

1.4

Antietam Sketches and Photographs, 1862

Anthony W. Lee

His name was John A. Clark, a lieutenant of Company D, 7th Michigan infantry. He was born to a large and prosperous family on an 80-acre farm near Ida Township, just across from the Ohio border, and almost as soon as the war began, he signed up for the Union cause. It's unclear what such a cause meant to him, whether to preserve the Union or to abolish slavery; Ida Township had no resident African Americans, though the farms in and around northwestern Ohio had been important stations in the Underground Railroad. What is clear is that he saw action almost immediately, fighting with the Army of the Potomac through much of McClellan's Peninsula campaign in Virginia. In late summer 1862, he caught some sickness, probably a virus or bacterial infection in the swampy region south of Richmond, and was sent home to recuperate. But by September, he was back at the front, as the two great armies prepared for battle at Antietam. He was then 21 years old.

The photographer Alexander Gardner could not have known any of Clark's story when he came across the young lieutenant on 19 September 1862. Clark had been killed two days earlier and, when Gardner arrived on the Antietam battlefields, was merely one of the staggering numbers of dead strewn about. The sight of so many bodies was grisly, "a pitiable sight," wrote Oliver Wendell Holmes after he, too, reached the area about the same time looking for his son, "truly pitiable, yet so vast, so far beyond the possibility of relief . . . it was next to impossible to individualize [them]."¹ By later reckonings, the numbers of Antietam dead and wounded amounted to more than 23,000, the bloodiest single battle in American history.² In trying to accommodate so many dead—to separate and straighten them, to dig grave after grave and bury them, all with some attempt at decency—the survivors were overwhelmed.³ McClellan was so paralyzed by the task that he could not bring himself to pursue the Confederate army, even though he held a tactical advantage. A week later, the dead still remained mostly unburied, and the stench was such "as to breed pestilence," a Union surgeon reported with dismay, "at least a thousand blackened bloated corpses with blood and gas protruding from every orifice, and maggots holding high carnival over their heads."⁴ Gardner tried to picture something of the battlefield's horrible scene (see Fig. 1.4a), showing a bloated corpse turned on its side and in rigor mortis. He also tried to show the ongoing efforts of burial, noting a grave already filled—Clark's, like those of Union officers who had been given immediate attention—and the all-too many unburied littered about, especially the Confederate infantry. And he included a survivor, who regards the gravesite and is confronted with the task of digging many more. The photographer may not have known Clark or his story, and perhaps never even learned



Figure 1.4a Alexander Gardner, *A Contrast. Federal Buried; Confederate Unburied, Where They Fell on Battle Field of Antietam*, 1862. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, LC-DIG-cwpb-01086.

his name, but he positioned his camera so as to capture the lieutenant's initials and military company ("JAC 7th M"), scrawled hastily on a makeshift tombstone, as if to give him some kind of recognition in the face of so many unnamed and unburied soldiers who lay everywhere else. Indeed, the marked grave stood in for those men who could not be otherwise identified and were "impossible to individualize." Gardner made sure to include in the background the wooden shards, remains of an old fence that had been blasted by gunfire and were now being used as materials for crude coffins and tombstones; the coffins often consisted of merely a wooden plank to keep the remains of a soldier from resting on cold ground. The grim process of laying the dead to rest had many more days to go.

Antietam marked the first time Gardner tried to photograph the aftermath of a battle of such traumatic proportions, and I suspect that he, like Holmes, was shocked by the "carnival of death," as the writer put it. Rummaging in the ruins, he found himself amidst a shadow army, which in the days and weeks after the battle included doctors and nurses trying to save the wounded, newspaper reporters trying to piece together the battle and its outcome, and then also coffin makers, embalmers, the local townspeople who

arrived with shovels and pickaxes to help with the enormous job of digging graves, parents searching vainly for their sons, even some tourists and relic hunters, and sketch artists and photographers. One of the artists, Alfred Waud, was also roaming about and, like Gardner, tried to summarize the awful scene; though in his mind it was best understood by the manic efforts to save the wounded and provide hope for the living (see Fig. 1.4b): on a makeshift surgical table, field doctors are desperately at work on an amputation; behind, more wounded awaiting their turn in the wagons; toward the right, a soldier, already having been attended to and having had his amputated leg bandaged, is being shuttled into a wagon for transport; and so on.

The sketch moves left to right in a kind of narrative tableau, so as to be “read” appropriately as a series of events across time, and lent itself to translation in the newspapers and magazines. A *Harper’s* illustrator stayed mostly true to Waud’s sequence when the picture was turned into a woodcut and appeared in the magazine a month later, in October (Fig. 1.4c), though for the sake of delicacy reversed the patient on the table to hide the amputated stump of a leg.



Figure 1.4b Alfred R. Waud, *Citizen Volunteers Assisting the Wounded in the Field of Battle*, 1862. From Morgan collection of Civil War drawings, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, LC-DIG-ppmsca-21468.



Figure 1.4c Unknown Illustrator (after Alfred R. Waud), *The Battle of Antietam, Carrying Off the Wounded After the Battle*, *Harper's Weekly*, 11 October 1862.

With his big box camera and laborious wet plate method, Gardner could not approach any kind of subject moving so fluidly and, even if he wanted to, could not so easily impose such a tight narrative. But it was more than simply the limitations of his camera that dictated what and how he photographed. Or perhaps, more accurately, it was precisely because of his awareness of the camera's slowness and deliberateness that he was best able to picture in memorial terms, with an attention to the dead, not the living, and the anxious efforts to handle them. Whereas Waud's sensibility might be likened to a reporter's, trying to organize and picture the light-speed of events, Gardner's was more like that of the the coffin maker and embalmer who were, like the photographer in the field, arranging the dead for observance.

A week after *Harper's* published Waud's sketch, it published Gardner's photograph (Fig. 1.4d). The lag between the two was not uncommon; sketch artists could deliver their goods much faster, and the sketch, already in linear form, was much easier to translate into a woodcut. As with Waud's drawing, the magazine illustrator remained faithful to Gardner's photograph, making sure to include all of its major components. Clark's initials and military company are even more prominently cut and much easier to discern than in the original; for *Harper's*, like the photographer, any identifying marker was important.



Figure 1.4d Unknown Illustrator (after Alexander Gardner), Untitled, *Harper's Weekly*, 18 October 1862.

And yet, in being published in *Harper's*, the photograph risked being transformed from memorial-like to journalistic-like. It was even accompanied by a long description of the sort that tried to provide a narrative for it, full of character and plot and moral. "There is such a dash of sentiment in it," observed a *Harper's* writer:

that it looks more like an artistic composition than a reproduction of reality. A new-made grave occupies the centre of the picture, a small head and foot board, the former with lettering, defines its limits. Doubled up near it, with the features almost distinguishable, is the body of a little drummer-boy who was probably shot down on the spot. How it happens that it should have been left uninterred, while the last honors were paid to one of his comrades, we are unable to explain. Gazing on the body, with a pitying interest, stands in civilian's attire one of those seedy, shiftless-looking beings, the first glance at whom detects an ill-spent career and hopeless future. It is some time, perhaps, since that blunted nature has been moved by such deep emotion as it betrays at this mournful sight.⁵

I do not think Gardner cared for the embellishments in the text; he was one of the first in a long line of photographers who grew annoyed with the contrivances and liberties taken by newspaper editors. When he left Brady's studio to set up a shop of his own later that year, he took the negative of the picture with him, published it as part of his *Photographic Incidents of the War*, printed at least two versions, one of the whole scene and another of the grave and body, and gave it the title for which it has since become

known, *A Contrast. Federal Buried; Confederate Unburied, Where They Fell on Battle Field of Antietam*.⁶ In his appraisal, there is no mention of artistic niceties, shiftless onlookers, or hopeless futures. Those were things better left to illustrations like Waud's, which could fashion a story from trauma. In time, Gardner and his fellow cameramen would come to understand the roles of news photographs and occasionally offer pictures that lent themselves better to texts. They would recognize and sometimes import the strategies of illustrators. When the war was going well, they would understand the hunger for information and the need for promising news for a northern readership. In bad times, they would learn how to ease anxieties and, in some cases when the moment demanded it, skirt the censor's hand. But at least in these early days of war photography in its regard of death on such a massive scale, the camera had more solemn purposes.

Notes

- 1 See the whole remarkable essay, Oliver Wendell Holmes, "My Hunt after the Captain," *Atlantic Monthly* (December 1862): 738–64.
- 2 The numbers sometimes vary, though 23,000 has become conventional. See James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988): 544. An earlier estimate of more than 26,000 is given by Thomas L. Livermore, *Numbers and Losses in the Civil War in America, 1861–65* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1901): 92–3.
- 3 On the traumas and meanings associated with the Civil War dead, see Drew Gilpin Faust, *The Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008); and Franny Nudelman, *John Brown's Body: Slavery, Violence and the Culture of War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).
- 4 *A Surgeon's Civil War: The Letters and Diary of Daniel M. Holt, M.D.*, James M. Grenier, Janet L. Coryell, and James R. Smither, eds (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1994): 28.
- 5 *Harper's Weekly* (18 October 1862): 663.
- 6 On the two versions, which are stereoviews, see William A. Frassanito, *Antietam: The Photographic Legacy of America's Bloodiest Day* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1978): 178–81.