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by Jeanne Schinto

A Book Review

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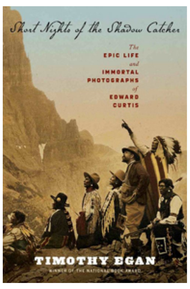
Short Nights of the Shadow Catcher: The Epic Life and Immortal Photographs of Edward Curtis
by Timothy Egan
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012, 384 pages, hardbound, $28.



On April 10, 2012, at Christie's in New York City, a complete set of Edward S. Curtis's *The North American Indian* sold to a private collection via an agent for $2,882,500. The price remains the world auction record for a copy of this monumental masterwork and for a photographically illustrated book of any kind. Yet, when Curtis died at 84 in 1952, he was embittered and cranky, having been reduced in his later years to farming and trying his hand at gold mining. The *New York Times* obituary of the man once hailed as a national institution was a mere 76 words, and it never directly mentioned his 20-volume, 20-folio masterwork that had taken him 30 years to complete.

Nor did the obituary say how he had recorded and preserved 10,000 Indian songs; vocabularies and pronunciation guides for 75 Indian languages; and transcribed an incalculable number of Indian myths, rituals, and religious stories. Also missing was mention of the groundbreaking work he had done in documentary film, producing the feature-length *In the Land of the Head Hunters* in 1914, eight years before Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*.

Timothy Egan's *Short Nights of the Shadow Catcher* tells the story of Curtis and how his magnum opus came about and almost didn't. It also includes, in an epilogue, its rediscovery, which began in the early 1970's after more than 200,000 photogravures and the copper gravure plates that he had used to publish *The North American Indian* turned up in a Boston bookstore's basement.

A gallery in New Mexico bought the cache and put on exhibitions. The shows "were mobbed." Reprints were widely circulated and still are today as Curtis's portraits of men such as Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce and Geronimo at age 76 have come to be seen as iconic as Gilbert Stuart's oils of early U.S. presidents. Then there was the backlash after some academics protested that Curtis's pictures were staged and his subjects were costumed in the clothes of their ancestors, rather than their own, obscuring the reality of their actual grim lives on Indian reservations.

The protests were not without merit, writes Egan. "If, back at the government food clinic in town, an image of short-haired men in overalls lining up for powdered milk was more representative of modern Indian life, Curtis wasn't interested...[He] was a documentarian only of a certain kind of life." A manipulator too, he famously had his studio assistant retouch a photo of two men in braids and native dress in a buffalo-skinned tipi. A small alarm clock was sitting between them on the earthen floor; the retouch removed it.

But these sins of omission should be forgiven, Egan argues, because Curtis's aim had always been "to capture native people as they were before their cultures were too diluted." By many measures, he succeeded at that task. True to the title of one of his most frequently reproduced images—a melancholy scene showing half a dozen Navajo on horseback traveling into the horizon, one looking back—he produced enduring pictures of a "vanishing race."

It all took time and patience. For the Hopi volume alone, Curtis spent seven summers among members of their nation. One result was a group portrait of four young Hopi women, each with her hair arranged in the squash-blossom whorls worn by the tribe's unmarried females. In a composition reminiscent of the four daughters of Edward Darley Boit painted by John Singer Sargent, they express a range of emotions from shy to pensive to curious to bold.

"In dealing with Indians, grandstand plays should be avoided," Curtis once told an inquirer. "One must be just simple, just quiet and as unostentatious as possible. Keep your dignity and stand on it. Make friends with the dogs."

Egan portrays Curtis as a man of great charm; a swashbuckler whose confidence was just this side of cocky; an autodidact who was not only able to live among the Indians but also convinced Teddy Roosevelt to become an early fan and J.P. Morgan to sign on as his financial backer. Based upon early newspaper accounts and many other primary sources, the book is an engaging narrative, told in an easy, colloquial manner ("Curtis wanted to slap him. He had no time for this crap.") But it's also a wrenching, sometimes melodramatic story. That's because Curtis had many personal problems, including a neglected wife, who after 24 years sued for divorce. Neither a family man nor a businessman, he had unending financial troubles too. One wants to plead with him to get this gargantuan job done. Instead, he took eight years off in the middle of it to make his film.

Egan doesn't dwell on it, but Curtis was not by any means the only one who took "Indian pictures" out there. *The North American Indians in Early Photographs* by Paula Richardson Fleming and Judith Luskey (1986) devotes only a handful of pages to him. More prominent is the ethnographic work of John K. Hillers, Timothy O'Sullivan, and William Henry Jackson. Yet Curtis images are among the only images that consistently portray his subjects' inner lives.

For example, Curtis's portrait of Wilbur Peebo, a Comanche, shows him in a shirt and tie and his hair close cropped and slicked, like "a regular Rotarian," in Egan's words. But, as the writer also points out, the face of this man, who came from a long line of fierce and feared horse warriors reduced to stoop labor, "conveys a deep level of hurt."

Peebo was assimilated, just like Curtis's longtime interpreter and assistant, Alexander Upshaw. The process of the project took its toll. Upshaw, a Crow, had a white wife and dressed like Peebo but "had trouble shuttling between two worlds," Egan writes. By day, he helped Curtis "recreate a time when the Crow had their own religion, dress, and economy, when nobody called them inferior or immoral." At night, he went home to the reservation "where nearly everything from that past was being scrubbed from the land."

When Curtis took his picture, Upshaw chose to wear a feathered head bonnet, hoop earrings, and 14 strands of shell necklaces against his bare chest. "This Upshaw is an Indian like his father, not someone else's definition of a man," Egan notes of the man whose face is sadder than Peebo's and who, four years later, in 1909, was dead at age 38 under suspicious circumstances in a Montana jail.

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