18: James Henry Beard *The Night Before the Battle* (1865)

Susan Dodge-Peters Daiss

The annual exhibition of the National Academy of Design in 1865 opened in a new building days after the ending of the Civil War. Both events were celebrated in the May 13th review in *Harper's Weekly* as the dedication of "a temple of art…in the soft dawn of returning peace." The reviewer remarks on the paucity of "works inspired by the war, which is so profuse of romance, tragedy and comedy." One of the first works cited, however, is a war-based painting: James Henry Beard's *The Night Before the Battle*. It is "a solemn and striking picture," declares the critic. "The soldiers lie sleeping around the guns; one of the men has just been writing a letter home; the sentry paces along the parapet; the cold moonlight gleams upon a gun which Death, the skeleton, is sighting." The painting's chilling commentary, the critic concludes, "makes the spectator glad that peace is come."[1]

In the spring of 1865, the military details of *The Night Before the Battle* were all too familiar to artist and audience alike. Rendered with the accuracy of a field reporter and the daring of a social commentator, Beard's painting was hardly a triumphant celebration of the Northern victory. The "solemn and striking" figure of Death is perhaps the most authentic detail of all, draped in a pall, with his scythe handily placed behind him. Beard must have painted this during the last months of the war when Northern victory was finally, but only very recently, assured. The painting's evident power then and now comes from an understanding of the enormous cost of this conflict that Lincoln had mourned the previous summer as a "terrible war," which "carried mourning to almost every home, until it can be said that the 'heavens are hung in black.'"[2]

The Beard family was intimately acquainted with the war on many fronts. All the eligible men enlisted, including James Henry Beard, who was close to fifty when he joined the Union army, commissioned as a captain in General Lew Wallace's division.[3] James's youngest son Daniel, who was born in 1850 and saw the war from home, later recalled his father's wartime activities. "When General Lew Wallace was in command of the Union forces, stationed in and around Covington, he had a unique and remarkable staff, composed of poets, artists and literary men.…All of the staff were wont to meet at our house, of which they made a sort of social headquarters."[4]

The Night Before the Battle is embedded with a wealth of details. Where had Beard observed fortifications made using gabions—woven baskets filled with dirt—and sandbags?[5] Where had he learned about the sighting of a cannon through the embrasure in a fortified wall, or the distinguishing profiles of different cannons?[6] And where did he see the cannon's iron carriage, with its distinctive triangular base, and massive bolts defining its side?[7] The most likely source of Beard's exposure to all of these faithfully rendered details may be the fortifications in and around the cities of Cincinnati, Covington, and Newport. Beard may well have been among the twenty-two thousand Union soldiers and fifty thousand militia who manned these forts on September 2–12, 1862, when the Confederate Army planned its attack and were deterred by the scope of the cities' defenses.[8]

To the audience in 1865, the soldiers in the painting would be immediately identified as belonging to the Union forces. Especially distinctive are the overcoats with outer capes, particularly visible on the soldier who is resting, propped against the side of the cannon carriage; the kepi caps worn by several men; and the artillery soldier's shell jacket with red piping and the three chevron insignia of a sergeant worn by the foreground soldier.[9] The bowler hats worn by two of the huddled soldiers closest to the fire were not, however, standard-issue caps, but rather civilian wear at the height of fashion. Had these soldiers lost their original headgear, replacing it with whatever was readily available? Or, were they perhaps newly come from civilian ranks, serving among the hundred-day recruits at the end of the war?[10]

The flag of the United States of America is prominently draped over the body of the sleeping soldier in the foreground. From the opening battle of the war—the rebel attack on Fort Sumter—the flag became the galvanizing symbol of the Union. In 1880, George Henry Preble chronicled how the flag was ceremoniously displayed throughout the country as never before. "Cincinnati, after the fall of Sumter, was fairly iridescent with the red, white, and blue.... The Queen City gave ample tokens that the mighty Northwest was fully aroused to the perils that threatened the republic, and was determined to defend it at all hazards."[11] Indeed, Beard was among those who decorated the city in bunting. In his autobiography, Daniel Beard recalls, "Shortly after Sumter, Father came home and said, 'Caroline [Beard's wife], war has been declared. The President has called for seventy-five thousand men and I must answer the call.' Father forthwith raised a company of one hundred men at his own expense, and offered them to the President. It was then that he brought home the big flag. It covered the whole front of our house, a three-story building."[12]

James Henry Beard,
1814–1893
The Night Before the Battle,
(detail), 1865
Oil on canvas, 30½ x 44½ in.
Gift of Dr. Ronald M. Lawrence,
78.15

By the flag-bearer's side on the powder-cask are the signs of a soldier's life: an inkwell, with feather quill, an envelope with the hint of a red stamp, an extinguished candle, a cup, and a small tan object that might be the remains of a twist of tobacco.[13] In the foreground, illuminated by the light of the moon, is an abandoned hand of cards. Whatever the game (which may be Four-Card Monte, one of the most popular card games during the war),[14] nineteenth-century viewers would have instantly recognized that the soldiers had been playing a game of chance—a powerful metaphor for the entire painting, evoked by the figure of the skeleton. Death in tomorrow's battle is certain; the only question is the identity of the victims. Are the eleven soldiers in the foreground doomed to die? Or could they be sleeping peacefully, safe in the care of Death, who has pointed the cannon toward the distant and invisible enemy? Or is the painting a memorial to all the war's dead? Whoever was to die in tomorrow's battle, by war's end, the grim reaper was the most fitting personification of the horrific carnage that many by then had likened to "a harvest of death."[15]

A 200-Pound Parrott Rifle in
Fort Gregg on Morris Island,
South Carolina, 1865
from War Department
Photography Collection
Courtesy, U.S. National Archives
And Records Administration
Photograph by Samuel Cooley

By the 1840s, Beard was exhibiting regularly in the annual exhibition of the National Academy. Beyond his portraits—including one of President William Henry Harrison and another of future President Zachary Taylor—the paintings that first gained Beard national recognition were his politically and socially charged genre scenes. *The Long Bill, North Carolina Emigrants: Poor White Folks,* and *Last of the Red Men* attracted critical attention to the artist as an astute observer of human nature and a controversial interpreter of contemporary issues. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Beard did not idealize or romanticize western expansion in his work.[16] His willing depiction of hard truths is revealed over a decade later when he painted *The Night Before the Battle.*

(Facing page)
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The Night Before the Battle
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Oil on canvas, 30⅛ x 44½ in.
Gift of Dr. Ronald M. Lawrence,
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Yet even as Beard reflected the country's exhaustion, his painting may also reflect a sense of relief—even triumph—at the war's ending, as conveyed in a popular song in 1865: "The Night Before the Battle." The song begins with a description that might easily fit the painting:

'Twas night before the battle/
The moon was beaming bright,/
But death's red storm would rattle/
With morning's early light.

And in the final verse it concludes:

> *He fought as fight the fearless,/'Twas often hand to hand,/And when the day was over,/His name rang through the land/And she who sat in silence,/Each breath in tremor drew;/But see, He comes the victor,/All hail! the tried and true./ But see, He comes a victor,/All hail! the tried and true.*[17]

Perhaps these soldiers are not doomed to die in the morning, but coming home after all.

The first audience for *The Night Before the Battle*, for whom this song may have been quite fresh, was clearly impressed by the painting, which, reviewers exclaimed, was "[s]tartlingly wild, [and] original," "solemn and striking."[18] But its message in the end may be its ambiguity. It is at once a paean to victory and a biting commentary. In the face of overwhelming death that visited, as Lincoln said, nearly every home, victory was a welcome relief, but at what cost?

Illustration by Frank Beard for
Jesse Bowman Young's book,
What a Boy Saw in the Army: A Story of Sight-Seeing and Adventure in the War for the Union, published by Hunt and Eaton, New York, ca. 1894,
illustration no. 100

Nearly three decades later, Frank Beard, James Beard's son who had served in the war as an artist correspondent,[19] illustrated a book intended for young readers by Jesse Bowman Young, *What a Boy Saw in the Army: A Story of Sight-Seeing and Adventure in the War for the Union* (1894). The final illustration celebrates "the good" that came of the war. Emerging from the cannon's smoke is a beautiful young woman—a nineteenth-century version of Botticelli's Venus or Primavera?—holding a dove in one hand and a laurel wreath in the other. In the background are idealized scenes of returning soldiers, lovers, and families reuniting. The drawing is titled *Peace and Liberty Born from the Mouth of the Cannon.*[20]

"In the soft dawn of returning peace," James Henry Beard first exhibited a painting that contemporary viewers singled out for praise and recognition. They saw its historic accuracy. They recognized its psychological truth. It would take the intervention of more than a generation, 1865–1894, to imagine that "peace and liberty [could be] born from the mouth of a cannon." *The Night Before the Battle* was painted without such illusions.

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