

FOREWORD

In this second volume of their biographical dictionary of photographers working in the nineteenth-century West, Peter Palmquist and Tom Kailbourn again demonstrate their extraordinary skills as researchers. Here are the lives of photographers, the known and the unknown, laid out for the reader with a literary wit and scholarly acumen that make this the rarest sort of reference work—one that is actually fun to read. The book represents a particular kind of history, well established in the United States by the late nineteenth century, which presumes that individual lives well-told will, in the aggregate, tell larger stories. Palmquist and Kailbourn present us with the trees, as it were, in the hope that we can get our bearings and begin to describe the forest.

By the late nineteenth century, Americans were fascinated with such biographical encyclopedias and dictionaries, the massive chronicles of assembled lives that documented individual achievement and argued implicitly for the genius and distinctiveness of the American nation. The principle behind these books was simple: history could be understood as the sum of individual experiences. In exemplary lives, one could read the grand sweep of the American past. Inevitably, the lives selected for inclusion in the books betrayed the editors' own particular sense of distinction and merit, but the texts also reflected a kind of democratic impulse. The United States did indeed include families of "ancient lineage and records," noted the editors of an 1898 edition of Appleton's *National Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, but there were "other families, founded in the soil, so to speak, destined to become the ancestry of the future." The history of the past may have focused on a few, "but the history of the present and the future must be a history of the many, who, by head and hand, or by force of character or high attainment, have made themselves the centres and sources of influence." Particularly in the West, one could find "men with rough exteriors who have done more for the prosperity and growth of their communities than has been done by many more noted personages in the East." Such men, the editors argued, merited particular attention.

Encyclopedias such as Appleton's struck an odd balance between two competing notions of history. On the one hand, they continued to honor the so-called great man conception of history, the sense that broad historical movements were best understood by analyzing the actions of key thinkers and doers, but they also remained open to the possibility that history could be conceived in broader terms. To write a full history of America, and particularly of the West, one had to be sensitive to local imperatives, recognizing the accomplishments of subjects whose achievements were more regional. Underlying both notions of history, though, lay an abiding faith in the power of individual lives to illuminate larger historical causes and effects. And there was a prevailing sense that such lives should be exemplary. As the editors of the *Dictionary of American Biography* put it in 1928, "The Dictionary cannot find space for average or merely typical figures, however estimable they may be."

In their attention to biographical detail and faith in the historical value of individual life stories, Palmquist and Kailbourn tread the path laid down by their late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century counterparts. But with a commitment to documenting the life of *every* photographer working in their Western study region before 1866, they make the seeming democracy of those earlier compendia look like some sort of elite version of Burke's *Peerage*. Happily for the reader (as well as the casual historical researcher), there is no focus on exemplary lives here; indeed, finding the scoundrels is half the fun. Where most editors of biographical dictionaries assert their authority by being selective, Palmquist and Kailbourn demonstrate theirs by being as inclusive and comprehensive as it is humanly possible to be. Unlike the editors of the online version of *American National Biography*, a reference source that is updated monthly and at last count included only four nineteenth-century Western photographers, Palmquist and Kailbourn presume we should be interested in everyone who tried their hand at photography or a related craft. It is in some ways a peculiar kind of history to write, for it is a history without large critical assessments. Given equal amounts of available documentation, any given photographer's life is more or less equivalent to another's. And given the biographical organization of the work, the focus is more often on the photographers than on the response to their work, their clients or patrons, or even the subjects of their pictures.

But from small stories come broad patterns; as we wander through the trees we do begin to discern the shape of the forest. From this extraordinary reference work come countless broader tales about nineteenth-century Westerners and the new craft of photography. In the aggregate stories so engagingly told (and meticulously footnoted) here, one finds bigger stories about the inventiveness and mobility of American lives, about the checkered fashion in which the West was settled, about the slow and tenacious growth of photography as a medium of documentation and communication. Still, as each life documented here finds its place in a broader pattern, each continues to assert its quirky distinctiveness and claim a place in our historical imagination.

It is tempting, as one reads through these engaging capsule biographies, to imagine that human lives have neat and discernable shapes, to think that each of these photographers—the successful and the unsuccessful alike—somehow perceived the curve of his or her life. But the literary logic of human lives is more often the invention of the biographer, who writes with hindsight, than of the subject who lives life forward, uncertain of what will unfold next. Peter Palmquist's tragic and untimely death, just as this volume was going to press, is a sober reminder of how hard it is to know or predict the ultimate path of any human life, and how wrong it can be to let a person's death reshape our understanding of how they lived. Addressing one of the historical subjects of his great novel *Angle of Repose* (1971), Wallace Stegner wrote, "I would like to hear your life as *you* heard it, coming at you, instead of hearing it as I do, a sober sound of expectations reduced, desires blunted, hopes deferred or abandoned, chance lost, defeats accepted, griefs borne." In the lively, engaged prose of the some three thousand biographies presented here, the reader can all but hear the passion with which Peter and his collaborator, Tom Kailbourn, engaged their massive research project, recovering from oblivion and bringing to life scores of little-known photographers. And in these stories of love and loss, struggle and success, live the sound of life coming at us, a tribute to the men who penned these biographies as well as to the subjects they celebrate.

Martha A. Sandweiss
Amherst College