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Photographs as evidence in writing the history of modern science

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In the late 1940s, G. C. Heron sat at his desk, frustrated. The photograph archive he directed at New Zealand's National Library, the Alexander Turnbull Library, was actively soliciting photograph collections. At the same time individuals throughout the country, seeing little value in them, were tossing images away. Heron found this deeply troubling. Photographs "preserve scenes, impressions and faces of bygone days and form an historic record as surely as does any manuscript, diary or printed work," he wrote, but few historians were doing anything with them.¹

During the last half-century photographic archives have burgeoned: over 8 million images fill the still photographs stacks of the US National Archives alone.² Yet historians remain hesitant about embracing photographs as evidence in the way Heron desired. Many only seek photographs at the end of research projects. Then they use them like potted plants, hoping to illuminate stories based on written archives. Keith McElroy has rightly observed that historians use photographs "primarily as illustrations, and frequently their content has contradicted the thesis of a publication that was derived from literary sources." Yet few historians pause to consider what images might teach them.³

Photographs are nevertheless becoming more important to scholars of modern history. The total number of books that directly address photographs as an aspect of historical methodology remains astonishingly small—just twenty-five have been published, all since 1973. But a growing number of historians are drawing on intense interest in contemporary visual culture to "read" photographs as evidence, as historians Alan Trachtenberg and Robert M. Levine have urged.⁴ In recent years social and cultural historians have employed photographic collections to analyze the living standards and cultural expectations of lower-class citizens of late nineteenth century Brazil, urban life in turn-of-twentieth-century America, the practice and ideology of the British Empire, rural life in the New Deal era, the cultural world-view of editors at the National Geographic Society, the ambitions of planners and financiers who promoted the first world's fairs, and the practice of medicine in post-Civil War America.⁵

Historians of science have moved more slowly than colleagues in other fields to incorporate analysis of photographs of the social, technical, and institutional practices of science into their writings. Sustained by the rich textual and archival sources of a privileged and highly verbal elite, few historians of modern science have felt the