



fig.1 William Notman Studio, copy, **Princess Alexandra of Wales**, 1885. (Photo: Notman Photographic Archives (NPA), No. 77,743-B11, McCord Museum, Montréal.)

SHORT NOTES / NOTES ET COMMENTAIRES

Late Victorian and Edwardian Jewellery in Montreal

Much of the antique jewellery found in Canada today dates from the late Victorian and Edwardian periods. They are often treasured family heirlooms passed on from generation to generation, occasionally available on the market as estate jewellery or through antique dealers. Whatever the case, the jewellery from the turn of the century is highly prized, not only for its intrinsic value but because it offers an inimitable touch of old charm, a glimpse into another society remote in customs, values and beliefs. Indeed, many of these jewels reveal everyday life: for example a brooch with a sentimental message, a locket with yellowed photographs, a piece of mourning jewellery, or a watch engraved with a name and a date. By conjuring up their owners these mementos can provide an insight into past generations.

A rare chance to study such jewellery in its original context is provided by the Notman photographic archives at the McCord Museum. William Notman, who emigrated to Canada from Scotland in 1856, became a recognized pioneer in the field of Canadian photography.¹ By 1860, he had established a studio on Bleury Street where he recorded the elite of Montréal society: the civic dignitaries and leading citizens and, more important for this study, their distinguished wives and comely daughters. On the death of William Notman in 1891, his son William MacFarlane Notman carried on the business until 1935. Thus, a complete and uninterrupted record of evolving fashion trends is presented from the mid-Victorian period to well past the Edwardian age. Our search through these thousands of Notman period photographs revealed that, more than a mere costume accessory, a jewel could be endowed with social and psychological meaning.

Photography was not then the informal medium that it has now become. The early portraits were often used as "cartes de visites" and the

subjects posed with all the decorum that the etiquette of the period required. The ladies in the 1860's albums appear in highly fashionable array; clothes follow new fashion trends and everyone seems to be wearing the latest and indispensable innovation, an "artificial crinoline,"² as their skirts swing attractively from the waist. A corsage usually closes demurely at the neck, adorned by a small lace collar. Little jewellery is worn and is always of a most unostentatious and conservative nature: a long chain of gold, at times with watch and fob; a discreet chatelaine at the waist; a simple black ribbon with cameo or locket; a small pin at the neckline. William Notman's early photographs were almost entirely of the Anglo-Saxon Protestant establishment and the typical female model's general appearance alludes to the prevailing Puritan ethics of virtue and modesty.

This puritanical reserve was rendered even more sombre in 1861 when, at the untimely death of the Prince Consort, Queen Victoria went into a period of deep mourning. For many decades afterward, fashion in England and its colonies would reflect the bereavement of the reigning monarch. Public mourning was nothing new to the British; it had been a tradition in the country since the execution of Charles I in 1649. What is more surprising is that a vast collection of mourning jewellery found its way to Canada. Victoria's loyal colonial subjects seem to have strictly adhered to their motherland's traditions. Every other locket or pin of this period seems to conceal a lock of hair, and jet jewellery or its French glass counterpart were almost as popular here as in England.

But the Victorian mourning period was alleviated nationally by the dawn of a brave new world as Canada became a nation with the Confederation in 1867. In Montréal, an air of self-confidence and ambition suddenly flourished: streets were widened, shops refurbished, and an air of wealth and grandeur prevailed along the main thoroughfares. An overseas visitor described Notre Dame Street as "flashing with plate glass and displays of jewellery and brocade."³ One of the finest jewellery stores in Montréal at the time was on St. James, one street away from Notre Dame. Savage & Lyman, watchmakers and jewellers, were considered in 1867 to have the most magnificent shop of its kind in Canada. Working there since 1857 was a young clerk by the name of Henry Birks who was to branch out in 1879 into a business venture of his own, thus giving Montréal and Canada an important and reputable jewellery firm, now in existence for more than a century.⁴

Lovell's 1877-78 Montreal Directory lists six retail jewellers and six manufacturing or wholesaling jewellery firms. A decade later, in 1889-1890, Montréal boasts, according to Lovell, no less than thirteen retail jewellers and more than a dozen manufacturers, importers and wholesalers dealing in watches, clocks, jewellery, and fancy goods, such as cutlery and silverware. A remarkable survey of the luxury items available to the Montréal population in the last decade of the nineteenth century is offered by the Birks catalogues, the first of which was published in 1896.⁵ This sudden expansion of the jewellery trade, both retail and wholesale, reflects the prosperity of the Montréal elite. The wealthy in Montréal imported the best wines and current fashions in clothing and accessories.⁶ One of these imported luxury goods, the pearl necklace, seems to have been extremely popular. By 1885, the Notman photographs offer a gallery of attractive Montréal women, many of whom are wearing pearl chokers, a welcome alternative to the demure little pins and cameos so favoured in the sixties.

Two important factors brought about this attractive jewellery fashion. Queen Victoria finally relented on the extreme mourning dress that she inflicted on herself and the court. On the occasion of her Silver Jubilee in 1887, she finally wore some jewellery after twenty-five years of unadorned and gloomy costume. Another and more important factor related to the renewed interest in jewellery was the rise of the Prince of Wales' set and the popularity of regal Princess Alexandra as a fashion setter (fig.1).

Alexandra's influence upon Montréal fashion trends is amply illustrated by the apparel in 1885 Notman photographs. Many sitters wear strands of pearls in Alexandra's characteristic dog-collar fashion (fig.2); and when pearls are unavailable, the effect is achieved by a wide black ribbon, worn high on the neck and adorned with a sunburst pin. However, pearls were Alexandra's fashionmark and many Montréal women bedecked themselves with as many strands of pearls as their husbands' income permitted.

At the time there were no cultured pearls as cultivation only started on a commercial scale early in the twentieth century.⁷ Two kinds of natural pearls were available: the fine oriental pearls that came from the sea and freshwater pearls found in many rivers of temperate countries, notably Scotland and China, and in the Mississippi Delta. A major source for oriental pearls was the Persian Gulf, where pearl-bearing oysters, such as the *Pinctada Vulgaris* and the *Pinctada Margaritifera*, were located in fairly



fig.2 William Notman Studio, Miss Earle, 1885. (Photo: NPA, No. 77,153-B11, McCord Museum, Montréal.)

shallow waters around most of the Gulf's shorelines. Yield was very low as only about one mollusc in forty contained a pearl.⁸ After recovery, pearls were sorted and perfect round pearls matched in sumptuous parures reserved for the wealthiest customers; the rest, slightly baroque and irregular, were nevertheless quite expensive and destined for a restricted market.

Indeed, as featured in the Birks catalogue of 1906 (fig.3), oriental pearls were by far the highest-priced item, largely outclassing diamond-set jewellery.⁹ Several women featured in the Notman albums of 1885 seem to be wearing oriental or freshwater pearls for many of the necklaces show irregularities, whereas a simili-pearl necklace would appear round and perfect in the photograph. Simili or imitation pearls had been available to fashionable ladies for many centuries.¹⁰ Many Montrealers resorted to wearing these attractive substitutes, especially at the turn of the century when the fashion for extremely long ropes of pearls can only be explained by the availability of good imitation pearl necklaces (fig.4).

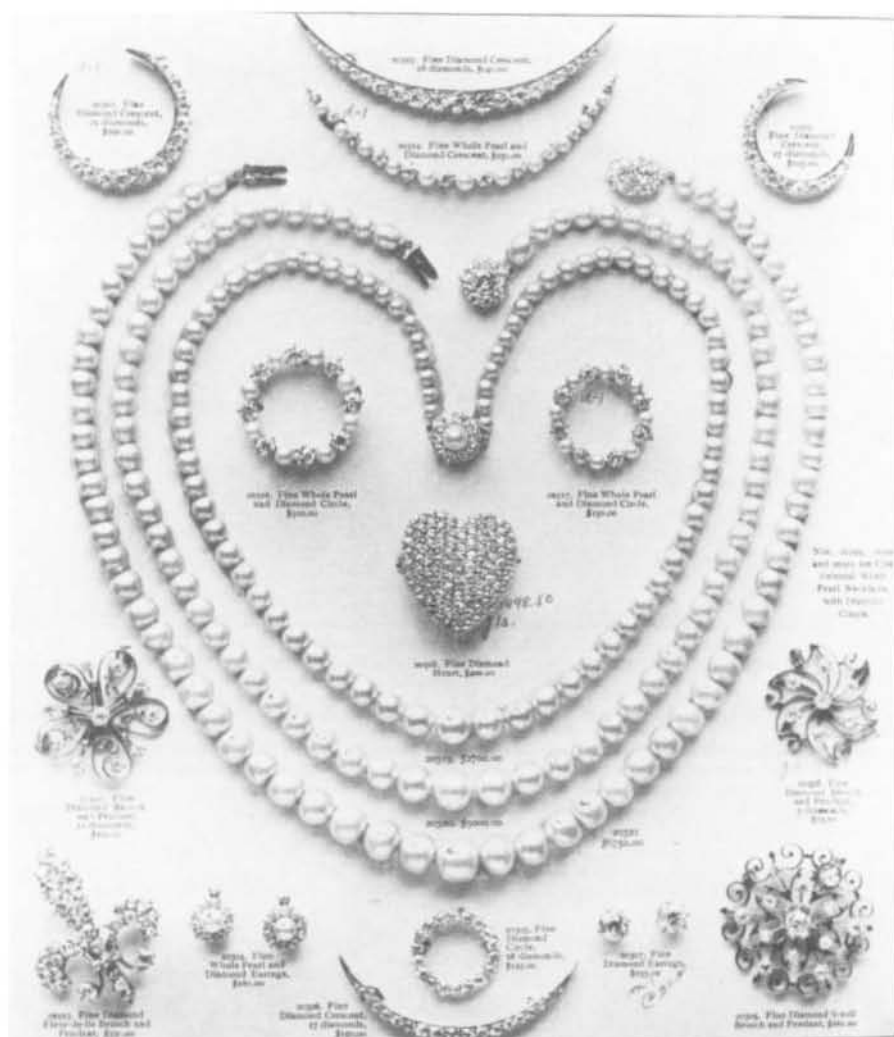


fig.3 Fine Pearl & Diamond Jewellery, Henry Birks & Sons' 1906 catalogue. (Photo: courtesy of Henry Birks and Sons, Montréal.)

The vogue for pearls did not, however, entirely supplant the diamond as a favourite parure for the wealthy. In 1886, Andrew Allan, nephew of Sir Hugh Allan, the famous Lord Montagu, ordered from Notman's studio a copy of a diamond necklace photograph (fig.5). Allan had probably bought this necklace in Europe in 1884, where he may have spent his honeymoon with his new bride.¹¹ The jewel, of exquisite design and superb craftsmanship, could have been created by Frédéric Boucheron



fig. 4 William Notman Studio, Miss Ashton, 1901. (Photo: NPA, No. 138,033-B11, McCord Museum, Montréal.)

(1830-1902). Together with Cartier, this leading Parisian jeweller was a specialist in gems, as well as a designer of luxury jewellery for an international clientele.¹² We have, unfortunately, no photographic record of the woman to whom this necklace was offered. Perhaps the photograph was only requested for evaluation or insurance purposes and the lady in question considered the necklace too sumptuous to be worn at a Notman sitting.

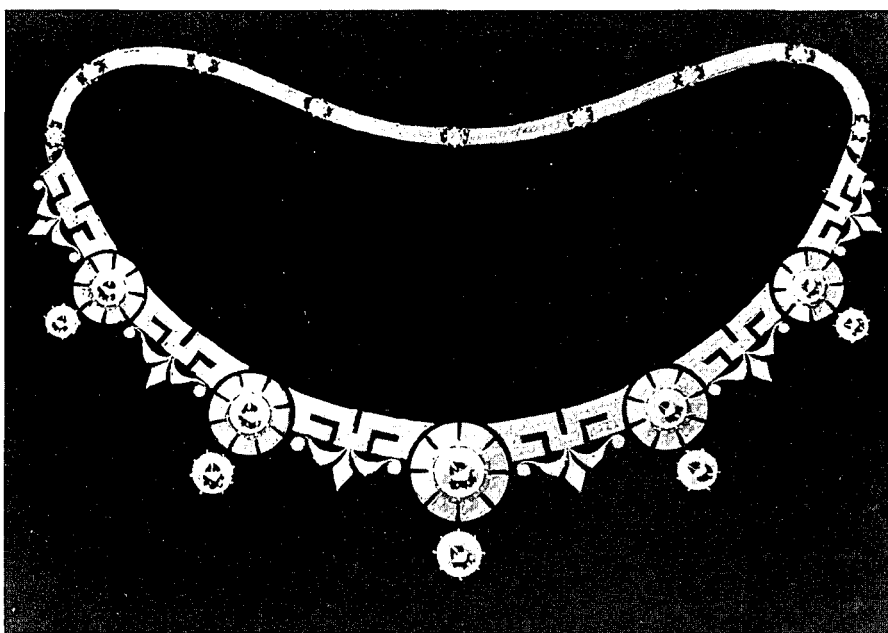


fig.5 William Notman Studio, Copy for Mr. Andrew Allan, 1886. (Photo: NPA, No. 79,977-B11, McCord Museum, Montréal.)

The demure matrons of the early Notman albums were seen as embodiments of domesticity, a virtue extolled in the Victorian period. Moreover, for a woman of social standing, the Puritan ethics restricted the activities outside the home to charitable works and philanthropic gestures. By the last decades of the nineteenth century, the social status of women had greatly evolved. Feminist movements, both abroad and in North America, began to make headway in their claim for women's social and political rights. Improved educational facilities, including the emphasis on the physical aspects of education such as gymnastics and out-of-door exercise, were now part of the curriculum in most girls' finishing schools.¹³ More women from the urban middle class were entering the teaching profession and higher education was made available to a restricted few when, in 1885, McGill University opened a few faculties to women students.

It may be a reflection of this new status of women that from the late 1880's Notman's photographs of Montréal women reveal, in the choice of clothing and jewellery, a self-assurance and assertion of taste that was largely absent in an earlier period. Domesticity has given way to glamour; many socialites were now posed in evening gowns and adorned with their most precious jewels. Notman albums of the turn of the century show that



fig.6 William Notman Studio, Mrs. Evans & family, 1898. (Photo: NPA, No. 124,920-B11, McCord Museum, Montréal.)



fig.7 William Notman Studio, (detail) Mrs. J.P. Dawes, 1898. (Photo: NPA, No. 124,782-B11, McCord Museum, Montréal.)

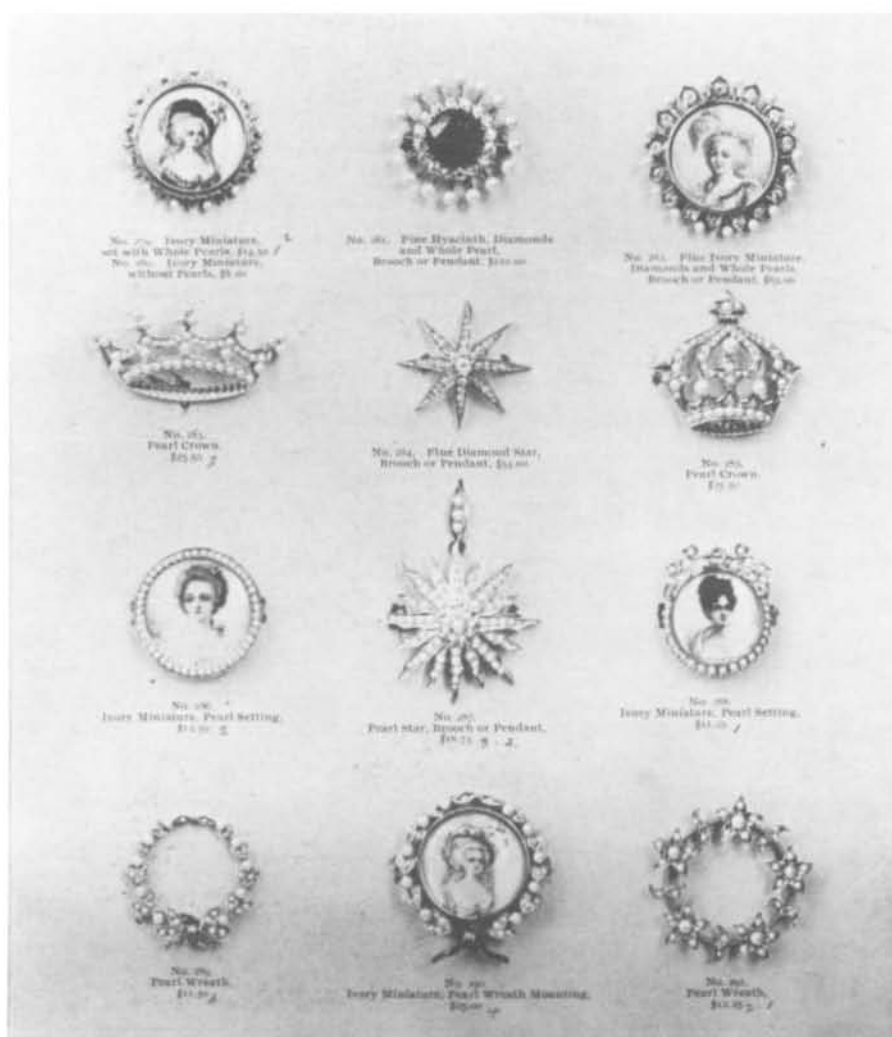


fig. 8 Fine Gem Brooches, Henry Birks & Sons' 1897 catalogue. (Photo: courtesy of Henry Birks and Sons, Montréal.)

the most popular jewellery motifs were the sunburst,¹⁴ the star, and the crescent. It is perhaps no coincidence that the Birks catalogues of the same period feature countless versions of these cosmic signs, in pins or pendants of gold set with seed pearls or diamonds.¹⁵ Mrs. Evans and Mrs. Dawes are but two of the great number of women wearing such jewellery in the photographs of the Notman collection (figs 6 and 7).



fig.9 William Notman Studio, **Miss McShane**, 1898.
(Photo: NPA, No. 123,921-B11, McCord Museum,
Montréal.)



fig.10 William Notman Studio, **Mrs. Boyd**, 1898.
(Photo: NPA, No. 124,600-B11, McCord Museum,
Montréal.)

A comparative study of the photographs and the catalogues reveals that jewellery worn by Notman subjects were contemporary creations as well as family heirlooms. Younger women tended to prefer more fashionable jewellery, as illustrated by Miss McShane (fig.9), whose ivory miniature portrait-pin¹⁶ is almost identical to that featured in the Birks catalogue of 1896-97 (fig.8). A bird motif pin worn by a Mrs. Trotter, and the neo-classic, full-figure cameo in the photograph of Mrs. Boyd (fig.10), could be family heirlooms, this type of jewellery having been fashionable in the first half of the nineteenth century. Yet slightly modified versions of the bird motif pin still appear in the Birks catalogues of the early twentieth century and there was a revival of cameos based on classical motifs in the late 1870's.¹⁷ In this respect, establishing the date of jewellery is not as conclusive as could be the case for costume. Even the most recent jewellery designs often are reminiscent of creations made generations ago.

The Notman collection of photographs not only reveals the habits and customs of its subjects, but also provides invaluable clues about the man-

ner in which they dressed and comported themselves in a social environment. More specifically, the reproductions of jewellery worn by the subjects, together with that featured in the Birks catalogues, offer precious information as to what was available and prized in various periods. Many of the jewels illustrated in the Notman albums can still complement modern clothes and are being worn today by the descendants of their original owners. This is the intrinsic quality of any real art form.

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Notes

¹ J. Russell HARPER and Stanley TRIGGS, eds., *Portrait of a Period, a Collection of Notman Photographs, 1856-1915* (Montréal: McGill Univ. Press, 1967).

² The "artificial crinoline" was a cage petticoat (a light understructure of fine steel hoops) that came into fashion in 1856, replacing innumerable layers of petticoats while holding out the skirt yet wider. Penelope BYRDE, *Fashion Outlines 1800-1879* (Bath, Eng.: The Museum of Costume, 1984).

³ Kathleen JENKINS, *Montreal, Island City on the St. Lawrence* (New York: Doubleday Co., 1966), p. 386.

⁴ Kenneth O. MACLEOD, *The First Century, A Story of the Birks Jewellery Firm* (Montréal: Henry Birks and Sons, 1979).

⁵ The jewellery firm of Henry Birks and Sons has published a yearly catalogue since 1896. The rare and precious early editions were graciously put at my disposal for this research.

⁶ Kenneth MCNAUGHT, *The Pelican History of Canada* (London: Penguin Books, 1973), p. 164.

⁷ A cultured pearl is created by a mollusc in the same manner as a natural pearl except that the process is stimulated by the human insertion of a nucleus. Pearl cultivation, as we know it today, started on a commercial basis in Japan around 1915. Harold NEWMAN, *An Illustrated Dictionary of Jewellery* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1981), p. 87.

⁸ "Pearl," *Colored Stones*, Gemmological Institute of America, Santa Monica, Ca. 1976, Chapt. 13.

⁹ The diamond crescent #20312 on the upper left-hand corner of fig.3 contains 21 diamonds, the approximate total weight is two carats in diamonds. Priced at \$200.00 in 1906, this jewel would be worth nearly twenty times this amount today, even making allowances for the Old Victorian cut of the stones. By comparison, the oriental pearl necklace, #20320 on the same page, priced at \$5,000.00, was

then worth roughly the price of a medium-size house. The tremendous popularity of pearls at the end of the nineteenth century, a period when income taxes were insignificant or nonexistent and wealth was more concentrated, caused the prices to be bid up to fantastically high levels. The pearl supply was never great and the demand was insatiable, so prices reached astronomically high figures. This situation ended abruptly in the 1929-31 period, when many dealers were forced into bankruptcy and great numbers of owners were forced to sell at any price. Over the years the price of oriental pearls has risen gradually but not nearly as much as diamonds or other precious stones. Also important in the decline of oriental pearls was the availability of cultured pearls which, early in the twentieth century, greatly changed the pearl market. It must be noted that a better quality cultured pearl can only be differentiated from an oriental with the use of sophisticated gemmological instruments.

¹⁰ Before pearl cultivation, the demand for pearls was always greater than the supply, resulting in the making of imitation pearls as early as the fifteenth century. In the seventeenth century, an improved version called "Roman pearls" was produced in France. It required a first coating of the interior of hollow glass beads with "Essence d'Orient" to provide a nacreous appearance. This essence was made of silvery crystals (guanine) from the lining of the scales of certain fish. The substance was applied inside and outside the glass bead, sometimes up to ten coats. To increase the weight of the bead, it was then filled with wax.

¹¹ B.M. GREENE, *Who's Who in Canada, 1925-26*.

¹² NEWMAN, p. 44.

¹³ Sarah DELAMONT and Lorna DUFFIN, eds., *The Nineteenth Century Woman* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), pp. 110-111.

¹⁴ In 1860, the famous Italian jeweller Fortunato Pio Castellani produced a circular Helios brooch, having in the centre a head of the Greek sun-god Helios surrounded by rays, from a Hellenistic prototype dating from about the third century B.C. Hugh TAIT and Charlotte GERE, *The Jeweller's Art* (London, Eng.: The British Museum Publication, 1978), pp. 16-17. The sunburst or "sun in splendour" brooch so popular in Canada in the last decades of the nineteenth century was probably a modified version of this type of archaeological jewellery.

¹⁵ Some of the prices for stone-set gold jewellery featured in the Birks catalogues appear ridiculously low by today's standards. But according to Statistics Canada for the period of 1881 to 1904, a female domestic working in Montréal earned an average of \$8.00 per month with board and in 1901, a plumber had an hourly wage of 25 cents.

¹⁶ A thin sheet of ivory was the base for most miniature paintings used in jewellery.

¹⁷ "Hair ornaments and cameos," *Jewellery from the Hull Grundy Collection* (London: Greater London Council, 1976), n.p.