The War That Does Not Leave Us: Memory of the American Civil War and the Photographs of Alexander Gardner

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Abstract
In July of 1863 the photographs A Harvest of Death, Field Where General Reynolds Fell, A Sharpshooter’s Last Sleep, and The Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter were taken after the battle at Gettysburg by a team of photographers led by Alexander Gardner. In the decades that followed these images of the dead of the battlefield became some of the most iconic representations of the American Civil War. Today, Gardner’s Gettysburg photographs can be found in almost every contemporary history text, documentary, or collection of images from the war, yet their journey to this iconic status has been little discussed. The goal of this thesis is to expand the general understanding of these Civil War photographs and their legacy by considering their use beyond the early 1860s. Although part of a larger scope of influence, the discussion of the photographs presented here will focus particularly on the years between 1894 and 1911. Between those years they were made available to the public through large photographic histories and other history texts as well. The aim of these texts, which framed and manipulated Gardner’s images, were to disseminate a propagandistic history of the war in a way that outlined it as a nationally unifying experience, rather than one of division. These texts mark the beginning of the influence the Gettysburg photographs would have on American memory of the war. Within these books the four photographs became part of a larger effort to reconnect with the past and shape the war into a source for a unified American identity.

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When people remember famous Civil War photographers, they think of one name in particular; and “Alexander Gardner” is not it. However, a significant number of the photographs of Mathew Brady were the work of Alexander Gardner. He was the first person to shoot a battlefield while it was still covered by the bodies of fallen soldiers. He was the man behind the most iconic images of President Lincoln, and the only photographer to capture the execution of the conspirators behind the president’s death. Beginnings. Gardner was from Scotland. Before his interest in photography...
While photographs of earlier conflicts do exist, the American Civil War is considered the first major conflict to be extensively photographed. Not only did intrepid photographers venture onto the fields of battle, but those very images were then widely displayed and sold in ever larger quantities nationwide. Photographers such as Mathew Brady, Alexander Gardner, and Timothy O’Sullivan found enthusiastic audiences for their images as America’s interests were piqued by the shockingly realistic medium. For the first time in history, citizens on the home front could view the actual carnage.