

**George Alfred Townsend, "Still Taking Pictures, (Mathew B. Brady)" 12  
April 1891**

(keywords: Mathew B. Brady, history of the daguerreotype, history of photography.)

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**STILL TAKING PICTURES**

**Brady, the Grand Old Man  
of American Photography**

**HARD AT WORK AT SIXTY-SEVEN**

A Man Who Has Photographed More  
Prominent Men Than Any Other Artist  
in the Country—Interesting Experiences  
with Well-Known Men of Other Days—  
Looking "Pleasant."

[SPECIAL CORRESPONDENCE OF THE WORLD.]

WASHINGTON, April 10.—"Brady the photographer alive? The man who daguerreotyped Mrs. Alexander Hamilton and Mrs. Madison, Gen. Jackson, and Edgar A. Poe, Taylor's Cabinet, and old Booth? Thought he was dead many a year."

No, like a ray of light still travelling toward the vision from some past world or star, Matthew [Mathew—ed.] B. Brady is at the camera still and if he lives eight years longer will reach the twentieth century and the age of seventy-five. I felt as he turned my head a few weeks ago between his fingers and thumb, still intent upon that which gave him his greatest credit—finding the expression of the inner spirit of a man—that those same digits had lifted the chins and smoothed the hairs of virgin sitters, now grandmothers, the elite of the beauty of their time, and set the heads up or down like another Warwick of the rulers of parties, sects, agitations and the stage. As truly as Audubon, Wagner or Charles Wilson Peale, Mr. Brady has been an idealist, a devotee of the talent and biography of his fifty years of career. He sincerely admired the successful, the interesting men and women coming and going, and because he had a higher passion than money, we possess many a face in the pencil of the sun and the tint of the soul thereof which otherwise would have been imbecile in description or fictitious by the perversion of some portrait painter. For the same reason, perhaps, Brady is not rich. He allowed the glory of the civil war to take away the savings and investments of the most successful career in American photography; his Central Park lots fed his operators in Virginia, Tennessee and Louisiana, who were getting the battle-scenes. It is for this reason, perhaps, that he is at work now over the Pennsylvania Railroad ticket office, near the Treasury Department,

and only yesterday he took the whole Pauncefote family, to their emphatic satisfaction—minister, wife, and daughters—as he took the Pan American Commission officially. His gallery is set around with photographs he has made from his own daguerreotypes of public people from Polk’s administration down, for he was very active in the Mexican War, taking Taylor, Scott, Santa Anna, Houston and Walker, Quitman and Lopez. I thought as I looked at the white cross of his moustache and goatee and blue spectacles and felt the spirit in him still of the former exquisite and good-liver which had brought so many fastidious people to his studio, that I was like Leigh Hunt taking the hand of old Poet—Banker Rogers, who had once shaken hands with Sam Johnson, who had been touched for the king’s evil by Queen Anne, and I had almost asked Mr. Brady about Nelly Custis and Lord Cornbury and Capt. John Smith.

“How old are you, Mr. Brady?”

“Never ask that of a lady or a photographer; they are sensitive. I will tell you, for fear you might find it out, that I go back to near 1823–’24; that my birthplace was Warren County, N.Y., in the woods about Lake George, and that my father was an Irishman.”

“Not just the zenith-place to drop into art from?”

“Ah! but there was Saratoga, where I met William Page, the artist, who painted Page’s Venus. He took an interest in me and gave me a bundle of his crayons to copy. This was at Albany. Now Page became a pupil of Prof. Morse in New York city, who was then painting portraits at starvation prices in the University rookery on Washington square. I was introduced to Morse; he had just come home from Paris and had invented upon the ship his telegraphic alphabet, of which his mind was so full that he could give but little attention to a remarkable discovery one Daguerre, a friend of his, had made in France.”

“Was Daguerre Morse’s friend?”

“He was. Daguerre had traveled in this country exhibiting dissolving views and Morse had known him. While Morse was abroad Daguerre and Nipes [Niépce—ed.] had after many experiments fixed the picture in sensitive chemicals, but they applied it chiefly or only to copying scenes. Morse, as a portrait painter, thought of it as something to reduce the labor of his portraits. He had a loft in his brother’s structure at Nassau and Beekman streets, with a telegraph stretched and an embryo camera also at work. He ordered one of Daguerre’s cameras from a Mr. Wolf, and felt an interest in the new science. Prof. John W. Draper and Prof. Doremus counselled me, both eminent chemists. It was Draper who invented the enameling of a daguerreotype and I entered at last into business, say about 1842–’43. My studio was at the corner of Broadway and Fulton streets, where I remained fifteen years, or till the verge of the civil war. I then moved up Broadway to between White and Franklin, and latterly to Tenth street, maintaining also a gallery in Washington City. From the first I regarded myself as under obligation to my country to preserve the faces of its historic men and mothers. Better for me, perhaps, if I had left out the ornamental and been an ideal craftsman!”

“What was the price of daguerreotypes forty-five years ago?”

“Three to five dollars apiece. Improvements not very material were made from time to time, such as the Talbotype and the ambrotype. I think it was not till 1855 that the treatment of glass with collodion brought the photograph to supersede the daguerreotype. I sent to the Hermitage and had Andrew Jackson taken barely in time to save his aged lineaments to posterity. At Fulton street, bearing the name of the great inventor before Morse, I took many a great man and fine lady—Father Matthew, Kossuth, Paez, Cass, Webster, Benton and Edgar A. Poe. I had great admiration for Poe, and had William Ross Wallace bring him to my studio. Poe rather shrank from coming, as if he thought it was going to cost him something. Many a poet has had that daguerreotype copied by me. I loved the men of achievement, and went to Boston with a party of my own once to take

the Athenian dignitaries, such as Longfellow, whom I missed. In 1850 I had engraved on stone twelve great pictures of mine, all Presidential personages like Scott, Calhoun, Clay, Webster and Taylor; they cost me \$100 for the stones, and the book sold for \$30. John Howard Payne, the author of "Home, Sweet Home," was to have written the letter-press, but Lester did it. In 1851 I exhibited at the great Exhibition of London, the first exhibition of its kind, and took the first prize away from all the world. I also issued the first sheet of photographic engravings of a President and his Cabinet, namely Gen. Taylor in 1849. I sent this to old James Gordon Bennett and he said: 'Why, man, do Washington and his Cabinet look like that?' Alas! They were dead before my time. I went to Europe in 1851 upon the same ship with Mr. Bennett, wife and son. His wife I often took, but the old man was shy of the camera. He did, however, come in at last, and I took him with all his staff once—son, Dr. Wallace, Fred Hudson, Ned Hudson, Ned Williams, Capt. Lyons, as I took Horace Greeley and all his staff, Dana, Kipley, Stone, Hildreth, Fry."

"Was the London Exhibition of benefit to you?"

"Indeed, it was. That year I went through the galleries of Europe and found my pictures everywhere as far as Rome and Naples. When in 1860 the Prince of Wales came to America I was surprised, amidst much competition, that they came to my gallery and repeatedly sat. So I said to the Duke of Newcastle: 'Your Grace, might I ask to what I owe your favor to my studio? I am at a loss to understand your kindness.' 'Are you not the Mr. Brady,' he said, 'who earned the prize nine years ago in London? You owe it to yourself. We had your place of business down in our notebooks before we started.'"

"Did you take pictures in England in 1851?"

"Yes. I took Cardinal Wiseman, the Earl of Carlisle and others. I took in Paris Lamartine, Cavaignac and others, and Mr. Thompson with me took Louis Napoleon, then freshly Emperor."

I could still see the deferential, sincere way Brady had in procuring these men. His manner was much in his conscientious appreciation of their usefulness. Men who disdain authority and cultivate rebellion know not the victories achieved by the conquering sign of *Ich Dien*—"I serve."

Mr. Brady is a person of trim, wiry, square-shouldered figure, with the light of an Irish shower-sun in his smile. Said I:

"Did anybody ever rebuff you?"

"No, not that I can think of. Some did not keep their engagements. But great men are seldom severe. I recollect being much perplexed to know how to get Fenimore Cooper. That, of course, was in the day of daguerreotyping. I never had an excess of confidence, and perhaps my diffidence helped me out with genuine men. Mr. Cooper had quarrelled with his publishers, and a celebrated daguerreotyper, Chilton, I think, one of my contemporaries, made the mistake of speaking about the subject of irritation. It was reported that Cooper had jumped from the chair and refused to sit. After that daguerreotypers were afraid of him. I ventured in at Biggsby's, his hotel, corner of Park place. He came out in his morning gown and asked me to excuse him till he had dismissed a caller. I told him what I had come for. Said he: 'How far from here is your gallery?' 'Only two blocks.' He went right along, stayed two hours, had half a dozen sittings, and Charles Elliott painted from it the portrait of Cooper for his publishers, Stringer & Townsend. I have had Willis, Bryant, Halleck, Giulian C. Verplank in my chair."

"And Albert Gallatin?"

"Yes, I took a picture of him who knew Washington Irving and fought him and ended by adopting most of his views. Washington Irving was a delicate person to handle for his picture, but I had him sit and years afterwards I went to Baltimore to try to get one of those pictures of Irving from John P. Kennedy, who had it."

“Jenny Lind?”

“Yes, Mr. Barnum had her in charge and was not exact with me about having her sit. I found, however, an old schoolmate of hers in Sweden who lived in Chicago, and he got me the sitting. In those days a photographer ran his career upon the celebrities who came to him, and many, I might say most, of the pictures I see floating about this country are from my ill-protected portraits. My gallery has been the magazine to illustrate all the publications in the land. The illustrated papers got nearly all their portraits and war scenes from my camera. Sontag, Alboni, La Grange, the historian Prescott—what images of bygone times flit through my mind.”

“Fanny Ellsler?”

“She was brought to me by Chevalier Wykoff for a daguerreotype.”

“Not in her Herodias raiment?”

“No, it was a bust picture. The warm life I can see as she was, though dead many a year ago.”

“Did you daguerreotype Cole, the landscape artist?”

“I did, with Henry Furman. I think Cole’s picture is lost from my collection.”

“‘Aggassiz?’”

“I never took him up, through the peculiarity of his tenure in New York; he would come over from Boston in the day, lecture the same night and return to Boston by night. One day I said sadly to him: ‘I suppose you never mean to come?’ ‘Ah!’ said he, ‘I went to your gallery and spent two hours studying public men’s physiognomies, but you were in Washington City.’ So I never got him.”

“I suppose you remember many ladies you grasped the shadows of?”

“Mrs. Lincoln often took her husband’s picture when he came to New York after the Douglas debates and spoke at the Cooper Institute. When he became President Marshal Lamont said: ‘I have not introduced Mr. Brady.’ Mr. Lincoln answered in his ready way, ‘Brady and the Cooper Institute made me President.’ I have taken Edwin Forrest’s wife when she was a beautiful woman; Mrs. Sickles and her mother; Harrier Lane; Mrs. Polk. Yes, old Booth, the father of Edwin, I have posed, and his son, John Wilkes, who killed the President. I remember when I took Mr. Lincoln, in 1859, he had no beard. I had to pull up his shirt and coat collar; that was at the Tenth street gallery. Mr. Seward got the gallery for the Treasury to do the bank-note plates by conference with me. I took Stanton during the Sickles trial and Philip Barton Key while alive. I had John Quincy Adams to sit for his daguerreotype and the full line of Presidents after that. I took Jefferson Davis when he was a Senator and Gen. Taylor’s son-in-law. Mrs. Alexander Hamilton was ninety-three when she sat for me.”

“All men were to you as pictures?”

“Pictures because events. It is my pleasant remembrance that Grant and Lee helped me out and honored me on remarkable occasions. I took Gen. Grant almost at once when he appeared in Washington city from the West, and Lee the day but one after he arrived in Richmond.”

“Who helped you there?”

“Robert Ould and Mrs. Lee. It was supposed that after his defeat it would be preposterous to ask him to sit, but I thought that to be the time for the historical picture. He allowed me to come to his house and photograph him on his back porch in several situations. Of course I had known him since the Mexican war when he was upon Gen. Scott’s staff, and my request was not as from an intruder.”

“Did you have trouble getting to the war to take views?”

“A good deal. I had long known Gen. Scott, and in the days before the war it was the considerate thing to buy wild ducks at the steamboat crossing of the Susquehanna and take them to your choice friends, and I often took Scott, in New York, his favorite ducks.”

I made to him my suggestion in 1861. He told me, to my astonishment, that he was not to remain in command. Said he to me: 'Mr. Brady, no person but my aide, Schuyler Hamilton, knows what I am to say to you. Gen. McDowell will succeed me to-morrow. You will have difficulty, but he and Col. Whipple are the persons for you to see.' I did have trouble; many objections were raised. However, I went to the first battle of Bull Run with two wagons from Washington. My personal companions were Dick McCormick, then a newspaper writer, Ned House, and Al Waud, the sketch artist. We stayed all night at Centreville; we got as far as Blackburne's Ford; we made pictures and expected to be in Richmond next day, but it was not so, and our apparatus was a good deal damaged on the way back to Washington; yet we reached the city. My wife and my most conservative friends had looked unfavorably upon the departure from commercial business to pictorial war correspondence, and I can only describe the destiny that overruled me by saying that, like Euphorion, I felt that I had to go. A spirit in my feet said, 'Go,' and I went. After that I had men in all parts of the army, like a rich newspaper. They are nearly all dead, I think. One only lives in Connecticut. I spent over \$100,000 in my war enterprises. In 1873 my New York property was forced from me by the panic of that year. The Government later bought my plates and the first fruits of my labors, but the relief was not sufficient and I have had to return to business. Ah! I have a great deal of property here. Mark Twain was here the other day."

"What said he?"

"He looked over everything visible, but of course not the unframed copies of my works, and he said: 'Brady, if I was not so tied up in my enterprises I would join you upon this material in which there is a fortune. A glorious gallery to follow that engraved by Sartain and cover the expiring mighty period of American men can be had out of these large, expressive photographs; it would make the noblest subscription book of the age.'"

"I suppose you sold many photographs according to the notoriety of the time."

"Of such men as Grant and Lee, at their greatest periods of rise or ruin, thousands of copies; yet all that sort of work takes rigid, yes, minute worldly method. My energies were expended in getting the subjects to come in, in posing them well and in completing the likeness. Now that I think of it, the year must have been 1839, when Morse returned from Europe, and soon after that Wolf made my camera. I had a large German instrument here a few weeks ago, and some one unknown stole the tube out of it, which cost me \$150."

I reflected that this man had been taking likenesses since before the birth of persons now half a century old.

Brady lived strongest in that day when it was a luxury to obtain one's likeness, and he had some living people who began with the American institution. John Quincy Adams, for instance, was a school boy at the Declaration of Independence, or soon after, but, living to 1849, Brady seized his image in the focus of the sun. Had he been thirteen years earlier he could have got John Adams and Jefferson, too; and he missed the living Madison and Monroe and Aaron Burr by only four or five years. For want of such an art as his we worship the Jesus of the painters, knowing not the face of our Redeemer, and see a Shakespeare we know not to have been the true Will or a false testament. Our Washington city photographer probably beheld a greater race of heroes in the second half of the nineteenth century than the first, but in the growth of the mighty nation has come a refined passion to see them who were the Magi at the birth of this new star. Before Mr. Brady was Sully the painter, before Sully was Charles Wilson Peale, working to let no great American visage escape, and in their disposition and devotion these three men were worthy of Vandyke's preserving pencil. The determined work of M. B. Brady resembles the literary antiquarianism of Peter Force, who lived in the city of Washington also, and the great body of collections of both have been acquired by the Government.

[End of text. Bracketed text, “SPECIAL CORRESPONDENCE . . .” is per original text presentation.—Ed.]

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**EDITOR’S NOTES:**

This text—with extensive annotations by Thomas R. Kailbourn—is reprinted in *Daguerreian Annual 1992* (Eureka: The Daguerreian Society, 1992): 109–17.

Another interview with Brady is found in “An Old-Time Photographer and His Reminiscences,” *Photographic Times and American Photographer* (New York) 25:681 (5 October 1894): 226.<sup>1</sup>

1. [http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8940005\\_BRADY\\_PHOTO-TIMES\\_1894-10-05.pdf](http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8940005_BRADY_PHOTO-TIMES_1894-10-05.pdf)

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