 2–3.

³⁸ Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, 30.

even though the same limitations were inconspicuous and irrelevant to full participation in the slower-paced society.”³⁹ Her reflections extend beyond paid work to domestic labour and parenting. Brendan Gleeson draws attention to the important differences between rural and urban experiences of impairment under capitalism in his study of “geographies of disability.” Gleeson argues that unlike the highly structured and disciplined spaces and “compulsive socialisations” of industrialization, “the material context of feudal production allowed peasant households a great degree of liberty in designing everyday tasks that would match the corporeal capacities of each family member.”⁴⁰ While late nineteenth-century Nova Scotia was far from feudal, enduring practices such as cooperative labour and occupational pluralism did allow for a great deal of flexibility and the accommodation of diverse abilities.⁴¹

³⁹ Susan Wendell, *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 37. On the way that ideas of time and pace under capitalism contribute to constructions of disability, see also Douglas C. Baynton, “‘These Pushful Days’: Time and Disability in the Age of Eugenics,” *Health and History* 13, no. 2 (2011): 43–64; Joshua St. Pierre, “The Construction of the Disabled Speaker: Locating Stuttering in Disability Studies,” *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies* 1, no. 3 (2012): 12–16. Wendell’s comments also bring to mind the classic work of E. P. Thompson on the transformation of time under industrial capitalism, in which he observes that the “more humanly comprehensible” task-oriented pace of peasant labour is perceived by “men accustomed to labour timed by the clock ... to be wasteful and lacking in urgency.” E. P. Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism,” *Past & Present*, no. 38 (December 1967): 60. Labour value often becomes the metric by which disability is measured. This is certainly problematic, and I do not wish to replicate this attitude, but instead to interrogate how notions of “productivity” were central to nineteenth-century conceptualizations of disability. For a contemporary counterpoint to the rhetoric of productivity, see Sunny Taylor, “The Right Not to Work: Power and Disability,” *Monthly Review*, March 2004, <http://monthlyreview.org/2004/03/01/the-right-not-to-work-power-and-disability/>.

⁴⁰ Brendan Gleeson, *Geographies of Disability* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 85, 83.

⁴¹ On occupational pluralism, cooperative labour, and other rural alternatives to liberalism, see for example Larry McCann, “‘Living a Double Life’: Town and Country in the Industrialization of the Maritimes,” in *Geographical Perspectives on the Maritime Provinces*, ed. E. E. Douglas Day (Halifax, NS: Saint Mary’s University, 1988), 93–113; Larry McCann, “Seasons of Labor: Family, Work, and Land in a Nineteenth-Century Nova Scotia Shipbuilding Community,” *History of the Family* 4, no. 4 (1999): 485–527; R. W. Sandwell, “Missing Canadians: Reclaiming the A-Liberal Past,” in *Liberalism and Hegemony: Debating the Canadian Liberal Revolution*, ed. Jean-François Constant and Michel Ducharme (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 246–73; Catharine Anne Wilson, “Reciprocal Work Bees and the Meaning of Neighbourhood,” *Canadian Historical Review* 82, no. 3 (2001): 1–19.

The experience of Peter Hurley and Alex Streach, working cooperatively with their small pony to haul logs in the Musquodoboit Valley, described in the first pages of this dissertation, is such an example.⁴² Although the logging industry in the valley was being transformed and modernized in the late nineteenth century, farmers continued the seasonal tradition of logging their own small-scale woodlots, or those of their neighbours, setting their own pace of production. In an environment where adaptivity and alternative models of productivity were common, the activities and patterns of rural life were also adaptive enough to accommodate a range of bodies and competencies. In effect, some people who might have been disabled by certain environments may not necessarily have experienced their impairments as disabling in their rural home communities. This flexibility extended beyond the demands of labour. Nora Groce's study of the island of Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts provides a concrete example of adaptability in a rural community. For more than two hundred years, until the early twentieth century, Martha's Vineyard had a high incidence of hereditary deafness and Groce shows how this rural community adapted rather than excluding a significant portion of the population. Everyone, deaf and non-deaf, spoke colloquial sign language.⁴³ Such accommodations would have been much more difficult among larger populations.

Peter Rushton, of Roslin, Cumberland County, who was taught to read Braille by Una Legge, the travelling teacher for the HTSB, offers further examples of the types of agricultural labour that visually impaired men and women were performing in late nineteenth-century Nova Scotia. In his note of thanks to the School, he apologized for not

⁴² *Atlantic Weekly* (Dartmouth), February 8, 1896.

⁴³ Nora Ellen Groce, *Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language: Hereditary Deafness on Martha's Vineyard* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985).

having written sooner: “During the past few months I have helped to put up a barn, to draw 36 loads of dyke mud for top dressing, and to get in the grain, but there is still plenty of work for me, so you will see that I have not had much time to study books.”⁴⁴ His letter reveals a range of collaborative labour to which people with diverse capacities might meaningfully contribute, while his description of his involvement as “helping” suggests that his was part of a family or community effort rather than an independent venture of which he was the head. Though he was very grateful to be able to read again, it is unlikely that Rushton would have understood himself as “disabled,” even as he acknowledged his limited eyesight.

Beyond the absence of a medical or legal definition of blindness, Superintendent Fraser’s difficulty in locating blind candidates for schooling was due, at least in part, to the very character of rural communities and the alternative, adaptive rural practices that defied normative models of productivity and independence—and thus normative models of ability. The “social process of disabling” for people with visual impairments in nineteenth-century rural Nova Scotia included the increasing demands of standardized labour and productivity, but to this had to be added the new idea that certain bodies were inherently unable to meet these demands. Many people in rural Nova Scotia were visually impaired, but until the School began searching for them, many of these same people were not “disabled.” The School had to invent the blind in order to find them.

Normative productivity and independence were central to the very definition of “blindness” in the nineteenth century. For adults, the vague requirements to “read ordinary print” or attend school were not applicable. It seems instead that the main

⁴⁴ Quoted in HTSB, *Report*, 1900, 12.

criteria by which adults with visual impairments were identified by the Home Teaching Society was simply that they were perceived to be, as Fraser put it, “powerless to help themselves.” In the absence of another coherent explanatory model, it was a lack of independence that identified people with visual impairments to officials looking for them in small towns and rural communities. While some people, like Peter Rushton, wished to learn to read for their own interest, for many others this would not have been a priority, and those who were not experiencing hardship would have had little reason to appeal for help—or to be reported to Fraser by their family or neighbours. In this way, those who were visually impaired but *independent* remained largely invisible to the School, as well as to the state, and are therefore also largely invisible in the historical record.

In his efforts to locate blind children and adults for training, Charles Fraser called for access to the census. We know now what he would have found there: partial, inconsistent records that themselves demonstrate, and indeed replicate, the very ambiguity around definitions of blindness that so troubled him. As Bruce Curtis has written, “censuses are not ‘taken,’ they are *made* ... through practices that do not simply reflect but that also discipline and organize social relations.” Moreover, “where the social practices that the census aims to record have not first been disciplined ..., informants may be incapable of offering reports” that fit into the acceptable parameters of the project.⁴⁵ In fact, Fraser was already aware of these issues. As he knew well, blindness had not yet been “disciplined,” and therefore it often evaded the enumerator’s gaze. Commenting on the 1891 census, he observed that there were only forty-nine people in

⁴⁵ Bruce Curtis, *The Politics of Population: State Formation, Statistics, and the Census of Canada, 1840-1875* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 33–34, 35.

Nova Scotia under the age of nineteen enumerated as blind, while fifty-three students from the province were enrolled in the School alone. “It is evident that these returns are far from accurate,” he remarked. “The inaccuracy is probably due to the enumerators only registering as blind persons who are totally deprived of sight, and not taking into account as blind those whose sight is so defective that they cannot see to read ordinary print.”⁴⁶ He may have been correct, but only partially so.

In 1881 and 1891, directions for census enumerators regarding blindness and deafness were non-existent. Under the headings *Deaf and Dumb* and *Blind*, the two enumeration manuals offered the same instructions, simply: “[these columns] are sufficiently explained by the headings.” This absence of specificity is particularly notable alongside the more elaborate instructions provided for interpreting the third category of disability, “Unsound Mind”:

The heading ‘unsound mind’ is intended to include all those unfortunates who are plainly deprived of reason. As many persons entertain prejudice on that account, the enumerator, if he is acquainted with the fact beforehand, must approach it with great delicacy, taking care, however, not to omit the entry of any such case. No attempt is made to distinguish between the various maladies affecting the intellect; as experience proves that the result of such inquiries made under such circumstances is perfectly worthless.⁴⁷

This disparity in the instructions reveals a matter-of-fact attitude toward sensory impairments that implied their identification would be self-evident to any careful enumerator. In 1901 the instructions for all three categories included the following particulars: “It is not necessary that **the degree of infirmity** should be absolute or total,

⁴⁶ Fraser quoted in *Nova Scotia Journal of Education*, April 1898, 69.

⁴⁷ Canada, Department of Agriculture (Census Branch), *Manual Containing “The Census Act” and the Instructions to Officers Employed in the Taking of the Second Census of Canada* (Ottawa: Government Printing Office, 1881), 30; Canada, Department of Agriculture (Census Branch), *Manual Containing “The Census Act” and the Instructions to Officers Employed in the Taking of the Third Census of Canada* (Ottawa: Government Printing Office, 1891), 18.

but that it should be so sufficiently marked in any one of the classes as to have reached **the stage of incapacity.**” The special instructions to use “delicacy” when inquiring about cognitive impairments were omitted, but they returned in 1911 in modified form and were extended to include deafness and blindness, suggesting that the enumeration of these conditions had not been as straightforward as census administrators had previously believed.⁴⁸ Although these instructions do not exactly confirm Fraser’s suspicion about a bias for “total” blindness, they do nevertheless confirm the “selective and disciplinary” nature of the enumerator’s gaze.⁴⁹ However, it is also evident that the work of enumerators was only partially determined by these instructions, if it was at all. Individual enumerators were often sloppy or inconsistent, overzealous or bashful; and ultimately they decided for themselves whether or not someone was “blind.”

The Canadian census is therefore of little use as a source for quantifying the number of people who lived with disabilities in rural Nova Scotia, or elsewhere. However, we might nevertheless use the census descriptively to explore the ways that some enumerators and their rural neighbours conceptualized both blindness and sightedness, and thus vision more broadly. Given the tendency to omit and under-report blindness (and other disabilities), we might legitimately ask why anyone was *ever* recorded as blind. I am interested in the conditions that made blindness undeniable to these functionaries of the state. One way to explore how some census enumerators transcribed their understanding of blindness into the historical record is to follow

⁴⁸ Emphasis in the original. Canada, Department of Agriculture (Census and Statistics Office), *Fourth Census of Canada 1901: Instructions to Chief Officers, Commissioners, and Enumerators* (Ottawa: Government Printing Office, 1901), 17; Canada, Department of Agriculture (Census and Statistics Office), *Fifth Census of Canada 1911: Instructions to Officers, Commissioners, and Enumerators* (Ottawa: Government Printing Office, 1911), 39.

⁴⁹ Curtis, *The Politics of Population*, 275.

graduates from the Halifax School for the Blind as they settled or resettled into rural communities.⁵⁰ These were men and women whom we can reasonably expect to have had significant visual impairments; however, the ways that individuals moved in and out of the category of “blindness” suggest a set of criteria that extended beyond their physical condition. As previously suggested, the definition of blindness espoused by many enumerators—and consistent with their instructions—relied heavily on notions of normative productivity and independence.

It is instructive to consider the case of Peter Rushton, who was too busy hauling mud and harvesting grain to keep up with his Braille reading, but who was nevertheless recorded as a dependent adult without an occupation in the home of his father in the 1891 and 1901 censuses. In 1911, when Rushton was forty-six years old, the same census enumerator changed his mind; Rushton’s occupation was initially recorded as *none*, but this was crossed out and replaced by *farmer*. It is clear that categorizing someone as “blind” often precluded also recording them as employed, obscuring many productive contributions to a household. This example also points to the ways that the generic and overly capacious category of *farmer*, which was used to describe a wide range of occupational situations in rural places, masks the diversity of people who were living, and making a living, in many rural communities, as well as making illegible the arrangements of mutuality and support that underpinned many of their lives. The gendered assumptions about work and dependency in the nineteenth century make it

⁵⁰ My sample includes the 121 students from rural communities in Nova Scotia who entered the School up to 1900; however, only a few descriptive examples and general observations will be given here. The sources for this analysis are the case book of the Halifax School for the Blind, the Canadian census 1881–1911 (occasionally supplemented by the 1921 census), and death certificates available through Nova Scotia Historical Vital Statistics.

more difficult to speculate about women who lived with visual impairments, just as they obscure the essential contributions that all women, children, and other so-called dependents made to household economies. These are not new observations; Canadian social historians have long troubled the under-enumeration of “undisciplined” forms of labour in the census and the attendant invisibility of many social practices.⁵¹ Here I add to this literature an exploration of the ways that the category of blindness contributed to shaping those patterns of invisibility.

Many graduates of the School appear as Rushton does in the census, as unemployed dependents in the homes of their relatives. Edwin Corbett, of Musquodoboit, Halifax County, is one example. Corbett was blinded by an accident with gunpowder in his mid-twenties. His case file at the School suggests that the accident may also have caused other physical impairments as he “appeared to have no use of his hands” and he was sent home from the School in 1888 after an unsuccessful, “long and patient” two-year attempt to teach him willow work.⁵² Corbett lived the rest of his life with his widowed mother, who in subsequent census manuscripts was enumerated as the head of their household and a farmer. In 1891, 1901, and 1911, Corbett was entered as blind with no occupation while the grown sons of their neighbours were listed as farmers’ sons or simply farmers. In 1901, his occupation was initially given as farmer but was crossed out. The combination of blindness, physical impairment, and agricultural work did not fit readily into the possible identities offered by the Canadian census. Without further

⁵¹ See, for example, Peter A. Baskerville and Eric W. Sager, eds., *Household Counts: Canadian Households and Families in 1901* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007); Bettina Bradbury, *Working Families: Age, Gender, and Daily Survival in Industrializing Montreal* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1993); Inwood, Kris E. and Richard Reid, “Gender and Occupational Identity in a Canadian Census,” *Historical Methods: A Journal of Quantitative and Interdisciplinary History* 34, no. 2 (2001): 57–70.

⁵² School Case Book, 72.

context, census records such as Rushton's and Corbett's might be read to suggest that blindness was an affliction that precluded its apparent victims from meaningful participation in society.

This becomes particularly apparent in the records of blind men whose living conditions changed significantly between census enumerations, and whose eyesight therefore also mysteriously improved and declined from year to year. Archibald Chisholm, from Ohio, Antigonish County, was blinded by scarlet fever and came to the school in 1894 as a teenager to study cane seating, brush making, and basket making.⁵³ He graduated in 1899 and married a sighted woman shortly after. In 1901 he was enumerated as a married farmer in his own home, living in Three Fathom Harbour, Halifax County. He was not recorded as blind. The enumerator did note that Chisholm was unable to read or write, which suggests some discussion of his capacities took place in order to determine that he did not qualify as "blind." Ten years later, however, Chisholm had evidently fallen on hard times. Although he was still the head of his household, he was enumerated in 1911 in the marginal occupational category of labourer, and he had become blind once again. A similar dynamic is apparent in the records of Orland Slack, who was blinded following the inflammation of his eyes in childhood. He left the School in 1906 after nine years, and returned to his home community of Folly Lake, Colchester County, where, his case file notes, he established and operated an egg hatchery.⁵⁴ He was enumerated in 1911 as an egg farmer, living in the home of his brother, and was not recorded as blind. It is unclear how long the hatchery was in

⁵³ School Case Book, 139.

⁵⁴ School Case Book, 196.

operation, but in 1921 Slack was enumerated as a farm labourer and he had been unemployed since the beginning of the year. This new status also rendered him “blind.”

In all of these cases, it is clear that productive rural life and work was perceived to preclude blindness—and vice versa. The category of identity that took precedence was largely at the discretion of the enumerator and it is essential here to note that Chisholm (farmer) was the head of a household and Slack (farmer) a business owner, while Rushton (blind) and Corbett (blind) were subordinates in their homes. A change in circumstances for the first two men also “made” them blind. Given this pattern, it is unsurprising that women who graduated from the School and resettled in rural communities were always enumerated as blind, as they were perceived to be inherently dependent. It is also possible that these men actively offered their blindness to enumerators as an explanation for being under-employed and were satisfied to have it unrecorded when they were doing well. Cultural scripts linking blindness and debility were pervasive and, despite Fraser’s admonitions, this remained a common and legitimate way to perform blindness. Enumerators did not create these notions, but through their work they inscribed them into the historical record in ways that occluded a variety of experiences.

This analysis of blindness in the census is not (and cannot be) conclusive, but it does highlight a historically-specific discourse of disability that contributes to our understanding of how blindness was conceptualized in the late nineteenth century. If even graduates of the Halifax School for the Blind could move in and out of the state’s category of blindness depending on the particulars of their living situation, it is not difficult to imagine the range of rural people with visual impairments—especially those

who lost their sight in adulthood—living and working alongside their sighted neighbours and family members without ever drawing the attention of the state. Despite Charles Fraser’s concerns about life in “sparsely settled country districts,” of course these people did exist.⁵⁵ But rural visual impairment confounded the category-making of the state, and so many individuals have remained invisible in the historical record. Again, these “facts” were made, not observed. These patterns of omission and categorization are therefore compelling as we work to understand the conceptualization of visual impairment and ideas about vision more broadly.

In contrast to the ambiguities surrounding rural and agricultural labour, another group of blind individuals was much more straightforwardly legible to census enumerators despite their lack of infirmity. Many graduates of the School for the Blind, men and women, settled or resettled in rural communities and used skills acquired at the School to pursue occupations unrelated to agriculture, most notably as musicians and music teachers. It is clear that many of these people self-identified as blind and performed public versions of blindness that contradicted prevailing ideas about blindness and debility.

Performing Blindness

Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander have argued that disability “is performed (like gender, sex, sexuality, race, and ethnicity) and not a static ‘fact’ of the body.” They emphasize that for people with disabilities, “the notion that disability is a kind of performance is ... not a theoretical abstraction, but a lived experience,” and suggest that

⁵⁵ Fraser, “Graduates of Schools for the Blind,” 10.

we might productively think of disability “as something one *does* rather than something one *is*.”⁵⁶ They position disability as part of the performance of everyday life and the performativity of identity, drawing on theorists including Erving Goffman and Judith Butler. If, as Lennard Davis argues, the “disabled body” is a recent invention, Sandahl and Auslander add that the people to whom this label has been assigned have been active participants in the making of that meaning. Certainly investigating the distinctive discourse of disability prevalent in the late nineteenth century makes this point apparent. The people with visual impairments who were legible to the state were those who performed “blindness” in ways that were comprehensible to the broader public of the time. Foremost, a legible performance of blindness meant performing the role of dependency, a state of affairs that Charles Fraser and those like him sought to change.

In 1896, the population of the Halifax School for the Blind was exceeding capacity and Fraser launched a fundraising campaign to build a new wing. In a promotional booklet, he contrasted a graduate of the School with the “pitiable ... condition of absolute helpless dependence” that was allegedly the lot of those without specialized education:

Mentally, physically and morally well developed, he graduates from the School for the Blind, and goes forth into the world prepared to fight the battle of life strongly, hopefully and manfully, and by his own exertions to win a fair share of the fruits of honest, conscientious labour. To him, blindness is not an affliction, is not a misfortune,—it is simply a difficulty to be overcome, an obstacle to be surmounted. He shares with others the ordinary burdens of life, and works away cheerfully and happily, regarding his loss of sight simply as a disadvantage which must be counteracted by greater effort upon his part. It is the enforced idleness, not the blindness, that make the loss of sight an affliction, and when, by means of education and training, a blind youth is actively and profitably employed, his loss

⁵⁶ Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander, “Disability Studies in Commotion with Performance Studies,” in *Bodies in Commotion: Disability and Performance*, ed. Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 2, 10; see also Petra Kuppers, *Disability and Contemporary Performance: Bodies on Edge* (New York: Psychology Press, 2003), esp. 9.

of sight ceases to be as serious a consideration. The School for the Blind at Halifax can point with pride to a large number of its graduates now settled in various parts of the Maritime Provinces, who are living happy, useful lives, and who are occupying responsible positions in the communities in which they reside.⁵⁷

Fraser described his former students as active, respectable, cheerful, useful, and masculine, themes that would be replicated in the self-representation of many graduates themselves.

Fraser encouraged graduates to perform this version blindness as part of establishing themselves in their communities. In his 1907 paper, mentioned above, in which he advocated for and against particular kinds of rural living, Fraser also noted, “Those who are blind are, as a rule, more successful in communities where they can become well known.”⁵⁸ Unlike agricultural work and other forms of manual rural labour, where the flexibility of tasks might produce ambiguity about visual impairment, the independent entrepreneurial ventures advocated for by the School necessitated that graduates publicly perform their blindness at the same time that they challenged its relationship to infirmity and dependency. Fraser acknowledged that “it is more or less difficult for young and inexperienced blind persons to establish themselves in communities where they are strangers. The man with sight will in a few weeks establish friendly relations with those about him. A glance of the eye, a nod of the head, and certain acts of courtesy win for him the recognition of his fellows and speedily break down the barriers of strangeness and reserve.” Special efforts were required to overcome “the disadvantages of the blind” in this respect, including personal introductions from the

⁵⁷ *The Blind of the Maritime Provinces: Their Work and Needs* (Halifax: The School for the Blind, 1896), [1], https://archive.org/details/cihm_92021.

⁵⁸ Fraser, “Graduates of Schools for the Blind,” 10.

Superintendent of the School himself.⁵⁹ Fraser also suggested that his graduates should carry a notebook for testimonials from satisfied customers of piano tuning or music instruction. He was adamant that his graduates should join “some local society, organization or brotherhood” in their community.⁶⁰ In all of these ways, Fraser encouraged his graduates to position themselves as competent, self-supporting, blind members of society.

For many graduates of the School, performing this version of blindness meant literally performing—as musicians, and more often as music teachers. Terry Rowden writes, “no role has been more strongly linked to disability than musicianship has to blindness. The idea of the special aptitude of blind people for music has been all but taken for granted since the beginning of organized education of the blind.”⁶¹ This was certainly true of the Halifax School, which prioritized musical education well into the twentieth century. Rowden adds that music was long considered one of the only respectable occupations for the blind; his study is about the tradition of blind African American musicians, who were also bound by racist stereotypes about musicality, but he makes it clear that his introductory comments are applicable to the work of blind musicians more broadly. He writes, “as public figures, blind performers must be read in relation to both the aural and visual identities they create as individuals and the cultural expectations that make a particular identity readable or unreadable, entertaining or

⁵⁹ Fraser, “Graduates of Schools for the Blind,” 10.

⁶⁰ Fraser, “Graduates of Schools for the Blind,” 11.

⁶¹ Rowden, *The Songs of Blind Folk*, 11; see also Frances A. Koestler, *The Unseen Minority: A Social History of Blindness in America* (New York: D. McKay Co, 1976), 96. Rowden suggests that the widespread belief in the natural predilection for music among the blind may have emerged, paradoxically, from the prevalence of blind beggars who played music, the idea of musical aptitude being perhaps more palatable than the idea that playing music was simply an effective strategy of survival. Rowden, *The Songs of Blind Folk*, 12.

disturbing, at a particular historical moment for a particular individual or group.”⁶² The cultural and historical contexts, including prevailing ideologies of race, gender, and ability, have determined whether a certain blind performer has been positioned as a freak, a genius, a charity case, or merely an entertainer at a particular moment in time. Petra Kuppers warns that “no study should discuss disability performance without acknowledging the history of oppression that had for so long kept disabled performers away from the ‘aesthetic’ stage and inducements to prestige, potential careers, and professional lives.”⁶³ By the late nineteenth century, white musicians, music teachers, and piano tuners who had graduated from the School, both men and women, had fanned out to small towns and rural villages across the Maritime Provinces and their lives were coloured by the tension that Kupper describes as they sought to create performances of respectable blindness and sustainable careers in music.

One of these people was Howard H. Taylor (1851–1920), from Middle Musquodoboit, Halifax County. At the age of fifteen he was left blind by an accident with a piece of hot steel. He entered the School in 1873 at the age of twenty-two, the fifteenth student to enroll, and like most of those before him, he did so as a young adult, not as a child.⁶⁴ By the time he left three years later, Taylor was a qualified pianoforte tuner, an occupation that would be dominated in the Maritime provinces by graduates of the Halifax School into the middle of the twentieth century. Taylor gave *piano tuner* as his occupation when he was married in September of 1882 but he pursued this field only

⁶² Rowden, *The Songs of Blind Folk*, 6.

⁶³ Kuppers, *Disability and Contemporary Performance*, 31.

⁶⁴ Of the fifteen students enrolled when Taylor entered, most were seventeen years old or older and only three were below the age of sixteen; the youngest, at eleven years old, was accompanied by an older brother who was also blind and who had entered the School the previous year. It was not until the 1880s that pupils under the age of sixteen became the norm; those under ten were rare until the mid-1890s.

briefly. His entry in the School's casebook notes with some understatement that Taylor "preferr[ed] giving concerts he was a good organizer & his concert trips proved remunerative."⁶⁵ In fact, by 1883, Taylor had inaugurated what would become an annual concert tour of the province for the next three decades. The Taylor Concert Company was composed of a varied and changing complement of entertainers, singers, and multi-instrumentalists, both men and women, including fellow graduates of the School, Taylor's sighted wife Georgina, and later their children.

The Taylor Concert Company toured the "country districts of the province," performing to "delighted audiences" and "hearty encores" in "packed houses" from Cape Breton to Yarmouth County, in small towns and in remarkably small villages along the way.⁶⁶ When they played in Lunenburg in 1886 under an early moniker the local newspaper had this to say:

the Taylor Comedy Company ... gave a most admirable concert at Temperance Hall, before a very appreciative audience. The programme consisted of instrumental and vocal solos and duets. Mr. Taylor received hearty encores for his violin and flageolet solos, and his fine bass voice was much appreciated. Mr. Cole, who seems a natural born comedian, brought down the house every time he appeared with his comic character songs. Miss Hunter was in excellent voice and each of her solos received an enthusiastic encore. Much of the success of the performance was due to the skilful accompaniments of Mr. A. P. McNeil, on a piano kindly loaned for the occasion The Company deserve large houses wherever they go, as their entertainment is not only a treat to musical people, but is so varied as to thoroughly suit the general public.⁶⁷

Cole, Hunter, and McNeil were all graduates of the Halifax School for the Blind.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Student Case Book, 15.

⁶⁶ *Truro Daily News*, May 1, 1901; *Bras d'Or Gazette* (St. Peters), August 5, 1896; *Port Hood Referee*, August 8, 1883; Port Dufferin community notes, *Truro Daily News*, August 28, 1912.

⁶⁷ *Lunenburg Progress*, September 29, 1886.

⁶⁸ Their blindness was not remarked upon. This is consistent with the findings of Terry Rowden's study of writing about blind performers. Rowden, *The Songs of Blind Folk*.

Taylor and his companions were part of a highly mobile world of labour and leisure in rural Nova Scotia. A transient labour force traversed the province and beyond, moving between forest, field, and ocean as work became available. Winter logging camps, lobster packing factories, merchant shipping, and apple picking, were only a few of the seasonally-determined occupations that drew men, boys, and some young women from their homes to work sites in distant parts of the province. On top of this generalized labour mobility, further layers of mobility and itinerancy were a regular and normalized part of the culture of rural communities. Peripatetic professionals such as doctors, dentists, opticians, religious clergy, circuit court magistrates, photographers, peddlers, business agents, and others, circulated around the province, remaining for a short time in a town or village before moving on. Additionally, a vibrant and idiosyncratic culture of itinerant performance was an essential part of the culture of rural life. Circuses, elocutionists, magic lantern lecturers, two-headed calves, and concert companies like Taylor's regularly toured the province's small towns and villages, playing to audiences in Temperance halls, schoolhouses, hotels, and private homes.⁶⁹

Although he appears to have been relatively well-known and well-regarded, it is perhaps unsurprising that little has been formally recorded about Howard Taylor or the Taylor Concert Company. Clues about his movements around the province, the nature of his shows, and the responses they engendered may be found in the brief references to his concerts that were published in the local columns of rural newspapers. Additionally, this promotional postcard (fig. 5.1) offers a sense of Taylor's own self-fashioning as a blind

⁶⁹ On itinerant culture in rural Nova Scotia, see Sara Spike, "'Photos of the school group of this place and others': An Itinerant Photographer Pictures Rural Education in Nova Scotia, c.1912" (Masters thesis, Concordia University, 2009).

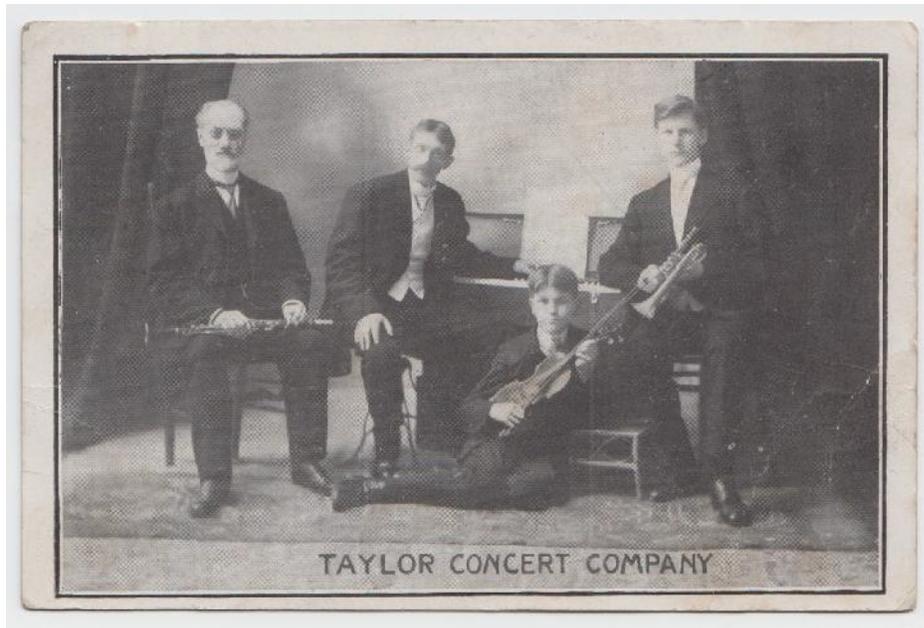


Fig. 5.1 Postcard of the Taylor Concert Company c.1910. Personal collection.

musician and business person. It was created as a mass-produced souvenir, likely sold at Taylor's concerts and perhaps used to advertise his shows in advance. The image shows a fairly late iteration of the Taylor Concert Company, including Taylor himself, at left, holding a clarinet; two of his sons, holding a violin and a cornet; and another man seated at a small piano or organ. The group is dressed formally, wearing dark suit jackets, stiff collars, and neckties typical of early twentieth-century attire. Taylor wears dark glasses, which would have been an unambiguous visual signifier of blindness to the contemporary audience of this postcard—but which may not be so readily visible to twenty-first-century eyes.

This was one of millions of postcards created, circulated, and collected in Canada in the early twentieth century, during an immense boom in the medium's popularity. Among their many subjects, it was common for postcards to feature the likenesses of performers, including international theatre stars and travelling entertainers from high art to popular culture. This postcard also fits into a more complicated history of

commodified images of people with disabilities, including, in particular, performers in freak shows. Many of those images exacerbated the exploitation already experienced by the subjects depicted in them, though some performers maintained significant control over their own presentation and image-making.⁷⁰

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when Taylor was touring Nova Scotia, he would not have been seen as a “freak,” but cultural tropes about mendicant blind musicians and stereotypes about the inherent dependency and infirmity of people with visual impairments would certainly have travelled with him everywhere he went. Rowden writes that the ability of a blind performer to read their audience determines their long-term success, and notes that “the ability to normalize oneself, and thereby create the space in which ‘entertainment’ can take place, [is] a more self-conscious and labor-intensive enterprise for a blind entertainer than it ever is for a sighted one.”⁷¹ The “disadvantages” that Fraser highlighted with regard to his graduates’ ability to integrate into new communities were encountered each time Taylor and his troupe took the stage. As he travelled around the province, Taylor inevitably provoked an engagement with blindness and therefore with vision. As audiences enjoyed his shows, they were also confronted, year and again, with his public performance of blindness, in a way that likely provoked anxieties and reflections on the value of their own eyesight.⁷² Taylor’s

⁷⁰ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, ed., *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (New York: NYU Press, 1996); Jane Nicholas, “A Debt to the Dead? Ethics, Photography, History, and the Study of Freakery,” *Histoire sociale/Social History* 47, no. 93 (2014): 139–55.

⁷¹ Rowden, *The Songs of Blind Folk*, 11.

⁷² Many scholars of disability have emphasized the anxiety that blindness produces in sighted people (in addition to the anxiety produced by encounters with disability more generally). See, for example, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How We Look* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Mark Hollins, *Understanding Blindness: An Integrative Approach* (Hillsdale, NJ: L. Erlbaum Associates, 1989), 89–109; Michalko, *The Difference That Disability Makes*; Rowden, *The Songs of Blind Folk*, 7; Susan M. Schweik, *The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

performances were therefore sites where ideas about vision were explored and interrogated by the wide range of rural people in attendance.

Although most commentary on Taylor's shows only mentioned their quality, occasional references to his blindness are a reminder that however professional he might have appeared, some people still understood his concerts to be charitable events.

Following a performance in North River, Colchester County, in 1911, a local correspondent to the newspaper advised: "As this company goes from place to place through the country, people should give them a full house. They cannot spend a quarter of a dollar in a much better way than by helping the blind and you certainly get your money's worth."⁷³ It is clear, however, that Taylor did not understand himself this way, but rather as an active, contributing member of society, such as when he volunteered to provide music at a benefit event on behalf of a farmer in a neighbouring community who had lost a hand in a milling accident.⁷⁴ Above all, then, this postcard represents Taylor's dynamic role in making his own meaning about disability, both for himself and for his audiences. As Sandahl and Auslander write, the goal of the performer "is to become an active maker of meaning, rather than a passive specimen on display."⁷⁵ Onstage Taylor performed music, but he also performed an active, modern, self-determined version of blindness, which is replicated on this postcard.

During the fundraising efforts in 1896, Fraser requested letters of support from former students, which he reprinted in the promotional booklet. Howard Taylor wrote:

This education has enabled me to get a foothold with the rest of humanity and press along in the march of the battle of life courageously and with no surrender. So far I have had enough and to spare, and am trusting the Hand which has guided

⁷³ North River community notes, *Truro Daily News*, June 11, 1911.

⁷⁴ *Truro Daily News*, January 27, 1895.

⁷⁵ Sandahl and Auslander, "Disability Studies in Commotion with Performance Studies," 3.

me from my youth up. I have no reason to complain of my lot in life, having a comfortable home and a happy family. My years go by as pleasantly as the heart could wish.⁷⁶

Taylor's letter, like all the others in the booklet, conforms very closely to Fraser's own rhetoric. Four other students described having "a happy, useful life," using Fraser's exact language. Taking up the "battle of life," no reason to complain, a happy life: just as Fraser had promised, here was evidence that his students were "cheerful, self reliant, and self supporting."⁷⁷ But even as they reveal the relative absence in the period of a diversified vocabulary and discourse for conceptualizing disability, these letters also suggest that some graduates of the School adopted that rhetoric as their own.⁷⁸ These letters are further performances of blindness; Taylor's description of himself emphasizes his embrace of this aspect of his identity and his refusal to be defined by stereotypes of debility and dependency. As Kudlick suggests, men who were blind were discursively feminized by the perception that they could not support themselves or a family.⁷⁹ For many male students, therefore, the most significant contribution of the School was to their own sense of manhood—and attendant access to conventional masculine privilege. Their letters to Fraser are assertions of competent masculinity, frequently using the word *success* and often mentioning, as Taylor did, that they support a family.⁸⁰ This positioning was well received; the School always seemed particularly proud of student entrepreneurs—Orland Slack's chicken hatchery, for example, or the successful retail business of Ainsley Shaw, in Musquodoboit.

⁷⁶ *The Blind of the Maritime Provinces*, n.p.

⁷⁷ Charles Fraser's scrapbook. NSA, RG 14, Series S, vol. 1, #1. *Yarmouth Times*, [n.d.] 1893 (scrapbook page 25).

⁷⁸ On the narrow range of options for conceptualizing blindness and blind identity in the period, see Kudlick, "The Outlook of *The Problem*."

⁷⁹ Kudlick, "The Outlook of *The Problem*," 202.

⁸⁰ *The Blind of the Maritime Provinces*.

The experiences of female graduates were likewise shaped by gendered expectations. Maggie Newcombe and Margaret Hunter, who both travelled with Taylor, were among the young, single blind women who pursued careers teaching music across the Maritime provinces following their graduation from the School. Newcombe was from Shoal Bay, Halifax County. In her 1896 letter of support for the fundraising efforts at the School she wrote, “I teach music and make fancy work and get along very comfortably.”⁸¹ She worked in her home community with long-term success as a music teacher and organist. Hunter, who received an “enthusiastic encore” in Lunenburg, was in fact a local girl. According to her case file, she was “possessed of a soprano voice of fine quality,” and following her time with Taylor she had a successful career as a music teacher, boarding with local families in Crapaud, PEI, and other rural communities in the western part of the island.⁸²

Like teaching more generally, teaching music was considered to be an acceptable occupation for women. Newcombe and Hunter were not taught piano tuning at the School, as their male colleagues were, and their manual instruction was also gendered, focusing on fancy work and knitting, while men were trained in seat caning, broom making, and basket making. Yet even as they adhered to gendered norms in these ways, much about their lives was unconventional for women of their time. Foremost, blind women were perceived to be unmarriageable, and it is certainly true that many graduates, including Newcombe and Hunter, remained unmarried. Madelaine Morrison has identified the place of music education in ideals of bourgeois femininity, emphasizing “music’s perceived benefits with regards to discipline, marriage prospects, domesticity,

⁸¹ *The Blind of the Maritime Provinces*, n.p.

⁸² School Case Book, 5.

and child rearing” for sighted women, alongside fears that such knowledge might encourage them to pursue careers as musicians or to neglect domestic skills.⁸³ For blind women, however, music education was intended explicitly to provide them with the skills necessary to make an independent, long-term livelihood, just as it was for their male classmates. Fraser regularly emphasized that “the young men and women trained here are to be prepared for lives of active work either as teachers of music, pianoforte tuners, or willow basket makers.”⁸⁴ Fraser preferred training in music education over musicianship for performance: “as a business proposition ... piano *playing* should take a second place as compared with piano *teaching*. Better graduate three qualified teachers than one virtuoso.”⁸⁵

While some did sustain careers, the majority of blind women who graduated from the School were not music teachers; most lived “at home,” where they contributed to household economies in other ways. Freelove Kaulback, from New Germany, Lunenburg County, who was a “bright, intelligent pupil” and who graduated in 1897 as a French teacher, supplemented her income by transcribing books into Braille for the School’s circulating library.⁸⁶ Maggie Newcombe mentioned she was making fancy work. Cora Longley, of Green Harbour, Shelburne County, “learned knitting, sewing & raffia work & ... found a ready sale for all the articles made by her.”⁸⁷ Many graduates continued to use the skills they acquired at the School, but the extent to which these produced an income is less clear. For these women, performing blindness was constrained by

⁸³ Madelaine E. Morrison, “Domestic Harmonies: Musical Activity in Southwestern Ontario, 1880-1920” (PhD dissertation, Carleton University, 2014), 127.

⁸⁴ School, *Report*, 1887, 11.

⁸⁵ Fraser, “Graduates of Schools for the Blind,” 10. Emphasis in original.

⁸⁶ School Case Book, 90.

⁸⁷ School Case Book, 147.

gendered notions of domesticity and feminine respectability. Nevertheless, they each, like their male counterparts, positioned themselves in relation to a modern ideal of productive citizenship, an identity consistent with the one that reformers sought to encourage throughout rural Nova Scotia.

A conventional interpretation of the absence of people with disabilities in the historical record is that they were hidden away and not being discussed; their voices were being silenced. As with the histories of many other marginalized groups, this has far too often been the case. But rather than taking those silences as givens, it is also important to interrogate them as productive starting points for understanding other ways of thinking and other social practices that existed in the past—in this case, other ideas about blindness and vision. The absence of a formal or consistent definition of blindness meant that a range of people lived in rural communities with visual impairments without this information ever entering the historical record. In the context of the alternative, adaptive models of productivity that were the norm in rural communities, school officials, census takers, and other bureaucrats, who founded their definition of blindness on ideas about independence or productivity, were often stymied. Following Davis, this discussion of the Home Teaching Society and the creation of the Canadian census helps to chart the contours of a historically specific discourse of disability that was in force in late nineteenth-century Canada. And following Kleege, it reveals how the perceived binary between blindness and vision contributed to the construction of a dependent, disabled blind subject in the political imaginary of Canada that contrasted with the lived realities of many people in rural communities.

The first two chapters of this dissertation showed how particular ways of looking, certain practices of observation, were believed by reformers in rural communities to be essential to a moral, modern, life. In all of those cases, the sightedness of rural men, women, and children was taken for granted. The next two chapters revealed how new anxieties about visual acuity emerged as the faster pace and increasing visual demands of modern life came under scrutiny in both rural and urban places. This chapter has further explored the relationship between vision and modernity, by interrogating the ways that blindness (and thus sightedness) was defined in relation to ideas about rural productivity and liberal individualism—the same values espoused by the reformers described earlier. Moreover, as Charles Fraser would have been quick to point out, as their owners aspired to those ideals of productive, independent citizenship, modern eyes could also be blind.

Conclusion: Making Vision Visible

While some rural Nova Scotians in the late nineteenth century were learning to see cows, or developing an eye for new species of apples, others were learning to spot buoys on the horizon from the deck of a ship, or assessing changes in the wind by observing the luff of the sails. Others were tracking animals by signs on the forest floor invisible to the untrained eye, or determining a wood oven was the right temperature for baking bread by noticing the particular way a water droplet scattered on the cook top. Recognizing visual cues could be a matter of life or death, such as for loggers who learned to judge the direction in which a tree was likely to fall, or a subject of leisure, such as for an amateur botanist, who identified leaves from the same tree to press into a scrapbook. These situations describe not just people looking at things, but a series of learned visual skills, both formally and informally taught, in which seeing was part of holistic, embodied sensory engagements, seamlessly integrated with the apprehension of sounds, odors, flavours, and textures to make sense and meaning of the world.

These sensory formations were also historically specific. None of the practices just mentioned were static, but instead were continuously being transformed by processes of modernization that reshaped both rural and urban lives. In the late nineteenth century, agricultural science was formalizing and codifying animal husbandry and horticulture, the increased speeds of steamships were transforming maritime navigation, new wildlife regulations were altering the significance of traditional ecological knowledge, domestic science was offering new approaches to cookery, aspects of logging were being mechanized and industrialized, and the prerogatives of rational recreation were

encouraging rural and urban Canadians to take up new hobbies like nature-study. Alongside these transformations was a persistent anxiety about the conditions of modern life that were taxing the eyes, while those same conditions also necessitated normative visual acuity and a capacity for sustained attention. Newspapers were littered with articles about how to care for the eyes. Educators were debating new forms of sensory education to ensure children grew up with sophisticated, disciplined visual skills that would prepare them for lives as modern liberal subjects, while children with disabling visual impairments were being removed from those same schools for a different sort of training with the same goals of modern citizenship in mind. The state increasingly scrutinized the eyes of workers, including those at sea. And for the first time, newly professionalizing opticians began to commodify these anxieties and to sell the idea of expert eye care as an essential part of modern life.

This dissertation has explored how these dynamics were articulated in rural places across Nova Scotia. It reveals a persistent pattern in which ideas about vision were inflected with concerns about the modernization of rural lives and places. In doing so, it makes a case for the history of vision as an effective and meaningful lens through which to understand the ways rural people encountered and negotiated the formations and transformations of modernity. The result is a cultural history that brings to light aspects of rural life that have so far remained outside the purview of scholarly inquiry, and encourages a reconceptualization of traditional approaches to modernity in both rural and urban places.

The most common responses I received when I said I was working on the history of vision in rural Nova Scotia (once it was clear that I had said *vision* and not *fishin'*) were comments and questions about photography, art, and other forms of visual representation. There is a prevailing assumption that to study vision is primarily to study our relationship to the aesthetic artifacts that were created to be looked at. It may have therefore come as a surprise to some readers to find only two photographs reproduced in this dissertation. Each of the photographs—of the 1881 Yarmouth exhibition in chapter 2 and of the Taylor Concert Company in chapter 5—was explored not as an illustration, but as a site where meaning was created, and from which it continues to be disseminated. The high-angle view and static perfection depicted by the exhibition photograph were guided by, and subsequently reinforced, the ideology of progressive reform espoused by the event organizers. And the professional portrait of Taylor and his fellow musicians was a tangible representation of his self-fashioning as a respectable blind performer and citizen. In both cases, it is the ideological work of the photographs that is important to my analysis. This is also true of my more extensive engagement with visual advertising in chapter 3. Advertisements for eyeglasses and later for opticians contributed to a shared public vocabulary and also a visual repertoire of imagery for thinking about the meaning and value of eyesight in late nineteenth-century Nova Scotia; they functioned as a popular visualization of modern vision.

This dissertation has also explored representations that could not be reproduced in its pages, but which would nevertheless also fit easily into a more conventional history of rural visual culture. Beyond a photographic depiction, the exhibitions described in chapter 2 were spectacles of rural modernity, representations of agricultural improvement

characterized by practices of display and pageantry, and guided by a belief in the educational effect of seeing. The stage shows of blind musicians, who travelled across the province playing in small towns and tiny villages, were part of a performance culture that also included local and itinerant theatre troupes, circuses, magic lantern exhibitions, and medicine wagon shows. These, too, engaged audiences in practices of spectatorship. If we stretch our definition, we might also coyly suggest that lighthouses, buoys, and sidelights on ships, were, technically, made to be looked at. However, notwithstanding the “show” of sparks in the air around the ship in Barrington Harbour as it used a searchlight to locate buoys in the introduction to this dissertation, it quickly becomes apparent that the visual experiences engendered by these technologies do not fit within the conventional understanding of visual culture, which highlights the dissemination of representations and subjects positioned as viewers and spectators.

This dissertation takes a much more expansive view of vision. It contributes to the fields of both visual culture studies and sensory history, the latter of which Canadian historians have been slow to take up. It posits that the “visual culture” of a society is made up of more than its things to see—it also includes its historically-specific ways of seeing, skilled practices of looking, and unique discourses about sight. This conceptual framework has allowed me to meaningfully connect lighthouses to advertising opticians—and also to mayflowers, pumpkins, and blind lumbermen—revealing an intersecting discourse about vision and rural modernity that has not previously been explored. Approaching rural culture as a history of vision provides a new analytical orientation to some of the topics (nature-study, exhibitions) covered in this dissertation,

while also opening a new line of inquiry to investigate subjects (optometry, lighthouses, rural blindness) that have so far received scant scholarly attention.

This project opens with a discussion of nature-study and its broader context of sensory education as moral reform. While the temporal period of this chapter occasionally extends beyond the boundaries of my overall study, it appears first because of the ways that it sets the stage for the rest of the dissertation to follow. This chapter reveals a formal pedagogical discourse aimed at training and reshaping the senses—particularly vision—to produce active, moral citizens, and its implementation in the context of rural Nova Scotia. The explicitness of this discourse provides a historically-grounded and highly legible reference point for understanding how the ideas about vision that appear in subsequent chapters were also examples of these same reform impulses, even (and especially) if this was not always as obvious to the people who articulated and received them at the time.

Nineteenth-century scientific education explicitly emphasized the training of vision and it is therefore unsurprising that among the topics covered in this dissertation, scientific observation is the only one that has already received significant scholarly attention from the perspective of the history of vision. Chapter 1 brings the insights of this important literature to bear on an analysis of A. H. MacKay's unique phenology project, a topic and set of sources that have not previously drawn the attention of scholars outside of the sciences. By exploring how project administrators interacted with their rural respondents, this chapter contributes new insights on the way that science works in tandem with the state in contexts well beyond narratives of so-called discovery. However, moving from the history of scientific observation, through exhibitions, optical

advertising, and maritime navigation to blindness, the relationship between the existing literature on the history of vision and my line of inquiry becomes increasingly frayed as I add entirely new topics to the conversation. There is a voluminous literature on the history of exhibitions, much of it exploring the way that the visual self-surveillance of the crowd acted as a form of social discipline. Less has been written about individual acts of visual discernment. Chapter 2 therefore contributes to the history of exhibitions by focusing on the visual pedagogy of the judges and the ideology of rural improvement that underpinned their lessons in agricultural aesthetics. The history of advertising has produced a substantial literature, but the history of optometry has not received meaningful scholarly attention. Chapter 3 is therefore innovative in exploring the professionalization of optometry and how this industry contributed to the popular culture of vision. Notably, the discourse of modern optical expertise found its way to both rural and urban communities at the same time in the late nineteenth century. Maritime history is an expansive field and its historians are frequently attuned to the embodied acts of perception that were essential to a sailor's professional knowledge. Nevertheless, neither the visual infrastructures, nor the practices of looking characteristic of seafaring have received dedicated attention. By foregrounding vision, chapter 4 brings to light a set of underutilized Canadian sources, contributing a new analytical perspective on the process of state formation in rural communities, revealing how the eyesight of sailors was frequently implicated in negotiations between rural people and the Canadian state on the coasts of Nova Scotia. As chapter 5 argues, to write about the history of blindness is fundamentally to write about the history of vision and it is essential to challenge models that posit the two as opposites. Chapter 5 offers a pointed rejoinder to scholarship in

visual culture studies and sensory history that continues to explore blindness mainly as a trope or hypothetical thought experiment. Moreover, it contributes to a growing history of disability in Canada, particularly a history that moves beyond institutions.

The preceding summary reveals some of the unique contributions made by this dissertation to a wide range of fields. However, it is essential to underline that this is not eclecticism for its own sake. Instead, I argue that combining subjects that are rarely, if ever, discussed together provides the most compelling and robust argument for the existence of a pervasive and widespread discourse in which ideas about vision were regularly interlaced with concerns about modernity in rural places. Moreover, doing so broadens the purview of rural history, contributing to a growing literature that moves away from agriculture and other aspects of rural production to explore a range of locations, experiences, and cultural forms that have not previously received scholarly attention. With the important exception of work by Cristina Grasseni on cattle breeders, major scholarship on the historically- and locally-situated character of vision has tended to focus on cities, as well as on formations of elite culture such as imperial science, art criticism, and urban infrastructure. This is consistent with the field of visual culture, and indeed, cultural history more broadly, which tend to accord a peripheral place to rural experiences and perspectives, particularly as they relate to constructions of modernity.

By contrast, this project argues that late nineteenth-century rural Nova Scotia was a meaningful location from which to register perceptions of modernity. It contributes to a growing literature in rural history that explores how the formations of modernity were encountered, embraced, resisted, and articulated in rural places. By tracing relationships between ideas about vision and modernity, this project offers a new perspective on how

rural people navigated a dynamic world characterized by dramatic changes to both rural and urban life, moving away from a pejorative interpretation of rural cultures as, at best, vernacular, belated, or colloquial, to position them in the mainstream of historical Canadian and transnational experience.

This position emphasizes the need to understand modernity as a multi-sited experience of cultural transformation and as a series of encounters with formations that were altering life in both rural and urban places. Countless important differences certainly did and do exist between the experiences of visuality (and indeed all experiences) in urban and rural places. However, from a cultural perspective, an analytical framework that allows us to think about nineteenth-century rural experiences and formations as *differently* modern, rather than *pre-modern* or *un/anti-modern*, places them in meaningful dialogue with urban experiences in a way that is impossible in formulations that emphasize hierarchies of culture, and dichotomies of tradition vs modernity, or sophistication vs naivety. Rural Canada was not an undifferentiated backdrop for the emergence of modernity in cities elsewhere. Rural Nova Scotians encountered the formations of modernity in a range of ways that would have been quite foreign to urban dwellers, and the opposite is also undoubtedly true, while they also encountered many of the same formations concurrently. In all of these instances, rural and urban Canadians were all engaging with the same broader cultural transformations and understanding these experiences as modern. This dissertation argues that the history of vision, and of the senses more broadly, offers an opportunity to reframe and remake our approach to modernity, significantly altering the way that we understand the differences and commonalities of late nineteenth-century life across Canada.

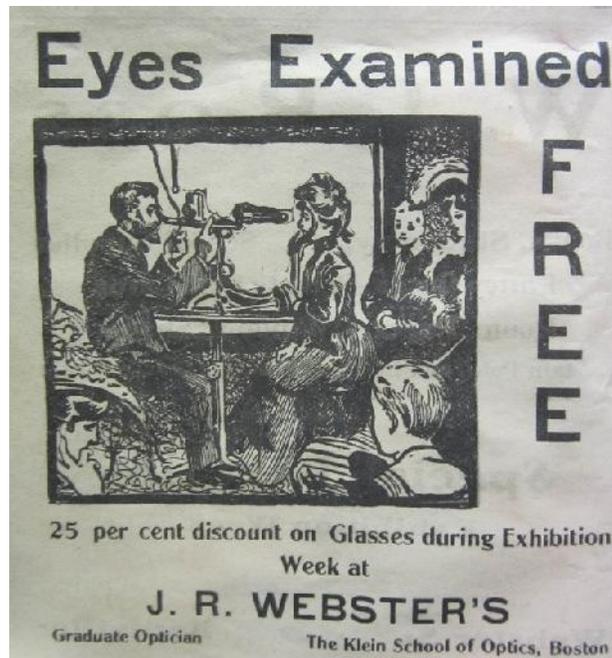


Fig. C.1 Advertisement for J. R. Webster, *Prize List and General Regulations of the Nova Scotia Horticultural Exhibition* (Kentville: Exhibition Committee, 1908). Kings County Museum and Archives, Kentville, MS150 P987.1256.1

Like optician J. R. Webster did, this dissertation has made a spectacle of vision (fig. C.1). Webster and I have each placed vision in the spotlight, made in the centre of attention, and invited an audience to look at the subject from a new perspective, to see it as a locus of modernity in rural Nova Scotia. This advertisement was placed in the pre-circulated prize list of the Nova Scotia Horticultural Exhibition, held in Kentville in 1908, and encouraged visitors to have their eyes examined while in town for the show. The illustration that dominates the ad shows a man (a stand-in for Webster) in a dark suit and beard examining the eyes of a fashionable woman by means of an elaborate table-mounted retinoscope. The pair are surrounded by a number of onlookers, women and boys, and the framing of the view implicates the reader of the ad as an additional witness to the scene. A representation of an exhibition that combines image and text, it depicts the performance of highly skilled and specialized vision under the careful scrutiny of an

audience. This is a remarkable representation of the network of gazes and visual signifiers that circulated at all exhibitions in the period, and is also emblematic of ideas about vision that were apparent in a wide variety of other contexts.

Across rural Nova Scotia in the late nineteenth-century, practices of looking were being scrutinized by a range of onlookers in ways that reinforced networks of power and contributed to discourses that sought to reform and modernize rural lives and places. Webster's performance was not neutral; he did not only seek to gaze upon the eyes of this woman as an opportunity to describe or catalogue them. He sought to *correct* her vision. This ongoing process of disciplining rural vision, of bringing rural practices and discourses of looking in line with other ways of seeing, was carried out in enumerable moments of encounter with formations of modernity, symbolized in this illustration by the retinoscope. Watching this performance, the audience in the ad—including the reader—was being taught that their rural eyes, too, might be in need of correction. In the absence of formal definitions of normative vision or visual acuity, ideas about vision were constantly made and remade as complex admixtures of modernity and local knowledge. With this advertisement, Webster made vision *visible* to modern rural eyes. This dissertation has illuminated the discourses and contexts that made that visibility meaningful in late nineteenth-century rural Nova Scotia.

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