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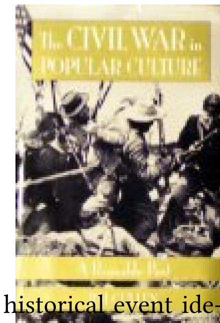
**Jim Cullen**. *The Civil War in Popular Culture: A Reusable Past.* Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995. x + 253 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-56098-459-7.

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What made watching Ken Burns's 1990 PBS documentary on the Civil War so compelling was the sheer familiarity of the sepia tide of photographs and winsome music. I refer not to the images themselves; the vast majority of them were new to me. Rather, what I recognized so clearly was the intensity of Burns's fascination (registered in the way the camera panned and zoomed each picture) with a period at once so distant and so close. This was the same fascination I had found as a boy when visiting most of the Civil War battlefields from Gettysburg to Richmond, when first reading the American Heritage *History of the Civil War* (with its meticulous maps complete with figurine soldiers in rank), and then Bruce Catton, *Rifles for Watie, and* The Red Badge of Courage_. I even remember as particularly conducive to boyhood revery one episode of "The Twilight Zone," where all the casualties of the war (the last being a solemn Abraham Lincoln) filed past one poor woman's cabin. Burns's epic brought together and focussed for me all of these memories (and more) into a curious melange of historical distance, personal memory, and immediate experience, provoking a profound encounter with what Freud described (in a different context) as the uncanny.

Jim Cullen would argue I think that my encounter with the Civil War exemplifies perfectly the power of popular culture to transform history into myth, and that myth into what George Lipsitz calls a "collective memory" able to yoke individual experience to social identity. From this point of view, for all of its attention to accuracy (indeed perhaps because of it) Burns's documentary is most interesting for how it inhabits, indeed draws its power from, contemporary forms and experiences of the past. As Cullen puts it, "Ken Burns was not simply *describing* the Civil War; he was also *using* it to make statements about the present" (p. 13). In other words, on one level his documentary made a historical event ideologically "usable": for instance, his largely unromantic stress on the passions, loss, and social upheavals of the Civil War spoke to an audience eager to put in the past an equally traumatic, if materially less devastating, war in Vietnam. On another level, what he was doing was "reusing" (to appropriate the subtitle of the book) a Civil War that had already been "used" by previous popular forms (i.e., "The Twilight Zone") and of course making his version available to future "users."

This is a very provocative idea for a number of reasons. First, it offers a way to take seriously popular versions of the past – Cullen discusses novels like *Gone with the Wind*, films, rock music, and reenactors – as culturally vital historical interpretations. Second, as Cullen tries to demonstrate, the idea of a reusable past applies equally well to "professional" or "academic" historians: no matter how carefully we (I put myself in this group) work toward accuracy and objectivity, we still participate in the "myth-making," or ideological, process of making the past into an image of the present. In short, as cultural products, popular and scholarly versions of the past are very closely related.

I am sure there are historians who would resist seeing their work as comparable to that published in *Civil War Times*. But I take Cullen's point as worth pondering. One need only consider how little popular attention other fields of historical study have received (there are few films on print technology, and few magazines devoted to child labor) to recognize how important the relationship between popular and scholarly uses of the past is to the study of the Civil War. In the U.S. at least I can think only of the "frontier" era of the American West, medieval Europe, and classical Rome as claiming a simi-

lar grip on the popular historical imagination.

But what exactly is that relationship? Cullen himself assumes a deep antipathy between "enthusiasts" (or "hobbyists," or "amateurs" – his vocabulary shifts) and "professionals." And to some extent he is right. Like all relationships between high and low culture, academic and popular history are defined in part by what they are not: the former is "objective," rigorously tied to sources, dedicated to finding truth, and written for small audiences; the latter presents "human interest" for a cultural marketplace, and hence often makes truth palatable as it seeks to address a wide range of consumers. From this standpoint, his object of finding with his book some middle ground between the two discourses, of encouraging more "honesty" (about ideology) and "artistry" (p. 33) by its practitioners, is laudable. I think, however, he has this relationship all wrong, and this misperception in the end damages what could have been an important book.

Cullen seeks his middle ground by examining five "unabashedly idiosyncratic" (p. 3) episodes in the historical half-life of the Civil War: Carl Sandburg's multivolume biography of Lincoln; Margaret Mitchell's and David O. Selznick's versions of *Gone with the Wind*; the recent film "Glory"; "Southern" rock 'n' roll; and the increasingly popular phenomenon of historical reenactment. As this list suggests, his goal is not a systematic historiographic study; nor does he discuss the war per se. He is, as he puts it, "less interested in formulating tightly reasoned arguments or documenting previously unknown aspects of human experience . . . [than] in making revealing juxtapositions and suggestive observations that can enrich our sense of past and present" (p. 3). Or, to translate this into the polarities I outlined above: what Cullen's book is not, he seems to say, is a standard academic history. Nor, because it is self-conscious about the manipulative potential of ideology, is it a work of popular culture. Then what is it? Presumably its impressionistic approach signals its place in the middle ground between both traditions of history. The trouble is, Cullen's juxtapositions do not compensate for his lack of tight reasoning.

This is not to say that the book offers nothing of interest. At his best, Cullen suggests a nuanced relationship between the making (writing, filming, etc.) of history, and the making of culture. For instance, the second chapter presents Sandburg's popularly influential biography of Lincoln (my parents bought it through The Book-of-the-Month Club) as both the product of the activist poet's vision of the ultimate populist president, and his ability to consolidate the already full legacy of Lincolnian myth into a hero whose management of the Civil War prefigured FDR's management of the Depression – a comparison that FDR himself exploited. Cullen then compares this Lincoln with that described in James G. Randall's *Lincoln the President*, which helped set the standards for modern historiographic objectivity. What distinguishes the two biographies, Cullen argues, is not their relative accuracy (as academic orthodoxy would have it), but their varying ideologies. If Sandburg's Lincoln is the populist, Randall's is the conservative, resisting the radical tendencies, or the mere blunderings, of the masses. So much for apolitical objectivity.

There are other sections worth reading. His discussion of the use rock 'n' roll performers like The Band, Lynyrd Skynyrd, Tom Petty, and Randy Newman have made of Southern myths of history and race does a good job of teasing out their often ambivalent and even contradictory relations to difficult past. His field interviews with reenactors combine journalistic verve and insight. In Cullen's eyes, reenacting represents what is most progressive and most conservative, even reactionary, about popular culture. On one hand, insofar as they are able to transform popular culture into a ritual of majoritarian values, participants embody the most vibrant strain of an amateur, or hobbyist, historiography of the war. On the other, dominated as it is by white men, many of whom feel as uncomfortable in allowing women a full place in their activities as they do admitting that slavery was a major issue in the conflict, reenacting reproduces a conservatism shaped as much by what is forgotten as by what is preserved.

His chapters on *Gone with the Wind* and "Glory" are less successful, in part because I find his interpretations flat and mechanistic, his conclusions predictable. More serious, because the problem plagues even the best sections, is his inability to build any but the most banal historical contexts for his interpretations. Only the most overused of journalistic cliches allow him, in two pages, to range in history from the Civil War to that in Vietnam, from Richard Nixon to "the U.S.-made monster Manuel Noriega," from the Civil Rights movement to Bosnia (p. 142). All this is supposed to supply a frame for understanding "Glory." Elsewhere, a line from John Ford's film, "Young Mister Lincoln" starts a line of domino-like reasoning that leads somehow from Hollywood to "another short step to electing a Hitler or a Mussolini" (p. 45).

There is a logic to such hair-raising generalization and overstatement: Cullen has much history to cover,

and so it becomes necessary, as he puts it several times, to "usefully oversimplify." After all, what really count are the "revealing juxtapositions and suggestive observations," not tight reasoning. To bog down in too many particulars, or to follow too closely the dictates of the latest cultural theory, would threaten the readability to which Cullen aspires. In short, it would make the book too academic.

I understand such sympathies. But oversimplifying is never "useful," partly because it implies a certain condescension toward the reader, but more particularly because the verve of the impressionistic style Cullen chooses depends on the very details and conceptual distinctions he avoids. I doubt that he consciously condescends, but I do not doubt that he misunderstands the nature of history writing at its best. When academic historians do "cross over" to popular acclaim – and I'm thinking here of Gary Wills and James McPherson – they do so without forgoing the rigor of "tightly reasoned arguments."

By their very exceptionality, of course, such writers attest to the vast gulf dividing popular and academic history. But their success also suggests the presence of a vital dialogue between the two cultural domains. For every historian frustrated by the evasions and often mean-spirited exaggerations of popular versions of the past, there is one who came to the serious study of history through the path of popular culture (who knows what generation of scholars will be inspired by Burns's decidedly middlebrow – and, has been pointed out in many places, partial – rendition of the war). For every enthusiast put off by the pedantry or abstruseness of academic prose, there is one who has partaken, directly or vicariously, in the excitement of scholarly insight. To be sure, there are sharp cultural and ideological skirmishes between those on either side of the divide. But the give and take is much more provocative, indeed much more productive, than Cullen represents.

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