

Lens of War: Exploring Iconic Photographs of the Civil War

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Recommended Citation

Jordan, Brian Matthew (2016) "Lens of War: Exploring Iconic Photographs of the Civil War," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 18 : Iss. 1 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.18.1.15

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol18/iss1/14>

Review

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Winter 2016

Gallman, J. Matthew and Gallagher, Gary W.. *Lens of War: Exploring Iconic Photographs of the Civil War*. University of Georgia Press, \$32.95 ISBN 9780820348100

Insightful Meditations on Civil War Photographs

This volume is the result of “a deceptively simple invitation” issued by J. Matthew Gallman and Gary W. Gallagher to twenty-five fellow Civil War historians: “select one photograph taken during the Civil War and write about it” (2). The book reproduces the images—many familiar, others less well known—alongside the contributors’ sprite reflections. The photographs fall into at least one of five categories—leaders, soldiers, civilians, victims, and places. Not surprisingly, many contributors decide on photographs that illustrate their line of research—Jane Schultz, for instance, contemplates a photograph of the Union nurse Annie Etheridge Hooks, Daniel Sutherland reflects on Champ Ferguson, and Joan Waugh takes on Grant—but others embrace the opportunity to write about a person, place, or event removed from their existing body of scholarship.

While the labor intensive wet plate process ensured that no Civil War photograph was truly candid, many of the essayists are. Indulging in autobiography, some adopt an almost confessional tone, recalling early childhood days spent thumbing through *The American Heritage Picture History of the Civil War* or *The Golden Book of the Civil War*. But the approaches are as varied as the photographs themselves. Carol Reardon takes a more traditional tack in her striking essay that takes Alexander Gardner’s haunting photograph, “A Burial Party at Cold Harbor,” as a point of departure. Turning to original research in widow’s pension applications, a source underutilized by historians, she demonstrates how the war continued for the families of the slain—suggesting the deceitful finality conveyed both by the photo and reconciliatory speeches that followed. Susan Eva O’Donovan reads the subtleties

of Timothy O’Sullivan’s famous 1862 image of African Americans negotiating the Rappahannock, positioning the photo in the larger historiography of emancipation. Judith Giesberg asks important questions about how Civil War civilians “saw” those unsettling woodcut illustrations of skeletal prisoners of war—and then juxtaposes those findings with the way recent Americans viewed photographs from Abu Ghraib. James I. Robertson, Jr., offers a moving elegy for the war’s equine casualties, while Emory Thomas does the same for the Virginia infantryman Cary Robinson. Stephen Cushman ponders photojournalistic ethics in his piece on the “Harvest of Death.”

It is not the aim of this book to make a sustained argument or historiographic intervention. And yet the contributors *do* uncover the extent to which photographs have variously preoccupied, inspired, and even challenged us as historians—and the degree to which they have informed our interpretations. Too, they reveal that photographs so often capture for us the war’s inherent contradictions. Ethan S. Rafuse perceives in a photograph of Robert E. Lee in Petersburg “a man who, though unable to hide the toll” of war, “keenly understood that he still had much to fight for” (23). Aaron Sheehan-Dean meditates on Union soldiers, “at once humanized by their humble pose and dehumanized because we do not see their faces” in the famous photograph James Gibson captured on the Peninsula. “This,” Sheehan-Dean writes, “was a tension that every enlisted man struggled against in the war” (72). And Thavolia Glymph discerns in Thomas Bankes’ 1863 photograph of a refugee camp in Helena, Arkansas, “a place of despair and death *and* a site of refuge and hope and the making of freedom” (139).

As the editors point out in their suggested readings list, those in search of “a broader theoretical perspective” or the “technical details” of Civil War photography will be better served elsewhere (246). But Civil War aficionados looking for personal and sometimes poignant reflections on the war’s participants and their legacies will want this book on their coffee tables.

Brian Matthew Jordan is Assistant Professor of History at Sam Houston State University. The author of Marching Home: Union Veterans and Their Unending Civil War (2015) and more than forty reviews, articles, and essays, he is at work on a life of Benjamin Butler.