

## Ken Burns Meets Jackie Robinson

There is no denying the accomplishments of Ken Burns's *Baseball*. The 18½-hour documentary created an unprecedented oral and visual history of the game and brought it before a broad audience of both devout fans and the uninitiated. Throughout the week that the series aired, I was repeatedly approached by people—many of whom had no previous interest in baseball—who were religiously and enthusiastically viewing the spectacle. Yet, while recognizing Burns's achievement, I was deeply disturbed by many aspects of the series. To demonstrate my qualms, I will analyze Burns's treatment of the subject that I know best: the saga of Jackie Robinson and the racial integration of baseball. The decision to focus on Burns's depiction of Jackie Robinson, reflects not only my own area of expertise, but the importance of Robinson and racial equality to the entire *Baseball* series. Burns repeatedly stated that the issue of race was the central theme of his work and the "Sixth Inning" episode was the pivotal juncture of his documentary. Certainly, here he would take great pains to ensure accuracy.

The segment begins with former baseball commissioner Happy Chandler's marvelous rendition of "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" and recounts the familiar tale of Jackie Robinson breaking the color barrier in major league baseball. Although Burns adheres to the fundamental spirit of the story, he takes substantial liberties with its sequence, facts, and events. The saga begins in spring 1945 as Brooklyn Dodger President Branch Rickey plans his historic breakthrough. The narrator, John Chancellor, describes a secret ballot wherein major league owners voted 15–1 against racial integration. But the discussion of this incident is problematical. While the owners' rejection of Rickey is a staple of the Robinson legend, there is controversy over whether a formal vote ever actually took place. If indeed it did, it occurred not in 1945, where Burns implicitly places it, but in August 1946. (See my discussion of this issue in *Baseball's Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson and His Legacy* (New York, 1983), 80–86.

The timing is significant. Rickey had not yet announced his plans in spring 1945. By August 1946, Robinson had already emerged as a star in the International League and his promotion to the majors was imminent. Thus, Rickey in his planning was not, as Burns implied, bucking any clearly defined opposition from his fellow owners from the start. By the time the unified owners made their objections known (if indeed they did), Rickey's coup was a virtual *fait accompli*. Burns's historically misleading presentation was, obviously, based on a filmmaker's belief that the story worked better the other way.

The story then shifted to the charming recollections of Buck O'Neil, Negro League veteran and former manager of the Kansas City Monarchs, who described an incident which took place when Robinson played for that team. The Negro League club pulled its bus into a Southern gas station, where they hoped to fill the tanks and purchase food. When the station owner refused to serve the

individual players, Robinson allegedly announced that they would purchase their gas elsewhere, whereafter the owner, fearful of losing the sale, capitulated. "We" learned a valuable lesson from Robinson, O'Neil indicated.

The gas station incident is a wonderful tale, repeated in many variations by former Monarchs to demonstrate Robinson's fiery temperament, his refusal to accept discrimination, and his awareness of the chinks in Jim Crow's armor. O'Neil's version appears authoritative. Viewers can only conclude from his presentation and reputation as Monarchs' manager that he was an eyewitness to these events. Yet, O'Neil, who was in the Army in 1945, never played with or managed Robinson on the Monarchs.

Such misrepresentations are presented throughout the Robinson segment. The narrator notes that after Robinson hit .387 in the Negro Leagues, *Pittsburgh Courier* sportswriter Wendell Smith arranged a tryout with the Boston Red Sox. The tryout, however, occurred in April 1945, *before* Robinson played for the Monarchs. Former Dodger scout Clyde Sukeforth described how he was sent to check out Robinson's arm and, if he liked how he threw, to arrange a meeting with Rickey. Moreover, according to the storyline, Sukeforth liked Robinson's arm and brought the two men together. The reality was more complex. Robinson had a sore arm when Sukeforth contacted him and was unable to throw or play. Sukeforth, who never saw Robinson play, took a gamble and set up the meeting anyway.

The initial 1945 *tête-à-tête* between Rickey and Robinson is part of American folklore. Burns has Sukeforth, the sole eyewitness to the conclave, describe it, while he focuses in on a still photograph of Ebbetts Field. The camera closes in on the old ballpark, coming to rest on a particular window. The implication is unmistakable—Rickey and Robinson met, if not in this room, then at least somewhere in Ebbetts Field. In fact, they met several miles away at the Dodger offices on Montague Street in downtown Brooklyn.

Burns repeatedly misrepresents photographs in a similar manner. When discussing the announcement of Robinson's signing with the Montreal Royals on October 23, 1945, Burns shows a photograph of Rickey signing Robinson to a contract. Rickey, however, was not at the Montreal signing ceremony (of which there are numerous photographs available). Burns's photo, taken several years later, has the advantage of showing Rickey and Robinson together, but has nothing to do with the historical events presented to the viewing audience. Likewise, Burns uses a dynamic filmstrip showing Robinson batting, fielding, and throwing bases while wearing a uniform emblazoned with the word Royals in 1946, when in truth, the sequence depicts Robinson as a member of the Kansas City Royals postseason touring squad in October 1945—not during his triumphant season with Montreal.

Such "minor" gaffes aside, Burns sometimes blatantly distorted the historical record. For instance, in describing Robinson's 1947 season with the Dodgers, he recreated an incident in which Kentucky-born Pee Wee Reese—in the face of hostile taunts from Cincinnati players—placed his

arm around Robinson's shoulder and silenced the abusers. There are many accounts of this incident, but most, including Robinson's own recollections, place it not in Robinson's inaugural season, but in Boston in 1948. Similarly, later in this segment, the narrator describes Satchel Paige throwing a shutout in his first major league start on August 13, 1948. But Paige had previously started a game 10 days earlier (after appearing in relief eight times), allowing three runs en route to a victory—not as dramatic as a shutout, but not bad for a 42-year-old rookie.

How serious are these errors? Burns has, perhaps correctly, dismissed his critics as “nitpickers,” since individually none of the individual flaws are terribly significant. Yet, collectively, they reveal a disturbing pattern of manipulation and distortion which, if present in a literary history of these events would be clearly unacceptable. Burns, in his defense, distinguishes between the scholarly and the popular, the documentary and the literary. “First and foremost, know that I am a narrative historian,” he told the *Journal of American History*. “I am interested in telling stories, anecdotes . . . creating a moment . . . . You place your audience there, or you do the best possible job of evoking what it must have been like.” Burns considers himself “primarily an artist,” and invokes the element of license. “As filmmakers,” he informed another interviewer, “we were forced to take a certain amount of poetic license,” based on available photographs and movies.

Given the paucity of visual evidence, some errors, like the inclusion of a later kidnap note, are trivial and even understandable. But, in other instances, where Burns has a choice between accurate images and those he deems more dramatic, he invariably selected the latter. Often, he treated the factual record the same way, transposing events to create what he apparently believed to be a better narrative—making a distinction between “what it must have been like” and what really happened. This might be more palatable if Burns consistently accepted this distinction between history and art. But Burns attempts to have it both ways. Throughout the tireless promotion of his series and in response to his critics, Burns repeatedly invoked his “distinguished panel of advisors who have been involved at every stage of the production” and his “Hall of Fame fact checkers [who] checked everything twice,” claiming both accuracy and legitimacy for his work.

But not all documentary filmmakers grant themselves so much artistic license. According to historian James Green, who worked as a consultant on *The Great Depression* series, filmmaker John Else instructed his staff. “Everything should be what the audience believes it to be. We must adhere to a rigorous standard of accuracy, especially when borrowing from fiction to structure well-told documentary stories with drama, resolution, tragedy, and humor.” Burns apparently operates under a different creed.

When asked about the furor over the errors in Ken Burns's *Baseball, Sporting News* archivist Steve Gietschier responded, “There are things in there that are misleading to people who are sticklers for historical accuracy. But the larger question is, is it important?” I leave that question to the readers for further discussion.