

# University of Guelph, Department of History

**Jacqueline McIsaac**  
PhD Final Oral Examination

**WRITING WITH LIGHT: RURAL ONTARIO'S GLASS PLATE  
PHOTOGRAPHY AND VISIONS OF RURAL LAND, 1851-1920**

## *A B S T R A C T*

**Wednesday  
August 16, 2017**

**Time: 10:00 am**

**Location: MCKN 132**

**Advisor:  
Dr. Alan Gordon**

**Examining Committee:  
Dr. Adam Crerar  
Dr. Kevin James**

**External Examiner:  
Dr. James Opp (Carleton  
University)**

**Chair:  
Dr. Elizabeth Ewan**

The 1851 development of glass plate negatives altered photography's documentary potential. Unlike previous photographic technologies, glass plate negatives allowed labourers, farmers, and shantymen to participate in an exciting and rapidly changing form of visual documentation. Glass plate were not only more technologically and financially accessible than previous technologies, but also allowed for a considerably wider variety of subjects to be captured. The result of this combination of increased accessibility, subject potential, and technological refinement was the introduction of photography into Ontario's countryside.

This dissertation prioritizes glass plate negatives as artefacts in an effort to assess rural photographers' physical and conceptual experiences with their cameras and the land. In so doing, this dissertation addresses a wide range of rural experiences and questions the extent to which visual priorities were influenced by technological advances. Negatives were prioritized to retain this study's focus on photography as an act, process, and social function. Many of Ontario's rural residents, including those working in agriculture, forestry, surveying, and the cottage industry, began using glass plate cameras in the 1870s, and from this point forward, they used their cameras to document their lives, aid in land development projects, create art pieces, or earn money. Recreational, commercial, amateur, and progressive photographers may have used photography to different ends, but they all engaged with it in ways that were defined through their identities as insiders or outsiders to rural areas. Tying these interests together were rural culture and land, as it guided photographers' engagements with their cameras and subjects. For rural residents, rural social norms and expectations dictated who used cameras, their financial participation as consumers or producers, their subject matters, as well as their appropriation and prolonged use of this technology. However, visiting photographers often made conscious choices to follow the artistic conventions of the time instead of accurately portraying the countryside. Competing visions of rural Ontario as a space were influenced by photographers' gazes and show the multiple meanings that were invested in rural areas. Ultimately, photographs taken of rural activities by a variety of people help examine understandings of rural spaces.

