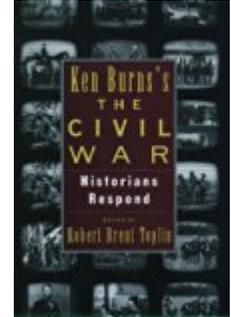


Robert Brent Toplin, ed.. *Ken Burns's The Civil War: Historians Respond*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. xxvi + 197 pp. \$24.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-509330-8.



Reviewed by Lex Renda

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When asked what my area of specialty is, my usual answer is "nineteenth-century American political history," rather than "The Civil War and Reconstruction." Even though I teach courses on the origins and consequences of the war, and even though my research focuses on the mid-nineteenth century, I shy away from giving a response that will inevitably lead to a second question: "What is your appraisal of the PBS television series, *The Civil War*?" Quite self-consciously, I fear that I might come across as an academic snob pointing out the many shortcomings of this extraordinarily popular film. Many of the contributors to this volume seem to be similarly affected. The affliction is far from fatal, and if the book is issued in paperback, it would work well as required reading in any Civil War and Reconstruction class. At the same time, the book confirms the existence of deep chasms, not only between historians and the lay public, but also between the

"new" social and political historians on the one hand, and military historians, biographers, and non-academic historians on the other.

Robert B. Toplin, perhaps the nation's foremost film historian, has assembled a cast of distinguished scholars for commentary on the series. Two of them, retired professor C. Vann Woodward and Toplin himself, clearly like the film; three of them, social and political historians Catherine Clinton, Eric Foner, and Leon F. Litwack, condemn it; and two others, biographers and military historians Gabor S. Boritt and Gary W. Gallagher, fall somewhere in between. The book concludes with spirited defenses by series writer Geoffrey C. Ward and director Ken Burns.

Toplin judges Burns by the standards of television, not by those of historians. Not surprisingly, Burns emerges unscathed. Toplin justly lauds Burns for his dynamic use of photographs and for eschewing fictional re-creations of events. Jay Ungar's musical composition, "Ashokan Farewell," the many quotations of individuals from various walks of life, and Sullivan Ballou's lovely and moving letter to his wife Sarah, are all properly

seen as vehicles for stirring viewers' legitimate emotions as well as their interest in the Civil War.

Toplin also asks that we see *The Civil War*, in three principal ways, as reflective of late-twentieth-century America. He makes the sensible observation that just as historians have been influenced by their times, so has Burns. By showing the darker side of war, Burns clearly has more in common with the directors of *Born on the Fourth of July* and *Glory* than with those of John Wayne's movies. Surely he is a product of the Vietnam War era. Second, by depicting the horrors of slavery and regarding the moral dimension of slavery as the fundamental cause of the war, Burns reveals his sympathy for the modern civil rights movement and the ongoing efforts to achieve racial equality in America.

Finally, Toplin notes that southerners and northerners have become more homogeneous with respect to regional issues, and that Burns's achievement reflects the reconciliation of the North and South. Burns's critics, of course, see contradictions between the first two phenomena and especially between the last two; but Toplin convincingly argues that the charge made by some neo-Confederates—that Burns is too "pro-northern"—is baseless.

Woodward simply recounts his role as principal consultant in the series. He recites the genesis of his involvement, his influence on the choice of additional experts, and the praise he and others received and heaped on each other for their roles in the project. Overall, Woodward's performance is surprisingly impoverished. He recalls how at one point in the film's production he had to chide scholars who dissented from Burns's approach and interpretations. He reminded them that they were not arguing with fellow scholars, and that they should respect the filmmaker's craft and special needs. Hypothetically, one can only wonder if the Woodward of 1955 would have been as at ease with a film about Jim Crow if it utterly ignored his path-breaking scholarship. The man who exhort-

ed a generation of historians to challenge accepted truths now seems blissfully resigned to conventionality.

Of all the contributors to this book, Gallagher most clearly feels caught in the middle. A military historian and an academic, he appreciates Burns's "ability to fire the imaginations of millions of Americans" (p. 43), and he berates scholars who belittle military history. Gallagher finds it telling that the public has little use for most academic history and considers it preposterous to criticize Burns's self-defensive remark that "only" 40 percent of the series was devoted to battles. After all, Gallagher reminds us, the film was about a war.

Gallagher instead focuses on the conventionality of Burns's approach to military campaigns. He finds fault with the film's overemphasis on the eastern theatre of the war, its pat explanations of the outcomes of certain battles, and its all too traditional portraits of both Union and Confederate commanders. Gallagher correctly chides Burns for not recognizing the role of political developments in shaping the options of generals, and he rightly points out that in an eleven-hour film, some attention could have been paid to modern scholarship. Gallagher's point, I would argue, can be justly extended to other parts of the series as well. Yet even Gallagher stops short of demanding from Burns a central argument about a military aspect of the war that transcends the war itself. As Foner points out in his piece, there is no "reflection on the war as a whole and its place in the history of warfare" (p. 105). One would think that a military historian would want Burns to address the question of whether or not the Civil War was the first "modern" war (though I realize some consider this a silly question), whether logistics were more important than tactics or individual personalities in shaping the outcome of nineteenth-century battles, and what impact the war had on militarism in American society. I would argue, in short, that there are more important ways to criticize *The Civil War*, even from the standpoint of

military history, than just disagreeing with Burns's emphasis on, or approach to, particular battles and military figures.

Boritt, like Gallagher, has a love/hate relationship with Burns. The director of the Civil War Institute agrees with many aspects of Toplin's positive appraisal. He also credits the film for making Americans cognizant of how well people wrote in the nineteenth century. More than any other contributor, Boritt appreciates the undeniable artistic beauty of the film. And bemoaning modern scholars for their aversion to the role of individuals in shaping history, he considers Burns's heroic portrait of Lincoln refreshing. Yet much of Boritt's analysis involves quibbling over minor errors (especially with regard to quotations). Most historians, I suspect, regard such mistakes as trivial and consider it exasperating to see people haggle over them, for doing so only draws attention away from broader defects. Indeed, even Boritt himself at times acknowledges that these tiny flaws are not worth highlighting.

Ambivalence certainly does not cloud Clinton's appraisal. One of the foremost historians of gender in nineteenth-century America, Clinton takes Burns to task for giving short shrift to women. Indeed, she goes so far as to list, by episode, the paltry number of times women are even mentioned. She gives examples of women who saw the war as an opportunity to redefine their roles in society and those who experienced the tragedy of war as decisively as men did. Examples of the former were women who disguised themselves as men and fought in major engagements, those who organized hospitals for the care of the wounded, and the former slave whom the Federals drafted to teach freed slaves how to read and write. Clinton's broadest criticism is that Burns gave insufficient attention to the home front. Her analysis, however, does not point to any argument about the overall impact of the war on women, or vice versa. Clinton, of course, has dealt with this issue elsewhere; but here, her main complaint is that

the film simply did not cover women enough. This position makes it all too easy for Ward to respond, "I wish ... that we'd done more with women and the home front, but we could never find a way to make their appearances seem more than interruptions in the midst of the complicated, headlong, largely military story we found ourselves trying to tell" (p. 144).

If Clinton criticizes Burns and Ward for slighting women, Litwack scolds them just as vehemently for their portrayal of African Americans. For Litwack, the film depicts African Americans in an essentially passive role. The impact of slaves who put down their tools, ran away from plantations, sabotaged their masters' property, feigned illness, and then fought in the Union army are all inadequately covered. Litwack resents in particular (as does Foner) the view of emancipation as a gift given to African Americans by Lincoln; instead he wishes that the film had conveyed the many ways in which slaves themselves brought about a social revolution. As Clinton acknowledges, Ward and Burns were so genuinely surprised and dismayed by earlier critiques of the film along similar lines that they accorded African Americans a central role in their subsequent blockbuster, *Baseball*.

Shelby Foote, the film's featured commentator, serves as the principal target of Litwack's assault. He attacks Foote for refusing to concede that slavery "defined the Confederacy as a nation" (p. 128), for treating "white southerners" as synonymous with all "southerners" (p. 133), for wishing, in retrospect, that compromise had prevented the war in the first place, for claiming that the "Black contribution to the war was overemphasized" (p. 137), and for arguing that the struggle for black freedom "dirtied up the war" rather than having "ennobled" it (p. 137).

Foner concurs, denouncing Foote's Dunnigite position (expressed in the companion volume to the series) that the Reconstruction period was "really cruel" (p. 116) in that southern whites

were punished by having to accept (for a time) black equality. Litwack concludes that "Foote is an engaging battlefield guide, a master of the anecdote, and a gifted and charming story teller, but he is not a good historian" (p. 137). Foner, even more forcefully than Litwack, is dismayed by Burns's failure to incorporate the Reconstruction era into the film. To make a film about the Civil War, especially one which stresses slavery as its fundamental cause, and not include its most important consequence, Foner reminds us, is to leave the film unfinished. Worse still, it perpetuates a romantic interpretation of reunion and contradicts the point emphasized by commentator and social historian Barbara Fields that the Civil War is not really over. Both Foner and Litwack correctly argue that to end the film with footage of a reunion of Union and Confederate soldiers and not explore the postwar racism that made that reunion possible is detestable. Foner writes: "Faced with the choice between historical illumination or nostalgia, Burns consistently opts for nostalgia" (p. 112).

Ward's rejoinder--that he and Burns were no more obliged to delve into Reconstruction than a director of a film on the First World War would be duty-bound to treat the Second World War--is disingenuous. In the first place, films on World War II abound. It is unlikely that any film about Reconstruction (certainly not of the same scope as *The Civil War*) will ever be made--or at least not in the foreseeable future. Wars, it seems, sell better. Second, the film's commentary on the fates of the leading "characters" of the Civil War does in fact make a statement about Reconstruction--but one that is simplistic and old-fashioned. When Ward and narrator (and film consultant) David McCullough see the Grant administration only in terms of corruption, when they audaciously tell us that Nathan B. Forrest abandoned the Ku Klux Klan when it became "too violent," then, as Foner makes clear, the issue is not merely one of "coverage," but of interpretation. Even though the film does recognize, in a vacuous manner, that the

promises of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments were unkept, it offers no intelligible explanation of why that was so.

Yet as much as I empathize with the critiques offered by Gallagher, Clinton, Litwack, and Foner, I maintain that the film's shortcomings are deeper still. What is most sorely absent from *The Civil War* is analysis of evidence, exposition of thesis, and historical dialogue. Even had the film presented arguments about the war's causes and its impact on society, thought, government institutions, economic change, and power relationships (and it certainly is lacking in those areas), without analysis of evidence it would still leave much to be desired. This would be true even if Burns had offered a more modern view of the role of women and African Americans in the war as well as Foner's "post post-revisionist" view of Reconstruction.

For all of the accolades that *The Civil War* has received, it is in many ways an all-too-predictable example of television history. Each episode begins with the perfunctory "timeline" that almost out of obligation insults the viewer's intelligence and makes chronology an end in itself. Why it matters that the Taiping Rebellion and the birth of William Randolph Hearst were contemporaneous with the Civil War is purely a matter of guesswork. Rather than having scholarly experts on the cutting edges of a variety of historical genres engaged with each other in amicable discussion (or, alternatively, rather than having the narrator assess the evidence for and against competing interpretations), we are instead treated to what amounts to, at best, sound bites from people, only some of whom are historians. At worst, the isolated comments of these people (most obviously, Foote and Fields) are contradictory and the differences between them are neither analyzed nor coherently resolved.

Ward argues that history on film must deal with the visual, that it must employ a narrative rather than an analytic approach, that it must not lecture (lest the viewer press the remote control

button), and that it works best when dealing with individuals and exciting events rather than impersonal, evolutionary developments. I respectfully dissent. Television (including PBS) is replete with analysis, even when the only visual object is a human being. Journalists are given the opportunity to analyze just about every aspect of life. Aside from biographers, academic historians are routinely slighted in this regard. Burns surmises that his critics are jealous because they were left out of the film. I submit that their jealousy is justified. And the view that history on film must deal with individuals flows from a misconception that seems to infiltrate the entire media. People do not need to "identify" with individuals to comprehend either the present or the past.

There are many examples of where the expertise of historians would have been helpful. For instance, Ward states that "even enlightened PBS viewers have a low tolerance for the subtleties of, say, the Wilmot Proviso" (p. 144). Without an explanation of those subtleties, it is impossible to understand the origins of the Civil War. A debate between William Gienapp and either James McPherson or Foner on the substantive versus symbolic nature of the slavery extension issue might have made Americans aware of what southern whites and northerners were really disagreeing about. A discussion between Mills Thornton, Daniel Crofts, and William Barney might have illuminated the nature of the secession movement. Why not have Anne Rose and George Fredrickson compare ideas on the war's impact on philosophy in American life? Or, as Gallagher might agree, have Herman Hattaway and Archer Jones explain the statistical techniques they used in *How the North Won the Civil War* to assess the overall effectiveness of the Army of Northern Virginia.

The list of course, could go on, and I am not suggesting a "talking heads" format for its own sake. And certainly the last thing I would want is an academic version of *Crossfire*. But the film's

contradictory and often useless sound bites, even when coupled with the unsubstantiated arguments of the narrator, do not add up to historical wisdom. If the Civil War really was a watershed in American history, if, as Foote maintains, it defined us as a nation and was the cross-roads of our being, then the film owes us some type of forum for understanding what that conclusion means and on what sort of evidence it is based.

Burns makes it quite clear in his essay, however, that he has no use for historical analysis. Portraying his work as the needed balance between history as art (*Gone With the Wind* and *Birth of a Nation*) and history as science (no examples are given), Burns excoriates modern historical writing as boring, uninspiring, and "so bogged down in statistical demographics and micro-perceptions" that it makes reading history akin to reading a telephone book. If Burns is arguing that some of the new social and political historians spew out mundane details about the lives of ordinary people much as earlier historians dwelled on minutia when writing about elites, I will be the first to agree. If, on the other hand, he is saying that it is too much to expect an intelligent audience to have a high school understanding of mathematics and to take a social scientific approach to history, then I vigorously disagree. As for the ecological fallacy, I maintain that social scientific historians who base their arguments on models are the most "macro-perceptive" analysts in the profession. And they certainly take a larger view of things than do filmmakers who have the "sex symbol" (p. 178) Foote wax nostalgic about Nathan B. Forrest.

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