**Carlo Gentile, Gold Rush Photographer, 1863-1866**

By Ronald A. Greene

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Photographs add a vast amount of detail to historical research, because images can convey information that could be missed in a project that relied solely on text.

A photographer might capture a scene without knowing the significance that scene will have the next day. There is no way of knowing, as a press of the shutter creates the image, what the value of that image will be in a century and a half.

A photograph might contain details too commonplace to be noted by a writer observing the same scene. If everyone knows what a street, for example, looks like, there is little point in writing a description, yet a photograph will create a lasting record of the physical environment.

We live in an age when photos can be taken without a second thought, and can be deleted just as quickly and easily. Yet we should remember that photographs can have meaning not just in the moment they are taken, but for many years to come.

All of this is an attempt to avoid stating the obvious, namely, that a photograph is worth many, many words.

There might be no better proof of that adage than Ronald A. Greene’s Carlo Gentile, Gold Rush Photographer, 1863-1866. It is a remarkable collection of images the photographer made during three years in the colonies of Vancouver Island and British Columbia.

Gentile was born to a wealthy family in Naples in 1835. He visited Australia, the Caribbean and South America before setting foot in San Francisco on his way to Victoria in 1862.

In Victoria, Gentile tried his luck as a merchant, but gave up within a year. His next idea was to become a photographer, and he set to work with his camera, recording scenes in Victoria at first, but eventually up-Island as far as Nanaimo as well as New Westminster, the Fraser River gold rush region and two routes between the coast and the gold.

His stay here was brief. By 1866, he had decided to return to the United States, and became famous there for his photographic skills.

Gentile, like other photographers of the day, made his prints available to anyone with money to pay for them. Given the difficulty of photography in the 1860s, he would have had potential commercial appeal in mind with every photograph that he took.

Many of his photographs were compiled into albums. One of those albums inspired Greene to start this project, which brings together almost half of the photographs that have been confirmed as the work of Gentile.

The photographs here allow us to look at Victoria, the Cowichan Valley, the Leech River, New Westminster, Clinton, Kamloops, and towns in Washington Territory. It includes ships that frequented Victoria as well as portraits of First Nations people as well as Europeans.

Greene has done his best to identify the people in the Gentile photographs — not always possible, especially with the First Nations — as well as the locations shown.

Some of the locations were obvious, or were well identified when they were taken. Others posed major problems, including a photo of the Cowichan Valley that prompted Greene to appeal for help through the pages of the Times Colonist last fall. That location has been confirmed, and the photograph has been included in this book.

Greene provides additional information with the photographs, with descriptions that help put the photographs into context. Most of the photographs are reproduced as large as possible, in order to allow a close examination of the details they contain.

Carlo Gentile, Gold Rush Photographer, 1863-1866 is not inexpensive. Greene chose to give his labour of love the highest quality possible. The paper used is acid-free, and the book’s binding is designed to survive for decades.

In allowing us to explore and understand more of our history, the photographs collected here are invaluable. Greene’s book is a fine addition to the accumulated knowledge of what British Columbia was like in the years between the first major gold rush and Confederation.

The reviewer is the editor-in-chief of the Times Colonist.

- See more at: http://www.timescolonist.com/entertainment/books/photographer-captured-b-c-s-earliest-colonial-days-1.1975177#sthash.tzGlHmdo.dpuf