

Review of A.J. Meek, *Clarence John Laughlin: Prophet Without Honor*
University Press of Mississippi, 2007, 218 pp.

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Only a handful of book-length biographies of famous American photographers (e.g., Dianne Arbus, Ansel Adams, Walker Evans, Dorthea Lange, etc.) have been published. Missing from this collection until now is a biography of well-known New Orleans surrealist photographer Clarence John Laughlin.

Laughlin (b. Lake Charles, La., 1905-1985), a self-taught photographer, writer, and Francophile, is recognized as one of the first American surrealist photographers. Due to a confluence of factors, he often felt ignored by mainstream American photography, and only truly appreciated by the French art scene—so much so that he is buried in Paris'Père-Lachaise Cemetery.

Although Laughlin's photographs appear in catalogues that accompany exhibitions of his work, and countless articles have been written by and about him, only three books, *New Orleans and Its Living Past* (1941); *Ghosts Along the Mississippi* (1943); and *John Laughlin: The Personal Eye* (1973), were specifically produced by Laughlin.

Moreover, only two books completely devote themselves to Laughlin as a subject. One was written by Keith E. Davis (1990) and the other co-edited by John H. Lawrence, Director of Museum Programs for the Historic New Orleans Collection (which stores the Laughlin Archive) and Patricia Brady (1997). Both of these monographs include essays by experts in art, poetry, fiction, photography or history as well as numerous Laughlin photographs. Although some of the writings in these monographs briefly review Laughlin's life, until A. J. Meek (a photographer and former professor of art at Louisiana State University), no one had written a book-length biography.

Meek's long awaited *Clarence John Laughlin: Prophet Without Honor*—which consists of a preface, a foreword by Lawrence, and twelve chapters—is primarily a

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popular rather than a scholarly or intellectual biography. It traces the development of Laughlin in a fairly straightforward chronological fashion. Along the way, it mentions his influences, choice of subject matter, well-known photographs, exhibitions, and relationships with colleagues, gallery owners, and publishers.

The best chapters are the first three. Chapter 1, “Childhood,” the shortest in the book, begins with a description of Laughlin on his deathbed. It quickly moves on to his early childhood, the sense of loss when the family’s rice plantation in New Iberia failed, and the medical issues that plagued his father, mother, and sister. The family eventually moved to New Orleans, where, at age 14, Laughlin lost his father. Meek goes on to describe the kinds of books Laughlin read during this time and his educational achievements. The chapter mentions how Laughlin “credited French photographer Eugene Atget and American expatriate Man Ray as early influences” looking closely at his connection to these artists, notwithstanding the fact that Atget died before Laughlin took up photography.

“The Artist as a Young Man,” Chapter 2, reviews Laughlin’s early photography subjects in New Orleans. Meek notes how the photographer “deliberately sought the decaying and forlorn places, avoiding the French Quarter clichés of some contemporaries” then details Laughlin’s early introduction to photography and briefly touches on Laughlin’s psychology and choice of subject in relation to his difficult past.

Chapter 3, “Ghosts,” examines Laughlin’s choice of subject matter: by wandering the back streets before dawn, Laughlin was able to capture images rarely noticed by others. Meek uses this chapter to talk about Laughlin’s early influences. He mentions the photographer’s social isolation, his early political leanings, and his label as a surrealist.

Although considered by many to be one of the first American surrealist photographers, Meek omits a detailed discussion of Laughlin’s knowledge of Surrealism. Meek suffices to mention that

Laughlin later accepted the label of father of American surrealism, but, as writer Frederick Starr explained, he was much more “Founding Father of the cult that accepted him as one of their own, and American critics agree that he holds the franchise for Surrealist photography on this side of the Atlantic. Yet the title both misrepresents and grossly under evaluates his achievement....” Nevertheless, Laughlin would promote the myth claiming he invented the paradigm. (p. 35)

Chapter 7, “Black and White,” the longest in the book, is the weakest. It details Laughlin’s life during the 1950s, and a series of failed applications for grants to support

his work. It also mentions new people with whom he started to correspond. The chapter talks briefly about Laughlin's relationship with Minor White, editor of the well-known photography magazine *Aperture*.

In the final analysis, Meek has succeeded in producing a book that is accessible to the average, relatively intelligent reader. He provides a competent overview of Laughlin's life and his work. At the very least, he mentions most of Laughlin's associates, reviews his most important work, and frequently examines the subjective nature of Laughlin's photographs. He also does a reasonable job in describing Laughlin, commenting on his cantankerous nature and his feelings of being misunderstood.

Although Meek is highly qualified as a photographer, he has numerous shortcomings as a biographer. One of the greatest failings of this book as a biography is its avoidance of the complicated relationships that Laughlin had with his immediate family. Little mention or analysis is made with respect to these individuals. The deficiency or absence of interviews with key family members, like Laughlin's estranged children, is problematic and a missed opportunity. This may have been due to the fact that few people who knew Laughlin are willing to talk to outsiders about him; but such is the challenge of writing an effective biography.

Meek also rarely makes use of any primary texts by Laughlin, his family, or his associates; nor does he draw upon the previous literature of Davis or Lawrence and Brady. A deeper investigation of Laughlin's production, stemming from his background and the effects of losses in his childhood that shaped his character, would have enriched the book and given the reader more insight into the man and his work.

Meek also fails to properly contextualize Laughlin's work. *John Clarence Laughlin: Prophet without Honor* does not adequately portray the New Orleans and Louisiana of Laughlin's times. Little attention is paid to the French legacy or influence, avowedly important to Laughlin, in the work of the Romantic artist Eugene Delacroix who lived for a time in New Orleans, or native photographers like the Louisiana-born Creole E.J. Bellocq (1873-1949).

Similarly ignored is the relationship of Laughlin's work to that of other pioneers of American photography such as, for example, Alvin Langdon Coburn (1882-1966). Laughlin's trademark multiple-image photographs were not new; Coburn, who later turned to the occult both for spiritual guidance and artistic inspiration, used this technique as early as 1916.

Nor does Meek draw a strong enough connection between Laughlin and what was happening elsewhere in art and culture at the time. Laughlin is not the only famous American photographer of the South, nor the only American photographer

who specialized in the surreal. Ralph Eugene Meatyard (1925-1972), whose work either predated or was contemporary with Laughlin's, is an important case in point.

Meek also fails to properly contextualize Laughlin's importance and influence for several contemporary surrealist and experimental photographers like Lee Friedlander, Les Krims, and Joel-Peter Witkin. None of these figures are considered, let alone mentioned, in the book.

Most significantly, the absence of any art or photographic theory or reference to other photographic studies, significantly diminishes the credibility and contribution of this book, putting it into a category of popular consumption.

In conclusion, Meek's book serves as a starting point for a more in-depth examination of Laughlin's life and the impact of his work. Indeed, as Meek states: "This story is not intended to be the final word on Laughlin but a beginning for future Laughlin scholars. Writing about him is like viewing Laughlin's last-seen film, *The Neverending Story*" (p. xxiv).

This book no doubt will find a niche in photographic circles and American history classes, focusing on the history of the Deep South and Louisiana. But for more than an uncomplicated presentation of Laughlin, within the context of photographic history and theory, another study is still badly needed.

And for those wanting to know more about Laughlin's intimate relationships this book will be disappointing. If you want a kiss-and-tell biography, you will not find it here.

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