

Un canadien errant: Charles Smeaton and the earliest photographs of the Roman Catacombs

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Article abstract

En 1866, en Angleterre, Charles Smeaton, photographe professionnel de Québec, fait la rencontre de John Henry Parker, éditeur et amateur d'antiquités d'Oxford. Smeaton accepte par la suite d'accompagner Parker à Rome où il passera les derniers mois de sa vie à photographier le projet historique révolutionnaire de Parker, qui sera publié sous le titre de *The Archaeology of Rome*. Expérimentant le ruban de magnésium, Charles Smeaton peut produire des images photographiques des murs des catacombes romaines et d'autres sites archéologiques, réussissant là où les photographes précédents avaient failli par manque de lumière. Ces images constituent aujourd'hui une importante source de renseignements, surtout en ce qui concerne les murs des catacombes qui aujourd'hui n'existent plus. Le présent article évalue le rôle de ce photographe pionnier canadien et documente sa carrière à la fois au Canada et à Rome.

Un canadien errant: Charles Smeaton and the earliest photographs of the Roman Catacombs

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Résumé

En 1866, en Angleterre, Charles Smeaton, photographe professionnel de Québec, fait la rencontre de John Henry Parker, éditeur et amateur d'antiquités d'Oxford. Smeaton accepte par la suite d'accompagner Parker à Rome où il passera les derniers mois de sa vie à photographier le projet historique révolutionnaire de Parker, qui sera publié sous le titre de *The Archaeology of Rome*. Expérimentant le ruban de magnésium, Charles Smeaton peut produire des images

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In 1867, Oxford bibliophile, publisher, and amateur antiquarian John Henry Parker issued a sales catalogue entitled *A catalogue of a series of Photographs illustrative of the Archaeology of Rome prepared under the direction of John Henry Parker in the winters of 1864, 1865, and 1866*. Supplements appeared thereafter on a regular basis as the collection of visual material grew, and eventually led to an ambitious scholarly project: an unusual (for the day) combination of text and original photographs, published in a thirteen-volume study entitled *The Archaeology of Rome* (London and Oxford, 1874–83). As Parker was not himself a photographer, he employed others for the physical process of taking the pictures and producing the prints. These were all local Italians, with one very significant exception. An expatriate Canadian, Charles Smeaton, was commissioned by Parker in 1866 to take the first photographs of murals in the Roman catacombs – a particularly difficult task given the small enclosed spaces and complete absence of natural light. Smeaton would overcome this challenge through the use of magnesium light, and his name appears in Parker's second catalogue, published in 1868. This article intends both to add a chapter to the history of early photography in Canada by documenting an individual who has hitherto been all but lost from the record, and at the same time to demonstrate his importance for the history of the study of the Roman catacombs.

Although the precise birth date of Charles Smeaton is not known, the evidence provided by his tombstone in Rome's Protestant Cemetery indicates that he was born in Quebec City, in or around the year 1837. The plain headstone (fig. 1) bears the following inscription:

IN MEMORY OF
CHARLES SMEATON
BORN IN QUEBEC LOWER CANADA
DIED MARCH 30th 1868
AGED 31 YEARS
ERECTED BY HIS ARTIST FRIENDS
IN TESTIMONY OF THEIR ESTEEM AND REGRET

By the time he was approximately twenty-four years old in

1861, he was assisting his father, Alexander, in running the family clothing business: C & A Smeaton Merchant Tailors, located in Quebec at 24 Palace Street, Upper Town.¹ In that same year, Charles Smeaton officially opened Smeaton's Photographic Gallery in the same building, and this new venture was advertised in the *Quebec Mercury* as offering a number of different types of photographs, including card portraits and album pictures, in addition to painted portraits, either in oil or watercolours, "from the smallest miniature up to full length life size."² This combination of both photographic and painted portraits may suggest that Smeaton had received some formal artistic training, in addition to an obvious knowledge of photography, although it is not known where this may have taken place.³ By 1863, a John Smeaton, presumably a relative (younger brother?), had joined him in the running of the photographic studio; the Quebec directory for 1863–64 lists the two men as both "artists and photographers."⁴

While the specific origins of his knowledge of photography are also unknown, some general observations about the transmission of the new technology to British North America may prove useful in establishing the general context. One potential source of information about photography was the series of reports in Canadian newspapers, documenting the various advances that had been achieved. For example, following the 1839 public disclosure in Paris of the invention of the daguerreotype by Louis Jacques Mande Daguerre, the *Quebec Gazette* published a report on the "new Art of Sun painting."⁵

In addition to newspaper reports, there were other sources of information available to enterprising professional photographers. In 1859, when Henry J. Cundall, a surveyor and land agent in Charlottetown, decided to pursue photography as an amateur, he ordered equipment, supplies, and a pamphlet of instructions for the "collodio-albumen" method from a British photographic firm.⁶ Professionals, like Montreal-based William Notman, often ordered the latest journals from both Europe and America, in order to keep informed of recent developments.⁷

In addition, some Canadian photographers were also pursuing their own individual experiments, and it can be shown

Figure 1. Tombstone of Charles Smeaton, Protestant Cemetery, Rome (Photo: John Osborne).



Smeaton did pay some attention to such developments. In 1863, for example, William Notman, along with Thomas D. King, published the first photographically illustrated art text in Canada: *Photographic Selections*.⁸ This contained 46 photographic copies of artworks by both “old and modern masters” along with two photographs taken “From Nature,” each with an accompanying text, written by King. The book was distributed to 263 subscribers scattered throughout the province, and the list of these subscribers, printed in the book itself, includes the name of a certain Charles Smeaton of Quebec City. Thus it is certainly possible that Smeaton and Notman were acquainted, although no direct personal connection can be demonstrated with certainty.

Given the various events and activities that were taking place in the early 1860s, Smeaton must have recognized the diverse ways in which photography could be exploited commercially. Moreover, the content of his studio photographs indicates that he did not confine himself to the production of portraits. Evidence for his early practice is provided by a small group of photographs, all produced by the Smeaton Studio,⁹ preserved today in the National Library and Archives of Canada in Ottawa (Hale Family fonds). Of the seven albumen prints contained within this collection, only one is a portrait: a full-length image of George J. Mountain, Anglican bishop of Quebec from 1837 to 1863, shown leaning against a column (fig. 2).¹⁰ The

Figure 2. Portrait of Bishop George J. Mountain (Smeaton photo, Library and Archives Canada, Hale fonds, C-052076).



other six photographs depict streetscapes and fortifications in the historic centre of Quebec City (figs. 3–8). It would seem, therefore, that Smeaton made a concerted effort to diversify his practice.

It is not known when, how, or why Charles Smeaton travelled from Quebec City to England, but in the summer of 1866 he appears to have met John Henry Parker, probably in London. Subsequently he agreed to continue on to Rome to work for Parker as his photographer. He would not return to Canada.¹¹

John Henry Parker was himself born in London on 18 March 1806, but spent his formative years as a publisher and bookseller in Oxford. His interests in architecture and history

Figure 3. Quebec City: Rue St Louis (Smeaton photo: Library and Archives Canada, Hale fonds, C-008578).



soon became a consuming passion, and his first book, *A Glossary of Terms used in Grecian, Roman, Italian and Gothic Architecture*, appeared in 1836. Three years later he was among the founding members of the Oxford Society for Promoting the Study of Gothic Architecture, which would later become the Oxford Architectural Society (1848) and then the Oxford Architectural and Historical Society (1860). Although lacking any formal education in this field, he soon became widely regarded by his peers, being elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries in 1849, and receiving an honorary M.A. degree from Exeter College, Oxford, in June 1867. In 1870, he was appointed Director of the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, a post that he would hold until his death in 1884.

In 1859, Parker made his first visit to Italy, where he was particularly struck by the surviving monuments in Rome and Ravenna. But it was a few years later that, on the advice of his doctor, he began to spend each winter in the milder climate of the Mediterranean. This decision was prompted by a bout of rheumatic fever, contracted in 1863 while studying the architecture of Windsor Castle at the invitation of Prince Albert. Beginning with the winter of 1864-65, Parker would spend some thirteen consecutive seasons in Rome, exploring the city's ancient and medieval monuments and bringing archaeological evidence to bear on current historical debates. He also supplemented his studies with visual documentation, employing a series of photographers for this purpose. Perhaps in part because his own background was not formally academic, Parker soon became involved with the active community of English-speaking expatriates who were resident in Rome, clustered in the zone around the Piazza di Spagna and Via del Babuino, and in 1865 he was a co-founder of the British and American Archaeological Society of Rome, of which he served as vice-president. It was probably as a result of his contact with this group of educated *amateurs* that he soon came to realize the enormous potential of this photographic archive, not only as an aid to scholars of Roman history and archaeology such as himself, but also for the

Figure 4. Quebec City: Rue St Jean (Smeaton photo: Library and Archives, Canada, Hale fonds, C-008583).



Figure 5. Quebec City: fortifications (Smeaton photo, Library and Archives Canada, Hale fonds, PA-051755).

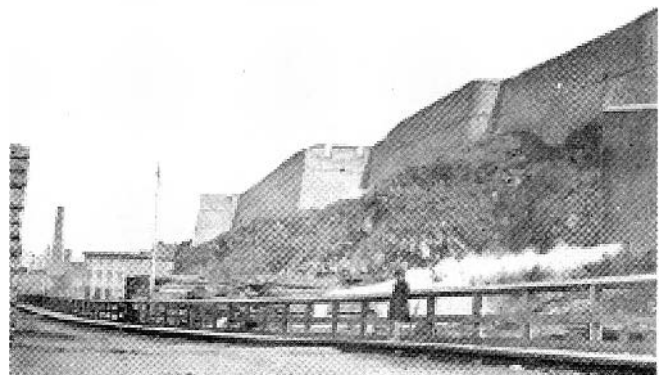


Figure 6. Quebec City: street scene (Smeaton photo, Library and Archives Canada, Hale fonds, PA-051756).

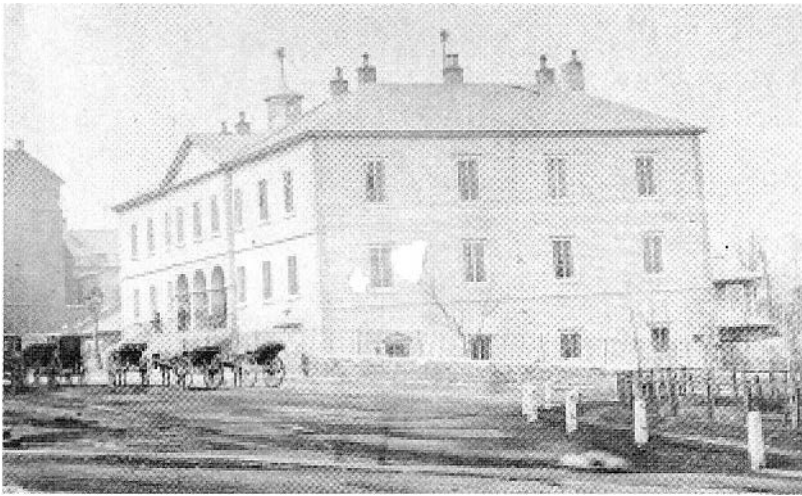


Figure 7. Quebec City: city wall and gate (Smeaton photo, Library and Archives Canada, Hale fonds, PA-051758).

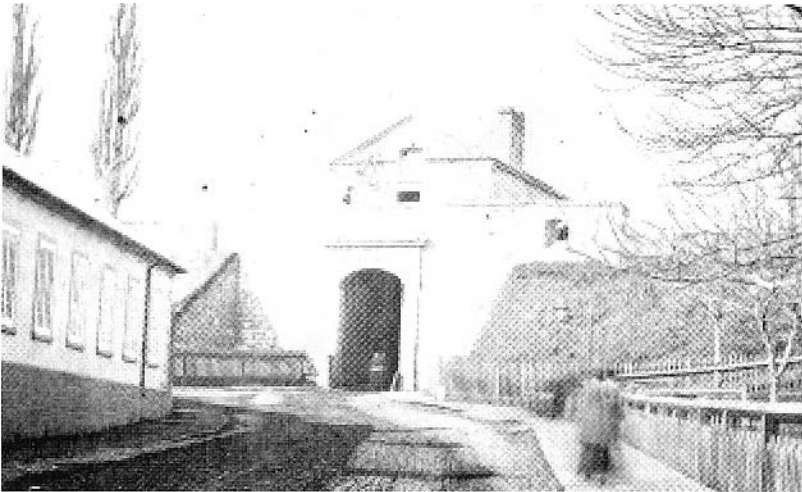
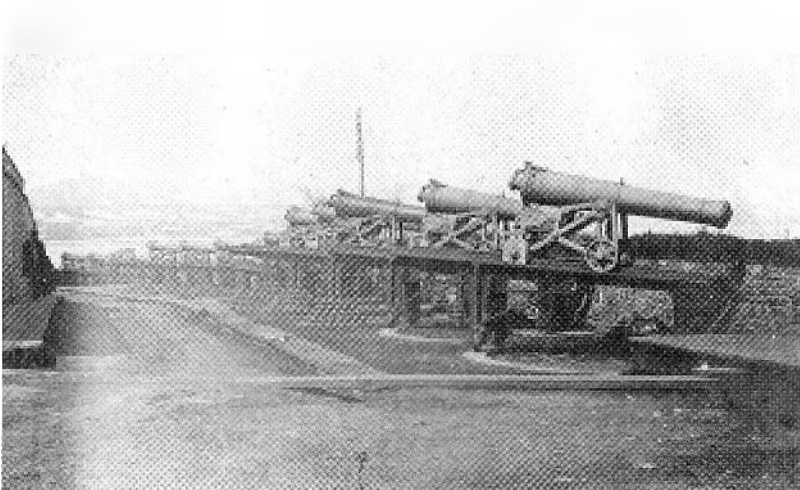


Figure 8. Quebec City: Grand Battery (Smeaton photo, Library and Archives Canada, Hale fonds, PA-051760).



purposes of communicating to a much broader public – and this led to a series of printed catalogues of his numbered photographs, prints of which were offered for sale in Rome and London, eventually accompanied by actual exhibitions of the material in London. The first of the catalogues, entitled *A catalogue of a series of Photographs illustrative of the Archaeology of Rome prepared under the direction of John Henry Parker in the winters of 1864, 1865 and 1866*, appeared in 1867, printed by Parker's own publishing house in Oxford. This listed some 755 photographic images. Supplements appeared thereafter on a regular basis as the collection of visual material grew, and eventually the archive would form the basis for Parker's principal scholarly project, the thirteen-volume series entitled *The Archaeology of Rome*, which combined published photographs with written text. By the time he returned definitively to England, Parker's collection of catalogued photographs had grown to almost 3400. Of the original negatives, only about 460 now survive, divided between the collections of the Istituto Centrale per il Catalogo e la Documentazione (Rome) and the American Academy in Rome. The remainder were lost in July 1893 when fire destroyed the Palazzo Negroni Caffarelli in Rome. Fortunately, however, the entire collection is today well known from a series of sets of prints, made from the original negatives before their destruction. These survive in a variety of locations, including Rome (American Academy, German Archaeological Institute, British School at Rome), Oxford, and Ann Arbor, Michigan (Kelsey Museum of Archeology, University of Michigan), and have been the subject of a number of exhibitions over the past few decades, reflecting a growing interest both in historiography and in the history of photography.

The first photographer employed by Parker in Rome was Carlo Baldassare Simelli (1811–77), who was probably responsible for most of the 755 photographs published in the first catalogue of 1867. Simelli, whose shop was located in the heart of the “tourist” zone at Via del Corso 509, appears to have been something of an entrepreneur in realizing the commercial possibilities of images of historical monuments and archaeological sites. Before working with Parker he had collaborated with the French historian Xavier Barbier

de Montault, and was responsible for the images in the latter's 1864 publication, *Antiquités chrétiennes de Rome du V au XVI siècle. Décrites par le chanoine Barbier de Montault et photographiées par C.B. Simelli*.¹² In succeeding years Parker would work with a number of other photographers, many of whom are mentioned by name in his catalogues. But in this group there is but a single non-Italian, Charles Smeaton, whose name first appears in Parker's second catalogue, published in 1868, which adds the photographs numbered from 756 to 1100.¹³ As shall be seen, however, Smeaton was already at work for Parker in the winter of 1866–67, and thus some of the photographs included in the first catalogue may be securely attributed to him.

Photography had been introduced to Italy very shortly after the announcement of Daguerre's discovery in 1839, and by the following year daguerrotypes were being produced in Rome by Lorenzo Suscipj. At first these were limited to views of buildings, since the exposure time required was too long to permit effective use for portrait photographs. This soon changed, however, as techniques rapidly evolved, and among the first sitters for a portrait photograph was the new pope, Pius IX, who posed in the gardens of his Quirinal Palace on the day of his installation, 21 June 1846.¹⁴

Parker's interest in photographs from the Roman catacombs can be first documented in that winter of 1866–67, his third "season" corresponding with the arrival of Smeaton in Rome. The catacombs – the extensive underground cemeteries which flanked the main roads outside the urban perimeter of the city, containing burials primarily from the period ca. 200 to ca. 500 CE – had been the subject of considerable scholarly interest since the late years of the sixteenth century, when Alfonso Chacon, Philip de Winghe, Antonio Bosio, and others interested in the early history of the Christian community in Rome had made the first explorations intended to document the paintings and inscriptions with which the burial spaces had been adorned or marked. This research had resulted in the first substantial scholarly study of the Roman catacombs, Bosio's *Roma sotterranea*, published posthumously in 1632 under the patronage of Cardinal Francesco Barberini. Scholarly investigation of the catacombs was substantially revived in the middle years of the nineteenth century, due in large part to the research activities of Giovanni B. De Rossi (1822–94), and the personal interest taken in his project by the reigning pontiff, Pius IX, who paid a personal visit to the Catacomb of St Calixtus on the Via Appia Antica in order to view the tombs of a series of his third-century papal predecessors, which De Rossi had rediscovered.

When Parker arrived in Rome sometime towards the end of the year 1864, interest in the catacombs was running high. The same year had witnessed the publication of the first volume of De Rossi's three-volume study, entitled *La Roma Sotterranea*

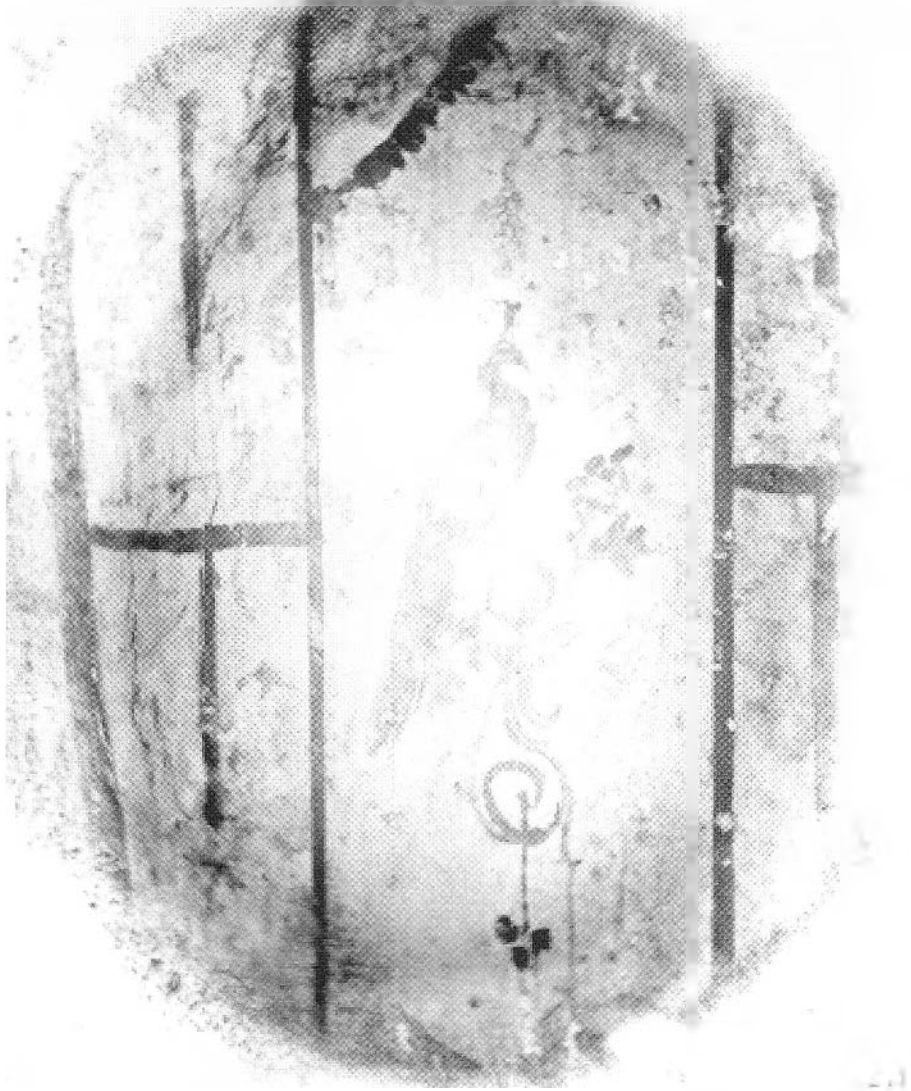
Cristiana (Rome, 1864–77), and new discoveries of interest to those concerned with Early Christian and early medieval Rome were being reported regularly to the public not only in the popular press but also in the pages of the *Bullettino di Archeologia Cristiana*, which De Rossi had launched in 1863. (This journal continues today as the *Rivista di Archeologia Cristiana*, now published by the Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana in Rome.) But for illustrative material, De Rossi's readers were dependent on drawings copied after the originals. Photography in underground spaces, completely devoid of any natural light, still posed too great a challenge to the fledgling technology – until the arrival of Smeaton, who brought with him knowledge of a process for creating very intense light using magnesium flares. Indeed, it was probably a lack of such knowledge on the part of Parker's first photographer, Simelli, that prompted the British antiquarian to invite Smeaton to join him in Rome.¹⁵ Parker and De Rossi were certainly well known to one another, and it was De Rossi who, in his capacity as the official of the papal government responsible for the maintenance and care of the catacombs, authorized Parker's visits and his pioneering attempts to take photographs.

It is not known precisely how Smeaton came to learn about the use of magnesium light in relation to photographic technology, but like most other photographers of the day he likely attempted to keep himself informed of new experiments and developments. In 1859, William Crookes, the editor of the *Photographic News*, responded to a question about how to light caves for photography. He wrote, "A ... brilliant light ... can be obtained by burning ... magnesium in oxygen. A piece of magnesium wire held by one end in the hand, may be lighted at the other extremity by holding it to a candle... It then burns away of its own accord evolving a light insupportably brilliant to the unprotected eye."¹⁶

One of the first to experiment with the use of artificial light in underground spaces was the French photographer Gaspard Félix Tournachon, better known by his professional name, Nadar (1820–1910). Beginning in 1858, he photographed the sewers and catacombs of Paris, documenting the changes taking place during the urban renewal projects of Napoléon III, overseen by Georges-Eugène Haussmann. Nadar initially developed a system of lights and reflectors employing Bunsen batteries, but, probably for practical reasons, he eventually abandoned batteries in favour of magnesium.¹⁷

Magnesium wire was first manufactured commercially in Manchester in 1864. In April of the following year, Charles Piazzi Smyth of Edinburgh used magnesium lighting with considerable success in order to produce photographs of the dark interior spaces of the Great Pyramid in Egypt, a possibility that had earlier been discussed at meetings of the Photographic Society of Scotland.¹⁸

Figure 9. Peacock, Catacomb of the Vigna Randanini, Rome (The British School at Rome, J.H. Parker collection, no. 561).



While Smyth's success with magnesium light was published in an interim report, dated March 1865, and in photographic journals in June of that same year, Smeaton could have also learned about the possibilities of magnesium lighting while still living in Canada, possibly from William Notman, with whose activities he was certainly familiar. By 1864, Notman was apparently conducting his own experiments with magnesium light. Along with his colleagues, Alexander Henderson and Professor Girdwood of McGill University, Notman produced three experimental carte-de-visite photographs of each of the friends sitting at Notman's studio table by "candle light."¹⁹ It is certainly possible that Smeaton was aware of Notman's experiments. And once again, contemporary newspapers also constitute another possible source of Smeaton's information. On 27 April

1864, a year before Charles Smyth's visit to Egypt, the *Quebec Mercury* published an article recounting the advantages of using "the new magnesium light" in photography. It reported that "at the distance of eight feet from the sitter, the light produces a negative equal to any obtained from sunlight under the most favourable circumstances... This opens a new page in photography."

The first reference to this new technique in connection with Parker's activities in Rome occurs in his catalogue entries numbered 561–64, recording murals, a sarcophagus, and inscriptions in the Jewish catacomb of the Vigna Randanini, a cemetery that had been rediscovered in 1859 on the south side of the city between the Via Appia Antica and the Via Appia Pignatelli. These constitute the first Parker photographs from the catacombs, and their position in the catalogue places them towards the end of the 1866–67 campaign. Each entry is accompanied by the notation "Taken with magnesium light." While not explicitly identified with Smeaton in the published catalogue, this may certainly be inferred from the annotation regarding the technique. Additional confirmation is provided by the inclusion of prints of the two images of murals (Parker catalogue numbers 561 and 562) in an album bearing the title "Photographs of the Archaeology of Rome by Charles Smeaton 1867," now preserved in the Albin O.

Kuhn Library and Gallery at the University of Maryland.²⁰ Parker appears to have been particularly interested in these recently discovered murals, depicting a peacock (fig. 9) and other birds, and there is a second series of photos from the same site (Parker nos. 773–76), recorded as having used the same technique, probably also the work of Smeaton in the following year (fig. 10).

The next sequence of catacomb photographs (nos. 607–11) records the cemetery of Pontianus, to the west of the city on the hill of Monteverde. In the early Middle Ages, this had been a significant site of pilgrimage due to the large number of early saints and martyrs whose relics were preserved there. The *Notitia Ecclesiarum Urbis Romae*, a guidebook dating from the first half of the seventh century, describes it as follows:

Figure 10. Loculus plaques, Catacomb of the Vigna Randanini, Rome (The British School at Rome, J.H. Parker collection, no. 776).



Next you proceed to the north, and you discover the church of St Candida, virgin and martyr, whose body lies there. You descend into a tomb chamber, and there you find a countless multitude of martyrs. The martyr Pumenius is there, and in another place the martyr Milix. The whole cavern is filled with the bones of martyrs. Then you come up to St Anastasius pope and martyr, and elsewhere lies the martyr Polion. Next you enter the big church, where saints Abdon and Sennen repose. Then you leave and enter [the place] where St Innocent pope and martyr lies.²¹

A number of these saints were depicted in murals placed above or near their tombs, no doubt intended to serve as reminders to the faithful. The Parker photographs are an important witness to their condition in the mid-nineteenth century. Of particular significance is Parker photograph no. 609 (fig. 11), depicting a large jeweled cross, as this space is today almost completely submerged beneath an accumulation of ground water, and thus the original mural is inaccessible. Smeaton's photograph serves as our only exact record of the subject matter.²² His role as photographer of this sequence is made explicit by the annotation "Smeaton phot." that appears on two of the prints in the British School at Rome collection: nos. 609 and 611 (figs. 11, 12). Similar inscriptions are included on all but one of the subsequent catacomb photographs that may be attributed to the

1867–68 season: two from the Catacomb of Priscilla (Parker nos. 612–13), four from the Catacomb of Praetextatus (Parker nos. 614–17), three from the Catacomb of Domitilla (Parker nos. 618–19, 621; fig. 13),²³ three from the Catacomb of St Agnes (Parker nos. 626–28; fig. 14), and one from the Catacomb of St Hermes (Parker no. 629).²⁴ All of these are recorded in Parker's catalogue as having been "taken with magnesium light," and all must have been produced prior to Smeaton's death on 30 March 1868.²⁵ Back in England the following summer, on 4 August 1868 Parker presented these remarkable photographs to a meeting of the Royal Archaeological Institute.²⁶

Not all of Smeaton's photography was confined to the catacombs, and Parker's catalogue also attributes to his hand a number of above-ground views of Roman street-scenes, most of which include the vestiges of ancient monuments (fig. 15). In this respect, however, Smeaton's work is not remarkably different from that of the numerous Italian photographers who by this time were active in the city. Rather, it is with regard to the earliest pictures taken in the catacombs that Smeaton has made his mark in the history of photography.

Like much else in pre-1870 Rome, the activities of photographers attracted the attention of the authorities of the Papal State. As early as 28 November 1861, rules governing the taking and the dissemination of photographs were issued by the Cardi-

Figure 11. Jewelled Cross, Catacomb of Pontianus, Rome (The British School at Rome, J.H. Parker collection, no. 609).



Figure 12. Catacomb of Pontianus, Rome (The British School at Rome, J.H. Parker collection, no. 611).



nal Vicar, Costantino Patrizi.²⁷ Physical access to the catacombs themselves was also controlled, as it is still today, and this led to Parker's encounters with Giovanni B. De Rossi, catacomb explorer and scholar extraordinaire, to whom the care of the underground cemeteries had been entrusted by the papal government. Initially, relations appear to have been cordial, but in the late years of the decade of the 1860s the situation changed, no doubt reflecting the evolving political situation in central Italy. As the forces of the Italian *risorgimento* gathered strength for the final assault on Rome (20 September 1870), resulting in the end of the Papal State, the court of Pope Pius IX became increasingly suspicious of foreign scholars, like Parker, whom they believed – not without good reason – of wishing to use archaeological and other evidence to challenge time-honoured Roman Catholic interpretations and beliefs. Parker's examination of the mural decorations in cemeteries such as the Catacomb of Pontianus had led him to believe, correctly, that many

of the paintings dated not from the time of the persecutions in the early centuries CE, in other words before the legalization of Christianity by the emperor Constantine I (306–37), but rather from later centuries when the graves of the martyrs became important places of pilgrimage, attracting visitors from many parts of western Europe. Whether for this reason or not, at some point in the late 1860s Parker was told that he could no longer take pictures in the catacombs, ostensibly because of the damage to the murals caused by the intensity of the magnesium light. In an article published in the 1870 issue of *The Archaeological Journal*, Parker records his version of this “falling out,” and it merits citation at length:

I will conclude with a few words respecting my explorations in the Catacombs, which I have pursued for the last four or five years with the permission of Signor de Rossi, who has charge of them for the Government. He permitted me also

Figure 13. Cherub, Catacomb of Domitilla, Rome (The British School at Rome, J.H. Parker collection, no. 619).



to take photographs of them, the results of which are now in my collection, together with another set from the mosaic pictures in the churches of Rome. These two sets throw great light on each other. The drawing of each century, like the architecture, is always the same, as we know from D'Agincourt's *Histoire de l'Art par les Monumens* [sic], but we have hitherto had no copies that we could depend upon, of either the fresco-pictures in the Catacombs or the mosaic-pictures in the churches; by putting them side by side it is evident that a large proportion of them are of the same periods, the work of the same Popes, whose names and whose portraits are in the mosaic-pictures themselves; and this agrees with Anastasius,²⁸ who tells us that they restored the Catacombs, and the paintings naturally belong to the last restoration. Whether this discovery of the truth was unpalatable to the authorities or not, I cannot tell, but the last time I saw Signor de Rossi, he told me he was very sorry to inform me that that the Cardinal Vicar had forbidden any more photographs to be taken in the Catacombs. The Pontifical Government has also refused me permission to take photographs in the pagan tombs on the Via Appia, which

contain a series of fresco-pictures of the second century, dated by brick-stamps. The style of these frescoes is so different from the greater part of those in the Catacombs that it is impossible to believe they are of the same period, which would be that of the tomb-stones of the martyrs. On the other hand the paintings in the Catacombs do agree with the mosaic-pictures of the sixth, eighth, and ninth centuries, the time when they were restored.

The shallow pretext for refusing me permission to take any more photographs is, that the light from a lamp of magnesium *may* injure the frescoes, which is entirely *moonshine*. The first person to have one of these lamps in Rome was the Cardinal Antonelli; and the first place in which he tried it was in the Catacombs.²⁹ The Cardinal Vicar (Patrizzi) has power to act in the name of the Pope, and he is always considered as an organ of the Jesuit or Ultramontane party, the bigots of the old school.³⁰

Parker's assessment of the dating of many of the murals was remarkably astute, and quite unprecedented, although in other publications he would significantly exaggerate the percentage of

Figure 14. Orant figure, Catacomb of St Agnes, Rome (The British School at Rome, J.H. Parker collection, no. 627).



catacomb paintings that belonged to this later period in which the suburban cemeteries, no longer used for their original function as places of burial, became tourist attractions for Christian pilgrims.³¹ Whether his assessment of the rationale for bringing his photographic campaigns in the catacombs to a halt is equally valid cannot be determined, due to a total absence of corroborating evidence. However, no catacomb photographs were added to his catalogue after 1868, so there is no reason to disbelieve his statement that such a prohibition actually occurred.

A second, and longer, account of these events is contained in Parker's letter of 19 July 1870, addressed "To the Editor of the *Guardian*," although evidently never published. Here he records both that he brought Charles Smeaton from London specifically to undertake photography using magnesium flare, and also the significantly more sinister comment that Smeaton's death in Rome occurred under mysterious circumstances. In describing his efforts to document the catacomb paintings, and the increasing suspicion of his activities on the part of the papal authorities, he wrote:

I took the late Charles Smeaton from London for the purpose, and he succeeded. He died in Rome in the second season (under strong suspicion of being poisoned); but he had taught others, and those taken since his death are equally

good with those he took himself. For the *real* history of the Catacombs there is nothing like them.³²

The present writers are content to leave it to their reader's imagination to determine whether such a suggestion is plausible or indeed possible!

Although almost entirely unknown today in his home country, Charles Smeaton's name has been preserved for posterity in the annals of the study of the Roman catacombs. It has been the purpose of this article to document what can be discovered about his origins in Quebec City, and to establish his place as a pioneer in Rome of the use of magnesium flare photography. Without his early photographs, our present knowledge of certain murals in the Roman catacombs would be demonstrably poorer. Canadians visiting Rome are invited to seek out his grave in the Protestant Cemetery, adjacent to the Pyramid of Gaius Cestius at the Porta di San Paolo, in order to express their own "esteem" at his achievements and "regret" at his untimely and premature passing.

Acknowledgements

John Osborne first encountered "il canadese," Charles Smeaton, while researching the historiography of the Roman catacombs.

Figure 15. Ruins of an Aqueduct, Rome (The British School at Rome, J.H. Parker collection, no. 759).



Andrea Terry was successful in tracking down his Quebec City origins and also explored the use of magnesium flare as an aid to early photography. The authors are very grateful for the assistance and advice of others in the preparation of this article, and would like to thank Alessandra Giovenco and Valerie Scott (Rome), Andrew Rodger (Ottawa), Nora Hague (Montreal), and especially Joan Schwartz (Kingston).

Notes

- 1 *The Quebec Directory for 1861–62, containing a complete list of all the inhabitants of the city, with full descriptions of their businesses and professions*, ed. Georges-Hippolyte Cherrier (Quebec, 1861), 318. An advertisement in the same Directory (p. 483) indicates that the Smeaton Merchant Tailors specialized in the importation of English broadcloths, “cassimeres,” doeskins, English and Scottish tweeds, and had a “Stamping, Braiding, Embroidery and Embossing” department in their establishment.
- 2 *Quebec Mercury*, 13 August 1861. By offering both photographic and painted portraits, Smeaton attempted to entice the largest clientele possible. While not everyone might have been willing to pay to have their photograph taken at this time, there had been a long-standing tradition of commissioned painted portraits in Quebec.
- 3 That Charles Smeaton was both an artist and photographer would appear to be confirmed by the obituary notice that appeared in *The Canadian News* issue of 14 May 1868, 306. This refers to him as “an artist of great promise.” (For the full text, see below, note 25.)
- 4 *The Quebec Directory for 1863–64*, ed. G. H. Cherrier (Quebec, 1863), 298. A business directory published in the following year lists nine active photographers in Quebec City, including Charles and John Smeaton: Mitchell and Company, “Photographic Artists and Portrait Painters,” *Canada Gazetteer and Business Directory for 1864–5* (Toronto, 1864), 1219.
- 5 Ralph Greenhill and Andrew Birrell, *Canadian Photography 1839–1920* (Toronto, 1979), 1. The report said little about the specifics of Daguerre’s discovery because the actual process was still secret.
- 6 Andrew Birrell, “The Early Years, 1839–1885,” in *Private Realms of Light: Amateur Photography in Canada, 1840–1940*, ed. L. Koltun (Markham, ON, 1984), 2–15, at 6.
- 7 Stanley Triggs, *William Notman: The Stamp of a Studio*, exh. cat., The Art Gallery of Ontario (Toronto, 1985), 143, records the contents of Notman’s personal library, including issues of *The Art Journal*, *The Illustrated London News*, *London Photographic News*, *The Philadelphia Photographer*, and *Harpers Magazine*.
- 8 Joan Schwartz, “Fort Chambly and the Creation of Symbolic Space: The Photograph as Site of Meaning,” *Histoire Mythique et Paysage Symbolique / Mythic History and Symbolic Landscape*, eds Serge Courville and Brian Osborne (Sainte-Foy, 1997), 9–20.
- 9 The prints all measure approximately 6 x 10 cm. Two (C–008583 and C–052076) have a small insignia on the reverse: “Smeaton’s [and then in a looped and buckled belt] Photographic Gallery

Palace Street Quebec. The others have a printed message on the reverse:

Smeaton’s,
Photographers,
Quebec.

The authors are very grateful to Andrew Rodger, Library and Archives Canada, for supplying this information.

- 10 Although none of the photographs are dated, a *terminus ante quem* is provided by Bishop Mountain’s death on 6 January 1863.
- 11 In 1869 the Smeaton “Photographic and Art Gallery” was associated only with the name of John Smeaton. It appears for the last time in the annual Quebec City *Directory* issue for 1869–70, 305.
- 12 This work appeared in weekly fascicules, each comprising three photographs accompanied by three pages of text, priced at one *scudo*: see Pietro Becchetti, *La fotografia a Roma dalle origini al 1915*, 2nd ed. (Rome, 1997), 31.
- 13 *Supplement to a catalogue of a series of Photographs illustrative of the Archaeology of Rome: prepared in the winter of 1867–68 under the direction of John Henry Parker* (Oxford, 1868).
- 14 Becchetti, *La fotografia a Roma*, 13–14.
- 15 With reference to the catacomb photographs, Parker would later write: “The photographs were taken for me by the late Charles Smeaton, a very clever Canadian photographer, whom I had taken from London for that purpose – with the help of the light of magnesium. All the Roman photographers had told Cardinal Antonelli that it was impossible to take photographs in the catacombs.” J.H. Parker, “Notes on the dates of the paintings in the Roman catacombs,” *The Archaeological Journal*, XXXIV (1877), 431–42, at 433 n. 4.
- 16 The first portrait photograph using magnesium was taken by Alfred Brothers of Manchester on 22 February 1864: see Robert Leggat, “Lighting for photography: A History of Photography,” <http://www.rleggat.com/photohistory/history/lighting.htm>.
- 17 See Naomi Rosenblum, *A World History of Photography* (New York, 1984), 248, who suggests that the switch was made because electric batteries were both weak and expensive. Despite the difficult conditions, Nadar managed to produce about 100 underground photographs. Some of the exposures required as long as 18 minutes.
- 18 The Magnesium Metal Company of Salford (Manchester) supplied Smyth with magnesium wire prior to his departure; see Larry Schaaf, “Charles Piazzi Smyth’s 1865 Conquest of the Great Pyramid,” *History of Photography*, III/4 (October 1979), 331–54. For further discussion of the use of magnesium light in photography, see Michael Frizot, “Artificial Light,” *A New History of Photography* (Köln, 1994), 285; and *Floods of Light: Flash Photography, 1851–1981*, ed. R. Martin (London, 1982).
- 19 According to Nora Hague, the light source employed in these photographs was a magnesium flare and not merely the candle on the table at which the subjects sit: Nora Hague, Senior Cataloguer, Notman Photographic Archives, McCord Museum of Canadian History, Montreal, personal communication with Andrea Terry, 15 November 2005.

- 20 Klaus-Dieter Dorsch and Hans Reinhard Seeliger, *Römische Katakombenmalereien im Spiegel des Photoarchivs Parker. Dokumentation von Zustand und Erhaltung 1864–1994* (Münster, 2000), 46.
- 21 Latin text published in *Codice topografico della città di Roma*, eds R. Valentini and G. Zucchetti, 4 vols (Rome, 1940–53), II, 91–92: “Deinde discendis ad aquilonem, et invenies ecclesiam Sanctae Candidae virginis et martiris, cuius corpus ibi quiescit. Discendis in antrum et invenies ibi innumerabilem multitudinem martyrum: Pumenius martir ibi quiescit, et Milix martir in altero loco, et omnis illa spelunca inpleta est ossibus martyrum. Tunc ascendis et pervenies ad Sanctum Anastasium papam et martirem, et in alio Polion martir quiescit. Deinde intrabis in ecclesiam magnam: ibi sancti martires Abdo et Sennes quiescunt. Deinde ex eas et intrabis ubi sanctus Innocentius papa et martir quiescit.”
- 22 This inaccessibility has led to some recent confusion about the contents of the mural: see John Osborne, “The Roman Catacombs in the Middle Ages,” *Papers of the British School at Rome* LIII (1985), 278–328, at 320 n. 237.
- 23 Parker photograph 620, recording brickwork at the entrance to the Catacomb of Domitilla, is the only one in this group not to bear Smeaton’s name, although presumably it is also his.
- 24 Here the caption changes, reading only “Smeaton.” In the other instances cited it reads “Smeaton phot.”
- 25 A slightly different date is recorded in the obituary that appeared in *The Canadian News* on 14 May 1868 (p. 306): “Mr. Charles Smeaton, eldest son of Mr. Alexander Smeaton, of Quebec, and an artist of great promise, died at Rome on the 26th March, of brain fever, after an illness of three weeks. He was interred close by the grave of Shelley.”
- 26 *Proceedings at meetings of the Royal Archaeological Institute* (1868), 346.
- 27 Becchetti, *La fotografia a Roma*, 36. The new regulations appear to have been prompted by concern at the circulation of “indecent” pictures, in other words pornography.
- 28 The reference is to Anastasius Bibliothecarius, the papal librarian in the third quarter of the ninth century who was thought to be the author of the series of papal biographies now known as the *Liber Pontificalis*. This source does indeed record a lengthy series of repairs to the suburban cemeteries undertaken by popes between the mid-sixth and the mid-ninth centuries.
- 29 If Cardinal Antonelli did indeed take pictures in the catacombs using magnesium flare, no evidence of these appears to have survived.
- 30 J.H. Parker, “Recent archaeological researches in Rome,” *The Archaeological Journal*, XXVII (1870), 165–80, at 179–80.
- 31 For example, in the preface to the volume of his *Archaeology of Rome* series entitled *The Catacombs of Rome* (Oxford-London, 1877), Parker writes: “The fact is, that fully three-fourths of the paintings belong to the latest restorations of the eighth and ninth centuries; and of the remaining fourth part, a considerable number are of the sixth century, painted originally in the time of John I” (p. xi). Similar percentages are claimed in his article “Notes on the dates of the paintings in the Roman Catacombs,” 433.
- 32 The full text is published by Dorsch and Seeliger, *Römische Katakombenmalereien*, 231–32.