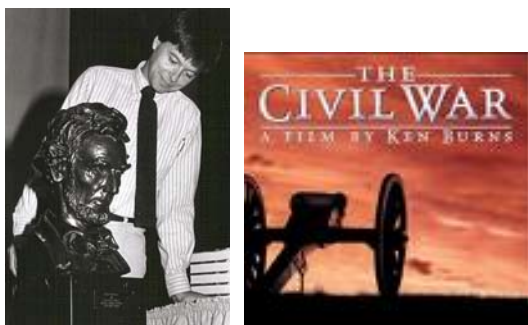


1991 LINCOLN PRIZE WINNER KEN BURNS FOR *THE CIVIL WAR*



LINCOLN PRIZE ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

Shortly after Appomattox, Walt Whitman, a Brooklyn journalist and sometime poet who worked in the appalling Union hospitals, warned posterity of what he had seen. “Future years” he wrote, “will never know the seething hell and the black infernal background, the countless minor scenes and interiors of the secession war; and it is best they should not. The real war,” Whitman insisted, ‘will never get in the books.’”

The writers and historians of future years have not been scared off by Whitman’s admonition. In the century and a quarter since the War’s conclusion, more than fifty thousand books have been published on the Civil War: countless personal diaries and regimental histories, biographies and military narratives, pictorial essays, social analyses, works that have treated cause and effects, demographics, crop statistics, even the weather. There have been books of maps, books of letters, books of orders, books of books, slim philosophical essays and three volume narratives, novels, poems, and music. Each year dozens of new titles appear, again offering to revisit the war, to reinterpret or rearrange those strange days and hard events – faint traces and distant signals now – looking still for the coherent, the conclusive explanation.

And yet Whitman’s words retain their force. The “real war” stays there, outside all the books, beckoning to us. Why did Americans kill each other and how did it happen/ Who were these people who fought and killed, marched and sang, wrote home, skedaddled, deserted, died,

nursed and lamented, preserved and were defeated? What was it like to be in that war? What did it do to America and Americans? What happened to the movement that freed blacks from slavery? Why have succeeding generations obscured the war with bloodless, gallant myth, blurring the causes of the war and its great ennobling outcome – the freeing of four million black people and their descendants from bondage? What did it mean that the Union won? What does it mean to be a Union? Why are we still so drawn to this tale of suffering, catastrophe, heroism and death?

Good evening. I am deeply honored to be standing here tonight, to be accepting the first awarding of the Lincoln Prize. I am doubly honored that in this, the first year of the prize, you have seen fit to award it not to a scholarly book, as your mandate principally instructs, not even to an essay or historical novel, but to, of all things, a film, a television show. I guess I have a lot of explaining to do.

First, because this is such a collaborative medium, I must acknowledge those whose contributions made this work possible. Foremost was the contribution of my brother Ric, as co-producer and writer, and Geoffrey C. Ward, the principal writer and my principal collaborator for the last seven years. They, along with editors Paul Barnes, Bruce Shaw and Tricia Reidy, were true partners in this extra-ordinary production experience and thus must necessarily share in anything that accrues to the series.

Because this is a collaborative medium and an expensive one, an equally important acknowledgement must be made to those underwriters who paid for the series, who literally made it happen. The Corporation for Public Broadcasting, Donald Ledwig, president, were the first supporters of this dream; the National Endowment for the Humanities, and its enlightened chairman, Lynne V. Cheney, gave this project its largest production grant; the Arthur Vining Davis Foundations and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation gave important, large and most of all, timely grants to the project which enabled it to continue again and again.

The sole corporate sponsor was General Motors, Roger Smith and Rager Stemple, chairmen, who trusted and nurtured with extraordinary support my belief that history, good history, could reach and touch millions. General Motors was also sufficiently committed to this project that they gave an equal grant to support the promotion and educational outreach of the film. To date I have received over nine thousand cards and letters from secondary school teachers grateful for the series. We have General Motors to thank for that.

Finally, it is necessary to acknowledge my oldest partner, Ward Chamberlin and WETA, the Washington, D.C. based public television station which served, over those one five years, as the presenting station for the Civil War, and more than that, as friend, protector, defender, inspiration when the days were darkest. Ward and Tammy Robinson and Sharon Rockefeller believed with me that television could be used to communicate great ideas and events and they never wavered in their support.

Much has been made in recent weeks of Ken Burn's Civil War film, but as you can see, there is much more to it. Indeed, in addition to the remarkable individuals and institutions just mentioned, this project employed twenty-four scholars, four researchers, a dozen assistant editors, innumerable librarians and archivists from more than 160 collections, five cinematographers, one amazing narrator, two helicopter pilots, eight talking heads, including the incomparable Shelby Foote and Barbara Fields, and more than forty "voices"- men and women from arts and letters who read diaries and journals and speeches and military dispatches of the men and women whose composite testimony give our presentation of the war its real character and meaning.

It is therefore, in the spirit of these myriad contributions that I plan to give the hugely generous financial award this prize entails to the relatively anonymous editors and their assistants, who labored for five years in the vineyards, but who deserve our utmost respect. So, particularly for Paul Barnes, Bruce Shaw, Tricia Reidy, Phoebe Yantsios, Joshua Levin, Meredith Woods, Ed Barteski, Ira Spiegel, Vida Fitzgerald, Marjorie Deutsch, and Joan Franklin, I accept this award with gratitude.

