

### Cwbr Author Interview: Compelling Images Enhance Narrative Histories: Interview With William C. Davis

Colleen H. Fava

Leah Wood Jewett

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

---

#### Recommended Citation

Fava, Colleen H. and Jewett, Leah Wood (2003) "Cwbr Author Interview: Compelling Images Enhance Narrative Histories: Interview With William C. Davis," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 . Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol5/iss1/8>

## Interview

### CWBR AUTHOR INTERVIEW: COMPELLING IMAGES ENHANCE NARRATIVE HISTORIES: INTERVIEW WITH WILLIAM C. DAVIS

Fava, Colleen H.  
Jewett, Leah Wood

Winter 2003

*William C. Davis is the author or editor of more than 40 books on the Civil War and Southern history, as well as numerous documentary screenplays. He has served as historical consultant on various television and film productions. Davis has twice been nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in history and is currently professor of history at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. His most recent book, **The Civil War in Photographs** (Carlton 2002), served as the platform for this interview.*

***Civil War Book Review (CWBR): In your introduction to **The Civil War in Photographs**, you discuss the coming of age of photography in the midst of the Civil War. How did the war foster the development of photojournalism?***

**William Davis (WD):** We need to distinguish clearly between the impact of the war on photography which was considerable and its impact on photojournalism, a term that did not yet exist. The war, of course, was something of a bonanza for some photographers, though not in the way many people might think. Mathew Brady and his studio did not make much from war photography, and neither did others like Timothy O'Sullivan, Alexander Gardner, and more. The Southern artists like Jay Edwards and George Cook made even less, of course. The demand for war scenes proved to be disappointing, perhaps because the idea was too new and the buying public was not accustomed to purchasing items that had not yet evolved to a place in the American consumer's world. The real money in photography was not in battlefield scenes but in soldier portraits, the ubiquitous cartes-de-visite that were produced in the hundreds of thousands, and to the extent that wide-scale experience at photography resulted from the war, it was in the portraits that most artists gained growing expertise, and financial reward.

Photojournalism is another matter. It did not exist, nor did illustrated journalism in general, other than in the so-called illustrated newspapers of the day, *Harper's Weekly*, *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, and the *New York Illustrated News* in the North, and, briefly, the *Southern Illustrated News* of Richmond. Perhaps journalism itself needs definition here, because of course there were several monthly illustrated journals at the time, but they were hardly timely enough to meet our understanding of journalism today. As for the aforementioned weeklies, they were real journalism, but the illustrations were pretty hastily done woodcuts. During the course of the war, many of their illustrations of camp scenes and generals would actually be based on photographs, but these provided no more news content than did the sketches done on the spot by the artists who traveled with the armies on behalf of the weeklies. In short, so far as photojournalism was concerned, photography really provided nothing that readers at home were not getting, or could not get, already by other means. Thus, the impact of Civil War photography on the future of photojournalism as a craft and industry was, in my estimation anyhow, negligible.

***CWBR: How did photography including images of the living and the dead, and the political and military leaders on both sides affect public opinion?***

**WD:** Because photography again here we are really talking about the scenes that showed the face of war rather than the 99% of war photographs that were just soldier portraits did not really have a big impact on the Northern home front, and none at all in the South, I would say that it had little or no impact on public opinion. What the public for the most part did not see could hardly influence them. The one exception would be in the political arena, perhaps, in which photo portraits of candidates, chiefly Lincoln and Douglas in 1860 and Lincoln and McClellan in 1864, were mass-produced and widely circulated. Did seeing a photo of a candidate influence a voter? I've seen no direct evidence that it did, but since it was all part of public awareness, as it is today, I think we have to take it on faith that it did.

But the photos of the dead in the Bloody Lane at Antietam simply did not reach a wide enough audience to have much impact in areas such as war-weariness, and again in the Confederacy there was no circulation of scenes at all other than several dozen early camp scenes taken by Edwards, and those hardly got out of the orbit of New Orleans.

***CWBR: It has been said that some photographers physically arranged dead bodies for maximum emotional impact. Did photographers such as Mathew Brady, Alexander Gardner, and Timothy O'Sullivan actively engage in taking photographs for the purpose of propaganda?***

**WD:** Most of the artists who took war views did some posing of props and even bodies. Certainly at Devil's Den at Gettysburg, the Brady operatives and others rearranged a few Rebel corpses. Then there was a lot of posing of live soldiers as if they were dead. However, to call these propaganda would be going too far, I think, especially as it conjures our modern imagery of propaganda. There is no evidence that the photographers were trying to make a point or exaggerate the horrors of war to influence people back home. They were just artists trying to make a better picture. The photos of the Andersonville survivors, which of course appeared only after the surrender, could qualify as real propaganda, but they were powerful, and still are.

***CWBR: Much of what we know and feel about the Civil War comes from photographs. In comparison to primary text sources, how important is photography to our current understanding and interpretation of the war? What can photographs tell us that narrative cannot?***

**WD:** Most of what the photographs can tell us that texts cannot is the ambience of the war, and especially of the ordinary soldier's daily camp life. Keep in mind that photos were still rarely candid in our acceptance of the meaning. Most were in some degree posed, and there are significant aspects even of soldier life that were not captured by the lens. They illustrate, rather than supplant, the narrative texts upon which in the end we still mainly have to rely. It would remain for wars of another later century for the photographer, especially the motion picture cameraman, to really capture the full and unvarnished look of warfare. ***CWBR: Photographs of dead soldiers and veterans with empty sleeves proliferated during and immediately after the war. Do you think that these images hindered reconciliation between North and South? Can the availability of photographs help explain the nationwide phenomenon of memorialization that blossomed after the war and continues today?***

**WD:** In a word, no. The empty sleeve photos were too much confined to the immediate families of the amputees. The so-called bloody shirt of the Radical Republicans, used so effectively in maintaining political power, was only

metaphorical. In fact, they made little use at all of war photography. But then, until well after the turn of the century they did not need the photos, because they could parade around the actual maimed veterans themselves. ***CWBR: Many books of Civil War era photographs have been published in the past. What makes The Civil War in Photographs different?***

**WD:** **The Civil War in Photographs**, if it is different from other similar works, is so only to the extent of the previously unpublished images it presents, especially of common soldiers. Otherwise, I am not sure that any of the photographic works since the very first over a century ago have been truly different from each other. Rather, they are all variations on a compelling theme.

***CWBR: A prolific writer and scholar, you have worked on numerous Civil War-related projects, from scholarly books to film documentaries. How does the story change when you move from a text-focused to an image-focused medium? Do you find that each suits a particular audience, i.e., academic versus popular, better than the other?***

**WD:** The shift from text to image, as you suggest, is certainly reflected in the audience reached, especially as we become more and more a visually stimulated and informed culture. It was photographs that originally got me interested in the Civil War as a child, and they are still, I think, a wonderful window for introducing neophytes, who may then find their interest sparked to proceed from the image to the depth that only narrative text can provide. Also text can be all encompassing, whereas with images one is severely restricted by what the photographers found interesting and where they worked. Whole areas of the Civil War experience simply cannot be illustrated by contemporary photos, because none were taken. ***CWBR: Since the Civil War, photography has become the expected witness of human conflict. With the click of a button, modern audiences can immediately retrieve photographs of the latest act of war around the globe. Is this the legacy of Civil War photography?***

**WD:** Again, while the impulse of a journalist would be to say yes, Civil War photography created our perception of photography as war's witness, the historian would have to say no, I think. Civil War photography, in the end, did not really bring that war to people of its own time nearly as much or as effectively as it has brought that war to later generations, starting around 1900, through development of the half-tone printing process. And even by World War I Americans were still not really getting their war impressions as much from

images as from word journalism. It is only the moving picture that pushed text aside in our expectations. If Civil War photography has a role in the creation of war photojournalism at all, it is probably in the technological push that came from the war, and in the reputations established for men like Gardner and O'Sullivan, who were thus able to keep photography alive as something more than a hobby or small-time profession though it barely supported them until the newsreel could capture real life in real time, and the explosion of the motion picture industry, followed by television, made voyeurs of us all.