

# THROUGH IRISH EYES

*The Civil War  
Photography*



## *Of Timothy O'Sullivan*

BY BRIAN MCGINN

You will not find his name in *A Dictionary of Irish Biography* or *The Encyclopedia of the Irish in America*.

The mountain bearing his name is not listed in guides to Irish America's historical landmarks. His grave, at St. Peter's Catholic Cemetery on Staten Island, is unmarked. In death, as in life, Timothy O'Sullivan has eluded the spotlight, and more than merited the subtitle of a 1966 biography, *America's Forgotten Photographer*.

This fate might at first glance seem fitting for a self-effacing Irishman who recorded some of nineteenth-century America's most gripping images from the working end of a box camera. But as O'Sullivan's genius is belatedly recognized—one of the twentieth century's foremost masters of the craft, the late Ansel Adams, placed the Irishman's work among the world's best

photography—the scarcity of verifiable information about O'Sullivan's background and personality has become a source of real historical frustration.

### IRISH BY BIRTH?

Even his birth in Ireland is hypothetical. Indeed, some biographers have taken at face value O'Sullivan's own claim in an 1880 job application for a photographic position with the U.S. Treasury Department that he was "a native of New York where my father now lives in Richmond Co."

This is contradicted by O'Sullivan's death certificate, drawn up two years later and presumably based on information provided by Timothy's still-living father. According to the certificate of death dated January 15, 1882, Timothy H. Sullivan who died the previous

*Photo: In late May 1864, O'Sullivan's lens found dusty, sweat-soaked Union soldiers enjoying a refreshing swim in Virginia's North Anna River. The bucolic respite was hard earned, coming after bitter fighting in which 1,973 of their comrades were killed or wounded. Courtesy of Library of Congress.*

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*Photo: Timothy O'Sullivan, c.1868 by Alexander Gardner. Courtesy of E. Marshall Pywell Collection.*



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day, aged forty-two years, was born in Ireland, the son of Jeremiah and Ann D. Sullivan.

Sometime between 1840 and his 1855 appearance in U.S. records, Timothy was taken to New York, most likely by parents fleeing the Famine. On November 11, 1855, the confirmation of Tim Sullivan is recorded at St. Peter's Catholic Church at New Brighton, Staten Island. No record of baptism for a Timothy Sullivan, or O'Sullivan—the "O" seems to have been capriciously added or dropped in nineteenth-century records—appears in the records of St. Peter's Parish, founded in 1839. Nor does the 1840 federal census include an entry for any Sullivan family on Staten Island headed by Jeremiah and Ann.

Leading historians of photography, including curators of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American Art in Washington, D.C., now agree that O'Sullivan was born in Ireland. The conclusion is clearly stated in the catalog of a major Smithsonian show titled "American Photographs: The First

Century." The 1996–1997 exhibit, which paid tribute to such photographic giants as William H. Jackson, Edward Steichen and Ansel Adams with just one or two images, included ten prints by the Irish photographer.

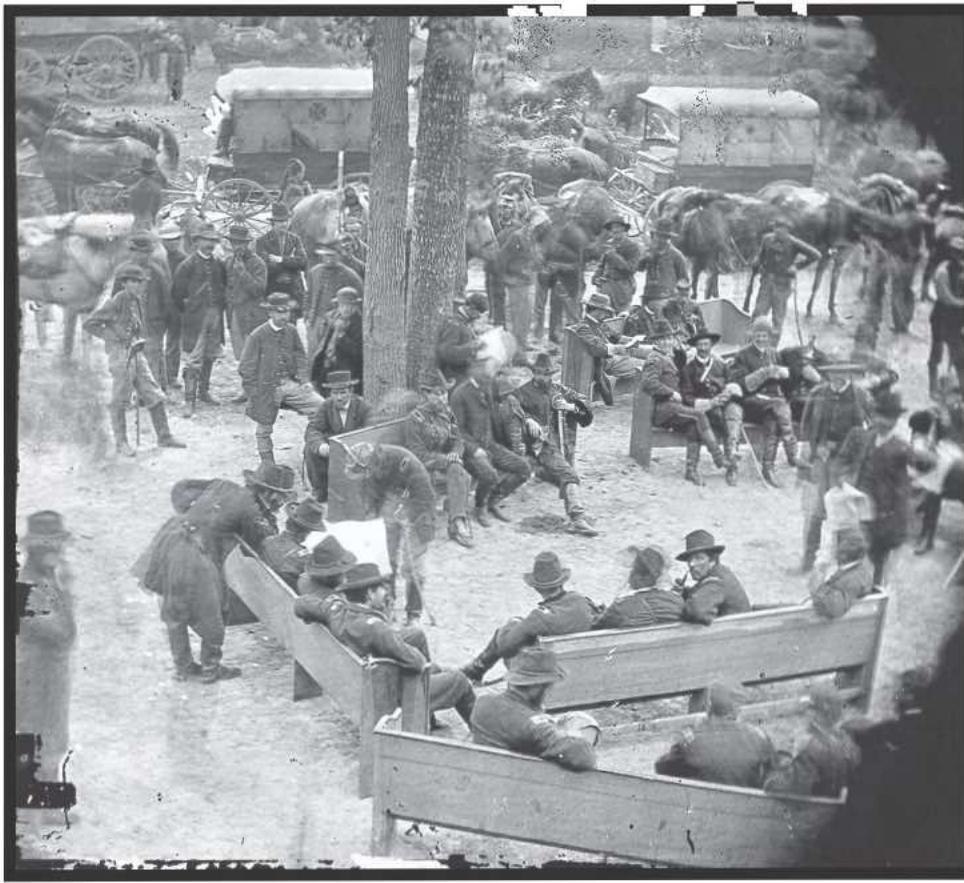
The circumstances that led O'Sullivan in 1880 to deny his Irish birth can only be guessed at. Personal factors, such as O'Sullivan's desperation to secure a salaried position in the face of financial and medical insecurity, must have come into play. If so, the perception that native U.S. birth was necessary to gain a winning edge in the competition for a prized federal post is in itself a valuable insight into O'Sullivan's psychological makeup. O'Sullivan's resort to this strategy also suggests a lingering climate of prejudice against Irish Famine immigrants, despite the blood sacrifices of the Union Army's Irish Brigade during the Civil War that he risked his life to document.

In July 1861, when an overconfident Union Army received its bloody baptism of fire at Manassas, Virginia, O'Sullivan recorded the aftermath of the stunning Confederate victory. Years later, he still lamented his failure to capture the Battle of Bull Run "close up." A Rebel artillery shell, O'Sullivan explained, had blown away one of his cameras.

#### PARALLELS WITH MATHEW BRADY

Also on the battlefield that day was the legendary New York photographer Mathew Brady, for whom the 21-year-old O'Sullivan then worked as an assistant. Just how the two met is undocumented. Coincidence, coupled with Brady's own Irish heritage, may have been at work. Brady lived on Staten Island while O'Sullivan was a teenager, and the Irish American may have picked the local Irish lad to help out in his Manhattan studio. Whatever the circumstances, O'Sullivan learned the tricks of the new trade while serving an apprenticeship in Mathew Brady's famous gallery at Broadway and Fulton Streets.

The early lives of master and apprentice present some intriguing parallels. Although Brady's father was believed to be Irish by birth, his photographer son displayed little knowledge of, or interest in, his own family background. Like Timothy O'Sullivan, Mathew Brady left no diaries or memoirs of an eventful



*Photo: During the Wilderness Campaign of May-June 1864, O'Sullivan captured Union commander Ulysses Grant (left) leaning over the right shoulder of General George Meade (seated, with map) as they plot strategy outside a church at Massaponax, Virginia. Courtesy of Library of Congress.*

career. His surviving letters, like O'Sullivan's, reveal little or nothing of his inner life and passions. Even his middle initial presents a mystery; Brady claimed not to know what the "B" stood for. The significance of the "H" in O'Sullivan's name is likewise unknown, although we could speculate that his middle name was Humphrey, an inept anglicization of the Gaelic *Ambhlaoibh*. Still common in west Munster, the name Humphrey appears in historical records of some O'Sullivan septs, and was famously borne by the eponymous nineteenth-century Kerry diarist.

Perhaps significantly, Mathew Brady picked up his first photographic skills from Samuel F.B. Morse, a brilliant professor of painting and design at New York University. In addition to his interest in the daguerreotype photographic process and the telegraph, which he is credited with inventing, Morse was also an outspoken leader of America's early anti-immigrant politics. And Morse's nativism, foreshadowing the Know-Nothing Movement, was strongly colored by rabid anti-Catholic bigotry.

The extent to which Morse's prejudices may have influenced Mathew Brady, or his Irish protégé, is unclear. But it is well to remember that Brady first established his reputation as a studio photographer, taking portraits in plush galleries that catered to his clients' sense of self-importance. As a pioneer in a brand new business dependent on the patronage of America's wealthy and powerful, Brady may well have absorbed, and passed along, the lesson that upward mobility for the sons of poor Irish immigrants might come easier if their ethnic and religious background was downplayed. Or forgotten.

The outbreak of the Civil War, in 1861, presented Mathew Brady with unprecedented opportunities and problems. As a visionary, Brady immediately grasped the chance to do what had never been done before, utilizing photography to fully document a war. But Brady secretly suffered from severe myopia, and he recognized that neither his eyesight nor his frail general health was suited to the rigors of field photography.

Brady's well-earned Civil War reputation rests not on his photography — he took very few of the images that later bore the credit line of Brady & Company—but on his bold decision to outfit roving teams of younger photographers, many of whom had learned the trade in his New York and Washington, D.C. studios.

#### WORKING WITH GARDNER

In all, an estimated 1,500 photographers were active during the Civil War years of 1861–1865. They produced approximately one million images, of which several hundred thousand survive. Few, however, have stood the test of time better than those of O'Sullivan and his sometime partner, the Scotsman Alexander Gardner.

The Irishman and the Scot, nineteen years his senior, made a natural team. Gardner had admired a display of Brady's work at an exhibition in London's Crystal Palace, and was already an accomplished photographer when he immigrated to New York in 1856 and introduced himself. In 1858, Brady sent both the talented Scotsman and O'Sullivan south to run his gallery on Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, D.C., a move that left the pair well positioned to reach the nearby battlefields of Virginia, Maryland and Pennsylvania.

After assisting Brady at Bull Run in 1861, O'Sullivan spent five months in the field photographing Federal armies and forts in South Carolina and Georgia. On his return to Washington, D.C. in May 1862, O'Sullivan discovered that Gardner had broken away from Brady and formed his own photographic enterprise. O'Sullivan soon followed, and worked for and alongside Alexander Gardner during the remaining years of the War.

Brady would not allow his staff to keep and publish photographs taken on their own time and at their own expense. But the main source of contention appears to have been Brady's refusal to grant individual credit to his staff. The issue would have been personally felt by field photographers like Gardner and O'Sullivan, who risked their lives to obtain images marketed under the best-selling brand name of Brady & Company.

It is primarily due to the Scotsman's strict sense of rectitude that we can today identify much of O'Sullivan's Civil War work. In his *Catalogue of Photographic Incidents of the Civil War*, a rare 1863 pamphlet available in the Prints and Photographs Division of the Library of Congress, Gardner credits O'Sullivan with almost thirty percent of the stock available for



**Photograph:** In July 1863, O'Sullivan photographed the bloated and looted corpses of Union soldiers on the battlefield at Gettysburg. When Alexander Gardner first published this print in 1866, he erroneously—but perhaps deliberately—misidentified the dead as “rebels.”  
Courtesy of Library of Congress.

sale in his own Washington, D.C. gallery (167 of 568 listed photographs).

And when Gardner, in 1866, published his famous *Photographic Sketch Book of the War*, he gave O'Sullivan credit for 44 of the 100 images in the original two-volume work.

By then, even the Scotsman may have succumbed to Brady's love of the limelight. Some of the photographs for which Gardner himself takes credit—and which were by 1866 among the most famous images of the War—were credited to O'Sullivan in the 1863 catalogue. Although in some cases it seems clear that the images were products of joint effort, many historians accept the earlier O'Sullivan credits as more correct.

According to photographic historian Joel Snyder, O'Sullivan was present at many of the best-known and bloodiest battles of the War, including Antietam, Fredericksburg, Aquia Creek, Fairfax Court House, Gettysburg, Petersburg and Appomattox. O'Sullivan's presence in the vicinity of Antietam is confirmed by his September 1862 photograph of a Union signal tower overlooking the battlefield. Rightly or not, Gardner takes sole credit for Antietam's landmark photographs: the Dunker Church, the Burnside Bridge, and the Confederate dead lining the sunken road later known as Bloody Lane.

Providing appropriate if unintentional historical redress, one of O'Sullivan's best-known images, titled "A Harvest of Death, Gettysburg, July 1863," occupies the cover of the 1959 reprint edition of Gardner's *Photographic Sketch Book of the Civil War*.

#### O'SULLIVAN'S VISION

To appreciate the contemporary impact of such images, it is useful to remember that never before had the American public been exposed to pictures of its war dead. Indeed, the photographs first exhibited behind Federal lines were of Confederate dead. This was due, in part, to the fact that Union casualties were often buried by the time photographers reached the battlefield. But pictures of dead and dismembered



Confederates could still shock public sensitivities. When Gardner's photographs of the rebel dead at Antietam went on display at Mathew Brady's New York gallery in October 1862, the *New York Times* reacted with a sharp intake of editorial breath: "Mr. Brady," the *Times* concluded, "has brought home the terrible earnestness of war. If he has not brought bodies and laid them in our dooryards and along streets, he has done something very like it."

Since O'Sullivan worked on several battlefields where Irish units were engaged, it would seem inevitable that some of his photographs include Irish soldiers. In fact, O'Sullivan did appear to take a special interest in chronicling the work of the 50th New York Engineers, a home-state regiment that undoubtedly had a significant Irish-American element. O'Sullivan's carefully composed photographs display the combat engineers at work and rest, laying pontoon bridges across rivers or showing off their log-built church.

*Photo: John Burns, a 72-year-old Gettysburg cobbler, suffered three wounds as he fought alongside Union troops during the climactic battle of July 1863. In addition to Burns' flintlock and crutches, O'Sullivan's composition captured the Old Hero's quiet dignity. Courtesy of Library of Congress.*

*Photo: In February 1865, officers of the 50th New York Engineers posed for O'Sullivan in front of a log church they built—and branded with their insignia—at Poplar Grove, Virginia. A postwar plan to reconstruct the church in New York City's Central Park was abandoned. Courtesy of Library of Congress.*

What is not evident is whether the Civil War's only Irish-born photographer was conscious of, or interested in, the ethnic identities of the War's participants and victims. None of the better known shots of the Irish Brigade — at an artillery emplacement in Fort Corcoran, or attending Sunday Mass in the field — is credited to O'Sullivan. The War's only known photograph of Irish dead, at Antietam, was taken by Alexander Gardner.

What can be said, however, is that O'Sullivan's work combines a high level of technical expertise with an honesty and integrity of vision. His still life shots reveal the debasement of war in the out-turned pockets and bootless feet of bloated Union corpses, and capture the self-confident dignity of an elderly civilian volun-

teer, a veteran of the War of 1812, who became famous as the "Old Hero of Gettysburg."

Motion presented the ultimate challenge at a time when photography demanded long exposure times and perfect stillness. When O'Sullivan spotted Union generals gathering for a Council of War on pews pulled from a nearby church, the Irishman seized the opportunity by shooting the scene from the church's second story window. The resulting photographs, with supply wagons passing in the background, have a film-like quality.

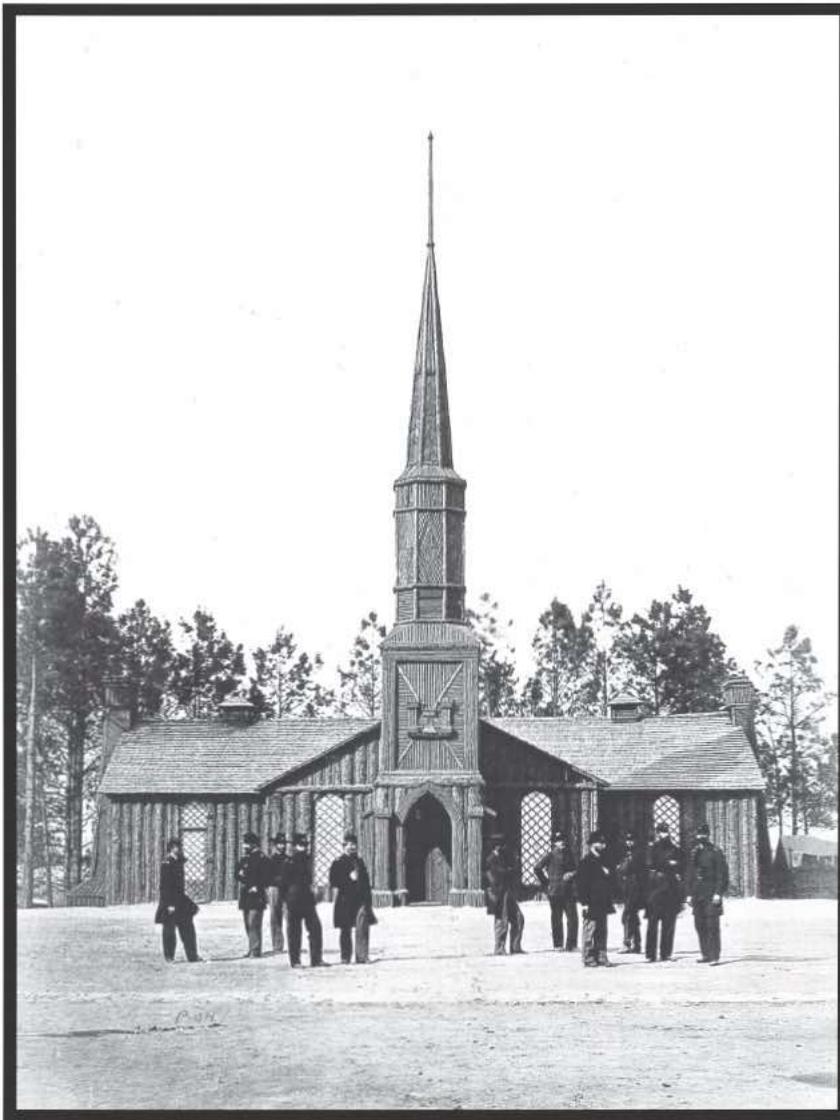
#### O'SULLIVAN AND THE WEST

After the War, O'Sullivan's professional life centered on his participation in two of the great survey expeditions to the American West. The first, led by Clarence King, explored a swath of wilderness 100 miles wide, stretching along the 40th Parallel between the Sierras and the Rocky Mountains, between 1867 and 1869. The second, under George Wheeler, covered vast areas of the American Southwest between 1871 and 1874.

These expeditions brought into the range of the Irishman's cameras not only the majestic natural beauty of the region, but also its Native American inhabitants. Among the thousand images that survive those seven years on the frontier are stunning and historically priceless photographs of ancient Indian ruins, inhabited pueblos, and early Spanish churches.

On leave from the West in 1873, O'Sullivan married Laura Virginia Pywell, the daughter of an English-born livery stable operator in Washington, D.C. Timothy likely met his future wife through her brother, William R. Pywell, a Civil War photographer whose work is also represented in *Gardner's Photographic Sketch Book of the War*. In addition to marrying outside his ethnic background, O'Sullivan was also abandoning whatever bonds remained to his Catholic upbringing; the marriage was performed by David Jutten, a Protestant minister in Washington, D.C.'s E Street Baptist Church.

After his final return from the West, in late 1874, O'Sullivan was employed printing the negatives from his survey work. His brief career at the Treasury Department, 1880–1881, was



abruptly terminated in March 1881 by the onset of tuberculosis of the lungs. While Timothy was convalescing at his parents' home on Staten Island, his wife Laura succumbed to the same disease on October 18, 1881 in Washington, D.C. She was thirty-one.

Timothy returned to Washington for the funeral and buried his wife alongside the couple's only child, a son stillborn in 1876, in the Pywell family plot in Rock Creek Cemetery. In late December, he returned to Staten Island and was placed under a doctor's care. Timothy died at his parents' home, aged 42, on January 14, 1882. Undertaker Daniel Dempsey handled the arrangements for his January 17 interment at St. Peter's.

Although his grave remains unmarked, there is a fitting monument to the accomplishments of this elusive Irishman in Utah, where O'Sullivan worked with both the King and Wheeler surveys. In 1979, through the efforts of Arthur Whitehead, a Department of Agriculture photographer in Salt Lake City, an 11,000-foot mountain on the outskirts of the Utah capital was officially christened Mount O'Sullivan.

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