

FAR BELOW AND FAR AWAY

Curator Denise Ryner responds to a photo from the archives



The audience frames the photographer's shot just as they once framed the unnamed parade route. Their relaxed, observational postures are mismatched with the abandoned litter and debris after a possible moment of recklessness minutes before. I imagine the photographer awkwardly leaning out from a similar crowd above, alternating between bouts of celebratory fervour and calm order.

Instability is also echoed in the contrast between the overhead shot and the graphic strips of the lane markers and lines of dots formed by the soldiers' white hats. Even the shadows of floral decorations seem intent on imprinting lightness on the marchers' attempt to create an atmosphere of civic responsibility and import.

The overhead perspective scales the marchers and onlookers down, reducing our susceptibility to the authority of the soldiers and the rifles resting easily across their shoulders. The distanced perspective also softens the connection to the histories and

ideologies—whether read as heroic or oppressive—that such soldiers and displays were part of, across Canada and globally. Who is missing from these celebrations—who and what is unseen?

In the year Major James Skitt Matthews took this photo, my parents' home island in the Caribbean was negotiating its independence from the British Empire. Did such a relaxed and celebratory atmosphere greet these processions there?

The marching soldiers and parade-goers convey a visual grammar of the nation state and the military heritage of the British Empire in a post-war era. But outside the frame, it was also a moment when decolonial and independence movements were gaining momentum around the world.

Denise Ryner is Director/Curator of the Or Gallery, Vancouver.

Major James Skitt Matthews, *Bird's-eye view of soldiers in a parade*, 1958, silver gelatin print, 7.5" × 9.4", City of Vancouver Archives