Feature Essay

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Madden, David REDISCOVERING CIVIL WAR CLASSICS: THROUGH THE EYES OF CIVIL WAR PHOTOGRAPHERS.

Up front: I am on a crusade, now in its tenth year, to bombard the ramparts of the Professional Civil War Historians Establishment to win proper recognition of photographers, artists, and mapmakers.

Later columns will deal with artists and mapmakers. The focus of this column is photographers.

First, let us now rediscover and praise a few individual photographers. This is also yet another opportunity to praise the late Hayward Cirker for his heroic Dover reprint publications of the work of four key Civil War photographers.

In his introduction to the 1959 Dover Publications reprint, E. F. Bleiler staked out a claim for Alexander Gardner's Photographic Sketchbook of the Civil War, published in Washington, D. C. in 1866, as the first published collection of Civil War photographs. I first saw this collection in Abraham Lincoln's house in Springfield, Illinois during the bi-centennial year, 1976. It was one inspiration of my Civil War novel, Sharpshooter, started a decade later. Gardner does not inform us that the image that became so famous that it may be seen enormously enlarged at the scene--the Rebel sharpshooter dead in Devil's Den, Gettysburg--was taken by Timothy O'Sullivan. It haunts my novel. To see what Gardner saw, look at two images in particular: In the most impressive battlefield image of President Lincoln, we see him towering over General McClellan, little Napoleon, and a gathering of officers of varying height at Antietam. Another image shows the little U. S. Arsenal town of Harper's Ferry, where John Brown made his last stand; it is one of the most exotic villages on earth.

As an enhancement to Gardner's own book, I also recommend the recent Witness to An Era: The Life and Photographs of Alexander Gardner by D. Mark Katz.
In 1977, Cirker reprinted George N. Barnard's *Photographic Views of Sherman's Campaign*, also first published, privately, in 1866. In his preface, Beaumont Newhall, one of the great photography historians, called the book a landmark of the history of photography. I imagine he would have said the same about Gardner's book.

Barnard's views seem as if they are seen by an omniscient eye, as in a panoramic series of my own hometown Knoxville from the cupola of my Alma Mater (not included in the book). Seen first by a man, Barnard, the views of *The Destruction of Hood's Ordnance Train* (plate 44) and *Rebel Works in Front of Atlanta, Ga.*, no. 1 (plate 39) become omniscient views such as men in war never saw, not even mindful of the photograph's contemplative aspect—generals. This effect is ruined by severe cropping in most books.

In 1974, Cirker reprinted Roy Meredith's revised 1946 *Mr. Lincoln's Camera Man: Mathew B. Brady*, a distinctive feature of which is Brady's Lantern Slide Lecture Book, consisting of his notes and of his choice of 135 photographs that he claimed him and his operatives took during the war. He died before he could give that lecture. Taking on the role of Brady, I have given his lecture myself, with slides, twice and intend to repeat the performance at every opportunity.

One of the photographs Brady seems to claim is a Barnard-like view. The feeling of omniscient detachment, perspective is very keen in a view of the garrison at Johnsonville, just as Thomas is pulling a federal battery out of there to go up against Hood at Nashville. It is shot from such an odd height, suggesting no man-made structure for tripod support, that I feel an omniscient eye gazes upon these men and caissons as they stand on wet surfaces, and General Forrest's entire career rushes in to my mind's eye, for he assaulted this place like a natural force a month before this evacuation. Unable to imagine a human eye looking through a lens to produce this view, I feel a shiver, as if an All-Seeing Eye is looking over my shoulder.

One of the most moving photographs of a Civil War general is the one of General Robert E. Lee, standing in the rear of his house in April after the surrender, his hat in his hand, looking into Brady's hooded eyes.

In 1982, Cirker, rediscoverer and reprinter of Civil War photographs, published a fresh collection, *Russell's Civil War Photographs: 116 Historic*
**Prints by Andrew J. Russell**, with a preface by Joe Buberger and Matthew Isenberg, who had purchased an album found in an old chest. Brady had published several Russell photographs as his own, some cropped, but others were seen for the first time, uncropped, in their original form. The views of the Richmond ruins may remind some viewers of Dresden or Berlin.

All four of Cirker's Dover Publications are in print.

Not in print is James D. Horan's *Timothy O'Sullivan: America's Forgotten Photographer* (1966), the first rediscovery of the work of another major Civil War photographer; he later took some of the most powerful images of the frontiers of the west. His photograph of three Confederate prisoners has often been misused; for instance, they are sometimes offered as stalwart examples of fierce Southern manhood, determined to fight to the death. Among my favorites, are the three views, probably shot from Massaponax church belfry, of Grant: he is seated on a church bench outside among officers, then moves behind Meade to look at a map, then sits again. One of the most powerful semi-posed portraits of the war shows Alfred Waud sitting on a rock, sketching, probably a Devil's Den scene. Horan cropped it, however. Comparison of an execution by hanging with the same shot in Katz's book about Gardner, cited above, suggests that the one in Horan is cropped; comparison of the dead rebel sharpshooter in Devil's Den in Horan with Gardner's clearly shows that one of the most famous photographs of the war has been insensitively cropped. Set aside for the moment the fact that Gardner and O'Sullivan, perhaps with the aid of Alfred Waud, posed this shot by moving the body, which is seen in other photographs in a different place and posture nearby.

Also not in print is one of the earliest and best of the pictorial histories of the war, *Divided We Fought* (1956: New York, The Macmillan Company), with text by the General Editor, David Donald, a now famous historian and biographer. The names of the picture editors, Hirst D. Milhollen and Milton Kaplan, and the caption editors, Milhollen, Kaplan, and Hulen Stuart appear prominently on the title page; as is typical, picture credits are not given with each photograph but are relegated to the back. Not much has changed in that regard in the half century since. Unfortunately, this book has many of the faults I will cite below, but I know of few books that do not.

I hope to see, someday, the publication of a collection of a hundred great photographs, with only the name, subject, place, and date, and an introduction
about the works as documentary art. The photos I cite above are among my choices of the greatest and I would be glad to see them in the environment of such a collection.

A general observation before returning to my crusade theme. Because the North's industrial capacity was far greater than the South's for waging war, there was an ever-increasing scarcity of photographic materials. Thus, no book can illustrate the Civil War in a balanced way. Beginning with titles, most books are less histories of the Civil War than of the North's battle with the South. There is no good reason why Civil War histories should not be read and looked at in that light--and in that light, many are magnificent--James McPherson's illustrated edition of *The Battle Cry Of Freedom*, discussed in my previous column, for instance. I am glad to stress the fact that he seems to have made a deliberate effort to balance the number of Southern and Northern images, especially during that time late in the war when the South was far less able to produce them.

A glaring indication of the problem is that some of the best pictorials cite no photographers' names at all, but cite, at the end, only the sources of the prints used. When a photograph is stretched over the gully between two pages, distortion is always the effect. Photographs are often treated as mere decoration, or for other purely utilitarian purposes. Cropping is a major abuse committed against artists and photographers. There are many instances of the pernicious use of a photograph taken in one place to give an impression of an event in another.

The naming of photographers is sometimes erratic. The most diligent and dedicated research may never discover the names of some of the photographers whose work appears in great number; but it may be possible to dig deep enough to discover many of them. In many books, we are told that this is the famous photograph of Lincoln and McClellan in a tent, but not the name of its creator, Alexander Gardner, one of the most famous photographers. The scholar's task is complicated by the fact that this and other photographs are often erroneously attributed to Mathew Brady. But such confusion is as much a part of history as the confusion in battles that historians devote much time to clarifying. Ironically, the historian asks the reader to see the battle of Gettysburg, for instance, through his or her eyes—a battle seen in the immediate aftermath by the photographer whose vision embellishes the historian's vision. When research leaves no other alternative, when no name is found, the phrase photographer unknown or photographer apparently unknown should be used. If a photographer seems to be unknown, dedicated and diligent research may discover a name.
My contention is that no history is complete without basic, in-text documentation of every photograph, map, drawing, and painting; and an ongoing account of the active role played by named mapmakers, artists, and photographers. I know of no historian writing a history of the war in general—as opposed to a few who have written a history of art and photography in the war—who has made a conscientious effort to research the names of artists and photographers and the names of the people in the photographs for the purpose of including them as a declared major, integral part of the history of the Civil War. The direct involvement in the war of Mathew Brady, Alexander Gardner, George N. Barnard, Timothy O'Sullivan, Andrew J. Russell, and Andrew Lytle was quite often not only colorful but meaningful.

Given my effort over the past decade to exhort historians to give credit for pictorial documents with the same scrupulosity with which they give credit to other historians and for written documents, my lament is not for lack of scholarly thoroughness but for lack of a corrective declaration and demonstration to the general reader of the vital role artists and photographers played during the war and the woefully unacknowledged service their work has performed. Their works are simultaneously records of fact as documents and inspirations in the sense that the impact of these images has played a major part in arousing and sustaining the public’s interest in the war and in moving many historians to write about it in the first place, as they themselves have sometimes testified.

Given the evidence in those Civil War histories, including many that are primarily pictorials, and even some books on individual photographers and artists, professional historians have not yet set high standards for the use of illustrations. At present then, we should not reproach historians for failing, overall or in part, to meet an as-yet undeclared standard. But we should indeed challenge them to set that standard as one all others can agree to adopt at the very next meeting of the Society of Civil War Historians.

The so-called Brady photographs are at the heart of the vortex of confusion now almost 150 years old over the question of attribution. He claimed photographs he did not himself take, not only those taken by his operatives, but also photographs taken by Russell and others who were not associated with him. Some historians have followed Brady and have added to the problem by
misidentifying him as the photographer of pictures others took. Meredith made mistakes, some of which James D. Horan quietly corrected in his 1955 book, *Mathew Brady: Historian with a Camera*. In 1997, Mary Panzer's *Mathew Brady and the Image of History* (Smithsonian Press) provided us with one of the most reliable sources for dealing with the Brady problem. Three years later, a very popular book on Brady by the late, myriad minded historian, Webb Garrison, *Brady's Civil War*, agitated the vortex all over again. It is a casebook for many of the misuses and abuses I note in this column. I trust Garrison, who only wrote the brief text, mostly captions. I recommended him for this project, which proved to be his last.

Again, these transgressions are not violations of a universally agreed upon prerequisite for writing a quality history of the war, failure to meet a standard that has not yet been set by the profession or demanded by the American reader, but we can justly expect historians in future printings and in new works to correct omissions where the names are known or may be discovered. Many books are important enough to deserve an ongoing reaching for perfection. Historians of the future will, one hopes, weave into the main text throughout a narrative and description of the crucial role of artists and photographers. Space routinely given over to the mere naming of many officers in a given battle could be devoted instead, or as well, to artists and photographers. Ironically, credit is given to the archive from which the photograph was secured but not to the photographer. Archives should demand that credit to the photographer be given. Campaign to give these men frontline status is long overdue.

The more direct importance we give to making the photographer who aimed his camera seem as real as we try to make the soldier or officer who aimed his rifle the more we are moved to imagine how the battle looked to the photographer as he waited for the smoke to clear so his lens and his plate could capture it in the long exposure. When we look at a photograph we do well to imagine the photographer's total act of seeing--the cruel radiance of what is--not just the one he developed in his hooded wagon. All Civil War photographs are documents, yes, but as we approach the sesqui-centennial our perceptions of them should rise to that level of art where respect must be paid. We should not only see, but imagine, the photographs, we should stare at, gaze into, meditate on photographs, until the images are made as much in your brain pan as in the original developing solutions, that painstaking process.
David Madden is founding director of the United States Civil War Center and founder of the Civil War Book Review. He is the author of the Civil War novel Sharpshooter and co-editor of Classics of Civil War Fiction and of a series of the same name with the University of Alabama Press. Among his forthcoming books are Thomas Wolfe's Civil War and Touching the Web of Southern Novelists, which contains several essays on the Civil War. He has written the introduction to the forthcoming reprint of the classic work Loss of the Sultana and Reminiscences of the Survivors. Recently, he interrupted work on a novel, London Bridge Is Falling Down to write a novella, Abducted By Circumstance.