penn state university press

Ken Burns' Civil War
Author(s): Gabor S. Boritt
Reviewed work(s):
Source: *Pennsylvania History*, Vol. 58, No. 3 (July 1991), pp. 212-221
Published by: Penn State University Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/27773462
Accessed: 06/01/2013 13:59

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Penn State University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Pennsylvania History*.

http://www.jstor.org

This content downloaded on Sun, 6 Jan 2013 13:59:58 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

Ken Burns' Civil War

Gabor S. Boritt
Gettysburg College

For a long time at the Gettysburg National Military Park a solitary stone wall left standing from a destroyed barn evoked, better than anything else, the American Civil War. Purists, some might say small-minded, objected vehemently, wanting it pulled down. After all, George Rose's barn did not start to crumble until 1934, long after the weary troops of generals Robert E. Lee and George Gordon Meade had left forever. But the tall wall stood there, amidst lush green and amidst white snow, year after year, decade following decade. Experts continued to grumble until at last, in 1985, a windstorm blew it down. The strong Pennsylvania stones that had for so long withstood the wind and weather and expert criticism, make a fine metaphor for one of the important achievements of the past hundred years and more by the students of the great American tragedy and triumph: Ken Burns' PBS documentary series, "The Civil War," the winner of the first Lincoln Prize, a new $50,000 annual award presented by the Lincoln and Soldiers Institute at Gettysburg College, for the best work on the Civil War era.

Burns' eleven-hour long masterpiece is a major contribution to how Americans perceive this central event of their history—indeed war in general. It follows in the tradition of brilliant film making which began with D. W. Griffith's "Birth of a Nation" in 1915. Woodrow Wilson described that work as "writing history with lightening," but better testimony to its terrifying power came with the black men lynched in the film's wake and the rebirth of the KKK.[1] Nearly a quarter of a century later David O. Selznick's 1939 "Gone With the Wind" demonstrated anew, if in a less malignant manner, that cinema about the Civil War continued to matter. Its long reign as the premier film on the War, and the premier romanticization of the "world the slaveholders made," came to a definite end with Burns. The PBS series was seen by fourteen million people in its entirety, when first shown in the fall of 1990, and in part by close to 40 million people.[2] Repeated runs on television and simultaneous release on video continues to add untold millions to its viewing audience. Its influence remains to be gauged, but George Bush and Colin Powell in Washington, and Norman Schwarzkopf in Saudi Arabia, provided telling illustrations as they watched the film hour after hour with its deeply disturbing emphasis on casualties.[3] The country was going to war with Iraq and the documentary reinforced the leaders' insistence on a strategy designed to minimize American military casualties. The recreation of Civil War history still matters in the making of new American history.

If for bibliophiles it is painful to honor a film in place of a book, it should be

This content downloaded on Sun, 6 Jan 2013 13:59:58 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

Courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art, Film Stills Archive, New York.



The KKK to the Rescue. *The famed cavalry charge in D. W. Griffith's "Birth of a Nation" (1915).*

Courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art, Film Stills Archive, New York.



Southern Visions: Tara. *The plantation mansion in David O. Selznick's "Gone With the Wind" (1939).*

This content downloaded on Sun, 6 Jan 2013 13:59:58 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

Courtesy of the Chicago Historical Society.



Unknown Union Soldier. *Image reversed here. Photographer and date unknown. From Ken Burns' "The Civil War" (1990).*

This content downloaded on Sun, 6 Jan 2013 13:59:58 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

some consolation that Burns' work is a close kin of literature. Words count for nearly as much in it as images and sounds. The filmmaker has both the ears and the eyes of a poet. He turns dull black and white photos into haunting images full of life. They hold us captive. They make us choke up. And so do the words. More than 800 quotations and a fine connecting narrative frame the images. In a nation seemingly uninterested in history, and for this visually oriented generation uninterested in reading, Burns invokes the power of the native tongue. Thanks to him, and talented coworkers, millions heard American words from a time when the American language reached perhaps its eloquent high water mark. The words may come from a Mary Boykin Chesnut, a Walt Whitman, an Abraham Lincoln, or a Frederick Douglass—or they may come from people long forgotten. We see men with guns. Soldiers charge. "They seemed to melt like snow coming down on warm ground," the words of an unnamed officer. Burns knew almost nothing about the War when he embarked on his work, and his fresh eyed innocence captured an essence that eluded experts.

The accusation of anti-Southern prejudice made against the film does not stand up well. The charge is summed up by the *Southern Partisan* cartoon showing General Grant leaning against a giant television screen carrying the words "PBS: The Civil War" and with the caption adding: "Brought to you by U.S. Grant." One can understand why the few Southerners still "fighting" the War with vigor would, for example, bristle at seeing in the film Andersonville by itself, with photos of its survivors matching the survivors of Nazi death camps, and with its commander a German immigrant. Anger, however, is directed at the wrong place, even if most Northern prisoner of war camps were also abominations. Burns, whose Confederate ancestors incidentally outnumbered his Union ones, and who made Mississippian Shelby Foote, with his wonderful whiskey voice, his star, intends no injustice. It is true that the North won the War, many Yankee values became dominant American values, and Burns is an American. But his Andersonville is not so much a Rebel crime as it is an American crime. It represents all the prisons and all the victims of the Civil War, indeed all victims of the horrors of war at all times. And the filmmaker's love of both Southerners and Northerners shines through everywhere. Much of this nation is ready for such an approach to the past.[4]

This is not to deny that as history the documentary is open to questions.[5] It makes the Civil War the central event of U.S. history—in the words of novelist-historian Foote, "the cross roads of our being," America's defining moment. I, too, feel the attraction of such a faith. But scholars who see the story of humanity in terms of long range processes should be very uncomfortable with it. Even within the four year focus, these and other historians, too, would want a systematic look at the home front, women, social history in general, religion, diplomacy, cultural, intellectual, constitutional and economic questions. Did any factors besides slavery deserve close attention in the coming of the War, for example? But on these and

This content downloaded on Sun, 6 Jan 2013 13:59:58 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

other matters scholars themselves disagree. Burns has earned the right to his own interpretations.

What historians would call "methodology" combines here music and sound effects, text read by 40 fine voices, and visual materials, primarily old photographs supplemented by virtuoso cinematography. Yet even as dead photos are endowed with unprecedented poetic brilliance, image and text do not always match. The rare expert familiar with the visuals receives repeated jolts. A voice speaks of a college in Gettysburg, the photo shows the Lutheran Seminary. Voice: Chancellorsville; photo: Wilderness. And so on. How much mismatching is justified by art? We would rebel if Lincoln's words were attributed to Grant, or Sullivan Ballou's to another unknown soldier. Yet photographs are as much historical documents as speeches or letters. For many historians, like William Frassanito, who have made great strides in turning photos into specific historical documents (rather than works of art or generic props), "The Civil War" represents a bitter setback. As a minimum the film needed a strong disclaimer.[6]

Out of place photographs also disturb one of the most striking elements of the film: the many photos of the dead. Burns is not so much obsessed with death as he is its friend, one who made utter peace with it. He often teaches us with photos which the Civil War era public never saw. Mutilated bodies, with parts blown away; men grievously wounded; amputees; people soon to be corpses; a

Courtesy of D. Mark Katz from his book *Witness to an Era: The Life and Photographs of Alexander Gardner* (New York: Viking, 1991).



Dead at Gettysburg. *Photograph by Alexander Gardner, July 5, 1863. From Ken Burns' "The Civil War" (1990).*

This content downloaded on Sun, 6 Jan 2013 13:59:58 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

pile of limbs. These give an anti-war ethos to the film which helps explain its warm embrace by post-Vietnam (and pre-Iraq) America. The contradiction between being *against* war and *for* its results—in this case black freedom—is no more resolved by Burns than by the scholars who are equally the products of the anti-war and civil rights era of the sixties and after.

The above contradiction springs from "the hearts and minds" of the creators of the film. Others result from the presence of historians with contrasting interpretations. The documentary pictures Lincoln as the emancipator. But Columbia University historian Barbara Fields dissents, giving most of the credit for black freedom to the black people themselves. The viewer can make up her or his own mind about the truth of history.

The soundtrack provides a rich variety of regional dialects. Even a few effete European voices are heard, sometimes to criticize the North with disdain. Sorely missing, however, are the *sounds* of the immigrants who made up 10% of the Confederate and 25% of the Union armies. The Germans, the Irish, and so many others. When German-born general Carl Schurz speaks, no old-country accent appears. Although the important if coerced African-American contribution to the Southern home front and their contribution to the destruction of slavery is ignored, the "United States Colored Troops" are accorded a deservedly large role in the Northern victory. The immigrants, however, remain unheard.

Many of the finest scholars of the Civil War period served as advisors to the film, a few appeared in it, and the work of others, too, is borrowed freely. Finding myself being quoted verbatim, in part one, without attribution, I remembered Cyrano's retort when told that Moliere stole from him: "Bah—he showed good taste." A film can not have footnotes after all and students of the Civil War surely owe as much to Burns as vice versa.[7] Yet what he and his co-writers badly needed was *one* outside expert to *carefully* comb through all of the footage for errors—probably a military historian since so much of the film targets the war on land, though not that on the waters. Gettysburg, July 1-3, 1863, illustrates the point.

Day one. "The greatest battle ever fought on the North American continent began as a clash over shoes." Folktale. The series uses these masterfully but ahistorically. "The South came in from the North that day and the North came in from the South." A fine sentence that stresses paradox. But the South came in from the West, then the North. Mundane facts often lose out to the well-tuned phrase or the enticing image. "Compared to what was coming, the first day had been a skirmish." Without going into arguments over exact numbers of troops and precise times—a venerable labyrinth—it is clear that the first day, with close to one-third of the three days' casualties, was anything but a skirmish. It foreshadowed what was to come.

Day two is largely devoted to one heroic episode, Joshua Chamberlain's defense of Little Round Top. Such a twist provides literal testimony to the adage

This content downloaded on Sun, 6 Jan 2013 13:59:58 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

that the pen is mightier than the sword. A professor of rhetoric from Bowdoin College, Chamberlain wrote excellent after-battle reports and memoirs. Not surprisingly, his unit, the 20th Maine, eventually attracted a fine regimental historian and, most importantly, in 1975, Michael Shaara, whose novel of the battle, *The Killer Angels,* won the Pulitzer Prize. It made the professor-colonel from Maine into a folk hero. Burns is sensitive to the fact that the mythology of the War continues to evolve. As for history, much of the action that made day two the crucial stalemate, disappears from the film almost entirely.[8]

Day three is Pickett's Charge. The seven-hour struggle for Culp's Hill is ignored. Chronology is upended for the sake of drama. The visual images at times do not match the spoken words and when they do they can still give a false impression. For example Lewis Armistead, who breaches the federal center, is shown on horseback in the romantic painting of Paul Philippoteaux. Of course the Virginian marched and ran, like the other Rebs, because a man on horseback could not have survived on the slopes of Cemetery Ridge. One wonders whether discomfort with military matters produces gaffes that turn "aim low" into the soundtrack's "aim slow," or is Garrison Keillor misreading the text and nobody knows enough to catch the error? Is this why the Taneytown Road becomes the Tarreytown Road? The inconsequential and the historically forgivable shade into the substantive until the battle becomes little more than the saga of Chamberlain and Pickett's Charge.

And yet, after spitting out what to many must seem malicious quibbles (who cares whether General Armistead rode a horse?) it is joyous to shout that the Gettysburg segment, like the film as a whole, is miraculously good art. Chamberlain, and Pickett, and Burns *do* make the battle come alive. And more. When the sunlight hits the cannon through the tree tops on the ridge, we know it is early afternoon, July 3, time for the Charge. Burns filmed on the right day at the right time. The rains come because they had in 1863. The birds sing because they are native to the ground.

We see in the background a 104 year old black woman, eyes shut, reciting War poetry. Her father was a slave, escaped, joined the U.S. Army, returned South and shot his former overseer. We want to believe. Even the expert forgets to analyze the words, the photographs, the paintings. They belong, our senses tell us. So do the sounds of battle, muffled in the background, marching feet, horses hoofs, neighing, wagons, artillery rumbling, something like a Rebel yell, guns fired, night noises, insects buzzing, birds, a piano. They take away your breath. They put tears in your eyes. They underscore the historical insights. Shelby Foote: "Gettysburg was the price the South paid for having Robert E. Lee. That was the mistake he made. The mistake of all mistakes." We know that we could not find 13,000 men in the western world today for Pickett to charge against those Yankee guns. Why did the soldiers fight? Why did *they* go up Cemetery Ridge? Then we hear a Rebel officer urging his men, attacking south against the insurmountable northern

This content downloaded on Sun, 6 Jan 2013 13:59:58 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

Courtesy of Walter Lane.



Intimations of Glory. *Photograph by Walter Lane. French painter Paul Philippoteaux's General Armistead is mortally wounded as his troops capture a Union battery at the Angle in Gettysburg. From Ken Burns' "The Civil War."*

breastworks: "Home, boys, home! Remember, *home* is over beyond those hills!"

It is preposterous to compare a work that outlasted millennia with another created during the past half decade. And yet as one lovingly contemplates "The Civil War" it conjures up the *Iliad,* the story of a war from the perspective of the winner, the perspective that mostly survives. Homer, of course, is not very good history. Nor are the works that have made history live over the ages, the *Bible, Beowulf,* the *Shah-nama,* the *Mahabharata,* the *Three Kingdoms, Heike Monogatari, Hiawatha* and *Shaka.* None are good history. By the strict and often deadening standards of academe neither is the work of Ken Burns. That it is touched by the fire of a great gift, however, can not be denied. It challenges our understanding of what history is.

This content downloaded on Sun, 6 Jan 2013 13:59:58 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

Notes

Robert V. Bruce and James M. McPherson both gave a critical reading to this essay. I also benefitted from discussing the Gettysburg segment of "The Civil War" with Norse Boritt, William A. Frassanito, Mark Nesbitt, William H. Ridinger, and Scott Hartwig.

1. Wilson quoted in Jack Temple Kirby, *Media-Made Dixie: The South in the American Imagination* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), p. 4.

2. Conversations with Neil Mahrer, Executive Vice President, PBS, January 17, and February 9, 1991.

3. Numerous conversations in person as well as on the telephone with Ken Burns during Spring, 1991, See also, for example, *The Washington Post,* September 19, October 16, 1990, February 5. 1991; *The New York Times,* September 24, 1990.

4. The Southern press, like that of the rest of the United States, gave lavish praise to the documentary. See the book of press clips on "The Civil War," PBS offices, Alexandria, Virginia. The cartoon mentioned above appeared in the *"Southern" Partisan,* Third Quarter, 1990, p. 37. Numerous, mostly brief, press reports also indicated Southern objections to "The Civil War." See for example New Orleans *Time-Picayne,* Sept. 22, 1990; Alan Patureau, "Charges of Bias in Civil War Series Open Old Wounds," *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution,* Sept. 22, 1990; W. Spears, "Battle Lines Drawn Over 'Civil War,'" *Philadelphia Inquirer,* Sept. 22, 1990; Jay Arnold (Associated Press), "PBS Series 'The Civil War' is Accused of Northern Bias," *Tucson Citizen,* Sept. 22, 1990; "South Fears Slam From Civil War Miniseries," Harrisburg *Patriot,* Sept. 22, 1990; "A Southern View," Augusta, GA., *Chronicle,* Sept. 23, 1990; David Braaten, "True Sons of the South Smell a Yankee TV Plot," *Washington Times,* Sept. 25, 1990; Philip Hosmer, "Civil War Still Evokes Controversy," Bridgewater, N.J. *Courier-News,* Sept. 26, 1990; "Documentary by Ken Burns," *Society of Civil War Historians Newsletter,* Sept., 1990, pp. 2-9; "Southern Group Criticizes 'Civil War' " *Electronic Media,* October 1, 1990; "The Civil War," *U.S. News and World Report,* Oct. 8, 1990; " 'Civil War' Deserves Emmy for Pseudohistory," Letter of Elizabeth Gardner Waddington, *New York Times,* Oct. 14, 1990. The strongest yet unconvincing attack on "The Civil War" from a self-conscious "Southern" perspective came from Ludwell Johnson, "PBS's Civil War: The Mythmanagement of History," *Southern Partisan,* Third Quarter, 1990, pp. 35-37.

The documentary was also charged with a pro-Southern and anti-black bias. See for example Michael Thelwell quoted in Charles Leehrsen with Mark Miller, "Revisiting The Civil War," *Newsweek,* Oct. 8, 1990, p. 62. The most cogent statement related to such a view came from Leon Litwack of the University of California, Berkeley, who argued that Burns did not do justice to the social revolution which ended slavery. Nancy Scott, " 'Civil War' Social Revolution? Berkeley Historian says PBS Series Gives Inadequate Version of Events" *San Francisco Examiner,* October 14, 1990, and Review of "The Civil War," *MHQ: The Quarterly Journal of Military History,* III (Winter 1991): 44-46. Litwack chaired the committee which denied 1991 the Erik Barnouw Award of the Organization of American Historians for the best television program or documentary film dealing with on American history to Burns, an award he had won twice before for substantially smaller achievements than "The Civil War." Not surprisingly, the above cited *Newsweek* cover story also noted that a lot of academics saw their own specialty slighted in the documentary.

5. For a useful recent look at history on film, including a bibliography, see John E. O'Connor, ed., *Images of Film and Television* (American Historical Association, Malabor, Fla.: Krieger, 1990).

6. For William A. Frassanito's work see *Gettysburg: A Journey in Time* (New York: Scribner's, 1975): *Antietam: The Photographic Legacy of America's Bloodiest Day* (New York: Scribner's, 1978); *Grant and Lee: The Virginia Campaigns, 1864-1865* (New York: Scribner's, 1983). For two good recent books on photography see Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Matthew Brady to Walker Evens* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), and Timothy Sweet, *Traces of War: Poetry, Photography, and the Crisis of the Union* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).

This content downloaded on Sun, 6 Jan 2013 13:59:58 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

Crisis of the Union (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).

7. A handsome book accompanies the documentary: Geoffrey C. Ward, with Ric Burns and Ken Burns, *The Civil War* (New York: Knopf, 1990).

8. The best work on the battle remains Edwin B. Coddington, *The Gettysburg Campaign: A Study in Command* (New York: Scribner's, 1968). The most important recent work is Harry W. Pfanz, *Gettysburg: The Second Day* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987).

This content downloaded on Sun, 6 Jan 2013 13:59:58 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions