

# PHOTOGRAPHIC ARTIST

## Rosetta Ernestine Watson-Carr (1845-1907)

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The following draws heavily upon a profile of Rosetta Ernestine Watson-Carr by Virginia G. Berry published in the *Canadian Dictionary of Biography* and in *Canada's Entrepreneurs: From the Fur Trade to the 1929 Stock Market Crash*, Edited by J. Andrew Ross and Andrew D. Smith (2011), as well as profiles appearing in the *Dictionary of Manitoba Biography* by J. M. Bumstead (1999) and the database of *Canadian Women Artists History Initiative*. The author also acknowledges the assistance of Watson family genealogist Randall McGinnis.

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In 1893, the Directors of the Winnipeg Industrial Exhibition were so impressed by the work of photographer Rosetta Ernestine Watson-Carr that, despite the unfortunate fact of her sex, they granted her the exclusive right to make photographs on the exhibition grounds during that year's fair. In the 1890s, long before smartphones or even Kodak Brownies, the production and sale of souvenir photos at such events was a lucrative business. Winnipeg's other photographers, all 17<sup>1</sup> or more of them, were so incensed they boycotted the exhibition entirely, leaving Watson-Carr's entry of several hundred works to sweep every prize in the professional photography class.

Born in 1845, Rosetta Ernestine was one of 10 children<sup>2</sup> born to Drummond Township farmer Henry Watson (1806-1893) and his wife Rosetta Goodall (1808-1888). She was the granddaughter of English-born soldier-settler Private John Watson (b.c1777), who served for 14 years with the 52nd, 1st and 41st Regiments of Foot before enlisting with the Glengarry Light Infantry. Arriving at the Perth Military Settlement in June 1816 he settled in Bathurst Township at C-8/L-20(SW).

At some date in the 1870s, when she was in her late 20s or early 30s, Rosetta Watson set off for New York City, and later New Haven, Connecticut, where she trained as a photographer. When she returned to Canada around 1880 she worked in the Ottawa studio of William Notman (1826-1891). From a base in Montreal, photographer and businessman Notman operated a chain of 14 studios across eastern Canada and the United States that, in the 1880s, employed a staff of 55 photographers.

While living and studying in the United States, or possibly during her few years working at Ottawa, Rosetta Watson reportedly married a man named John Carr. From about 1880 she presented herself as a widow, but whether or not there ever was a marriage, or even a John Carr,

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<sup>1</sup> There were probably more, but the Manitoba Historical Society has identified at least 17 professional photographers working in Winnipeg in 1893: J. F. Allen, Baldwin & Blondal, Peter Allan Bauslaugh, Israel Bennetto, William B. Cheshire, John A. Clark, John Henry Clarke, Thorsteinn Davidsson, Hall & Lowe, William Johnston, Israel Leclair, Chisholm R. Lundy, John Fletcher Mitchell, Frederick W. Parkin, William Pullar, Ernest R. T. Smith, Frederick W. Steele.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Watson-Cromwell (1831-1898), Elizabeth Watson (1834-1930), Alexander Watson (1835-bfr.1859), Saunders Watson (1837-1897), Rebecca Watson-Sproule (1837-1915), William G. Watson (1840-1910), Henry Watson (1843-bfr.1893), Rosetta Ernestine Watson-Carr (1845-1907), Charles Watson (1848-1888), Caroline Watson-Nichol (1850-1888) and Harriet Alecia Watson-McKenney (1851-1903).

may be in question. No date or place of marriage, or information of any kind concerning her husband, has been found. If there was a husband named John Carr he died within a year or two of their marriage. It was not until 1884 that women in Canada secured the same property rights as men. Prior to that time women were, essentially, the property of their father's until they became the property of their husbands. Even though single and married women were thus limited in what they might aspire to outside the home and could not act at all on their own account in business affairs, widows had more latitude. Becoming the 'widow' Rosetta Watson-Carr, in reality or otherwise, had its advantages for a woman making her own living as a photographer and seeking her own independent business opportunities.

In 1883 Rosetta Watson-Carr moved to Winnipeg, Manitoba, and the following year purchased the Searl & Company photographic business from George William Searl (b.c.1846). Searl had only established the firm a year earlier and remained as one of several Watson-Carr employees.<sup>3</sup> Press announcements concerning the purchase made no mention that the buyer was a woman and the re-naming of the company as the American Art Gallery seems to have intentionally avoided associating it with female ownership.

The American Art Gallery<sup>4</sup> advertised itself as the most complete studio in Winnipeg and offered *"the services of a first-class artist from Cleveland, Ohio"*. That *"first class artist"* may have been an employee or may have been Watson-Carr herself. She was well versed and trained as a *"photographic artist"* with skills in different techniques and poses, and in hand-colouring her prints with watercolours and oils. During the boom years of the early 1880s the number of photography firms in Winnipeg more than doubled, and competition was keen. Watson-Carr had to maintain high standards. She was skilled in dry-plate printing, which was new in Winnipeg, and later adopted improved methods such as the photo-crayon process and platinotypes.

In addition to her technical and artistic skill with the camera, darkroom and tint-brush, Watson-Carr was a highly capable business woman. She maintained a thriving business through various marketing schemes: special prices for babies and children, gifts, coupons, trading-stamps, reduced rates on holidays, and special programs which included free exhibitions and music. The amenities of the gallery also attracted patrons. It had handsomely furnished parlours, large, excellently lit studios, and dressing-rooms and work-rooms equipped with *"every convenience and the latest apparatus"*.

Her greatest strength, however, lay in the quality of her work, especially her portraits. Admired for their easy poses, natural expressions, and skilful shading, these ranged from pictures of children to photographs of such public figures as Manitoba Premier John Norquay (1841-1889) and Roman Catholic archbishop Alexandre-Antonin Taché (1823-1894) of St Boniface.

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<sup>3</sup> Photographers employed at The American Art Gallery included - George W. Searl (1885-1889), James Moore (1886), Henry W. Sproule (1887-1889), Miss R. S. Millar (1889), Frederick W. Parkin (1891), Peter Allan Bauslaugh (1896), Samuel Gray (1896).

<sup>4</sup> Located briefly at 40 James Street East, then moved to 574 ½ Main Street, Cheapside Block.



A photograph by Rosetta Watson-Carr of First Nations prisoners at Stoney Mountain Penitentiary, Manitoba, June 8, 1893. Standing rear is Sheriff Duncan J. D. Campbell; center, left to right, Constable Jarvis L. Back, Middle Bull, Bear Shin Bone, and an unidentified Constable; bottom, left to right, T. McQueen, Medicine Pipe Stem, and Nez Percé Sam (concealing his handcuffs beneath a blanket). The death sentence imposed on Nez Percé Sam [Charley Hasenahamhikt], for the murder of White Bird, a chief of the Nez Percé tribe, had just been commuted to life in prison but he died at Stoney Mountain later that year. The the Nez Percé were among the tribes that fled American cavalry attacks, seeking sanctuary in Canada, in the wake of Custer's defeat at the Battle of Little Big Horn – Glenbow Archives NB-9-13

Among the many groups Watson-Carr photographed were hospital nurses and college students, tobogganists and hockey players, and societies of all types. She also photographed landscapes of the country between Port Arthur (Thunder Bay), Ontario, and the Rockies. She was a frequent exhibitor and took pride in a diploma and medal won at the Colonial and Indian Exhibition in London, England, in 1886, as well as prizes in the art section of the Winnipeg Industrial Exhibition (in years when she was not the only entrant).

Watson-Carr's last years in business were dogged by ill health. She sold the American Art Gallery in 1899 and moved back to Ottawa to live with her sister Rebecca Watson-Sproule. She died seven years later of pernicious anemia and heart failure at Ottawa's St. Luke's Hospital and was buried in St. John's Anglican Cemetery, 1876 Merivale Road, Ottawa. Her death certificate was issued in the name of Rosetta E. Carr, the Ottawa Journal death announcement uses the name Rosetta E. Carr and her gravestone reads "*Rosetta Watson, Wife of John Carr, Died July 6, 1907, Aged 62 years*". If John Carr was a fiction, Rosetta stuck to her story to the very end.

Drummond Township native Rosetta Ernestine Watson is remembered for both her reputation as a fine photographer and her business acumen, especially so for her time when a woman's participation at any level in either undertaking demanded talent and perseverance far beyond that of her male competitors.

- **Ron W. Shaw (2018)**