

Review

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Richard S. Lowry. *The Photographer and the President: Abraham Lincoln, Alexander Gardner, and the Images That Made a Presidency*. New York: Rizzoli Ex Libris, 2015. Pp. 242.

In 1856 a 35-year-old Alexander Gardner journeyed from his native Scotland to New York City. The unemployed photographer hoped to land a position with Mathew Brady, the nation's preeminent photographer. Gardner arrived with modest technical skill and substantial business acumen. Before long, the burly Scot was an invaluable part of Brady's emerging photographic empire, eventually taking on the job of running the day-to-day business in Brady's thriving Washington, D.C., studio. Photography—as art, as technology, and as business enterprise—was in its infancy and in rapid flux. New technology allowed for the cheap production of small photographic portraits for everyday Americans and the mass production and sale of similar images of national celebrities. Other developments allowed energetic photographers to go into the field and make photographic images of outdoor scenes.

And then, to borrow from Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, the war came. Although photographers had produced some images in Crimea, the Civil War was in most senses the first photographed war. The new medium shaped how Americans understood and remembered the war in myriad ways. The most humble recruit could now have his portrait made, with multiple small images—known as cartes de visite—that he could give to family and friends before he marched off to war. Enthusiastic patriots could purchase similar-sized images of generals and political leaders, placing them in photograph albums (another innovation) alongside pictures of their own loved ones. Scores of photographers went to battlefields to capture the carnage created by this terrible war, and civilians far from the front (especially in the northern states) flocked to photographers' studios to contemplate the fruits of these labors. Meanwhile, two brand-new illustrated weeklies, *Frank Leslie's* and *Harper's*, filled their pages with engraved illustrations based on the latest photographs. It was a heady time to be a photographer.

Even before his election in 1860, Lincoln had sat (or stood) for several dozen portraits, including the famous picture taken by Mathew Brady on February 27, 1860, the day of Lincoln's Cooper Union Speech. A year later, on February 24, 1861, Abraham Lincoln sat for Alexander Gardner on the day after the president-elect arrived in Washington. Almost precisely four years later Lincoln would pose for his final formal portrait, again captured by Gardner. In the intervening period President Lincoln would be the most photographed man in the world. More than 130 photographs of Lincoln exist today, nearly 40 of those made by Alexander Gardner.

The Photographer and the President is based on a clever idea. Alexander Gardner and Abraham Lincoln led interestingly intertwined lives for four of the most crucial years in the nation's history. Photographs of Lincoln helped document these years and perhaps helped shape the events as they unfolded. They certainly had an impact on how ordinary Americans came to visualize their commander in chief. Meanwhile, the entrepreneurial Scotsman built a grand reputation, at least partially through his talents in capturing the image of the president and the events that swirled around him. Richard S. Lowry sets out to "tell the story of the partnership between these two remarkable men" (2). This interesting intellectual task is challenging, however, because neither man left much of a written record on which to build. Although Lincoln's writings are substantial, he never kept a diary and wrote surprisingly few truly personal letters. And Gardner apparently left no substantial written record. But we have the photographs themselves.

The result is a book that tells several intertwined narratives. One story is about Gardner and his career. At the outset of the war, Gardner worked as part of Brady's operation, with the more celebrated photographer owning the product of Gardner's work. Eventually, Gardner went into business for himself, employing several talented photographers to work under him. In addition to his formal portraits of the president, the battlefield scenes Gardner captured after Antietam and Gettysburg probably account for his greatest acclaim. He also took some of the most famous pictures of the conspirators involved in the assassination of Lincoln, both in life and immediately after their executions. In an interesting coda to this celebrated career, not long after the war Gardner abandoned photography, joined the American Masons, and threw himself into acts of philanthropy.

The second narrative concerns the main events of the Civil War, with Lincoln at the center. Lowry's book is in five chapters, each organized loosely around a year from 1861 to 1865. Within that narrative, Gardner's photographs provide a vital architecture, with images of Lincoln

playing a central role. The text moves back and forth in time, so that, for instance, Lowry contemplates Gardner's important portrait of Lincoln prior to the Gettysburg Address before he turns to the battle itself and Gardner's celebrated photographs of the dead.

Occasionally the text drifts from the crucial interactions between the two subjects into fairly distant terrain. Sometimes Lowry is simply filling in narrative when neither Lincoln nor Gardner is in the frame. On other occasions, different voices add valuable texture where the two main subjects are silent. Walt Whitman, who knew and liked Gardner and who often saw and certainly admired Lincoln, appears now and again. Whitman is a useful addition in that he tended to write down his thoughts.

The strength of this volume is Lowry's "readings" of the photographs themselves and his insights into the photographer's practice and evolution. Without dragging his prose down with technical jargon, he is adept at noting and explaining decisions that the photographer made about framing images and using both the light and his camera settings to get just the right effect. Lowry is free with his aesthetic judgments and quick to offer assessments that another viewer might not share. Was the posing of Tad and Lincoln on opposite sides of a table a sort of light-hearted joke, shared by the photographer and the president? Perhaps. After Antietam, Gardner was on the scene to capture Lincoln's famous visit with General George McClellan. In one celebrated image the two men sat in a tent, surrounded by maps and flags and other props. In another, Lincoln stands outside a tent, posing with the much shorter McClellan and quite a few of his officers. Lowry calls the latter "the more compelling shot" (47). Reasonable people might disagree. On other occasions the analysis pushes hard in interpreting the meaning of Lincoln's expression in one image or another, suggesting that the viewer can see the impact of recent events on the president's countenance. In his analysis of the famous "cracked plate" image that Gardner took of Lincoln in February 1865, Lowry twice turns—surprisingly—to a 2005 *Time* magazine essay by then U.S. senator Barack Obama. But in most cases these interpretations are presumably his own.

The Photographer and the President includes roughly seventy illustrations in the text and 19 plates clustered in the book's center. It is not fair to blame the author for the quality of illustrations, but the prospective reader should know that the illustrations are small and sometimes quite dark. On some occasions Lowry describes a particular detail in a photograph that really cannot be identified in the accompanying illustration.

Beyond the scrutiny of the photographs themselves, Lowry's analysis sometimes is strained or nearly absent. This sense perhaps is owing to the central argument that Gardner and Lincoln were engaged in some sort of partnership, though there is little evidence that either man conceived of their relationship in those terms. Gardner certainly had a professional interest in photographing the president, but so did many other photographers. In the sense that experienced subjects played a role in determining how they would pose, these images might be understood as the product of collaboration, but the text rarely contemplates Lincoln's input into these images. Lowry offers a satisfying sense of the photographer's evolving skills, but it is a stretch to see him as actively engaged in some sort of partnership, seeking to produce images of Lincoln in the interest of some larger political, ideological, or historic agenda.

Meanwhile, Lincoln—the subject of so many photographs and the author of so many public letters—really does not appear here as an active partner in shaping his own public identity. Again, such an argument is challenging to construct in the absence of substantial documentary evidence from Lincoln, but surely the president's frequent trips to photographers' studios and his willingness to pose for pictures in the field at Antietam speak to his own belief that the regular production of new images would enhance his identity in the public mind and further the war effort. But in this story Lincoln is rarely presented as the active agent behind the production of these portraits. Instead, Lowry describes Lincoln in February 1861 as "famously disinclined to engage with the aperture" (5). Perhaps Lincoln found the process tedious, but by February 1861 he was already one of the nation's more frequently photographed individuals, suggesting that even in those early months his political ambitions trumped any aversion he may have felt about the process. Once he became president, Lincoln certainly chose to be photographed and even how to pose, but we get little sense of an active collaboration between subject and artist.

Conversely, there are other moments when Lowry surprisingly connects dots that appear far apart. He struggles mightily, for instance, to link Gardner with Whitman's personal thoughts and actions. Thus, when Whitman lost his job in 1865, Lowry speculates that "it is possible that Gardner, with his friends, clients, and connections to the government, tried to intervene on Whitman's behalf," although he offers no shred of evidence that that was the case. In the following paragraph we learn that Gardner "may also have read" pieces that Whitman published in the New York press, and that perhaps Whitman told Gardner about his travels after visiting his brother, which

included passage by train and boat. And perhaps at some point the poet “may have told” the photographer about a visit to Culpeper, Virginia. All of which builds to the seemingly fanciful conclusion that when Gardner put together his 1866 *Sketch Book* of wartime photographs he might have selected scenes as a “re-creation of the landscape of his friend’s experience” (137). Or, to put it another way, Whitman traveled to and from the seat of war on several occasions, and northern photographers captured many of these locations, so perhaps when Gardner put together his postwar book (a final effort to profit from the war) he selected images to illustrate Whitman’s experiences. Yes, this is possible, but it is hard to imagine why we ought to believe that it is true.

Another feature of this volume may matter to some readers while going completely unnoticed by others. Lowry includes an extensive, although far from exhaustive, bibliography, but the citations—keyed to pages and unmarked by numbers—are intentionally sparse. As he explains, he documents primary source quotations but only selectively refers to the secondary literature. In some sections he notes two or three titles that informed his thinking, but for large portions of the narrative the notes rely on only a few sources (David Donald, Doris Kearns Goodwin, and Michael Burlingame being favorites). Where several pages of text have no direct quotations, there are sometimes no citations. The result is that the interested reader can usually track down the original location of an interesting quotation but often does not learn the source of particular facts and interpretations within the text. This discrepancy could prove frustrating to readers wishing to know more about the origins of particular nuggets. Richard Hofstadter famously compared the prose in the Emancipation Proclamation to “a bill of lading.” Lowry updates this sardonic commentary by comparing it to “a mortgage agreement” (93). Both phrases make precisely the same point about the nature of Lincoln’s legalistic prose, but the citation convention does not leave room to acknowledge the debt to Hofstadter. The convention of providing sources for direct quotations is certainly a good thing, but some readers will wonder which of the quotations from newspapers and journals is a product of individual research and which originally appeared in other unnamed scholarly sources.

The Photographer and the President is based on an interesting idea, even though the grand theme of a partnership between two captivating public figures does not always work. Readers interested in the life of Abraham Lincoln or in the many fascinating episodes that shaped his wartime experience will find more satisfying histories. One

of the best works about the life of Alexander Gardner, marvelously illustrated with his photographs, is Mark Katz's *Witness to an Era* (1991). There are many broader histories of Civil War photography, but Jeff Rosenheim's *Photography and the American Civil War* (2013) is a wonderful, beautiful volume. For a more theoretical discussion of 19th-century photography and the interpretation of those images, the work of Alan Trachtenberg, Susan Sontag, and Laura Wexler are recommended. Gardner's own *Sketchbook*, originally published in 1866 and discussed by Lowry in detail, has been reissued in a beautiful volume. Gardner's contemporaries George N. Barnard and A. J. Russell also produced postwar "scrapbooks" that are available.

In this volume Richard Lowry has made various contributions, but in the context of several rich scholarly literatures, the work's greatest strength is its examination of Alexander Gardner as an evolving artist who turned to his favorite subject, Abraham Lincoln, again and again for some of the Civil War's most powerful images.