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## A Brief, Brilliant Career Capturing America

***Looking for the Light:  
The Hidden Life and Art of  
Marion Post Wolcott***

By Paul Hendrickson  
Knopf

Book review by **Judith Paterson**

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Marion Post Wolcott**

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297 pages; \$35

In 1987, on leave from the Washington Post to write a biography of Robert McNamara, Paul Hendrickson got sidetracked when he walked the few blocks from his home to the Library of Congress and discovered the work of photographer Marion Post Wolcott.

Although her photographs are testament to her inherent talent, Wolcott's career lasted only five years. Why, Hendrickson wondered, would someone so gifted quit, as Wolcott did in the early 1940s, at the peak of her career? That question marked the beginning of Hendrickson's research for this book — an odd and beautiful account of Wolcott's life and the stark images she left of the stricken South. However, it is Hendrickson's excessive attention to this question that mars the book, while his investigative approach to the photographs saves it.

Hendrickson began with trips into the still dusty, still isolated, still impoverished region that is the setting for Wolcott's best work. He tracked down the subjects of Wolcott's photographs, and recounts their personal histories from the 1930s to the present. He also made two excursions to California, where Hendrickson located and befriended Wolcott, then 82, and her husband. (She died in 1990, before the book was published.)

Born in New Jersey to incompatible parents, Marion Post had gotten herself educated, traveled a bit, made some artsy friends, learned a thing or two about photography and, in 1936, landed a job at the Philadelphia Evening Bulletin.

Two years later — bored with shooting fires and society parties — she joined the photography project of the Farm Securities Administration (FSA). Brought together to document the Depression and justify the New Deal, FSA photographers — Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange and Ben Shahn among them — fanned out across America to produce more than 270,000 images and, in the process, shape modern documentary photography.

For three years, Marion Post drove almost nonstop, shooting 15,000 photographs (77 of which Hendrickson includes in his book). In 1941, she met and married Leon Oliver Wolcott, a possessive, strong-willed bureaucrat with two small children. The 31-year-old photographer dropped out of the public eye and, at her husband's insistence, had all her work postcredited to reflect her new name. She took only a few more professional photos after that.

Collectors and curators rediscovered her work in the late 1970s. About the same time, Hendrickson began writing about American culture for the Washington Post Style section, honing his skills as a documentary storyteller. This book is most satisfying when it relies on the profiling techniques Hendrickson knows best. Some of the more self-contained of the Wolcott scenes fall into this category — Marion as a young woman on the road, taking photos for the Farm Service Administration; a long-forgotten Marion left outside during the opening of an exhibit by one of her rediscovered FSA colleagues because she didn't have an invitation; Marion in her later years, ailing and a little bitter over life's losses.

Among the best of the vignettes is Hendrickson's portrayal of a family of tenant farmers. Wolcott had spotted a son and daughter coming down a "scabbed hill in North Carolina" in 1938. "[The son] looks bald. His legs are bowed outward like barrel slats. He has on a one-piece dresslike garment that may be homemade," Hendrickson writes of the image. "He is being led by an older child, who may be his big sister and who is about a half-step ahead."

Some 40 years after Wolcott photographed the scene and labeled it "Rickets," Hendrickson found the boy, Jerry Little, grown up and doing pretty well in North Carolina; two of his sisters (one of them the girl in the photograph) live in Washington, D.C. From there Hendrickson weaves a story of time and place and survival at least as intriguing as Wolcott's life. The intermingling of people, places and history makes this a book that documents America more than it does the life of Marion Post Wolcott. And when Hendrickson is at his best, no one documents better.

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