

# H-Net Reviews

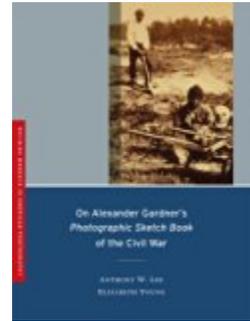
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Anthony W. Lee, Elizabeth Young. *On Alexander Gardner's Photographic Sketch Book of the Civil War*. Defining Moments in American Photography Series. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007. 119 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-25151-9; \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-25331-5.

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## Gardner's Photographic Sketch Book in Review

*Gardner's Photographic Sketch Book of the War* (1866) certainly warrants close scrutiny and further study. Anthony W. Lee and Elizabeth Young, authors of *On Alexander Gardner's Photographic Sketch Book of the Civil War*, are to be commended for recognizing the importance of the work from the standpoint of both Civil War photography and literature. The authors note that they examine the book from the points of view of an art historian and a literary scholar, and that sometimes they disagree. While their different viewpoints are appreciated, unfortunately, it seems that neither has carefully researched Civil War history or the history of photography of the era, both of which are critical to the discussion at hand.

Problems with Lee and Young's book start early in the introduction. Lee suggests that Gardner may have seen Roger Fenton's Crimean War images at the Crystal Palace Exposition in 1851 before immigrating to the United States. However, Fenton photographed the Crimea in 1855, four years after the Crystal Palace, making that connection impossible.

While discussing the production of the *Sketch Book*, Lee mentions that "invariably Gardner himself" printed the photographs in the *Sketch Book*, but he never stops to consider how many photographs that would have included (p. 6). If two hundred *Sketch Book* sets were made, as suggested by Albert Ordway in the 1880s, Gardner

would have had to print twenty thousand photographs for the project, something he surely did not do. The text on the *Sketch Book* mounts identifies the photographer who made the negative and also adds "Positive by A. Gardner." By this notation, Gardner simply meant that the positive was made in his studio, not that he personally printed them. The *Sketch Book* volumes were not all bound in "expensive brown morocco" either, as stated by Lee. A survey conducted by this reviewer has determined that several different binding colors have been discovered as well as many variants in *Sketch Book* cover designs.

Lee writes about "Gardner's many assistants" who took the photographs for the *Sketch Book* plates without mentioning them by name or even indicating how many participated in this capacity (p. 6). The work of eleven photographers is represented, and their choice of subject was important to the final publication. It would have been appropriate for Lee to have noted and discussed them at length, particularly Timothy O'Sullivan who made almost half of the negatives for the *Sketch Book*. Gardner was the editor and author of the *Sketch Book* but made only sixteen of the one hundred negatives, a fact also not mentioned by Lee.

Lee's lack of expertise in the history of photography is further illustrated when he discusses types of Civil

War-era photographs. He writes, "While portraiture was well established, the landscape view, in the form of a stereo view or album card, was just coming into its own. This new face of photography was a riskier venture, attempted by only the more established photographers" (p. 11). Actually, it was the small *carte de visite* portrait that was just becoming popular, whereas the stereograph had steadily gained popularity since 1851. Photographic historian Keith F. Davis has noted in his excellent essay entitled "'A Terrible Distinctness': Photography of the Civil War," published in *Photography in Nineteenth-Century America* (1991), that portraiture was the most common application of photography during the conflict, but that more stereo negatives were made in the field than any other format.

In considering documentation of the Civil War, Lee reviews and discusses at length the many sketch artists working for *Harper's Weekly* and other publications. He focuses particularly on Alfred R. Waud and even lists the locations in which he worked, but strangely he does not do the same for Gardner or the other photographers. Waud was at many of the same locations at the same time as Gardner, but this fact goes unnoted. Lee does not mention Gardner's studio portraits of Waud, their obvious friendship, and, more important, the *Sketch Book* title page designed by Waud. Lee, however, does make a good point when he suggests that the differences in equipment accounted for the different ways in which artists and photographers covered the war.

Regarding the making of plates in the field, Lee states, "Working in teams, as Gardner often did, sometimes made the process a little faster" (p. 22). Actually, Gardner did not often work in teams; he only did so at Antietam and Gettysburg. In a footnote, Lee incorrectly claims that Gardner made 95 pictures at Antietam. Based on information in Gardner's 1863 catalogue and existing vintage prints, Gardner and his assistant made approximately 120 negatives on his two visits to Antietam. Lee never bothered to check data or do any research with the material available online from the Library of Congress. Lee writes, "Gardner arrived at Antietam ... on either the final day of the battle or the day after it ended," implying that there was more than one day of fighting (p. 26). He also relates that, "riding at breakneck speed from Washington ... [Gardner] was still too late to observe any of the fighting" (p. 26). Unfortunately, Lee does not identify the source of this information. One question his research since there is a Gardner stereo view dated September 17, the day of the battle.

Lee says it may strike one as "bizarre" that there are no dead bodies shown in the *Sketch Book* plates of Antietam, but he does not attempt to suggest possible reasons for this omission (p. 40). Research in Gardner's 1863 catalogue would have shown Lee that none of the large Antietam photographs show bodies strewn on the battlefield evident in the stereos. They probably were made somewhat later after bodies and debris had been removed. Lee discusses the two variants of the Signal Tower image in different *Sketch Book* sets, suggesting that Gardner "could not decide which might better capture such an important scene" (p. 43). However, it is more probable that one of the glass negatives broke and a variant was substituted. Lee seems unaware that there are also two versions of the Dunker Church plate in different *Sketch Book* sets.

According to Lee, Gardner "had felt the snub of being unrecognized and unappreciated by [Mathew] Brady" in late 1862 (p. 40). This widely published myth regarding the split is simply untrue. Again, research would have shown Lee that Brady was bankrupt, did not pay his creditors, and most likely was not paying his employees either. A shrewd businessman, Gardner knew important politicians and military figures in Washington and no longer needed Brady.

The reproductions and layout in Lee and Young's book are poor. In addition, there is not a single whole *Sketch Book* plate with complete title and photographer notation reproduced in the book. This omission deprives the reader of the full visual impact of the original book's presentation. Lee took most illustrations in the book not from the prints, but from Library of Congress scans of negatives, a fact that they never acknowledge. These choices fundamentally misrepresent the subject of this study: the *Sketch Book* itself. Moreover, Lee does not discuss the two different versions of the *Sketch Book*: the first has "Incidents of the War" on each mount; while later sets include the same images but do not have the "Incidents" line.

Young as a literary critic naturally investigates the *Sketch Book's* prose, and she makes a good point in suggesting that the text has been somewhat overlooked in discussions of the book. Although the text accompanying the photographs is important, the book is entitled *Gardner's Photographic Sketch Book of the War*, so it would appear that Gardner's emphasis was on the photographs.

Right away, Young shows her lack of familiarity with Gardner's photographs in discussing the Gettysburg images, writing, "Gardner's contrast between inaccurate

words and accurate photographs seems disingenuous, given the amount of restaging in the photographs,” implying that this was a regular practice (p. 63). First identified by William Frassanito in his book, *Gettysburg, A Journey in Time* (1978), it is generally accepted that the body in plate 41, “Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter,” was moved by Gardner or one of his men since photographs in two locations at Gettysburg appear to show the same dead soldier. No other instance of restaging in Gardner’s work has been observed by this reviewer or in anything I have read by others.

Young’s discussion of various literary “sketches” is good and puts Gardner’s book in the context of other books from the period with similar titles. Like Lee, however, Young does not discuss the work within the context of other photographically illustrated books (books with original photographs glued on mounts in the book), a varied and unique genre. She also neglects to review Gardner’s experience as a newspaper editor in Scotland and does not address the *Sketch Book* at any length in terms of photojournalism. Historian William F. Stapp in his important essay in *Eyes of Time: Photojournalism in America* rightly identifies the *Sketch Book* as a “pioneering photo essay,” emphasizing its place at the beginning of photojournalism.[1]

Although she acknowledges that Gardner was an abolitionist, Young asks: “Where are black people in Gardner’s Civil War body politic” (pp. 68-69)? Like Lee, she totals the actual numbers of blacks in the pictures at six; however, they are present in eight at least and several show people whose race is difficult to discern. Young seems to view the book from a twenty-first-century perspective, finding racist and sexual innuendos throughout book. One example is her discussion of plate 2, “Slave Pen, Alexandria, Va.” To quote Young, “here, the name is ‘Price Birch & Co., Dealers in Slaves,’ an identification that unmistakably links the war to slavery. The names ‘Price’ and ‘Birch’ connote money paid for slaves and the whips used to coerce them; they constitute a brief allegory of purchase and punishment within the photograph” (p. 74). Of course, there was a specific message in selecting the slave pen illustration indicating that slavery was a major issue leading to the Civil War. However, to assume that the name Price Birch & Co. was included to reference sale of slaves and mistreatment is out of line—it was a sign with the company name, not intentionally placed on the wall by the photographer to give the photograph further meaning.

In discussing plate 76, “A Fancy Group, Front of Pe-

tersburg, August, 1864,” Young points to the dynamics of the men in the image. She states that the “racial asymmetries of the photograph are spatially organized, with white men sitting and standing above black men” (p. 82). In fact, many of the white men are sitting at the same level or below the two African American men who are holding roosters poised for a cockfight. Young also seems unaware that the “Fancy Group” photograph is not by Gardner but by David Knox; she writes, “Gardner does not focus on muscles and complexions, but his photograph, too, shows white men looking intently at black men. Since *cock*, then as now, could be a synonym for *penis*, it is possible to think of the word as having sexual connotations in the sketch” (p. 85). Her homoerotic interpretation seems farfetched and unconvincing.

Young continues the racial focus throughout her essay. While discussing an image of men digging graves, she makes unfounded generalizations about who performed such duties: “Black men in the Union army were frequently assigned burial detail, assembling remains and digging trenches for graves; such duties accorded with the inequitable treatment they received from the military” (p. 87). While African American men did often carry out burial duty, they were by no means the only ones who did. Drew Gilpin Faust in her excellent book, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*, goes into detail on the subject, calling the burial of the dead after a battle “an act of improvisation” where white troops, prisoners of war, troops being punished, or even civilians were enlisted to perform the unsavory duty.[2] An important note regarding the “Burial Party” image is that the only man who can definitely be identified as black is the man sitting behind the cart looking into the camera, and he is not a soldier. The four men in the background who are actually digging are uniformed soldiers; they are out of focus, so while dark they could even be sunburned white men. Young further digresses in her discussion when she states that “the shoe-clad foot, added by Gardner to the scene for dramatic effect, dominates the center of this image, and we can interpret its centrality as symbolic of the fractures of the nation” (p. 87). One wonders why she imagines the foot was added when it looks natural in its placement as a segmented body part among others. The photograph was not made by Gardner but by John Reekie, another fact overlooked by Young.

While Lee and Young’s book had a more than worthy subject in *Gardner’s Photographic Sketch Book of the War*, they unfortunately fall short of giving it a fair analysis in terms of its place in the history of photography, Civil

War history, or literature.

Notes

[1]. William F. Stapp, “‘Subjects of Strange ... and of Fearful Interest’: Photojournalism from Its Beginnings in 1839,” in *Eyes of Time: Photojournalism in America*,

ed. Marianne Fulton (Boston and Toronto: New York Graphic Society, 1988), 1-36, quotation on 23.

[2]. Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), 65.

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