



Ronald S. Coddington. *Faces of the Civil War: An Album of Union Soldiers and Their Stories*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004. xi + 251 pp. 95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-7876-3.



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A Passion for Photographs

“And so it was off into the vast, unknown conflict, to possible maiming or death, with the image of the proud and probably fearful new soldier, uniformed and posed in the photographer’s studio, left behind” (p. ix).

When learning about Michigan’s role in the Civil War, students frequently puzzle over the reasons for the initial enthusiastic response to military service by men enlisting in the Union Army. For most, the idea of valor, nation, and service suffice to answer that question, but for others, the idea of fighting in distant states when the land of their birth had not been assaulted, remains something of an alien concept. Students understand far more easily why Confederate soldiers served in the war. Those men were at least fighting to protect home and hearth from what they viewed to be a foreign invader bent on destroying their very way of life, which has been captured in the popular imagination through the romance of *Gone With the Wind* (1936), for example. Although photographs from the war can make the conflict seem more “real,” most of the images depict battlefield carnage of the dead strewn across a variety of landscapes, nameless and scattered, sometimes where they fell, at other points

posed, and in all cases devoid of a sense of the fallen soldiers as individuals. In *Faces of the Civil War: An Album of Union Soldiers and Their Stories*, Ronald S. Coddington attempts to represent the ordinary Union soldier in a format that will clarify for readers why and how these men served their country.

Photography was a relatively new technology when the Civil War began, and the ability to produce inexpensive images was even newer. Based on the new collodion process, the lens was exposed to chemically treated glass plate negatives and then positive prints could be made on treated paper. Attaching the photo to a business card, a uniform size of 2 1/2-inches by 4 inches, produced the *carte de visite*, an inexpensive form of portrait photography. These cards developed into the primary method by which soldiers could have their likenesses made and distributed to loved ones, friends, and fellow soldiers. The enormous demand for these cards prompted photographers, including Matthew Brady, the most famous of Civil War photographers, to follow Union armies wherever they encamped. They were not, however, the most durable of portable imagery; that distinction belonged to

tintypes or ambrotypes (sheets of photo-sensitized tin or metal) that traveled with soldiers. Today, these cards provide a staple of swap meets, the Internet, and museum displays—a tribute to their enormous appeal and wide distribution.

Faces of the Civil War contains seventy-seven of these card photographs from Ronald Coddington's personal collection. These images are produced on fine quality stock paper and enlarged from their original size for greater visibility and to highlight detail. This grouping does not include the usual cast of Union generals or Abraham Lincoln, but instead presents officers and men from regiments of every type. Coddington notes that the greatest number of photos are of company commissioned officers—lieutenants (twenty-one photographs) and captains (twenty-four photographs)—possibly due to demand and greater economic status. Privates (ten photographs), corporals (six photographs), sergeants (seven photographs), lieutenant-colonels (four photographs), and surgeons (two photographs) have the next greatest number of photographs, while majors, chaplains, and seaman have a single photograph each. Coddington's photographs are not representative of every state in the Union and instead reflect Coddington's own collection, shaped by his work in the Northeast and the Mid-Atlantic states (p. xix). Each of the seventy-seven photographs have a short one to one and a half page biography that details the most significant part of that man's military service and then some details of his life after mustering out.

The book grew out of visual journalist Ronald Coddington's passion for the Civil War and personal collection of *carte de visites*. The rationale for the work is his assertion that the soldiers of the Union Army never fully entered the nation's collective consciousness as unique individuals. Though steeped in sentimentality, *Faces of the Civil War* does help address the need to preserve the stories of soldiers before they became completely lost, especially when considering the overwhelming literary narrative of the "Lost Cause." The cause of the North's army, at least for some, is harder to romanticize in popular culture, and has not captured the public's imagination. Though unstated, this is at least an implied function of this work, along with Coddington's observation that few images appear to exist of African Americans, women, or Southerners.

Some of these short biographical sketches previously appeared in the magazine *Civil War Times* and have been a popular feature for a number of years. The stories range from the most mundane of experiences, to those of extreme heroism under fire, to the unusual. The most compelling of these involve the lives of men beyond the war, as noted in Michael Fellman's foreword: "Although Coddington does not speculate on the psychology of these later lives, it does seem clear from their stories that for many soldiers the wounds of war were by no means all visible" (p. ix). Coddington draws these stories from the service records and pension application files in the National Archives and the multitude of regimental histories available. His notes contain accounts of how he came by this information, which sometimes prove more interesting than the life of the pictured soldier.

Faces of the Civil War serves neither as a history of mid-nineteenth-century photography, a comprehensive examination of either units or particularly important individuals, or a thorough narrative of military service. It is but one of an endless number of books devoted to images of the Civil War. Repeated discussions over the accuracy of Civil War battlefield photography, the various Lincoln portraits, and whether Lee's left or right was his good side, have obscured other interesting components of Civil War photography; therefore, Coddington's book is a welcome effort to move us beyond these topics by portraying the lives of "ordinary soldiers." Although, the soldiers' biographical sketches tell their stories, there is little to contextualize their experiences and tell the reader whether they are unique or common. The involvement of Johns Hopkins University Press in publishing this book is unusual; despite the attractive dust jacket and the high quality materials used, it does not fit with their typical slate of academic publications. Nor is it a traditional mass-market publication, despite the subject and popular approach. While not a particularly unique addition to the literature, this is a work for dedicated collectors and the reader interested in picking up a work that is a "snapshot" of Union soldiers in the Civil War and how they lived their lives, presented in a compact and attractive publication.

For teachers, the lives of these soldiers may well serve as a lens through which students can examine the personal reasons for serving in the Civil War.

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