



# Mathew Brady: Portraits of a Nation

*Robert Wilson*

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In the 1840s and 1850s, "Brady of Broadway" was one of the most successful and acclaimed Manhattan portrait galleries. Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, Dolley Madison, Henry James as a boy with his father, Horace Greeley, Edgar Allan Poe, the Prince of Wales, and Jenny Lind were among the dignitaries photographed in Mathew Brady's studio. But it was during the Civil War that he became the founding father of what is now called photojournalism and his photography became an enduring part of American history.

The Civil War was the first war in history to leave a detailed photographic record, and Mathew Brady was the war's chief visual historian. Previously, the general public had never seen in such detail the bloody particulars of war--the strewn bodies of the dead, the bloated carcasses of horses, the splintered remains of trees and fortifications, the chaos and suffering on the battlefield. Brady knew better than anyone of his era the dual power of the camera to record and to excite, to stop a moment in time and to draw the viewer vividly into that moment.

He was not, in the strictest sense, a Civil War photographer. As the director of a photographic service, he assigned Alexander Gardner, James F. Gibson, and others to take photographs, often under his personal supervision; he also distributed Civil War photographs taken by others not employed by him. Ironically, Brady had accompanied the Union army to the first major battle at Bull Run, but was so shaken by the experience that throughout the rest of the war he rarely visited battlefields, except well before or after a major battle. The famous Brady photographs at Antietam were shot by Gardner and Gibson.

Few books about Brady have gone beyond being collections of the photographs attributed to him, accompanied by a biographical sketch. MATHEW BRADY will be *the* biography of an American legend--a businessman, an accomplished and innovative technician, a suave promoter, a celebrated portrait artist, and, perhaps most important, a historian who chronicled America during its finest and gravest moments of the 19th century.

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