

Using Ken Burns's *The Civil War* in the Classroom

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WHEN IT AIRED IN 1989, Ken Burns's epic documentary about America's Civil War garnered the largest audience in PBS history. Viewers who had little interest or knowledge of the Civil War were attracted to the powerful images and sounds as well as the narration by David McCullough and commentary by Shelby Foote—the combination of which served to introduce a heroic and tragic story to a national audience. While historians have spent considerable time analyzing Burns's documentary as historical interpretation, little attention has been given to the ways in which the film can be utilized in history courses on the high school level.¹ All too often, the film is used as a launching pad to other classroom activities or simply shown with little student preparation; such an approach renders students as passive observers rather than engaging them in trying to better understand the choices that went into the film's script along with how the various elements come together to tell a coherent story.² More importantly, students fail to see the film itself as a product of long-standing assumptions about the war that are embedded in our popular imagination and often guarded as sacred. The beginning of the Civil War Sesquicentennial in 2011 will provide a unique opportunity to introduce questions of memory and interpretation in our high school history classes. In this essay, I explore how I engage students with questions of memory and interpretation through a careful viewing of Burns's *The Civil War*.

Few teachers have the time or inclination to show the entire seven-part series, and even in my own elective courses on the Civil War, I rarely show

more than one episode or segment at a time. With this in mind and for the purposes of this essay, I will concentrate on two moments in the film. The first is Robert E. Lee's decision to resign his commission in the United States Army and align himself with Virginia in April 1861, and second is Burns's explanation of what led to the release and announcement of the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation in September 1862.

Before proceeding, it is important to point out that the extent to which high school history teachers are able to utilize *The Civil War* as a source will depend on their own familiarity with the subject as well as some basic training in media literacy; the documentary must be approached as both the product of a talented producer-director as well as a self-proclaimed "amateur historian." As with any filmmaker, aesthetic and technical factors always influence and compete with the historical representations and interpretations that result. Understanding how strictly historical interests compete with the more aesthetic-technical factors is a skill that students can utilize when viewing a wide range of films, whether they be Hollywood films or Burns's many documentaries. Students should be able to critically evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the historical documentary and the stylistic, narrative, and interpretive aspects that have come to be identified with his work.

Burns's approach since his first documentary, *Brooklyn Bridge* (1981), has become a distinctive and well-recognized style. His movies blend narration with what he describes as a "chorus of voices" including readings from personal papers, diaries, and letters as well as commentary from scholars, critics, and witnesses. Images include a blending of old photographs, paintings, and drawings as well as the rephotographing and filming of artifacts and contemporary scenes such as peaceful battlefields. Add in sound effects and musical tracks that feature period music and you have Burns's standard formula which he hopes will help transport the viewer back in time.

Consider for a moment one very popular short scene titled "Honorable Manhood" which comes at the end of Episode 1's "1861—The Cause" to get a feel for Burns's style. The scene revolves around a letter written by Union Major Sullivan Ballou to his wife just before he was killed at First Bull Run in July 1861. I have posted numerous inquiries on various listservs to get a sense of how high school teachers utilize this scene, and while I received over fifty responses, most teachers use it simply to highlight the emotional hardships of wives on the home front or the strong desire for loved ones to remain connected during war. There is nothing wrong with this, but as analysis, it is limited.

The stirring lament that serves as the series anthem, "Ashokan Farewell," accompanies the voice-over for Ballou. Interestingly, the segment

comes at the end of the episode, which covers events through December 1861. Students can discuss why Burns chose to place this scene out of strict sequence and what effect he was hoping to engender in his viewer. Photographs of six other couples are shown along with static shots of the Manassas battlefield as the viewer listens to Ballou's declaration of love to his wife. So, we have a letter written by a soldier that needs to be analyzed, along with accompanying sounds and images. Students can discuss whether these other elements help or hinder their understanding of the letter. I usually wait to tell my students that the letter was discovered inside Ballou's personal trunk and was never sent to his wife until well after the end of the war; in addition, because the original has been lost, more than one version of the letter is available—raising other issues. Some of my students are shocked to learn this and this usually has to do with the fact that they view the episode imagining his wife reading it shortly after the battle. Of course, Burns could have mentioned this along with other important pieces of information, but chose not to—and thus another reflective moment presents itself for class discussion. I ask my students to think about how much background information is sufficient for understanding this letter, the placement or timing of the information given, and how it all comes together to shape our ability to identify with Ballou and his wife on an emotional level.

Other filmic elements can also be analyzed, with some of my favorites being the various voices that provide multiple and sometimes confusing perspectives on the Civil War. What role does the narrator (David McCullough) play in the documentary? How much (if any) authority should his own words carry compared with the other “talking heads?” What is the role of the “talking heads” such as Shelby Foote? What specific role does Foote and his wonderful “Southern drawl” play in the documentary (i.e., historian v. entertainer) as opposed to other experts such as Barbara Fields or Stephen Oates, and can we assume anything about the frequency with which they appear and their tendency to tell stories as opposed to analysis? Voice-overs are also potentially useful avenues of inquiry. Students can compare the dignified voice of Robert E. Lee done by George Black with the scraggly one of Jason Robards, who serves as the voice of Ulysses S. Grant. How do these vocal interpretations shape how the viewer identifies and the extent to which we are able to sympathize with individual historical figures? More importantly, what are the sources of these interpretations?

Instructors with more time to spare for Civil War topics in the classroom can track broader themes addressed by the film: How does the film balance between the battlefield and home front; Eastern v. Western theatres of operation; North v. South (Union v. Confederate); enlisted men v. officers;

commoners v. elite? How much time is spent on individual battles and what does this tell us about how we remember the military aspects of the war? A lesson plan on the life of the common soldier can utilize Burns's attention to Sam Watkins of Tennessee and Elisha Hunt Rhodes of Rhode Island. How well do they represent the common soldier in their respective ranks? Similarly, a lesson plan on life on the home front can examine the film's use of Deer Isle, Maine and Clarksville, Tennessee. Again, are they representative of small town life in their respective regions?

I have found that *The Civil War* is best utilized in the classroom as an engaging pedagogical aid when accompanied with a variety of related scholarly readings, primary sources, and engaging class discussion centered on the ways in which Burns constructs his films, the strengths and limitations of his filmic representations, and how his film can and should be seen as historical interpretation.

This brings us to Robert E. Lee, who dominates our collective memory of the war. No other moment better reflects the veneration and mythology of Lee than the story of his supposed reluctant decision to resign his commission in the U.S. Army in the wake of Fort Sumter and Virginia's decision to secede. Burns's interpretation appears near the end of a segment titled "Traitors and Patriots." It opens with a unified Northern populace rallying to Lincoln's call for 75,000 soldiers to put down the rebellion in the Deep South. The sound of drums competes with images of broadsides announcing the organization of new regiments throughout the North and the enthusiastic voices of young men eager to go off to war. Viewers are introduced to William T. Sherman, Ulysses S. Grant, and Elisha Hunt Rhodes as well as a young George A. Custer who, the viewer is told, recently graduated from West Point close to the bottom of his class.

White Southerners are also depicted as unified and ready to go off to war. One soldier is quoted as saying, "I feel that I would like to shoot a Yankee, and yet I know that this would not be in harmony with the spirit of Christianity." The viewer is introduced to Nathan B. Forrest and Sam Watkins, as well as more colorful newly formed regiments such as the "Tallapoosa Thrashers," "Chickasaw Desperadoes," and "Cherokee Lincoln Killers." David McCullough's reference to the long odds facing these men provides an ideal transition to the Lee moment.

The segment opens with Winfield Scott, who was ordered to offer Lee full command of United States forces: "If ... the President of the United States would tell me that a great battle was to be fought for the liberty or slavery of the country, and asked my judgment as to the ability of a commander, I would say with my dying breath, 'Let it be Robert E. Lee!'" The 1862 photograph of Lee in full military dress and George Black's voice-over follows: "I can anticipate no greater calamity for the country

than a dissolution of the Union. It would be an accumulation of all the evils we complain of, and I am willing to sacrifice everything but honor for its preservation.” The viewer is then shown a short film clip of Arlington House at night with the upstairs room lit, which allows us to empathize with the momentous decision that must be made and everything that hangs in the balance. Most viewers already know that Lee will resign, but it takes Shelby Foote to provide the explanation as to why: “When Lee had to choose between the nation and Virginia, there was never a doubt about what his choice would be. He went with his state. He said, “I can’t draw my sword against my native state,” or, as he often said, “my country.”

Burns’s choice of images, narrative, music, and commentary is carefully woven together to give his viewer a sense of Lee’s personal struggles with the conflicting loyalties of his beloved Virginia and his oath to protect and defend the Constitution. In the short list of things most of my students know about the Civil War, the belief that Lee was a reluctant warrior sits close to the top, so the film tends to reinforce this superficial analysis in an overtly emotional way. I have my students analyze Foote’s claim that Lee’s decision was inevitable along with the sympathy which Burns encourages, which is no doubt deeply engrained in our collective memory of the war.

This is an ideal moment in the film with which to have students analyze a set of documents. By the time we are ready to view the film, my students have already read a short excerpt from Douglas S. Freeman’s biography of Lee, which beautifully captures the drama and emotion of this decision. Once we have finished discussing Burns’s version, I have my students read sources from other Virginians in the U.S. Army who did not resign. These Unionist officers challenge the notion that Lee’s decision was inevitable. After all, many of these men, including George H. Thomas, Philip St. George Cooke, and Winfield Scott, experienced similar personal and regional pressures to secede that Lee experienced, but they chose familial estrangement and regional alienation for the sake of the oath that Robert E. Lee repudiated. In addition to the letters and diaries of some of these men, we look at new data that breaks down the number of Southerners, including Virginians who resigned as opposed to remaining in the U.S. Army. This gives my students a chance to better judge the significance of Lee’s decision.

Of all Southern officers connected to a seceded state, 60 out of 300 stayed in the Union and 200 left for Confederate service. Of the 487 graduates of West Point who were affiliated with a seceded state, 173 stayed loyal to the Union and 251 aligned themselves with the Confederacy. If we consider Lee’s age, length of service, and residence in Virginia, the data is even more revealing. While 9 of 27 (33%) Virginia graduates of

West Point classes up to and including the class of 1830 went Confederate (Lee was in the class of 1829), a higher percentage of graduates of this group stayed with the Union: 13 of 27 (48%).³

I want to emphasize that my goal in the classroom in utilizing comparative sources is not to impugn Burns's film, but to highlight it as an interpretation. Burns's use of filmic techniques beautifully captures a very traditional interpretation of this moment in Lee's life, and Burns does so in a way that brings about a visceral response in many. The use of comparative sources forces my students to question and evaluate whether the emotion that Burns hopes to engender in his viewer is justified based on the relevant sources. Although the drama behind Lee's decision is diminished for many of my students, this does not necessarily overshadow the significance of the decision; rather it leads to other questions, such as why we find the idea of the reluctant warrior so appealing within the biography and our popular memory of Lee.

The other moment in Burns's documentary that I spend time on in class is his portrayal of Abraham Lincoln. Using *The Civil War* to shed light on the events throughout the summer of 1862 that led Lincoln to issue the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation following the battle of Antietam on September 17, 1862 presents a number of opportunities to highlight and challenge our tendency to see Lincoln as the prime mover in the process of emancipation. Once again, I use the film in a comparative fashion to remind my students that historians disagree over how to explain the central events of the Civil War and that this is essential to historical studies. In emphasizing these interpretive differences, I have students read excerpts from an essay by Ira Berlin that emphasizes the role of the slaves themselves in bringing about emancipation as well as primary sources pulled from his Freedmen and Southern Society Project out of the University of Maryland.⁴ This bottom-up interpretation stands in sharp contrast to the traditional view of Lincoln as the "great emancipator" which is emphasized in the Burns segments that I use and is engrained in the thinking of most of my students at an early age. To drive home the pervasiveness of this interpretation of Lincoln, I also have students examine various images such as Thomas Ball's famous statue, and lithographs by C. Nahl, E. J. Post, and John L. Magee.⁵

I begin the Burns documentary in Episode 3 with the chapters "Saving the Union" (August 1862) through "A Higher Object" (September 1862). The first section focuses on George McClellan's reappointment to command as well as the defeat of Union armies under the command of General John Pope following the failed campaign around Richmond in June-July 1862. Shelby Foote makes a few appearances to wax poetic about the camaraderie of men in arms as well as the human price of war.

The only mention of slavery before the segment on Antietam is a reference to Horace Greely's letter to Lincoln calling for the emancipation of slaves as well as Lincoln's famous response. In addition, British Prime Minister Palmerston hints at the possibilities of official recognition of slavery. Burns then shifts to Lee's invasion of Maryland as well as the battle of Antietam itself. Following that section is the final chapter to be shown, titled "A Higher Object," which opens with an image of Ulysses S. Grant and his failed attempt at taking Vicksburg. A short interview with historian Ed Bearrs follows:

The Confederacy was on the offensive over a thousand mile front. Mr. Gladstone, a power in the English cabinet, is saying, "Jeff Davis has made a navy. He's made an army and what's more important," intimating that he's made a nation. But, the invasion of Maryland fails. Lee is defeated, falls back. They lose at Perryville in Kentucky. They lose at luka and Corinth in Mississippi, and even Newtonia, Missouri. And the Confederate tide rolls back. Lincoln, as a result of Antietam, converted the war to a higher plane, again the master politician. He announces the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. Of course, it doesn't free a single slave in revolt, frees only as a war measure and only frees slaves in states where the Confederacy is in control. And it will take effect on the first day of January.

Bearrs is a bizarre choice to interview on this subject. Bearrs is known primarily for his work with the National Park Service and as a battlefield guide. He is not widely known as a Lincoln scholar or a specialist on the Emancipation Proclamation and race. When you get beyond his mannerisms, he offers a rather simplistic overview of Lincoln's decision. This is the extent of the analysis of what led to Lincoln's decision to issue the proclamation. Images of slave families follow as the viewer listens to Sam Waterston recite a few select passages from the document. There is no attempt whatsoever to look at this moment from the perspective of African Americans, which provides a useful point of contrast with Ira Berlin's article. The only African American quoted comes at the very end of Episode 3 as McCullough summarizes, from various perspectives, the changes that had taken place throughout 1862. No surprise that the individual in question here is Frederick Douglass, whose voice-over is done by Morgan Freeman: "We shout for joy that we live to record this righteous decree—'Free forever.' Oh, ye millions of free and loyal men who have earnestly sought to free your bleeding country from the dreadful ravages of revolution and anarchy, lift up now your voices with joy and thanksgiving for with freedom to the slave will come peace and safety to your country."

This alone would give the class plenty to analyze, but in fact Burns does not completely ignore the way in which slaves influenced events

at the highest levels of government. In earlier segments, Burns briefly references both the First and Second Confiscation Acts and the role that fugitive slaves played in securing their passage on the ground in places like Virginia; in addition, he utilizes a number of short interview clips with historian Barbara Fields who, at one time, worked with Ira Berlin on the Freedmen and Southern Society Project at the University of Maryland. What makes this interesting for the purpose of classroom analysis is the placement of those clips throughout the documentary. I collect these short interviews with Fields in the form of a handout for my students. Here are a few examples:

Prologue to Episode 3: It could have been a very ugly, filthy war with no redeeming characteristics at all. And it was the battle for emancipation, and the people who pushed it forward—the slaves, the free black people, the abolitionists, and a lot of ordinary citizens—it was they who ennobled what otherwise would have been meaningless carnage into something higher.

Episode 3's "The Beast": The slaves understood that that war was about slavery before it was a war. They made a nuisance for the army and they also made an issue that the army had to deal with. And if the army had to deal with it, the War Department had to deal with it. If the War Department had to deal with it, Congress had to deal with it. That means that every fugitive slave who made a nuisance of himself to the local commander eventually made a figure of himself to the Congress of the United States.

Episode 4's "Oh! Be Joyful": The people most affected by the Emancipation Proclamation obviously did not receive it as news because they knew before Lincoln knew that the war was about emancipation and moreover they knew, as perhaps Lincoln did without fully realizing it, and certainly as many people today do not realize, that the Emancipation Proclamation did nothing to get them their freedom. It said that they had a right to go and put their bodies on the line if they had the nerve to believe in it and many of them had the nerve to believe in it and many suffered for that.

In utilizing these excerpts, I draw the attention of my students to the question of why they are not included as part of Burns's immediate coverage of emancipation. Students discuss why Bearrs was used at this critical juncture instead of Fields, as well as whether her commentary is properly integrated into the overall narrative that Burns introduces.

Although it is not always easy, I ask my students to think about the challenges facing filmmakers to represent change through biography as opposed to groups. Burns's overriding preoccupation is with biography as the key organizing principle with which he structures his narratives, as opposed to the faceless stories of slaves and civilians. Students should have a sense of why that is in considering the two examples discussed here. Looking at secession through the eyes of Lee or emancipation through

Lincoln provides an ideal focus for the filmmaker and makes it more likely that the viewer will be able to exercise his/her other-regarding emotions.

As a way to wrap up this lesson, I have my students utilize all of the sources, including Burns, to write an essay answering the question, "Who freed the slaves?" They must analyze the strengths and weaknesses of their individual sources and justify their particular position. More recently, I have had students make their own documentary films on some aspect of the war. Groups of students take on individual responsibilities that include writing the script, choosing music and images, playing various roles such as talking heads, and providing voice-overs. The crucial part of the project, however, involves having to justify various choices made in the production of the film that point to the competing purposes of film and analytical history.

While some historians have faulted Burns's approach in this film as too consensus-oriented and biographical, as a classroom source, it is ideal in that it introduces themes that are deeply engrained in our collective imagination, as in the case of Lee's decision to resign from the U.S. military and Lincoln's role in emancipation. Understanding the various elements that make up a Ken Burns film, supplemented with various primary and secondary sources, places students in a position where they can better appreciate the strengths and weaknesses of documentary history as well as the challenges involved in interpreting the past.

Notes

1. Jane T. Censer, "Videobites: Ken Burns's 'The Civil War' in the Classroom," *American Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (June 1992): 244-254; Robert B. Toplin, *Ken Burns's The Civil War: Historians Respond* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

2. Lesson plans can be found at the PBS website for *The Civil War*: <<http://www.pbs.org/civilwar/>>.

3. Data is taken from Wayne Wei-Siang Hsieh, "I Owe Virginia Little, My Country Much": Robert E. Lee, the United States Regular Army, and Unconditional Unionism," in *Crucible of the Civil War: Virginia from Secession to Commemoration*, ed. Edward L. Ayers, Gary W. Gallagher, and Andrew Torget (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 2006), 35-57.

4. Ira Berlin, "Who Freed the Slaves: Emancipation and its Meaning," in *Union and Emancipation: Essays on Politics and Race in the Civil War Era*, ed. Brooks Simpson and David Blight (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1997), 105-123.

5. A useful collection of Lincoln images can be found in Harold Holzer, "Picturing Freedom: The Emancipation Proclamation in Art, Iconography, and Memory," in Harold Holzer, Edna Greene Medford, and Frank J. Williams, *The Emancipation Proclamation: Three Views* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 83-136.



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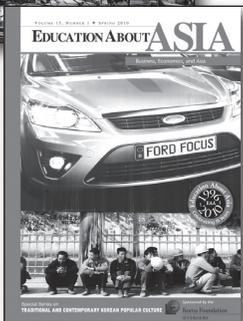
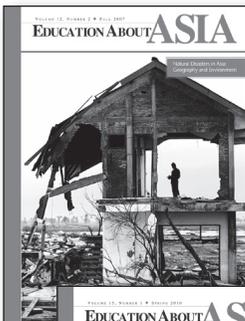
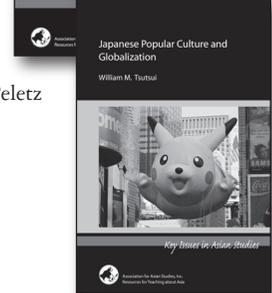
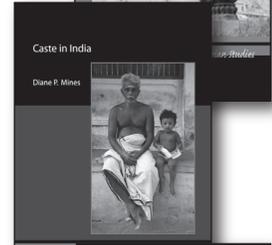
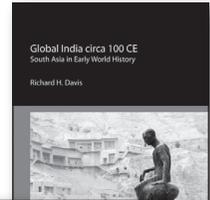
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