

BOOK REVIEW

'Mathew Brady' by Robert Wilson

By Glenn Altschuler / Globe Correspondent / August 9, 2013

Despite the severe economic downturn following the Panic of 1837, the photography business in the United States grew at a brisk pace in the 1840s and '50s. Only two sorts of people were thriving, a newspaperman wrote in 1843, "the beggars and the takers of likenesses by daguerreotype." In 1853 the New York Tribune guessed that at least 3 million photographs had been taken throughout the country that the 1860 United States Census counted 3,154 professional photographers in the nation.

MATHEW BRADY: PORTRAITS OF A NATION

Author: Robert Wilson

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One of the most prominent was Mathew Brady. As a young man, Brady had set an ambitious goal: His gallery at 205 Broadway, in Manhattan, a block away from P. T. Barnum's American Museum, would contain "life-portraits of every distinguished American now living." He had come close, with a project called *The Galleries of Illustrious Americans*, which in 1850 offered the general public a new portrait every other week on "improved drawing paper" for a dollar apiece, including two presidents, Zachary Taylor and Millard Fillmore; US seigniors John C. Calhoun, Henry Clay, and Daniel Webster; generals John C. Fremont and Winfield Scott; naturalist J. Audubon; historian William Prescott; and New York Governor Silas Wright.

Brady's greatest claims to fame, of course, were his photographs of Abraham Lincoln and the Civil War battles. The pictures he and his team took at the First Battle of Bull Run, Antietam, Fredericksburg, and Petersburg. Their most dramatic impact, Robert Wilson suggests, in his elegant and informative biography of Brady, was probably not felt until the war was over. The images, including the careless treatment of the dead, "Wilson writes, marked a turning point in the portrayal of war. The grand heroic paintings of the past were again taken as seriously as realistic depictions of war's appalling consequences.

In "Mathew Brady," Wilson, the editor of *The American Scholar* and the biographer of Clarence King, acknowledges that we don't know how Brady was born; how, if at all, he was educated; much of anything about his married life; and which, of the thousands of photographs he took to his studio, he took. Nonetheless, he demonstrates that Brady was the most important photographer in 19th-century America, establishing photography as things of value, contributing to the culture of celebrity, arguing for photography as an art form, and creating a stunning archive.

Along the way, Wilson manages to capture elements of Brady's character and temperament and the tenor of his times. A photograph of Brady at Bull Run (the first time anyone took pictures under fire), dressed in a white linen duster, straw hat, white shirt and tie, with a watch fob to his belt, Wilson indicates, suggests that he thought the Rebels would be routed and the Union Army settled in at Richmond, the Confederate capital, in a day or two.

Unlike his colleagues, who rearranged bodies following battles and jumped at the chance to photograph the execution of David Herold, Powell, George Atzerodt, and Mary Surratt, who had been convicted for conspiring to kill President Lincoln, Brady, Wilson speculates, was really drawn to the drama of slaughter. His interests "were generally more commemorative or documentary than journalistic."

Wilson reviews, in painful detail, Brady's chaotic last years, his use of "spirited liquors," declaration of bankruptcy, and his decision to take thousands of negatives, some of which were mishandled, lost, or thrown away. Unable to speak because of a swelling in his throat, Brady died in Manhattan in 1896, from an inflammation of the kidneys. A friend who was with him reported that Brady had not realized he was dying. His body was embalmed and shipped to Washington, where he was buried next to his wife at Congressional Cemetery, near Capitol Hill. As Wilson tells us, no one offered to pay for a headstone because when it appeared, the date of death was wrong.

Many Brady images will never be accurately dated and attributed. But, Wilson concludes, the still extant corpus of his work ensures that the act of creating a portrait of the nation succeeded far better than even he could have hoped."

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Book Review|How Soon It May Be Too Late. <https://nyti.ms/14DQxgi>. Advertisement.Â The tale is retold by Robert Wilson, the editor of The American Scholar, in "Mathew Brady," his patient and painstaking new biography of the portraitist and Civil War photographer. Brady wasn't one to overlook a sales tool. "You cannot tell how soon it may be too late," he warned in an 1856 ad that ran in The New York Daily Tribune, advising readers to come sit for a portrait while they still could.Â There are exceptions: Brady's portrait of a very young Henry James posing with his father is a beauty, as is his portrait of Robert E. Lee standing beside his back porch after Appomattox. But too often Brady's subjects have portentous, glassy expressions and stand in stylized, impersonal postures.