

Carleton Watkins: Making the West American

Tyler Green

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Carleton Watkins may not be a name known to contemporary artists and art critics, but his exceptional photographs of the American West, taken during the mid- to late-1800s, “did more to make the West a part of the United States” than any single American, writes critic/historian Tyler Green. This extensive biography of Watkins, complete with a wealth of black-and-white reproductions of his photographs, had to be painstakingly constructed from a wide variety of sources, since Watkins’s own documentation was destroyed in the 1906 San Francisco earthquake.

Green’s yeomanlike effort to tell the story of Watkins is rewarded by his own accidental discovery of a surprising fact: Green’s great-great-grandfather, W. H. Lawrence, was apparently an investor who aided Watkins in reestablishing his career after a bank loan went bad. This coincidence notwithstanding, the story of how Watkins came to photograph landscapes in California, Oregon, and Utah is both fascinating and prophetic. He developed a camera “so advanced that his peers and competitors would need most of the 1860s to catch up.” His photography was used by scientists to study and teach, and it influenced other artists. Some of his work (the pictures he took of Mount Shasta in California, for example) “stands alone” to this day. His photographs even helped open up the West, writes Green: “Since nearly the start of Carleton Watkins’s career, his work had motivated Americans to visit California.”

Green’s clearly written chronological narrative traces Watkins’s life and career. His inclusion of many of Watkins’s most notable photographs enriches the portrait of a photographer whose work left an indelible mark on an expanding country. It is a testament to Watkins that his photographs are just as stunning more than 150 years later. This is a book to be appreciated both textually and visually.

BARRY SILVERSTEIN (September/October 2018)

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