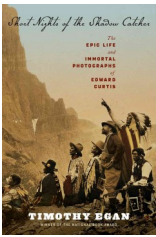


# Photographing a Vanishing America



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If you've ever seen any of Edward Curtis's photos of Native Americans, you cannot forget them. Not only did Curtis capture members of various tribes with respect but their individuality and humanity stares at you from the page. He also recorded many spiritual ceremonies and active shots that give us some insight into what daily life was like for these people.

This excellent biography tells the story of the famous photographer's life, how he came from utter poverty in Wisconsin, then provided for his entire family as a young teen-ager, to a hardscrabble existence fishing and crabbing near Seattle. But in his late teens, he buys something for himself - a rare occurrence. He purchases a lens for his dad's old camera. Soon he manages to round up \$150 - a large sum for a young man supporting an entire family in those days--and buys into a photography business in downtown Seattle. In a mere two years, he becomes the most famous photographer in the Northwest, in high demand to immortalize society and business leaders. But though the work makes him rich and feted by society, it's the Native American culture that draws him. He realizes that the country has finished expanding, that the westward migration has ended, and that the native tribes will have less and less space to call their own. Curtis understood that their way of life-- the clothing, the hunting, and especially the spiritual ceremonies--will mostly cease to exist.

*Short Night of the Shadow Catcher* opens with the story of Princess Angeline, the daughter of Chief Sealth (later anglicized to Seattle) whom the city is named after. She's living hand to mouth in a shack at tide-level suffering from another bout of debilitating pneumonia. Edward visits her and asks to take her photograph. She refuses several times, but eventually allows him. This photo starts him on a quest that leads him to British Columbia, Montana, Arizona and New Mexico, and many places in between to record the Native Americans vanishing way of life. One of his life-changing experiences occurred in 1899, when he was invited to join the 1899 Harriman Expedition to Alaska. The ship was full of scientists doing research along the route yet Curtis made time from his photographic duties to attend their lectures. Because he had very little education, he always relished learning from others.

Curtis even visited Teddy Roosevelt's summer presidential home in New York State where he photographed the President's children. Meanwhile, back home his wife was getting antsy. Business at Seattle's once most popular photography studio had fallen off. Curtis had little interest in taking pictures of bankers, debutantes, or wedding parties. Under a self-imposed time crunch, he realized that the wonderful, complex Native American society was disappearing and that his true mission in life was to record it before that happened.

One disappointment is that the book is standard-sized so that the photos that are included are not shown in large format. But nonetheless Curtis's fascinating life will keep you turning the pages. To see some of this magnificent photographer's work, check out *Edward S. Curtis: The Women* . It's based on an exhibition of his photos and offers high quality reproductions.

Posted by Dory L. on May 2, 2013

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