

The Early Innings

In a candid interview with *Journal of American History* editor David Thelen, Ken Burns discussed his own approach to history—completely self-taught—and his filmmaking methodology. His life's work has been involved in "the very powerful emotional resonance that seem to emanate from the collision of individuals and events and moments in American history." His goal is "trying to lasso these feelings and trying to translate them for a large popular audience." Burns's proposal to the National Endowment for the Humanities was twice the length of the Civil War Project because he was afraid of snobbish suspicion of the historical legitimacy of studying baseball. He argued that "if you wished to know the country that the Civil War made us, you could find no better vehicle to find that out than studying our national pastime. This is the story of race, the age-old tensions between labor and management, the history of immigration and assimilation, the exclusion of women, . . . the growth and decay of cities; all of these broad themes were on display in our national pastime . . ."¹

Such fine-sounding phrases beg certain questions: *How* did these such issues that were reflected by baseball influence American society? What does baseball have to do with the press, with radio, with the rise and fall of cities? Is it sufficient to assert relationships exist, or should we expect more? One major theme is the development of baseball as a big business. If baseball evolved into a big business, how does it relate to the larger pattern of corporate and industrial development? Another major theme is the development of baseball into an extremely enjoyable game which sustained its popularity over a long time. How did baseball achieve its status as the national pastime? How and why did rules evolve in the late nineteenth century to keep it successful? What does the history of baseball tell us about the evolution of recreation in America? Perhaps the documentary's central theme was the impact of racism on baseball and the agency of African-Americans in coping with prejudice by organizing their own teams and leagues. (This may well have reflected certain negative evaluations of *The Civil War* where Burns was taken to task for giving insufficient attention to African-American participation in the military.)² How did this reflect and influence the history of American race relations?

Burns identifies himself primarily as an artist. He relies on historians at various stages of the project. He asks consultants, most notably William Leuchtenberg, the renowned twentieth-century scholar, to critique an initial idea and review a proposal for funding. Burns relied heavily on Leuchtenberg in this project, not as a baseball expert, but as a scholar whose judgment he could trust. Consultants are next involved in reviewing an early rough assembly of the footage. They subsequently evaluate a more advanced rough cut, and finally a fine cut. Burns relies on his experts for first-person documentary material, criticizing

1. "The Movie Maker as Historian: Conversations with Ken Burns," *Journal of American History*, 81 (December 1994): 1031, 1032, 1044.

2. My thanks to Patrick Miller for bringing this point to my attention.

emphases that emerge, or the lack of emphasis. The primary documents are critical for his work to enable him to effectively tell his story. "I'm interested in telling stories, anecdotes. I'm interested in people, biography . . ." The process of research, writing, and rewriting is a laborious endeavor. The script for this project went through 10–15 versions before it was completed. As the process takes place over many months, the original plans are usually modified. For example, Burns originally planned to devote only three or four lines to the actual Black Sox Series of 1919, although he did expect to spend considerable time setting up the event and then examines its impact. But in the course of research, he uncovered some interesting stories and visual materials, and ended up with 5–6 pages on the games themselves.³

As a consultant on the project, my first duty was to write a summary of what I felt were the major events in the various innings of baseball and offer suggestions for quotable materials drawn from my own original research. Then toward the end of the winter of 1991, I wrote a supportive critique of Geoffrey Ward's brief and extremely rough first draft which was obviously just a sketch of what he had in mind, and praised the project's importance for a mass audience. At this stage, the documentary was projected at only about half the length it ended up. Thereafter I rarely heard from producer Lynn Novick, other than an occasional update, and about various plans that were underway to bring consultants to New York City to review the film as it approached completion. I knew nothing more than anyone else (except for some rumors from SABR [Society of American Baseball Researchers]) what was going to be covered by the documentary, or who the expert interpreters or other talking heads would be. In the end, certain consultants were brought in to work 4.5 days going over the nearly finished production. Each half day was devoted to criticizing a particular episode ("inning") and its emerging themes.⁴

The finished product seems to have been well received by the casual fan, but not so well accepted by the experts. I was particularly taken by the judgement of Jerry Holtzman, the doyen of American baseball writers:

I never thought I would nod off while watching a documentary on baseball, but I hadn't previously encountered Ken Burns, the so-called epic film maker, who above all, is a master of overkill. I witnessed the first five installments of his "Baseball" last week and found it pretentious and repetitious ... It is the "War and Peace" of baseball, but whereas Tolstoy entralls, Burns slugs us with minutiae. Worse, he splices his account with intellectual nonsense. Baseball is likened to a religious rite. I didn't know I was at the ballpark to pray. I thought I was witnessing a boys' game played by men.⁵

Holtzman took umbrage at the various Harvard types—who were prominent among the various talking heads—politicians, playwrights, and

3. "Movie Maker a Historian," 1033, 1035, 1037.

4. *Ibid.*, 1033, 1038-39.

5. *Chicago Tribune*, September 25, 1994, III:15.

academics (but I would add, no sports scholars) who popped in and out with their snippets, without citing any sources. Holtzman maintained: “Burns should have left the amateurs on the cutting-room floor. Their tedious bubblehead recitations are of no consequence and drag the action. Had they been eliminated the show could have been cut in half.”⁶

Holtzman makes some strong points that are close to my own professional biases. Burns was very tied to the Cambridge-Boston nexus. Doris Kearns may be a very fine biographer, but did we need her reminiscences on the Brooklyn Dodgers? Why were there only antiquarians and not a single baseball historian relied upon? Burns’s “experts” seemed glib, but all often seemed unprepared, and spoke off the tops of their heads. John Thorne, a principal consultant, who is primarily a statistician, described the early ballplayers as “gentlemen” by class, which historians know they were not. George Will contributed a dubious analysis of how baseball represented democracy. Baseball for Will, is a slow-moving game which teaches fans that changes in a democratic society must also move slowly. I found the testimony of an old Chicago baseball fan or baseball writer Shirley Povich far more compelling than baseball author Daniel Okrent. I would have particularly appreciated interviews with some former ballplayers, but I realize there probably were no old-timers still around from the pre-1920s.

The lack of the historian’s perspective in the early innings of *Baseball* are reflected by Burns’s analysis of the Black Sox Scandal that concludes inning three. Burns suggests that the entire fix was orchestrated by Arnold Rothstein. However, his major source, Eliot Asinof’s *Eight Men Out*, points out that Rothstein was too smart and never was directly involved, largely working through intermediaries like Abe Attell, who is just mentioned in passing. Was the scandal inevitable as Okrent points out? Did Arnold Rothstein run this all? How does John Sayles, producer of *Eight Men Out*, know what Rothstein was thinking when the Black Sox Scandal unfolded? Neither he nor his confederates left any diaries or memoirs. Literary license is fine for fiction, but not a documentary. Were the Sox the lowest paid of the era? Or underpaid for their value?

Holtzman was struck by the “creativity” of Burns in this section. Burns claims the players had first become known as the Black Sox because of their dirty uniforms. Comiskey wouldn’t pay to wash the uniforms, so they did it themselves, paid for it, or didn’t bother. Holtzman was unfamiliar with this tale, as were the various experts he questioned after watching *Baseball*.⁷

Comiskey is portrayed as the heavy. Studs Terkel, who played the journalist Hugh Fullerton in *Eight Men Out* was interviewed by Burns. He describes Comiskey as an ogre who had poorly paid the players, and otherwise mistreated them, which led to the fix. Yet while several of the conspirators were underpaid, a lot of other players on other teams were also not fairly compensated. Was Eddie Cicotte actually cheated out of a bonus by Comiskey? A recent article in the

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*

Journal by Lowell Blaisdell suggests he wasn't.⁸ As it turns out, Jackson was actually cheated worse by the conspirators than by Comiskey, who only gave him \$5,000 when promised \$20,000. Holtzman argues that Comiskey's greater crime was that of complicity, because he had recognized the fix was in and did nothing about it. The suspected players were very valuable to him and he was looking for any way he could to keep them on his roster.⁹

The early innings of *Baseball* were relatively accurate in the narrative, and the graphics were only occasionally anachronistic or erroneous. However, as I will point out below, the scope of Burns's story is actually remarkably narrow. Burns and his staff did an excellent job discovering visual materials, especially old films. As in *The Civil War*, he aptly employs original quotations drawn from a myriad of uncited sources to make his visual images come alive. However, he never gives Lawrence Bitter proper credit, even though players interviewed for *The Glory of Their Times* are constantly quoted. Burns is a master of biography, and much of the narrative is told from a biographical perspective. *Baseball* does well portraying the heroes like Christy Mathewson and Walter Johnson, and offers a full picture of Ty Cobb. Burns is very good on labor relations, analyzing the reserve clause, the Players' League, and the emergence of unions. The "Early Innings" are especially strong in their coverage of early African-American baseball and women's participation in baseball. He is consistently strong in portraying singular incidents like the Merkle boner and the Snodgrass error. However, when it comes to analysis, the important questions are not always posed or answered. Did "stars" leave Organized Baseball for the Feds? Were salaries cut in half once the Federal League collapsed?

To his credit, he does briefly discuss industrial baseball, enough to whet our appetite, but does not go very far. How was it possible that nearly 100,000 people attended a semipro game in Cleveland in 1914? Why did they attend the game? How interested were women in general in the national pastime? The baseball anthem "Take Me Out to the Ball Game," written in 1908, is frequently performed during the production. However, Burns seems unaware of its significance as an historical artifact. It is not, as is widely assumed, a song sung by a young boy who wants to see a ballgame, but was a plea by a young lady to her boyfriend. He wants to go to a show, but she wants to attend a ball game and, in the course of the song, exhibits her fervent support for the local nine. One does not have to be a deconstructionist to consider the song as a commentary on female interest in baseball.

As I wrote in a critique of the fit draft, the material was quite good if it had been written in the 1960s. However, recent scholarship, or rather, what is no longer so recent, is completely missing from the narrative even after the 10–15 drafts. While Burns generally got his facts right, his analysis does not always hold up. Furthermore, there are some glaring omissions in his story. While no one

8. Lowell D. Blaisdell, "Legends as an Expression of Baseball Memory," *Journal of Sport History*, 19 (Winter 1992): 230–35.

9. *Chicago Tribune*, September 25, 1994, 111:15.

expects that *Baseball* could cover all the bases, I would expect it to mention the first real game played between the Brooklyn and the New Yorks in 1845 before the Knickerbockers took on the later. A more egregious oversight was the failure to discuss the National Association of Professional Baseball Players, which was the first professional baseball league (1871–1875).

Another great problem is the selectivity of the presentation. Despite the many hours devoted to the early innings, major topics that are of vital concern to academic historians and, I would guess, to the general public, are completely omitted. The impact of the industrial revolution could have been treated more systematically. What was the role of social class in baseball? The impact of urbanization is not dealt with in any significant fashion. There is little in the film about the development of the ballpark. How and why did ballparks emerge and change? Where were ballparks located? What were their major features? What was the relationship of the ballpark to the neighborhood? Why were fireproof ballparks constructed? Shibe Park was not singled out as the first modern ballpark and what that innovation meant. Very limited attention is given to the matter of baseball crowds. Little in the way of crowd photographs were displayed. Who attended games? How large were crowds? How did crowds behave? Did women attend games? Were crowds democratic in their composition? How did American Association audiences compare to National League crowds? When were games played? Were they played every day? How long did games take?

Because Burns is so taken with the nature and symmetry of the game, I expected to learn more about the rules of playing baseball and the evolution of those rules. Not only do we learn relatively little about rules; why baseball rules changed is never explained. Was it to make the game more competitive? A better spectator sport?

The business of baseball is a major focus of the film, but mainly just along the line of labor relations. Who were the owners? Other than ballplayers like Mack, Comiskey, and Spalding, they are virtually unmentioned. How much money did they make? What goals did they have in mind? What was their relationship, if any, to urban politics? How did the baseball business in smaller cities compare to the business of professional baseball in the larger cities? Why is Chicago a cipher on the entire film?

Finally, what about the ballplayers? Who were they? Where did they come from? What were their social backgrounds? Did they attend college and play baseball there? How did they compare to other Americans of the day? How much money did they make? What happened to players after baseball? One gets the image from the film that they were often miners or millhands. How common was that? What happened to former ballplayers after they left baseball? I realize these questions don't lend themselves as much as other subjects to visual images, but given Burns's felicity with biography, it seems an appropriate subject.

In sum, *Baseball* does not often open out to the broader themes in social and cultural history that Burns claimed to have been reflected by the development of baseball. To a significant extent, what is missing in *Baseball* are the themes

examined in recent baseball scholarship.

Despite my critical comments, I am in awe of the exhaustive research and the great visual images that were uncovered for *Baseball*. It is unlikely we shall ever again see such a mammoth film on sport produced in our lifetime. And while it cannot be considered “cutting edge” scholarship, I intend to use segments of *Baseball* in my classes. Burns must be commended for, as always, swinging for the fences, but given the resources at his command, it would have been worthwhile to have spent more time in spring training to get up to speed.

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