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 year. The 1860 United States Census counted 3,154 professional photographers in the nation.

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 Gallant Illustrious Americans, which in 1850 offered the general public a new portrait every other week on “imp drawing paper” for a dollar apiece, including two presidents, Zachary Taylor and Millard Fillmore; US secretary of state John C. Calhoun, Henry Clay, and Daniel Webster; generals John C. Fremont and Winfield Scott; natura 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. The pictures he and his team took at the First Battle of Bull Run, Antietam, Fredericksburg, and Petersburg. Their most dramatic impact, Wilson suggests, in his elegant and informative biography of Brady, was probably not felt until the war was over. The images, including the photographs of the dead, marked a turning point in the portrayal of war. The grand heroic paintings of the past again be 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 Brady was born; how, if at all, he was educated; much of anything about his married life; and which, of the thousands of photographs at 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 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 Con
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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 “spirituous liquors,” declaration of bankruptcy, and his decision to throw away thousands of negatives, some of which were mishandled, lost, or thrown away. Unable to speak because of a swelling in his throat, Brady died of kidney failure in 1856, from an inflammation of the kidneys. A friend who was with him reported that Brady had not realized he was dying body was embalmed and shipped to Washington, where he was buried next to his wife at Congressional Cemetery, near Capitol Hill. A

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 of creating a portrait of the nation succeeded far better than even he could have hoped.”

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