

MATHEW B. BRADY: PIONEER WAR PHOTOGRAPHER

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INTRODUCTION

Probably the first person to use photography as a journalistic approach to "cover" a war was Roger Fenton. In 1855, he became perhaps the first combat photographer, when he equipped a wagon with cameras, lenses, glass plates, chemicals, a stove, and a portable darkroom and photographed the Crimean War. He returned with more than three hundred negatives of French and British soldiers at campsites at Balaklava Bay.¹

But Fenton's achievement was overshadowed a few years later by an American photographer, Mathew B. Brady, whose coverage of the Civil War has been called "one of the greatest achievements in the annals of photography."²

James D. Horan, in Mathew Brady, Historian with a Camera, points out that no great photographer has ever impressed his personality on a nation more strongly than Mathew B. Brady. "Perhaps this is partly because no other photographer has more completely absorbed the spirit of his times, so that mid-nineteenth century America and the American Civil War are linked with his name. Mathew B. Brady, who used his camera to record his country's

¹John B. Whiting, Photography is a Language (Chicago: Ziff Davis Publishing Co., 1946), p. 13.

²Robert B. Rhode and Floyd H. McCall, Press Photography Reporting with a Camera (New York: MacMillian Co., 1961), p. 15.

history, produced the greatest pictorial essay of our times.³

In The Press and America, Edwin Emery noted:

The most notable contribution to pictorial journalism in the 1860's was the photograph. Pioneer war photographer was a lovable Irishman, Mathew Brady.

True, his photographs could not be used in the newspapers of the time, since a practical method for transferring light and shade in the printing process was not perfected for another decade. But Brady was famous for his war pictures, and his photographic record of the conflict comes down to us as one of the finest examples of reporting . . .

These pictures give us an entirely different impression than the usual report of people and events. Although Brady's equipment was inferior to the simplest box cameras of three generations later, he produced amazing pictures.

Some of them were the equal of any produced in World War II, although he could not stop fast action. Despite the limitations of his equipment, somehow he was able to capture through his lens the hysteria, horror, and occasional glory of war.⁴

Beaumont Newhall, in American Photography, 1839-1900, wrote that the War Between the States gave Brady his greatest opportunity to record history with the camera. Brady went to the front, organized teams of combat photographers, and produced the remarkable collection of several thousand "Photographic Views of the War." Newhall said that "taken as a whole, the photographic documentation is a landmark . . . the impact of these stark images which as Brady stated, 'present grim-visaged war exactly as it appears' has seldom been excelled even today."⁵

³James D. Horan, Mathew Brady, Historian with a Camera, (New York: Crown Publisher, Inc., 1955), p. xiii.

⁴Edwin Emery, The Press and America, an Interpretative History of Journalism, (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962), pp. 304-305.

⁵Beaumont Newhall, ed. American Photography, 1839-1900, (Washington: Library of Congress, 1957), p. 1.

There seems to be little doubt that the pioneer accomplishments of Mathew Brady had a tremendous influence in pictorial journalism. Perhaps Brady's contributions can best be summed up by Arthur Rothstein as he comments in his book, Photojournalism:

These photographs, now in the National Archives and the Library of Congress, have influenced war photographers ever since.

Here, for the first time, the special quality of photography which is so important to the photojournalist became evident: the strong sense of realism and truth, the participation with the photographer in presence at the scene and as a witness to the event.⁶

⁶Arthur Rothstein, Photojournalism, Pictures for Magazines and Newspapers. (New York: American Photographic Book Publishing Co., Inc., 1965), p. 7.