

“Doings of the Sunbeam” (excerpts)

Oliver Wendell Holmes

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Holmes devotes most of this article to a description of how photographs are made. In this passage he remarks upon the way “photography is extending itself to embrace subjects of strange and sometimes fearful interest.”

...

We have now before us a series of photographs showing the field of Antietam and the surrounding country, as they appeared after the great battle of the 17th of September. These terrible mementos of one of the most sanguinary [bloody] conflicts of the war we owe to the enterprise of Mr. Brady of New York. We ourselves were on the field upon the Sunday following the Wednesday when the battle took place. It is not, however, for us to bear witness to the fidelity of views which the truthful sunbeam has delineated [drawn] in all their dread reality. The photographers bear witness to the accuracy of some of our own sketches in a paper published in the December number of this magazine. The “ditch” is figured, still encumbered with the dead, and strewed, as we saw it and the neighboring fields, with fragments and tatters. The “colonel’s gray horse” is given in another picture just as we saw him lying.

Let him who wishes to know what war is look at this series of illustrations. These wrecks of manhood thrown together in careless heaps or ranged in ghastly rows for burial were alive but yesterday. How dear to their little circles far away most of them! – how little cared for here by the tired party whose office it is to consign them to the earth! An officer may here and there be recognized; but for the rest – if enemies, they will be counted, and that is all. “80 Rebels are buried in this hole” was one of the epitaphs we read and recorded. Many people would not look through this series. Many, having seen it and dreamed of its horrors, would lock it up in some secret drawer, that it might not thrill or revolt those whose soul sickens at such sights. It was so nearly like visiting the battlefield to look over these views, that all the emotions excited by the actual sight of the stained and sordid scene, strewed with rags and wrecks, came back to us, and we buried them in the recesses of our cabinet as we would have buried the mutilated remains of the dead they too vividly represented. Yet war and battles should have truth for their delineator. It is well enough for some Baron Gros or Horace Vernet [French artists known for painting battle scenes; Gros, 1771-1835; Vernet, 1789-1863] to please an imperial master with fanciful portraits of what they are supposed to be. The honest sunshine

“Is Nature’s sternest painter, yet the best”;

and that gives us, even without the crimson coloring which flows over the recent picture, some conception of what a repulsive, brutal, sickening, hideous thing it is, this dashing together of two frantic mobs to which we give the name of armies. The end to be attained justifies the means, we are willing to believe; but the sight of these pictures is a commentary on civilization such as a savage might well triumph to show its missionaries. Yet through such martyrdom must come our redemption. War is the surgery of crime. Bad as it is in itself, it always implies that something worse has gone before. Where is the American, worthy of his privileges, who does

not now recognize the fact, if never until now, that the disease of our nation was organic, not functional, calling for the knife, and not for washes and anodynes [something that eases pain]?

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