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Canada by Postcard

Visual Urbanisms 2015

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Focus of the talk

- Introduction to the Library's Canadian photographic collection
- Some thoughts about the collection's legacy
- The digital present of the collection
- Pictures of cats



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So, what's in the box?

- Collection comprises 4,500 photographs
- Collected between 1895 and 1924 from across Canada
- Topics range from the frivolous (see across) to the important
- A unique record of Canada's history - not mediated by curators



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Picturing all of Canada

- Which means photographers big and small are found in the collection
- Not limited to select geographical areas
- Also a reflection of the trade economies driving commercial photography at this time (mostly a postcard trade)
- And so...



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It covers this -

1896: Laurier
elected for
the first time



1899: First South
African War
begins



1903: Silver
discovered at
Cobalt, Ontario



1906: Roald
Amundsen
Navigates NW
Passage

1914: World
War One
begins



1918:
World War
One ends

1923: Grand
Trunk Railway
joins
Canadian
National Rail



1898: Klondike
gold rush



1905: Alberta &
Saskatchewan join
Confederation

1908: Anne
of Green
Gables
published



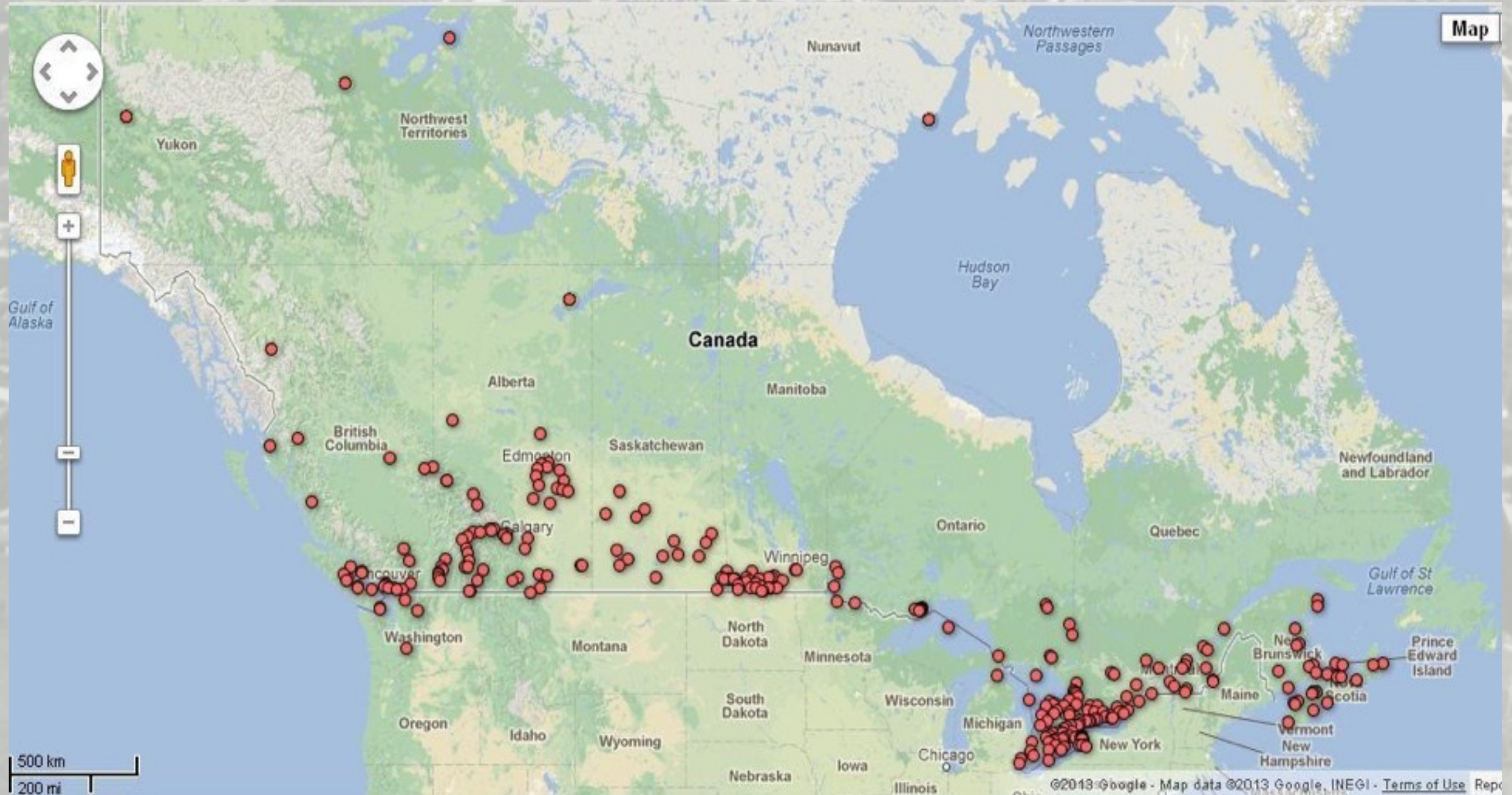
1916: Women
gain right to
vote in Alberta,
Manitoba and
Saskatchewan



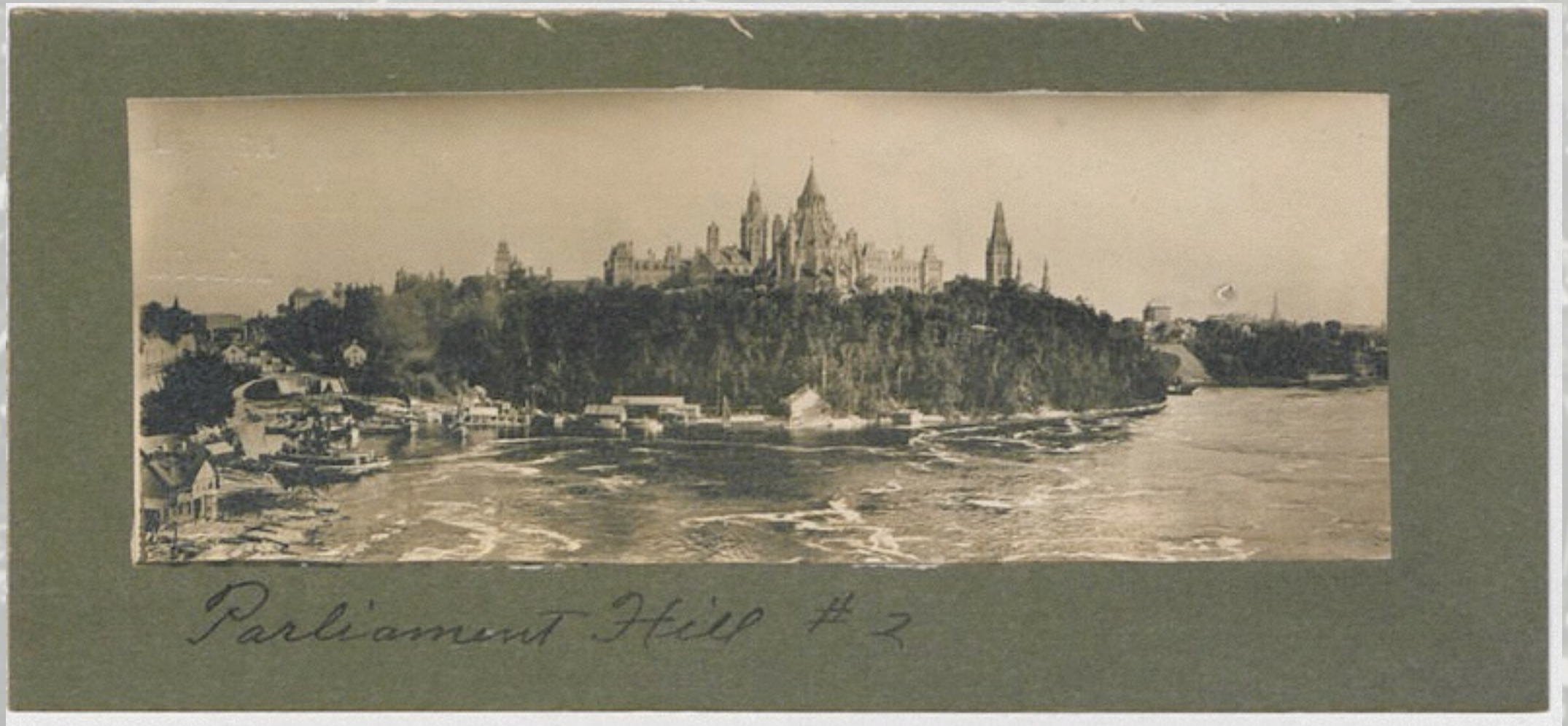
1919: Prince
of Wales visits
Canada

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And all of this -



A first experience of Canada



- A self reflexive aside, collection was one of my first experiences of Canada
- An uncoloured, historic view, materially familiar but surely bearing little resemblance to the present?

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Contrasted with a modern experience

- Except, that's probably not the case
- Later experiences showed Canada, like UK, lives its past as well as its present. The present constantly looks back to the past
- So what does that mean for this collection?



Some things change?

- Perhaps it helps us see change over time?
- These aerial photographs show how much Toronto's skyline has changed
- But also remind us our desire to see the city from on high has a long heritage
- Except once only pilots and a few others experienced it, now you visit the CN Tower



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Some things stay the same?

- Perhaps it helps us see things that stay the same?
- More pertinent are sites like, 'The EX' in downtown Toronto
- Here we see a modern show situated on the site of the 'Canadian National Exhibition'
- Here too, things have changed (the automobile now rules)
- But the site, its function and role in Canadian society endure



Unfinished worlds

- Or, is it more complex?
- In, 'In the Skin of a Lion', Ondaatje uses a photographic moment to capture an idea of the city
- Photographs and the city itself are never complete, they are always reinterpreted and rebuilt by other actors
- These 'unfinished worlds', the photograph and the city, are self-referential palimpsests in constant dialogue with each other



A dialogue with the past

- As a result, other parts of the collection remind us this Canadian story is complicated
- These cities stand on First People lands and they are now bound up in its exchanges
- The collection's unruly nature makes this truth harder to avoid than in a dedicated collection of 'urban' photography
- And perhaps open up opportunities to imagine the post-colonial Canadian city



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The importance of collections

- It is the role of collections, through their action of preservation and accidents of curation, to facilitate these histories
- To remind us that this farm, supporting a neighbouring city, stands on this Chief's former land
- As a result, the visual complicates our understanding of the urban; its construction, meaning and boundaries
- These photographs and other historic collections, then, are punctums which force us to see the city differently



And making them mobile

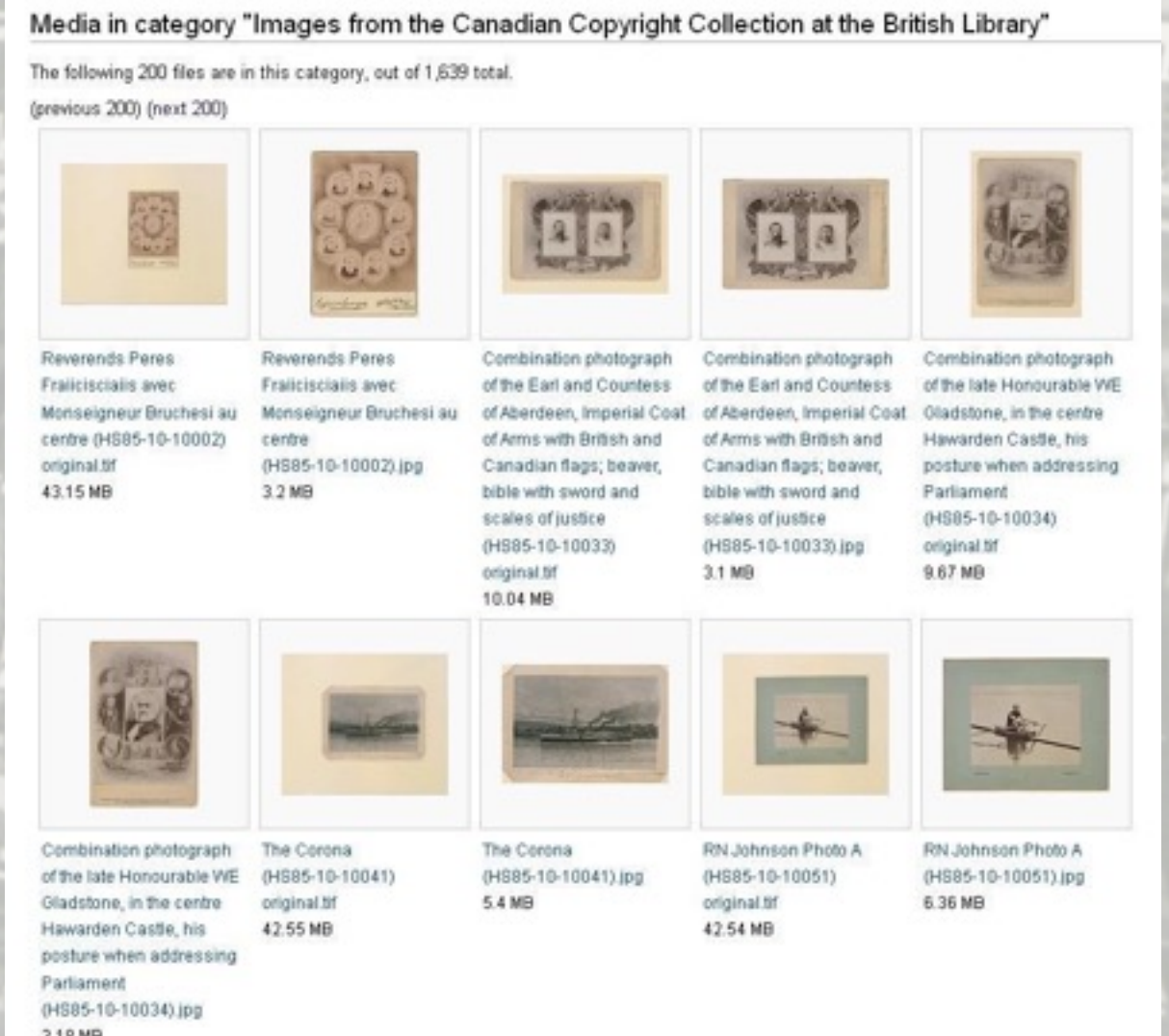
- With this in mind, what next for the collection?
- Recently attempted to remobilise images, the arrival of our cats in Japan suggests some success
- Key idea is that through digitisation (and public domain licensing) we can reconnect images with communities



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A BL-Wikimedia production

- In 2012 - 13 the BL Eccles Centre and Wikimedia UK collaborated to digitise the collection
- Now, over 4,000 images are online, in high resolution and open to reuse
- The cityscapes depicted can now have a dialogue with the urban sphere again



Now available online

- Collection can be found at: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Commons:British_Library/Picturing_Canada
- More information here: <http://publicdomainreview.org/collections/canada-through-a-lens/>
- Over to you, perhaps, to use these images to contextualise the modern city



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Thanks!

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