THE LOST EXPRESSIONIST: NICK YUDELL, A PHOTOGRAPHER DISCOVERED

The Grey Box

In 1928, in Canada's Midwest, a boy of 12 began taking photographs. He was a tall boy, quiet and a little shy. His first photos featured his cousins Wolfe, Ruby and Beryl in dramatic poses. He moved on to capture images in his town and, later, in the capital city of his province. Later, he organized his negatives in small brown envelopes, on which he wrote carefully in ink the time, date, place and lighting conditions, and the names of the individuals who became his subjects. He placed the envelopes in a large wooden grey box that he built for that purpose. The images therein tell his story. His name was Nick Yudell.

Whosoever opens this box opens a world. It is a world that does not exist anymore, but that lives through Nick Yudell's images. Its lost persons and moments, although partial and incomplete, enter our world. They flicker with life, asking us to remember them, to find their place in Nick's story. Nick was captivated by the new art of photography, with its ability to grasp human character in a moment, using light and darkness to create a story. He depicted his friends and family in different guises. Sometimes he turned the camera on himself, investigating other personas. He observed people acutely, watching for the play of light and the transient expression. He engaged his friends in imaginative scenarios to explore friendship, romance and mystery, experimenting with shadows and expressionistic design. Unlike the formal studio portraits of the time, his subjects are without pretense, authentic and comfortable in their own skins.

Nick had an anthropologist's mind and an artist's imagination. His images are witness to the people around him, their play and their place in Manitoba from 1928 throughout the Dirty Thirties. He anticipated avant-garde art with double exposures and experimental lighting that aspired to a modern vision. His work paralleled the new photography emerging in Europe, yet without the resources that those artists enjoyed. In this remote place, Nick captured the mystery of light raking across a human form or landscape, and the activities and pleasures of his friends and family. These women and men of the prairies had shared understandings of loyalty, friendship, romance and the right use of nature. Their age was fascinated with mechanical devices: the camera, the typewriter, the telephone, and the future of automation. New machines arrived on the prairies -- tractors and combines without horses to power them, even though the creatures offered lasting metaphors for human behavior. It was a time when exchange was still beyond money, and commodity did not yet rule the world. Nick's journey unfolds in these prairie communities with their recent immigrants. This is the world of Nick's grey box.

Milton Rabinovitch (1909-2001)

Watching my father's black-and-white movies from the 1930s, I saw, walking towards the camera, a tall young man with large gentle eyes in the uniform of the RAF (Britain's Royal Air Force). I wondered aloud who that was. My father (Milton Rabinovitch, 1909-2001) said that was his cousin Nick, who died in the Second World War. No one knew much of Nick Yudell – at least that they spoke of.

Nick's presence lingered in Milton's keepsakes. The presence of his younger cousin arose only when my father handled something that Nick had made or had owned – one sensed it in the grace with which his large hands touched things. Milton had kept Nick's photographs and magazines in the apartment above his store on Stephen Street in Morden, where my parents lived like bohemians until 1951, and later in his basement workshop in our home in Winnipeg. Nick's photo archive and a few letters lived in a large grey wooden box, near his studio materials, and were accompanied by keys, antique tools, clothing remnants and other curiosities that constituted a casual ethnographic museum of his own design.

Milton's collecting instincts embodied his ties with places and especially with people, embedded in the material objects that they had used, revealing a depth of feeling that was not immediately apparent. His personal feeling for the past allowed these fragments to emit a lingering scent, a fragrance that expanded in the imagination. Held in the hand, these discards yielded obscure sensations and memories. The heavy account book from my father's store in Morden contained receipts written in Milton's spare cramped handwriting or in Nick's elegant slanting script. Compatriots in both work and play, the cousins' personalities emerged in their distinctive cursive styles. Milton showed me the brown envelopes with Nick's negatives, placed in the handmade grey wooden box. He said, "These were Nick's. I couldn't bear to throw them out." Then he added, "Do you think you could do anything with them?"

Who was Nick Yudell? Searching the Archives

Who was he? I sought him in the collaged pieces of his life, trying to uncover who he was and what his world was like. I scanned the black-and-white images that he stored in his archive, read the scraps of letters, and watched the films that my father made with Nick throughout the 1930s. I talked with family members and the Morden townspeople who remembered him, with cousins who visited, and with those who knew the history of the town. By all accounts, he was shy and retiring -- hard to grasp or to understand. These conversations sketched a silhouette of a tall, handsome youth filled with curiosity, courage and resilience -- and a passion for photography.

Nick's RAF recruitment documents and Operations Records taught me more. Nick first tried to enlist in September 1939, at the beginning of World War II, and although he

excelled in the interview, he was ranked as average and told to wait. In August 1940 he enlisted and was dispatched to the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (BCATP) at bases in Shilo, Manitoba; Lethbridge, Alberta; and finally, Brandon, Manitoba – reaching into a wider world in Canada and beyond. He was not alone – he was one of nearly 20,000 Canadian Jews—10 percent of the community—who enlisted in the military, and one of the approximately five hundred Jewish Canadian soldiers who died in World War II. In 1940, the RCMP reported, "The Jewish community … has subscribed generously… not because they consider it a 'Jewish' war, but because they understand the clear-cut policy of decency versus brute force much better than people who take their freedom for granted." Nick became an RAF pilot and Warrant Officer in a critical mission in North Africa to stop the Nazi advance into the Mediterranean. I

Such fragments speak of a life with color, shape and value – a particularity within his faith, his community, his region, and his nation. Nick's family heritage encompassed the tragedy of the Jewish people during the late 19th century as they were driven out of Russia and what would later become the Ukraine, and their very different experience in Canada, where they became members in the prairie communities of Winnipeg and Morden. His journey was shaped by his inner resources, his adventurousness, his curiosity, and the passion for knowledge instilled in him by his upbringing. Unlike the politically fraught social environment today, where identity politics designated history and cultures into oppositional narratives, Nick's community in Morden tolerated many faiths and allowed cultures to flourish, so that if one could, then so too all would. His western Canadian experience reflected the central covenant of the exchange embodied in Judaism and Christianity.

A Canadian war hero, Nick Yudell shows us the Jew as hero, not victim. His story dispels the fiction of "divided loyalties" and other tropes that discount Jewish contributions. As a Canadian and as a Jew, he dedicated his life to fighting fascism.

Alex Yudluvitz (later Yudell, 1878 – 1939) and Nettie Kluner (April 5, 1881 – June 5, 1918) – Nick's Family

Nick was born in 1916 to Alex Yudluvitz and his wife Nettie ("Sophie") Kluner on Dufferin Avenue in Winnipeg, then a booming railroad city in Western Canada. Alexander Yudluvitz was an officer in the Tsar's army until he defected in 1903. Jewish boys were conscripted at an earlier age than ethnic Russians. They were not allowed by the Empire to live beyond the Pale of Settlement, and were not accepted by ethnic Russians, although they were somewhat protected by the Tsar as potential cannon-fodder. The Russians took Jewish boys from large families, or orphans without families, and those who were not yet head of households, and required them to serve for a mandatory thirty years. Conscription

diminished the population of Jews in Russia, but, at the same time, it provided a false semblance of the cultural integration and assimilation that was sometimes achieved by middle-class Jews living in the larger centers. (My great-uncle Jacob Rabinovitch is said to have dreaded conscription so much that he severed his index finger to be declared unfit by the Tsar's army.) Alex was only 12 when he was taken from his family and forcibly conscripted in 1890. Thus, he lost his own childhood and remained a man of formal Russian manner throughout his life, evident in his military bearing and his letters to my grandfather David "Doc" Rabinovitch.

At the turn of the century Alex sent a postcard to Nettie, his fiancé in Kiev. It is a photograph of Alex standing tall in his military uniform, holding his cornet – he may have been a standard bearer calling men into battle. Appearing to be in his early twenties, by that time Alex had served for more than a decade. He carries a saber reserved for officers and a revolver in a holster. Uniforms and accoutrements were regulated in the army, and Alex clearly had higher status than that of a common soldier. His grandson Arnold Yudell has owned this cornet for many years. The photo's backdrop suggests a rocky Asian landscape that may refer to the breadth of the Russian Empire and Alex's position in the Far East. An art photographer, Stanski, made the image in his studio in Vinnytsia, a town in Ukraine equidistant from Kiev and Odessa. On the reverse is an elaborate engraved design of an artist's palette, easel, and a bellows camera that Alex inscribed tenderly for Nettie, "*You are in my mind all the time, your image stays with me. I think of you always and one day you will be my fiancé and my bride, Love always, Alexander Yudluvitz*."

When Alex deserted from the Russian army in 1903, violent antisemitic pogroms tortured the Jewish communities in Russia and Ukraine. He was most likely stationed in Vladivostok, a far eastern Russian port where the Trans-Siberian Railway ended. Indeed, the Tsar needed his forces to push his railway development south through Manchuria, to the warm water port of Port Arthur, which was strategically important for Russian trade and defense - but was sought after by Japan, France, England, and Germany. Sensing a potential disaster, Alex made a dangerous escape and travelled across Siberia to Kiev to find passage to North America. He first landed in Cuba, making connections in the sugar business, before he left for Nettie and New York.

Nettie had been living in New York with her father, Wolf Kluner, and her older sister Sonia, then a floor leader in the garment industry, making shoulder pads; they all shared the home of their eldest sister and her family. But by 1901 Sonia had entered an arranged marriage with David ("Doc") Rabinovitch, a widower with two children, and moved to his home in Morden, Manitoba. Doc had a dry goods business supplying sundries to the farmers in the rural region 80 miles southwest of Winnipeg. Two years later, in 1903, a pregnant

Sonia returned to New York for her sister's wedding to Alexander Yudluvitz. Alex married Nettie and their first child, Mary, was born in New York in 1906. But New York meant crowded apartments, living with parents, extended family and their children, and no land – there were no gardens, and limited light. Sonia had told Nettie of the fresh air and fertile land that they could have if they would come west.

Alex and Nettie arrived by train to Winnipeg's CN Station in 1909. Its blue cupola opened up as if it were the sky itself; it promised family, freedom and opportunity. Sonia and her husband met them at the station with clothing and supplies. They settled in Winnipeg's lively North End with other Eastern Europeans of Jewish, Russian and Ukrainian descent. Alex employed his contacts from Cuba to open a trading company, Wiseman & Yudluvitz, that imported sugar and sweets from Cuba. My father Milton preserved a letter that Alex wrote to Doc in Russian Yiddish to supply him with sugar, a note that begins formally in the Russian:

Wiseman & Yudluvitz, Wholesale Merchants and Jobbers, 277 Dufferin Avenue Winnipeg, December 11,1912

My dear Brother-In-Law,
We are sending you a draft for 276.56 for two months…
Please accept it. We needed the money and you won't have to pay it. We sold (some sugar) and that gave us a profit of $500.
Regards to your wife
Your brother in law
Alexander Yudluvitz

In another business note, Alex writes:

Wiseman & Yudluvitz, Wholesale Merchants and Jobbers, 277 Dufferin Avenue Feb 14 1913

My brother in law Rabinovitch,
We have a lot of sugar in 100 lb. bags, in first class shape.
The name of the sugar is Halifax Sugar and … we are selling it for $470.00 each sack.*
If you want anything of that write to us…but do it soon, we now have 250 sacks, but we can be selling quickly. So, write to us soon,
Regards to your family
Alex Yudluvitz

*(author's note: from the sugar refinery in Halifax, blown up in 1917 in WW I)

A Child in Morden 1920-1930- the Rabinovitch Family

In 1918, when Nick was two years old, his mother died of blood poisoning from a cut with a fish knife. His father, Alex, struggled to look after Nick and his two siblings, Mary, who was twelve, and Milton, who was seven. Alex had a new business to run, the Star Trading Company on Dufferin Avenue. Facing such conflicting demands, he decided that it would be best if Nick should live with Nettie's sister Sonia and her husband, "Doc" Rabinovitch, and their large family in Morden.

One day, he addressed the child, "*Nikolai, we are going to visit your aunt Sonia*." Alex could not utter the rest of his thoughts. "*You will live with her."* His military experience had made him formal, so that expressing grief or joy might unsettle the equilibrium required of a soldier. Nick resembled Nettie. His wide eyes and forehead, even features and fair complexion recalled her presence. Nick boarded the train from Winnipeg to Morden with his father, brother and sister. They rode quietly while the boy looked out at the clouds racing in from the west, the fields of grain, scatterings of bush and spare homesteads, a spray of light brushing the backs of grazing cows, trailing across a patch of green growth and settling on the geometry of a farm roof. A rainstorm in the distance formed grey pendentives into a vault in the sky.

When they arrived at the house on Stephen Street, Nick was immediately submerged in the humid atmosphere of flour and boiling water, the fragrance of apples piled high in baskets, and the gentle embrace of his aunt Sonia, whose arms were soft, fine and white, dusted with the flour she used to coat the *kreplach* dumplings for the chicken soup that evening. The Rabinovitch family was one of seven Jewish families in the region, including those that travelled from nearby towns Plum Coulee and Winkler to congregate in the small synagogue founded there, Beth Israel. The families had also established a cemetery that is now a historic site maintained in perpetual care by the town. When only the Rabinovitch family remained, the synagogue closed in 1922.

Nick came to live in the large Victorian family house on the main street in Morden, built by the town's first postmaster, a home so big that my aunts and uncles remembered playing baseball in the attic. He joined a family of nine children – two elder sisters from Doc's first marriage, and the four boys and three girls he had with Sonia Kluner, his second wife. Nick's nine cousins became brothers and sisters to him, but he was especially close to my father Milton, then eleven.

Thus, Nick became the youngest of ten children. The warmth of the home comforted him and he delighted in discovering the greater freedom of its rural setting. Nick's older brother Milton and sister Mary ran into the yard, where they met their cousin Milton Rabinovitch. The two Miltons were unusually tall. Nick's brother was an imposing 6'7" when he was fully grown and would become known as "Big Milton". They played with their Rabinovitch cousins outside, including the eldest brother, Archie, Wolfe, Milton and young Leon, shooting marbles, tossing baseballs and riding on a bicycle. They were an exuberant force. Nick's older sister Mary liked sports, preferring her gentle cousin "Little Milton" to her female cousins Ann and Ruby. Everyone fussed over "Nicky", who became the baby of the family. His cousins included him in everything. Beryl, only two years older but already an actress, took Nick's hand and walked him around the house and the yard. It made her feel important to look after him. His cousin Milton put Nick on his shoulders to walk down the main street of the town to the family store.

For the next few years, the boy lived a peripatetic life, moving between his two families, between Morden and Winnipeg, by car or by train, with his cousins or with truckers that worked with the Rabinovitch family. This was the beginning of a life enriched by moving between his two families, between Morden and Winnipeg.

Nick began to pursue photography when he received a camera at the age of 12 in 1928. His older cousins fascinated him. He shot them from extreme angles, in everyday activities and while they performed stunts. His earliest photographs are of his cousin Wolfe, a vivid, ambitious character who led the family band, *Wolfe Rabinovitch and his White Caps*, touring Manitoba, North Dakota, Minnesota and Saskatchewan with the latest jazz and blues music. Wolfe left for Chicago in 192y, taking his youngest brother, Leon, to their mother's great sorrow. A year later, Wolfe returned with a big car and a camera. One of Nick's earliest images from 1928 captures a freewheeling Wolfe who has climbed high on a telephone pole in full-dress clothing. Gravity does not define him. Four years later, in 1931, Nick copied the same pose on a telephone pole in front of his father's Dufferin Avenue home. *Wolf Rabinovitch, Morden, prior to 1928 (No. 15) Nick Yudell on pole by 387 Alfred Ave., Winnipeg, made with Joe Adelman, May 1933 (No. 22)* He also caught a cocky Wolfe leaning against the car with an African American friend who likely had travelled with him from Chicago back to Morden. Despite the remoteness of the prairies, there was a lot of travel between Chicago, Winnipeg, Morden and other railroad and transport centers -- no one seemed to mind driving long distances. Nick's older cousin Ruby was the next to leave, heading for New York City, where she met members of the Algonquin Club and wrote for *The New Yorker* under a pseudonym. In a thoughtful portrait taken that same year, Ruby calmly regards the viewer in front of their house in Morden. To Nick, they are all movie stars, amplified by their love of cinema and by the gestures and attitudes they had learned from

the actors. (*Ruby Rabinovitch, Rabinovitch House, Morden, prior to 1930 (No. 23) Ruby Rabinovitch left home by 1928 to become a writer in New York City. She wrote for The New Yorker magazine and associated with the Algonquin Club. She moved to Montreal in the late 1930's.)*

Self-Portraits

As a youth, Nick created an evolving series of self-portraits that forecast the direction of much contemporary fine-art photography. His work predates today's "selfie" but goes further to explore the self without glamourizing it. He captures himself as both actor and subject. From his joyous self-portrait with camera on the steps of Winnipeg's St. John's Technical Collegiate in 1931, to his last self-portrait anticipating his departure for World War II in 1940, his images show his awareness of self. Though working in isolation from the wider world of photography, Nick interrogated his own persona with staging and lighting through his series of self-portraits. In one, he poses as a Greek statue, using lights to overexpose his face. Cloaked in velvet, his head appears classical, with a decorative disc floating in the background that suggests a Greco-Roman leader. He captures himself with extreme angles, shot from below. In other self-portraits, he uses raking light to define his features, introducing a noirish film sensibility to his image. To look more mature, he wears menswear made of sturdy full-bodied fabrics - his boyishly round face incongruent as he is only fifteen or sixteen. Staging himself as an actor, he directs others to shoot at just the right moment, when he stands on top of a chicken-coop ventilator, arms raised exuberantly. (*Nick Yudell, 383 Alfred Ave., Winnipeg, 1934 (No. 9) Nick Yudell, Choen's Machray & Salter, made with Willie Lucow, September 1937 (No. 51) Nick Yudell on Chicken Coup Ventilator, 383 Alfred Ave., Winnipeg, made with Joe Adelman, May 1933 (No. 20))*

St. John's Collegiate, Winnipeg 1931-33

In 1931 Nick entered St. John's Collegiate, a Technical High School in Winnipeg's North End. Photography became his passion. While attending St. John's (1931 -1933), Nick captured images that offer a sparkling prism of his young life. One of his first images is his self-portrait with camera on the steps of the school. He is only fifteen. Experimental photography intrigued Nick, and he created double exposures with photographic illusions directing his cousins Beryl or Leon as actors in a visual reverie. Later he portrayed his high school friends, using light to find the most dramatic or telling image. His subjects obviously like and trust him. His portraits of his peers reveal character, hesitation and self-regard. At home in Morden, he photographed his cousin Beryl in a fur-trimmed evening dress, her body creating an abstract triangular form in the yard. Later, experimenting with double exposures, Nick created imaginary scenarios with Beryl and her brother Leon - a James

Cagney lookalike - and their friend Shirley Rice. They reflect 1930's film noir movies in a sensibility attuned to the uncanny and the mysterious presence of the ghostly impressions made by movement. [*[Image 1. Beryl Rabinovitch, Rabinovitch Residence, Morden, 1931] <c> Beryl Rabinovitch, 383 Alfred Ave., Winnipeg, March 1934 (No. 3) Beryl Rabinovitch, Rabinovitch Residence, Morden, 1938 (No. 190)*

Nick explored extreme angles and unusual perspectives in capturing his friends in character studies utilizing experimental photography. Attracted by dramatic lighting, he created images of compelling mystery emulating a film noir style, even in the most mundane settings. These images chronicle his friendships and flirtations: there are many of the pretty Rose Rothstein and her father -- in some she is so self-conscious that we, as viewers, are uncomfortable. Other young women are confident – he photographs *Fritzy Green and Shirley Walsh* smoking with tipped heads and observant eyes. His portrait of *Shirley Walsh* is a study of simplicity, allowing her dark eyes and symmetrical features to draw us into her personality. He captures Esther Granovsky's delicate blonde curls and luminous skin by shooting her against an illuminated lace curtain. The romance of these photographs appears in the image of them laughing together. (*Fritzy Greene, Shirley Walsh, Suite 12, N. Panama Apartments, Winnipeg, December 1934 (No. 81) Shirley Walsh, Suite 12, N. Panama Apartments, Winnipeg, December 1934 (No. 82) Etta Granovsky, 620 Selkirk Ave., Winnipeg. April 19, 1935 (No. 103) Etta Granovsky, Nick Yudell, 105 Bannerman Ave., Winnipeg, September 1937 (No. 114)*. The image of *Zenon Yonker* employs a dramatic perspective from a low vantage point, allowing for extreme diagonals to form an abstract space. Zenon gazes down at us; the white curtains point to his face. We only once see him in a photograph, yet his name appears again in the memorial to Canadian officers who died in 1943, on the page with the Y's – for both Yudell and Yonker. (*Zenon Yonker, Yonker Residence, 397 Burrows Ave., Winnipeg, January 1933 (No. 42)*

Other high school friends emerge from the grey box: one is *Earle Gildemaster*. Earle and Nick experimented with primitive lighting effects in photographs that they staged together. Several photographs use lighting below the face. Instead of a spooky effect, Nick arrived at abstraction where his features are revealed as if in a negative; in another his double exposure of his head unnervingly creates the premonition of a nuclear cloud at the top. In 1934, Nick's lens captures Earle in a portrait of considerable depth and beauty. Earle is casually seated in an interior with side lighting travelling across his face, glasses and his eyes. He looks with authority and confidence at the viewer. He leans on a leather jacket whose zipper catches the light intermittently. His hand is relaxed, fingers sensitively dropped, and the rest of his figure disappears into dramatic darkness. (*Earle Gildemaster, 362 Burrows Ave., Winnipeg, February 1934 (No. 73) Earle Gildemaster went to high school with Nick. They experimented with photography together, making lighting studies and double*

exposures. He was an intense and skeptical young man, aware of himself and his stance in the world.)

Depression, the Dust Bowl and Photography

After the stock market crash of 1929, drought withered the prairies. The Dust Bowl swept the topsoil away. The economic devastation of the Great Depression grinding away opportunity and employment. Local campaigns began in Morden aimed to help farmers to "keep your soil at home" by planting caragana bushes and willow trees. The price of wheat plummeted. In 1931, Morden set up a distribution center for relief for the farmers south of Morden, providing thirteen tons of cabbage and eleven tons of mixed vegetables, but the farmers demanded employment rather than relief. Then, in 1932 grasshoppers beset the town and the surrounding region. The province established a campaign to help eradicate the plague and in the town the Morden Chamber of Commerce members mixed poison around the clock for the farmers to rid their crops of locusts.

While attending high school in Winnipeg from 1929 to 1933, Nick lived with his father, his brother Milton and sister Mary in the family home on Alfred Avenue in Winnipeg's North end. He continued moving between his two families, frequently taking the short ride on the train southwest to Morden to stay with Aunt Sonia and her family, the seemingly infinite landscape of glowing fields or snow reflecting the vault of the sky still a reminder of his early loss. As the Depression weighed on the prairies, Nick returned to Morden in June, 1933. He had just turned 17 and had completed his grade eleven matriculation at St. John's Collegiate. There was no work for him other than as a clerk in the Rabinovitch Bros. store. His adventurous cousins inspired his curiosity, although he remained shy and quiet. At home, dinner talk flew between topics, punctuated by Milton's quiet wit and Beryl's vivacious laughter, or when they visited, by Archie's gravelly voice and Ann's declarative statements. Friends from Winnipeg alternated with strangers like Lazarus, king of the hoboes, whom Doc invited home to hear tales of life on the road. They brought descriptions, likely embellished broadly, of other places they had been and seen. Nick's peripatetic existence as a child, shuttling back and forth between his father's home in Winnipeg, and his aunt's family in Morden, built his desire for adventure. The changing world around him fired a restlessness reflected in his fascination with air flight. He increasingly inserted foreign scenes in his photographs, perhaps indicating what was to come. (*Nick Yudell, Meilicke Residence, Morden, November 17, 1935 (No. 123)*

It was during this period that Nick set out to develop his photography skills further. There is a great tradition in painting in which artists from Botticelli to Picasso include a painting within a painting. It is a kind of *mode d'emploi*, or "instructions for use", that allows the

viewer to open the image with the key formed within it, as a code for the work. Nick used this device by sometimes depicting individuals seated beneath paintings or tapestries. Occasionally, his self-portraits are seen under European landscapes or London Bridge. These may embody his need to be *somewhere else*, drawing us to faraway places brought in the imagination by the individuals that read or reflect on their world – and he presents these figures without striving for dramatic effect, but rather by visually echoing the reveries of reading.

As the Depression threatened the west, newsreels and radio brought close the menace of war in Europe. Nick captured people in creative or stoic repose, posing as wise guys, seductresses, or rural types proud of their abilities. Popular film offered romantic fantasy, while science fiction imagined future possibilities. Individuals found respite in reading, listening to music and presenting themselves to Nick's camera. He photographed women reading – a relaxed pleasure that reappears in his work *(Vera Steele reclining with a book on a sofa, Mary Ginsburg Reading*). In a self-portrait made in the prairie town of Carman, Manitoba, Nick reads *The Green Rust*, a novel by science fiction writer Edgar Wallace describing the devastation wrought by an evil scientist who has planned releasing a virus to destroy the world's grain crops – mirroring the concerns of our own bedeviled era. *[Image 134. Nick Yudell reading, Stobart res, Carman – 1936] <c> Nick Yudell reading, Stobart residence, Carman, 1936. </c>*

The Dust Bowl moved north over the border into the Canadian prairies, drying up the central plains. Nick's cousin Milton Rabinovitch had planned to study agriculture and develop new crops to feed the world, but his father, Doc, advised him against it; there was no money in agriculture nor to assist him in university. Milton stayed in Morden, working in the store with Nick from 1933 to 1939. Despite the family camaraderie, this was restrictive for two young men with ambition. They experimented with photography – Milton making movies, and Nick still photographs. They captured scenes with moving pictures and still images at the Dominion Experimental Farm in Morden where Milton had volunteered since he was a youth, working in teams to develop plants such as rust- resistant wheat, triticale, and apples that grow in the North. (Milton continued to volunteer there until 1960.) Nick made striking landscape images of his friends resting on the grounds of the farm. (*Vic Burgess and Edith Dickie, Dominion Experimental Farm, 1937)*

Prairie farmers rebelled against the exploitation of their grain production by Toronto and Montreal. They had opposed the domination of "eastern interests" since the 1880's, but poverty during the Depression increased their discontent. They desired change, and it came in two forms – politically in the Social Credit movement in Alberta in 1932; and in the earlier travelling evangelists who brought apocalyptic Biblical prophecy to the rural prairie

communities. Since 1925, travelling evangelists had arrived from the central United States. Speaking in tongues, the holy rollers in their tents proved an entertaining distraction for many. Amy Semple Macpherson, a Canadian evangelist, came through the territory near Morden around 1931. After the witty stunts photographed during the 1920s -- Nick's photo of Wolfe Rabinovitch scaling a telephone pole -- these spectacles reflected the Depression's worries and hopes.

Nick would stage his friend with visual humor to make witty photos. He captured a man and a woman (Edith Dickie and Cliff Milne) in one pair of big pants – likely borrowed from the Rabinovitch Bros Store. He captured Beryl in movie-star poses on a bed, and made film noir portraits of his friends. He experimented with the striking black-and-white intensity of expressionist imagery, usually shooting a person from below to create a monumental extent of their form; and he sometimes seemed to echo the altered perspectives of surrealist photography by shooting his cousin Beryl in an extreme position.

[*Image 194. Edith Dickie, Cliff Milne, Behind Burgess Store, Morden, 1937] <c> Edith Dickie, Cliff Milne, behind Burgess Store, Morden, 1937. </c>.*

Morden offered a kind of refuge from the urban social strife of the Depression; probably due to the resilience of the farming community and their capacity for self-sufficiency. Doc Rabinovitch had wisely cultivated a loyal market of people whom he had helped in the spirit of exchange. His youngest son, Leon, had followed Wolfe to Chicago, Archie had become a dentist, and there was Milton or Nick to work the store. In Morden, the stores stayed open Saturday nights to accommodate farmers who worked long hours in the growing season. The Rabinovitch Bros. Store, an 1884 building with an entrance at the center framed by a narrow façade and a cornice on the roof, offered great warmth. It became focal point for the community and people could often be found congregating there on Saturday nights, when farmers arrived for conversation and supplies. A behemoth of oak and glass, the McCaskey Accounts Register held accordion folds for the account slips written by Nick and Milton – their different handwriting animates each receipt. A radio played in the back, where they kept schnapps for an occasional after-hours shot.

Milton took eight-millimeter movies through the display windows of the store. Nick documented daily life in the town. Their photographs and movies create a record of how people lived, worked, played and thought of themselves in the 1930s on the prairies. Often young nurses from their training residence in Morden came to flirt with the two tall men – becoming ideal subjects for film and portraits. One winter likely in 1935, Milton shot footage of the nurses through the store window as they were sliding down snowbanks, waving and being goofy, fooling around. The head of the nurse's residence, Marian Vrooman, became Nick's close friend. He photographed her posed with her dog, giving them equal dignity; in

the interior of her apartment; at graduation events, and in conversations. A blurry photograph of a partially clothed woman on a bed suggests that Nick deliberately moved the camera to obscure the woman's identity, but perhaps they were lovers. She remains a constant in his images through the 1930s.

Nick acquired the first issue of *Popular Photography* in 1937, as well as *Minicam* magazine, and continued to purchase them at the drugstore across the street from the Rabinovitch Bros. store until he enlisted in 1940. (Milton kept them all after Nick's death in 1943.) He purchased his film at the drugstore, using each negative purposefully. Strange lighting, radical perspectives and double exposures informed Nick's innovations in photography. He implied visual and psychological narratives that seem startlingly modern and explored the expressive potential of double portraits, anticipating the themes covered in *Popular Photography* magazine. He timed some of his images – Marian Vrooman in a costume at the Nurses Residence –for one shot, captured as she blew the noisemaker. In settings, Nick used juxtapositions of scale for visual surprise – he flew model airplanes above houses on Burrows Street to make invented images. [*Image Marian Vrooman, Sitting Costume, Morden – 1938] [Image 74: Model Plane Bannerman and Aikins, Winnipeg – 1933]*

Paper was costly during the Depression and Nick's often wrote his notes on the back of envelopes or other materials that he had at hand. Searching through his collection of *Popular Photography*, I found Nick's drawings for an electrical switch box penciled on the beveled cardboard used to package shirts. The drawings show his older brother's influence. Big Milton was a radio operator in Ottawa during the War and later started an electronics business in Winnipeg, called Western Electronics. He taught Nick to solder metals. In the 1930s, Nick captured images of his elder brother and his friends in Winnipeg, including a mysterious image of Big Milton's slim figure leaning against the house wall, his face obscured by leafy shadows.

Photography and Air Flight: The Royal Air Force Pilot

Nick's passions for photography and flight merged in the 1930s. As a youth, Nick had been intrigued by air flight, making model planes and shooting biplanes on the river or at Stevenson Field in Winnipeg, and pontoon planes up north. He spent much of his time in his room poring over photography magazines or reading. He built mechanized model aircraft, using these as props on film and taking advantage of the photograph's depth of field to play with illusions of scale. And he built his own equipment: lights and stands, electronics, and other equipment for a photographic studio.

From 1937 to 1939, Nick created an extraordinary series of portraits of babies, plumbing their emotions through keen observation. He positioned his camera on the ground, at the level of the baby's world, shooting from the floor upward and making the child monumental. To make *Baby in Lake 1939*, he got in the water with the child, shooting low near water level to capture the child's wonder at the reflections. The image suggests that a child who was an actor in the world, with their own curiosity and agency. Nick was twenty- three, perhaps reflecting on his own childhood. [*Baby in Lake, 1939, Image 224.) Nick in Chair, 1941 before leaving for WWII*] <c>

His sister Mary was a favorite subject, either reading, seated in a field, or as a mother. Before he left to go overseas, Nick shot a series of his immediate family, his sister Mary, her husband, Bere Ginsburg, and their daughter Barbara and young son Barry. The images of his sister and her son are classically posed, with astute use of posture and gesture, echoing Renaissance art and in particular Raphael's Madonna.

Nick's father, Alexander, died before the start of World War II in 1939. He had lived with Parkinson's disease in his last years, and it limited his ability to write or play music. In Nick's photograph he sits stiffly in a chair in his home on Dufferin Avenue, almost a ghost. It is an image of illness overtaking a strong and disciplined man. Once his father was gone, Nick continued working at the store, but the center of his family was gone.

The rise of fascism in Europe countered by the British and Canadian response led Nick to enlist. Restless, frustrated by clerking in the store, in 1938 he became a member of the Manitoba Mounted Rifles. Established in 1907 in Morden, they were a regimented non-permanent active militia – a volunteer militia. The crest for the Manitoba Mounted Rifles portrays a sturdy bulldog advancing over a field with the motto *Ut Irruent Omnes* – or Aggressive in Attack. They were connected to the North-West Mounted Police, or Mounties. *[Image 74: Model Plane Bannerman and Aikins, Winnipeg – 1933]*

In 1940 Nick entered the military, and he became an RAF pilot in 1941 as a British subject. To pilot an aircraft - a cumbersome Vickers Wellington II - demands a high degree of physical and spatial awareness, because pilots must sense their positioning in space. Nick was physically gifted with spatial intelligence, not only through his inventiveness with images. On his military application, he writes in an elegant slanting script that he plays table tennis, lacrosse and hockey. His military records also note that he planned to open a photography studio after the war.

His dexterity with the camera, and his ability to creatively place his subjects in pictorial space using expressive angles, foreshortened views and compressed depth of field, were

perceptual skills that supported his flying ability. He composes his images with precision in unedited photos – because they are framed so well, the photographs are not cropped.

Nick enlisted on August 1, 1940 in Manitou, Manitoba, Canada. One of his last photographs is a self-portrait in which he appears worried but determined; there is a sense of waiting. He was already in the military and was about to be sent overseas. *Nick in chair, 1941 before leaving for WWII.* </c> On the way to Shilo for training he stopped in Winnipeg, where his brother Milton lived. He left this note on the back of this photograph of a child. Apparently, he took some of his photographs with him – they must have been important to him. He left his civies (civilian clothes) and a bottle of gin:

Milton,
You never left the key so I had to break in. Anyway, I slept here. Will leave everything as I found it and will lock the doors again. The train leaves at 8 o'clock so will be gone when you get this.
I am leaving my civvies here and will pick them up later. Will also pick up the gin later. Expect to return from Shilo about the 18th of August.
If you want to write to me, address for your letters:
Trooper I. N. Yudell
"A" Squadron
Manitoba Mounted Rifles
Shilo, Manitoba

Nick

A Canadian War Hero

I uncovered Nick's final years from 1940 to 1943 through his RAF papers and Operations Records, often written in code. F.R. Chappell, an RAF intelligence officer, mentions Nick and his squadron leader, Ivan Cornelius Strutt ("Strutty"), in two books including in his book *Wellington Wings"*. Ivan Strutt's nephew provided me with Ivan's diaries written when he was at Cambridge University in England in 1936 and on the continent in 1938. Nick and Ivan were the same age, living in parallel worlds, brought together by the circumstances of the war. Ivan's diaries express alarm at the rise of fascism in Germany. By comparison, Nick's images offer a playful world in a perilous time. Nick and Ivan and their crew were drawn together by World War II, and each acted united to fight for freedom.

At Shilo, Manitoba, Nick went into the Canadian military training program to study operations

and from there he transferred to the British Commonwealth Air Training plan for servicemen in Brandon. Initially Canadian airmen were part of the RAF. and then became the RCAF in 1943. Nick was sent overseas by air from Halifax - a passage threatened by war planes. He was just one of many colonials sent to the hardest battles in the most difficult circumstances – from the perilous flight from Halifax at the easternmost port of Canada, to further training in Driffield in England, where he became a pilot of Squadron 104, a bomber unit, whose motto was "Strike Hard," -- its emblem a thunderbolt over eagle wings. His fellow crew members were from Britain, Australia and Canada. The squadron leader was Ivan Strutt, courageous and astute - Nick was the co-pilot and Warrant Officer. In addition to Ivan, Nick flew with Australian gunner Geoffrey O'Keefe and four other crewmen. Chapell describes them as a "gen" or genuine crew, a stalwart and brave squadron.

In the autumn of 1942 Nick and the crew deployed with RAF Squadron 104 to North Africa, where Allied troops were led by recently appointed Field Marshal Montgomery during the Battle of El Alamein. His squadron was initially stationed at Kabrit in Egypt and assigned Wellington II bombers, positioned close to the advancing German-Italian Panzer Army. RAF records show that Nick arrived at Kabrit in late October, towards the end of the prolonged second Battle of El Alamein (between October 23 and the November 2, 1942). Although the Allies succeeded in beating back Rommel's Axis forces at Tripoli, once the Battle of El Alamein had ended another major Allied offensive, Operation Torch, began to battle the Nazi takeover of the Mediterranean. Their mission was to disrupt the enemy's supply lines in the Mediterranean. German forces had begun to build up in Tunisia, unopposed by the local French forces from the collaborationist Vichy administration in France. By early January 1943, Tunisia became the new battleground of the Western Desert theater of war.

Squadron 104 was dispatched to Malta to oppose the Nazi advance. On January 6, 1943, Nick Yudell and Ivan Strutt flew their Vickers Wellington II from Malta to Tunisa to bomb Rommel's supply lines. On the return from their night mission, German flak ignited their bomber. Nick and Ivan Strutt ordered the crew out of the burning aircraft while flying over the Tunisian desert. The entire crew perished.

From the RAF Operations Record for Flight F for Freddie:

The RAF flight log recorded that Isadore Nicholas Yudell, Ivan Cornwallis Strutt, Geoffrey Aloise O'Keefe and four other crewmen disappeared after an air battle over Sousse, Tunisia at 5 pm. A large flash was seen in the sky. They were recorded as missing in action until 1946. Records state that the flight disappeared, but later show that Nick Yudell and Ivan Strutt were found and buried in the Tunisian desert, their bodies subsequently exhumed and moved to a mass grave for those fallen in World War II in a Christian cemetery in Sousse, Tunisia.

In *Wellington Wings*, F.R Chapell, RAF Intelligence Officer writes:

6th January, 1943. *This afternoon AHQ Malta refused permission for me as an IO to go on the operation to Sousse, although our new Wing Commander (Gibson) had readily agreed… Watching the take-off of the Wellingtons for operations against Tunis and Sousse, I reflected that I might have been on 'F for Freddie' with Squadron Leader Strutt, Tommy Lonsdale, (Nick Yudell) and the others. They are flare dropping tonight for other bombers at Sousse. After dinner at the Luqa Mess and an enjoyable time listening in, I heard that Tony Crockford was returning early and so waited for him to come in… We went back…on the bus together chatting cheerfully and little thought of what was happening at Sousse."*

January 7, *Squadron Leader Strutt, (Nick Yudell) and (the) crew are not back from last night's operation and I soon learned to my sorrow that a plane had been seen hit over Sousse. An explosion occurred at 7000 feet and then an aircraft with Very lights and small explosions from it was seen on the ground three to five miles SSW of the target area. Perhaps some of the crew got out – Sergeant O'Keefe might have done so as a rear gunner. It's a rotten blow for the squadron – they were a 'gen' crew – keen and competent. I spent the day cleaning up the office and working hard – just as well to do so on such a day. It is also a sobering thought that only a chance decision by AHQ prevented me in going in 'F for Freddie'–the second 'F for Freddie' lost in three weeks."* [ii]

On May 9, 1943, Sergeant David Monaghan, Nick's friend from Morden, wrote to Doc Rabinovitch:

Hello Doc,
How are you doing in this cruel world? …I heard about Nicky, that is tough luck, but there is still a good 50 percent of a chance that he is alive & well. The Middle East is known for airmen walking home.
By the way, how is your wife getting along. Say hello to her and Milton will you. Things are not too bad here. You wouldn't like it - no Pepsi Cola.
So long - for now,
David Monaghan, Seargent

Within six months he, too, had perished

On July 19, 1943, A.S. O'Keefe, the father of Australian gunner Sergeant Geoffrey O'Keefe who served with Nick on Flight F for Freddie, wrote to the Secretary of the RAF Casualty Section. He sought hope that his son was alive:

"I regret to note from your letter re my son Geoffrey A. O'Keefe that you have abandoned

hope of his being alive.
... a letter has been received from Major Strutt, the father of the Captain of the bomber, whose body was one of those found. He expresses the opinion that his son ordered the others to bail out, while he and another (Nick Yudell) tried to land the machine.
Under the circumstances although I have received no further news of my son other than the above, I am loath to abandon all hope of his still being found alive. I have heard that the aircraft was burnt. Is this correct? Yours faithfully,
A.S. O'Keefe

Nick Yudell was awarded the 1939-45 Star, Africa Star & Bar, Defence Medal, Canadian Volunteer Service Medal and Clasp, and War Medal 1939-45. He was posthumously awarded RCAF Operational Wings in 1946 in recognition of gallant service in action against the enemy. The Malta Memorial, the Morden Cenotaph, Canada's Book of Remembrance, and Yudell Lake in northern Manitoba bear his name.

Nick Yudell left us a prism of his life through these images. They glow with life as it was then, unvarnished by nostalgia or anachronism. His life, work, intelligence, and heroism are of one fabric. His photographs show how wide and complex one person's life is. These images of individuals during the Dirty Thirties recall a time where relationship and human exchange was not defined by money but by the community and kinship. This principle arose in many cultures, from the Judeo-Christian covenant whereby each relationship reflects the connection with the sacred, to Buddhist compassion that embodies an energetic connection between beings. Finding connections between Nick's images, we uncover how his life unfolded in time, how he confronted himself, and how his photographs express love, loss, curiosity, and power. Looking at his work seems as if we are looking into the Aleph, the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet – that has no sound but that exhales the breath that forms all – that contains the world and its images. Nick's breath and his world is in these photographs.

[I] References and original sources for this article are listed in the Timeline that is appended to the article, in the footnotes to the timeline, and in the Bibliography of works consulted. I reconstructed Nick's biography through the dates and identifications of the negatives, which I restored, and then contextualized this information into the oral histories I took from Milton Rabinovitch, David Rabinovitch, Arnold Yudell, Anita Kirson, Valley Jean Berman, and from Ron Laverty, Lenore Laverty, Mel Reimer, and Maurice Butler in Morden Manitoba.
Additional information came through RAF records sent to me by Paul Strutt, the nephew of Ivan Strutt, and from Ivan Strutt's diaries of 1936 and 1938.

I found both Nick Yudell and Ivan Strutt in the two books listed below.
The University of Winnipeg provided me with photographic materials from its Western Regional Archives.
The Lost Expressionist: Nick Yudell, a Photographer Discovered was a major exhibition I curated and co-produced with the Manitoba Museum February 3, 2022 – January 6, 2023. www.lostexpressionist.com
The website provides more information and photos as an adjunct to this article and the exhibition. There is also an Instagram account with archival movies that I edited and set to music. @lostexpressionist

[ii] RAF PILOTS in MALTA and TUNISIA - Ivan Strutt, Nick's squadron leader in RAF 104, died with him in their fatal flight over Tunisia. These diary excerpts are from F. R. Chappell's, Wellington Wings: An RAF Intelligence Officer in the Western Desert, *1980,* and F.R. Chappell's Bomber Commander: A Biography of Wing Commander Donald Teale Saville, DSO, DFC, *1988*. Portrait of Ivan Strutt courtesy of Paul Strutt, nephew of Ivan Strutt, United Kingdom.