

# Making Photography Matter: A Viewer's History from the Civil War to the Great Depression

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*Making Photography Matter: A Viewer's History from the Civil War to the Great Depression*, by Cara A. Finnegan. Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2015. xiii, 240 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$50.00 hardcover.

Reviewer John Raeburn is professor emeritus of English and American studies at the University of Iowa. His books include *Ben Shahn's American Scene: Photographs 1938* (2010) and *A Staggering Revolution: A Cultural History of Thirties Photography* (2006).

What historical viewers made of photographs publicly displayed—how they interpreted and then assimilated them to their own experiences and belief systems—is the daunting topic explored by Cara Finnegan in *Making Photography Matter*. Much is known about individual photographers and their ambitions, a fair amount about the institutional structures that expedited and displayed their work, but practically nothing about responses by the vast number of individuals who, since the medium's invention in 1839, have viewed photographs in books, periodicals, and exhibitions. The reason for this deficit is simple enough: typically, few discursive traces of those viewing experiences remain. In contrast to other expressive arts such as drama or painting, moreover, until recently photography has not even elicited a rich vein of professional criticism that could at least hint at the public reception of specific bodies of work.

Finnegan's subtitle, *A Viewer's History from the Civil War to the Great Depression*, was likely inscribed at the publisher's insistence because her introduction explicitly disavows such a comprehensive historical ambition. Instead, she develops four case studies of photographic reception, two from the nineteenth century centered on Civil War photographs and a Lincoln portrait, and two from the twentieth featuring pictures of child labor and Depression-era poverty; in each case, the photographic corpus elicited a textual response that has survived. That residue is essential to Finnegan's method of deploying rhetorical analysis of those texts to reconstruct how viewers understood the photographs and what contemporary cultural concerns their responses addressed. This method allows her to demonstrate that, far from being passive ciphers as often supposed, viewers actively engaged in complex acts of interpretation. Her analysis thereby "recover[s] the viewer as a key participant in the event of photography" (170).

Only relatively few viewers would have seen photographs shot on Civil War battlefields, most by Mathew Brady's staff, because the technique for reproducing them in printed matter did not yet exist. More commonly, audiences encountered verbal renditions of the photographs and magazine engravings based on them. Finnegan argues

persuasively that, from these encounters and the interpretive work they encouraged, audiences imbibed a sense of “presence” that helped them negotiate the war’s uncertainties.

In 1895 *McClure’s* magazine reproduced a daguerreotype of a thirtyish Abraham Lincoln to accompany an installment of Ida Tarbell’s biography of Lincoln; the photograph had not been displayed publicly before and is still Lincoln’s earliest surviving portrait. It stimulated a vigorous discourse that subsequently filled several of the magazine’s pages with letters offering interpretations of it. Most writers, representatives of the white male elite, pronounced on how the portrait embedded the future president’s character, drawing heavily on the popular pseudoscientific discourses of phrenology and physiognomy. Their interpretations made the young Lincoln represent a new ideal in the nation’s character development, forged by his frontier upbringing. The urgency with which this interpretation was advanced, says Finnegan, was attributable to the racial and class anxieties that undergirded it.

In 1912 T. R. Dawley, a former inspector for the U.S. Bureau of Labor, used Lewis Hine’s photographs to illustrate his book-length polemic *against* child labor reformers such as Hine. Factory work, Dawley argued, benefited southern children who would otherwise languish in abysmally ignorant poverty. Finnegan’s circumstantial account of Dawley’s project amply unpacks a crucial paradox of photography: that its apparently unimpeachable representation of some concrete fact can without image tampering be appropriated to serve a contrasting and even antithetical purpose.

In 1938 government photographers of the Farm Security Administration (FSA) exhibited about 75 of their pictures of Depression-era scenes at a massive, week-long photographic exhibition in New York’s Grand Central Palace; a fair number of them have since become iconic. The agency invited viewers to submit written comments about the pictures, and 540 did so. Remarkably, for all the subsequent attention to FSA photography, no one until Finnegan had investigated those responses. Her training in rhetorical theory made her ideal for the task. Her nuanced analysis reveals how viewers interpreted what they had seen and “insert[ed] themselves as active agents in the stories the photographs had to tell” (168).

Largely because it depends on such a richly qualitative and quantitative sample of audience response, the FSA case study is the book’s strongest and provides a fine model for future reception studies. The archives of state historical societies and local institutions hold numerous photographic collections that possibly have accompanying textual

evidence that has been neglected or perhaps not even recognized. Discovering whether they do could productively amplify the “viewer’s history” Finnegan has begun.

*Carnival in the Countryside: The History of the Iowa State Fair*, by Chris Rasmussen. Iowa and the Midwest Experience Series. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2015. vii, 206 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$27.50 paperback.

Reviewer Tom Morain is director of government relations at Graceland University and former administrator of the State Historical Society of Iowa. He has taught Iowa history at several institutions and online and has been active in public history projects around the state.

Good histories spark curiosity on questions that their audiences may never have considered. On that scale, Chris Rasmussen plows new ground in his *Carnival in the Countryside: The History of the Iowa State Fair*. It is a good guess that among the record 1,117,398 visitors who passed through the gates at the 2015 fair, very few have ever given even passing consideration to the enormous complexities its production entails and fewer still to the philosophy behind its rise to become such an iconic tradition. Rasmussen, an American cultural and intellectual historian, is an Iowa native who earned a B.A. at Grinnell College and a Ph.D. at Rutgers. His passion for the fair is genetic. His father raced stock cars at the Iowa State Fair, he writes in his acknowledgments, and his mother “went for the country music.”

The book takes a chronological approach. The fair’s earliest advocates were local agricultural societies whose mission was to promote better farming by displaying the results of superior methods: bigger ears of corn, fatter hogs, bigger and faster horses. Through the rest of the year, the societies promoted “book farming” through lectures and papers, but the fair was where they put their products into competition to prove their superiority.

But their high-minded motives for agricultural exhibitions had to contend with the stubborn reality that the public wanted something else, or at least something more. Fair visitors wanted entertainment. A day spent looking at longer carrots or the latest cream separators just didn’t do it, especially for mom and the kids. Rasmussen documents the continuing struggle between those who promoted the fair as an educational experience and those who looked to entertainments to increase gate receipts that would pay the bills. Vendors and performers of every variety also coveted the dollars that fairgoers brought with them. At one time, vendors, tent shows, and games of chance were