

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

1996

REVIEW ESSAY: *The Way West* Written and directed by Ric Burns

Martin Blythe
University of Helsinki

Mia Graeffe
University of Helsinki

Sanna Heinsalo
University of Helsinki

Ossi Heinänen
University of Helsinki

Ari Helo
University of Helsinki

See next page for additional authors

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Blythe, Martin; Graeffe, Mia; Heinsalo, Sanna; Heinänen, Ossi; Helo, Ari; Hirvinen, Kari; Kiviniemi, Piia; Ruus, Vello; Wright, John; and Wunder, John R., "REVIEW ESSAY: *The Way West* Written and directed by Ric Burns" (1996). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 1084.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/1084>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Authors

Martin Blythe, Mia Graeffe, Sanna Heinsalo, Ossi Heinänen, Ari Helo, Kari Hirvinen, Piia Kiviniemi, Vello Ruus, John Wright, and John R. Wunder

REVIEW ESSAY

The Way West: Episode I, Westward, the Course of Empire Takes Its Way, 1845-1864; Episode II, The Approach of Civilization, 1865-1869; Episode III, The War for the Black Hills, 1870-1876; Episode IV, Ghost Dance, 1877-1893. Written and directed by Ric Burns. Produced by Lisa Ades and Ric Burns. Introductory remarks by David McCollough. Production for *The American Experience*, Channel Four Television (Great Britain). Boston: WGBH Educational Foundation and Steeplechase Films, 1995. 6 hours; 90 minutes per episode. \$69.95.

The Way West, scripted and directed by Ric Burns, is advertised as the story of United States expansion into the American West from 1845 to 1893. Burns sets the series' temporal boundaries arbitrarily from a New York editor's first use of the term "manifest destiny" in 1845 to Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 address on the significance of the frontier and his announcement of its close. The documentary's episodes actually focus on the struggle for control of the Great Plains, pitting the U.S. Army against the Sioux nation and its allies. Largely forsaking the challenge of providing a sure overview of who the Native peoples of the Plains and the West were, or of what sorts of people took their land as settlers, the series instead offers descriptions—at times in prolonged detail—of some of the classic battles and massacres of Great Plains history. In short, it is Old Western History with a twist: the addition of Indian perspectives to the story.

Introduced by David McCullough and narrated by Russell Baker, *The Way West* is divided into four ninety-minute programs. The first, *Westward, The Course of Empire Takes Its Way, 1845-1864*, borrowing its title from the Emmanuel Leutze mural in the United States Capitol, opens with McCullough establishing the series' subject: the migration of Americans from the East to the West during an era of "American triumph and a haunting American tragedy." It is "an epic story about the bright promise and dark sorrow of the American dream." The clichéd expression of this duality is repeated frequently in the phrase, "how the West was won and lost." There are winners and losers. The winners are the white

Americans and the losers are the American Indians. McCullough then mispronounces the name of an important Plains nation, the Kiowas, perhaps symbolic of what is to follow.

The first episode establishes a disturbing scholarly laxness. For example, although quotations punctuate the narrative, only initially are they carefully documented with author and date. Soon dates disappear. Eventually even the authors or sources are omitted as well. We hear about the 1845 New York newspaper editorial on manifest destiny without any cogent analysis of its meaning; then Americans suddenly explode westward in 1846, the narrator intoning, "The most troubling and transformative period in American history had begun." We see footage of a train that could not possibly have been taken during the era the documentary covers. We hear a Tecumseh quote over images of Plains Indian tipis and buffalo. The script tells us that by 1843 the Indian frontier—whatever that is—is crumbling. We are told that by 1840 all eastern tribes had been subdued, annihilated, or removed. By 1846 Mormons are in the West. The United States forces England to cede Oregon; the Mexican Cession occurs in half a sentence. Neither the Lewis and Clark Expedition nor even the Louisiana Purchase receives any mention. An empire is sort of "taking its way."

Ric Burns interjects experts' observations throughout the narration, some—such as those of Robert Utley, Alvin Josephy, Jr., Michael Her Many Horses, and Charlotte Black Elk—to rich effect. Charlotte Black Elk notes the fundamental differences between

the origin beliefs of Plains Indians and Christians and between Indian and European understandings of people's relationship to land. Countering her thoughtful explanation of differing world views, Burns gives us Ian Frazier, whose uninformed statements, including his notion that the Cheyennes during this era camped from Canada to the Rio Grande, moving to and fro depending upon the weather, undermine the documentary's reliability. Stephen Ambrose offers a variety of dubious comments, claiming for instance that Indians had more freedom than had ever been known before in human history, and that neither geography nor their own political institutions exerted any restraints on Plains Indians.

Why this disparity among the experts? The white authorities are mostly free lance writers, not experts in the history of the American West or directly involved in current historiographical debates in Western history. Only Utley and Josephy are recognized authorities who have spent their professional lives in the field of Western history, Utley primarily in Western military history and Josephy in Indian-United States relations. At the project's inception, Burns consulted several Western historians who read and criticized the script, which was then revised and rewritten. The consulted experts, however, make no appearances and go unacknowledged. At the end of this first episode and all the others in this series about "conquest," only Patricia Nelson Limerick among Western historians is credited with assistance, and even she, the articulate author of *The Legacy of Conquest*, makes no appearance on screen. The four native voices, Charlotte Black Elk, Michael Her Many Horses, Mardell Plainfeather, and Marie Not Help Him, usually offer careful, personalized observations on specific events and avoid rash generalizations.

Episode I, the story of American acquisition of western lands, concludes with significant footage and commentary devoted to explaining the Santee Sioux resistance in Minnesota and the Sand Creek Massacre of Cheyennes and Arapahoes in southeastern

Colorado. The discussion of these bitter events is generally accurate, and the visuals are impressive. Setting the stage for the next episodes, *Westward, the Course of Empire Takes Its Way* explains the impact the Homestead Act and the Pacific Railroad Act would have on the West, personalizing the story to include three whites, army officers William T. Sherman, Philip Sheridan, and George Armstrong Custer, and three Sioux leaders, Red Cloud, Sitting Bull, and Crazy Horse.

The second episode treats five years of Great Plains history, laying the groundwork for the battle of the Little Big Horn in Episode III. We see the building of the transcontinental railroad, several Sioux-U.S. Army skirmishes, and a sampling of atrocities. One sequence offers a pair of bizarre discussions. We witness first a gruesomely mutilated Englishman fighting in the American army. The camera swings slowly over his nude body, revealing the cuts to his arms, legs, and genitals, as well as his missing scalp, the narrator meanwhile explaining how each slash was made and by whom. Next we are served an amazing comparison of the railroad and buffalo, the narrator claiming that the railroad was to whites what the buffalo was to Indians: a "condition of life." While the railroad's practical and symbolic significance for non-Indian Americans was certainly enormous, the buffalo was Plains Indians' sustenance. That the railroad's completion would seal the Indians' fate is frequently stated, though thinly documented. The story of the destruction of the buffalo receives a much more thorough telling.

The Approach of Civilization contains several examples of skewed history. While treatments of the social dimensions of westward migration and Plains Indian social life are slim or entirely absent, we are told that white settlement on the Plains along the new railroad brought vices. Banality shifts to hyperbole as the narrator assures us there "was not a virtuous woman west of Cheyenne." Novelist Thomas McGuane asserts that the railroad "housebroke" the West, "tamed" being too tame a word.

The episode achieves stature in its rendering and assessment of the actions of Red Cloud on behalf of his Sioux nation. Important discussion about the Fort Laramie treaties and the role of Red Cloud in Siouan-American relationships is allowed to unfold with care, the episode concluding with a thoughtful treatment of Custer and his attack on Cheyennes and Arapahoes at the Washita River in Kansas. Experts unable to agree on an interpretation of this well-known confrontation show how history is susceptible to rational disagreements.

Episode III, *The War for the Black Hills*, brings the documentary to what appears to be its main goal: a recreation and interpretation of the battle of the Little Big Horn. The battle, described in overwhelmingly dramatic tones—"What happens there would haunt the nation forever"—represented, we are told, three decades of conflict culminating in a violent climax. "Heartbreaking," David McCullough explains, is the best designation for this era.

The episode's core is a forced, reductive discussion of Custer and Crazy Horse. The script asserts that the two men are etched in the American imagination and that it should be no surprise that their lives converged. Custer in essence is characterized as a foolish, vainglorious commander who wilfully sacrificed the lives of his men throughout his military career. Robert Utley says he polarized people, though Stephen Ambrose praises him as a great leader in combat and a superb tactician. Ian Frazier describes him as "a pain to live with," and Michael Her Many Horses claims he failed as a true warrior when he eventually met "some real men."

Crazy Horse is presented as a lover of war whose eccentricities the Lakota tolerated as long as he won. John Carter observes that whites respected him, and Mardell Plainfeather, a Crow, says he refused to have his photo taken because he didn't want anything to do with whites. Ian Frazier adds that Crazy Horse was a completely self-invented man who never tarnished his own image. He gave Native Americans an unshakeable identity be-

cause, Frazier intuits, Crazy Horse always did as he saw fit. Finally, Stephen Ambrose would have us believe that Custer and Crazy Horse were actually very much alike: both were great riders, both loved to hunt, both loved the Plains.

An obvious thought surely should have grazed Ric Burns's mind: Are there no Sioux to comment on Crazy Horse at this point in the narrative? Moreover, can one imagine a documentary on World War II offering experts seriously pondering the resemblance between Adolf Hitler and Dwight Eisenhower? These are moments that shake one's faith in the integrity of the documentary enterprise.

After a jarring sequence that suddenly veers to the southern Plains and quotes from Satanta, then back north to the Northern Pacific Railroad in North Dakota, then on to Custer on the Yellowstone, then back East to the Panic of 1873, then west again to Custer in the Black Hills looking for gold, with brief appearances of President Grant and the Philadelphia Exposition, the episode finally focuses on the battle of the Little Big Horn. Although divergent views are well represented, some experts are prone to dramatic overstatement. Ambrose says Custer was "pumped up" and made rational strategic choices. Utley observes there was enormous chaos and no organization on either side. Other experts offer opinions on Custer's mistakes. The episode concludes by stating that the battle of the Little Big Horn represented the beginning of the end of a way of life for the Sioux and for white Americans alike. Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse gave up hope, the narrator enigmatically offers. The episode ends with images of the Ghost Dance, preparing for the portrayal of Indians as victims in the concluding episode.

Episode IV, *Ghost Dance*, offers a selection of events following Little Big Horn: the assassinations of Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull; Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show; how the Ghost Dance began and ended; what occurred at Wounded Knee I. It is the most compact and coherent of the four parts. Rare footage of Buffalo Bill's show and photos of ghost dancing

and the Wounded Knee massacre are used effectively. Wounded Knee poisoned relations between Indians and whites over the twentieth century, the narrator observes.

The episode begins inauspiciously with Stephen Ambrose repeating his claim that the Little Big Horn not only spelled the end of a way of life, but was "the most glorious moment in the history of the Lakota people," a dubious statement. He goes on to say that Wounded Knee happened because Indians had been put in their place and were now escaping. Their desire to be Indians, to keep their "Indianness," had to be crushed. The narrator, offering that the Sioux people turned against Crazy Horse because Lakota leaders were jealous of the attention he had gotten, and that Crazy Horse was "heartbroken," in essence blames Crazy Horse and his people for his own murder. This is far from a competent characterization of the assassination at Fort Robinson.

As the episode unfolds, Charlotte Black Elk explains what the assassination of Crazy Horse meant and continues to mean to the Lakota. The episode moves on to consider the background to Sitting Bull's death, the rise of the Ghost Dance, and the prelude to the massacre at Wounded Knee. Wovoka is explained, as is Kicking Bear's odyssey to bring the new religion to the Sioux. With care and balance, *Ghost Dance* reports what happened at Wounded Knee to powerful effect. The episode concludes with Turner giving his 1893 lecture and Buffalo Bill celebrating the mythic West in his show business extravaganza.

What makes for a good historical documentary? We have observed some of the serious factual lapses, problems of presentation and definition, and events distorted for dramatic impact throughout *The Way West*. What of the documentary's technical dynamics? Here the series excels visually, though its images and techniques are often stereotypical. Repeatedly the camera floats quickly over idyllic grassy plains, soft and sad music filling the aural background. Indian voices talk of how

things used to be. There is an atmosphere of melancholy beauty. Frequently, the same buffalo herd runs across green and empty grasslands without destination or goal, free to move anywhere and live anyway. The entire continent seems available to them. A train pushes toward the green and empty grasslands, steaming forward, inevitably, unavoidably, to a destination and goal. Nothing can stop its advance. These images effectively embody the documentary's message.

And there are other technical problems. The repetitive music, employed in predictable ways, becomes annoying and tiresome after the first episode. Indians are accompanied by mystical, howling, eerie strains, whites by period music that is upbeat and crisp. Racial distinctions also drive the dramatization of quotations, Native American quotes read slowly by deep voices, white American quotes read quickly and lithely. Initially stunning photographs of Indians are used over and over again. Perhaps the most effective visuals are depictions of battles where photos and music match, where viewers hear guns and orders shouted, the sounds of flying arrows and human excitement and anguish. Almost magically, still pictures bring battles to life.

For all its ambition, then, *The Way West* is in many respects an old fashioned "Cowboys and Indians" history, with a bit more attention paid to the Indian point of view. Overall, it represents only small improvement over prior documentaries. New perspectives on the general knowledge of the era have been added, but *The Way West* leaves the overriding impression of an old story of myths masquerading as history.

Reviewed at the Renvall Institute,
North American Studies Program,
University of Helsinki, Finland, by
MARTIN BLYTHE, MIA GRAEFFE, SANNA
HEINSALO, OSSI HEINÄNEN, ARI HELO,
KARI HIRVINEN, PIIA KIVINIEMI,
VELLO RUUS, JOHN WRIGHT,
and JOHN R. WUNDER.