

***The War*, (dir.) Ken Burns and Lyn Novick, Public Broadcasting Service, 2007.**

From the producers of the PBS' television series *The Civil War*, *Baseball* and *Jazz*, director Ken Burns, with Lyn Novick and writer Geoffrey C. Ward comes *The War*, an unashamedly American history of the Second World War.¹ I say 'unashamedly', but this is not a criticism as such; merely, Burns' seven-part fourteen-hour series (fourteen-part for the ABC's Australian release) documents the experience of the Second World War solely from an American perspective. In doing so, the story is told from the perspectives of citizens of four towns or small cities: Luverne, Minnesota; Mobile, Alabama; Sacramento, California; and Waterbury, Connecticut. The focus on these towns adds a sense of American nostalgia, reminiscent to Burns earlier works, especially once we come to know and recognise some of the interviewees as the series progresses. In essence they become characters within the film, and Mobile and Sacramento in particular oversee significant changes as they become 'war towns', in which booming war industries cause an explosion in population resulting in dramatic changes to the social fabric.

Burns proclaims that these four towns could represent any town across the breadth of the United States; however, it is easily understandable why Mobile and Sacramento were chosen. A focus on Sacramento provides sad insight into the plight of Japanese-Americans who resided on the West Coast and were interned within camps for the duration of the war. Similarly, despite the ideals of President Franklin Roosevelt, race relations within the township and war industries of Mobile make this hub an interesting case study. Less understandable, though not questionable in their choice, is the focus on Waterbury and Luverne. Assumedly these towns were considered to be representative of Middle America. Indeed, the choice of Luverne allows the inclusion of the brilliantly penned editorials of Al McIntosh from the *Rock County Star-Herald* (voiced by Tom Hanks) that document the arrival of news from the battlefields amidst the changing seasons of Minnesota in a style very

¹ *The Civil War*, (dir.) Ken Burns, PBS, 1990; *Baseball*, (dir.) Ken Burns, PBS, 1994; *Jazz*, (dir.) Ken Burns, PBS, 2001.

reminiscent of a later Minnesotan author and radio-personality Garrison Keilor (who incidentally provided his voice for early Burns' documentaries such as *The Civil War*). How well this focus on the experiences of men and women from just these four towns actually works is questionable, as the voices from others – such as the famous war correspondent Ernie Pyle, and the extraordinary tales of men such as Daniel K. Inouye, a Japanese-American resident of Hawaii who saw the drama of Pearl Harbour unfold from his home and later served in Europe within the 442nd Regimental Combat Team (a highly-decorated battalion comprised entirely of Japanese-Americans) where he won the Medal of Honor – are much valued additions.

One of the series' strengths is Burns' ability to progress through each episode whilst changing the focus across the various theatres of war in Europe, Africa, and the Pacific. He cleverly interweaves these narratives and experiences of battle with various aspects of life on the homefront as experienced by citizens within one of the four subject towns. As the memorialisation, commemoration and remembrance of the Second World War in popular culture has been very Eurocentric, this approach provides equal coverage to the war in the Pacific as well as Europe, by alternatively covering each campaign in a chronological order. For example, popular culture and memory has placed much attention on the D-Day Normandy landings in June 1944, but within *The War*, D-Day takes its rightful chronological place in 'Episode Seven: The Pride of Our Nation' (episode numbers for the ABC's Australian release are used within this review). Past series documenting the history of the conflict (such as *The World At War*) have often focused on one campaign per episode that ultimately upsets the chronology of events and has the effect of giving unequal coverage to certain campaigns or areas of operations.² Burns' choice to alternate between battlefields gives a greater sense to the context of particular events as they are contrasted with events taking place simultaneously in other theatres of battle around the globe (however, we do not hear from Americans serving in the Burma-China theatre).³

² *The World At War*, Imperial War Museum / Thames Television, 1974.

³ A cynic might question whether this oversight may be due to the failures of the United States to impose its values on sovereign states in more modern conflicts – as it tried unsuccessful

Furthermore, the series features thousands of photographs that are brought alive by what has become known as the 'Ken Burns effect'; the practice of panning across a photo whilst slowly zooming in or out – often to the accompaniment of narration, music or atmospheric sound effects – giving a particular image a sense of life. In particular the combination of the originally penned score by Wynton Marsalis with sound effects – the roar of engines, the rat-a-tat-a-tat of machine gun fire, the shriek of a passing artillery barrage overhead, or even the detailed ping of enemy rounds bouncing off the armoured plating of landing craft when documenting an amphibious landing – add much drama and chaos in an effective attempt to capture the experiences of combat. Likewise, the particular images chosen by Burns add much drama, as does the inclusion of radio broadcasts, film and newsreel footage. Particularly haunting is some of the colour footage documenting the air war in Europe ('Episode Four: When Things Get Tough'), as is the inclusion of part of the controversial newsreel *With the Marines at Tarawa* ('Episode Five: A Helluva War') which was ordered to be shown at cinemas by Roosevelt as an example of the tough fighting and hardships men on the frontlines were facing as opposed to what was perceived as increasing complacency of an Allied victory on the homefront.⁴ This newsreel was particularly controversial as it featured graphic images of combat as well as images of dead Americans upon the shoreline and floating in the Tarawa surf. Popular consensus has viewed the Vietnam War as the first conflict in which news footage made a profound impact, but the effect of *With the Marines at Tarawa* on the civilian population was severe, as voluntary enlistments within the Marine Corps unexpectedly ceased. To differentiate between the particular newsreel films and other snippets of footage, Burns introduces selected newsreels within the series by featuring photographs of cinemas and cinema audiences from Luverne, Waterbury, Mobile or Sacramento, as a prelude identify these scenes as such. The inclusion of such haunting footage from the air war in

with China's nationalists in the Second World War. It is more likely however that Burns overlooked this so-called 'forgotten' theatre of the Second World War like many before him.

⁴ *With the Marines at Tarawa*, United States Marine Corps Photographic Unit, 1944; much of the colour footage of the air war comes from *The Memphis Belle: A Story of a Flying Fortress*, (dir.) William Wyler, 1944.

Europe and from the Marines assault across the Pacific prevents *The War* from becoming overtly nostalgic by documenting the graphic footage bravely taken by American filmmakers who were sent abroad with the services for that particular purpose. Some of this footage is familiar from past documentaries, some rare, and much has only recently been shown in colour due to the re-discovery of the original films amongst private collections and public archives (it was assumed much familiar footage from the war was originally filmed in black and white due to the practice of running colour footage through black and white projectors and because reproductions of these colour films were produced on black & white film).

Commendable is the inclusion within Burns' series of the experiences and issues surrounding the internment of American civilians by the Japanese in the Philippines; women in the workforce; the contribution of African-Americans on the frontlines and on the homefront; segregation in the army and war industries; as well as documenting the often delicate subjects regarding the internment of Japanese-Americans; the bombing of civilians within Germany and Japan, including the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. As such, the experiences shared by Burns' interviewees ultimately challenges facets regarding the myth of 'the Greatest Generation' with little fanfare, although rightly, the series does not undermine the sacrifices made by citizens across all the Allied nations in the determination to defeat Fascism and Militarism. This is particularly evident within 'Episode Nine: FUBAR' – including excerpts from *With the Old Breed: At Peleliu and Okinawa* by Mobile's Eugene Sledge – which documents the horrific cycle of violence that characterised the Marine's advance across the Pacific. This episode also includes evocative interviews with Quentin Aanenson of Luverne who served as a fighter-bomber pilot in Europe, and who unequivocally reveals the feelings that he was living a fatalistic existence, which he confirms by reading of a letter he penned home to his fiancé bleakly revealing his life as a pilot and feelings regarding his likelihood to survive his ordeal.⁵

⁵ Eugene Sledge, *With the Old Breed: At Peleliu and Okinawa*, Annapolis, Naval Institute Press, 1996.

Critics of Burns' series have cited his failure to identify the post-war professions of several of his interviewees, inferring that their post-war lives are of particular importance regarding their recollections of their wartime experiences. In particular, Infantryman Paul Fussell is not introduced as the literary historian Professor Paul Fussell of the University of Pennsylvania and author of the important study *The Great War in Modern Memory*, nor is the pilot Samuel Hynes identified as a the Princeton literary scholar.⁶ Likewise, Ward Chamberlain is not introduced as a retired public television executive, nor is Daniel K. Inouye identified as the long serving United States Senator for Hawaii until late in the series. Because of the evocative expression of interviewees such as Quentin Aanenson, critics suggest that because part of the identity of these better-known individuals is not revealed, questions may curiously arise as to the post-war occupations and backgrounds of other interviewees within the series and whether some of these men and women are writers and scholars too.⁷ This is made particularly problematic as we are told Quentin Aanenson lived his post-war life as an insurance salesman, but we are not told that he also wrote his very own documentary *A Fighter Pilot's Story*.⁸ However, what these men and women did in their post-war lives is not necessarily relevant to their evocative recollections of their wartime experiences, which after all, remains the point of most interest to audiences of *The War*. As a foreign viewer who did not know that Daniel K. Inouye was a Senator, his story as an outcast is in fact made more dramatic as his political career is not revealed until late in the series.

Another controversy was the accusation following preliminary screenings that certain minority groups were not adequately represented, particularly from Native American and Hispanic communities. Burns was reportedly particularly distressed by these criticisms that the experiences of particular groups were overlooked or neglected, especially when considering that over his career race-relations has been an enduring theme within his catalogue of works (see for example the moving documentation of the first African-Americans to play

⁶ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1975.

⁷ For example, see Marianna Torgovnick, 'Ken Burns's "The War": an American Anthem', *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Vol. 54, No. 4, 21 September 2007.

⁸ *A Fighter Pilot's Story*, Quentin Aanenson, 1993.

within the major baseball leagues). Thirteenth hour alterations to the final film ensured that some of these early criticisms were addressed before the television premiere. However, one criticism that stands true is that there is very little coverage of women close to the frontlines performing their duties as nurses. Particular criticism also – whilst obviously out of Burns' hands – needs to be directed at the ABC for choosing a timeslot of 2:00pm on Sunday afternoons to premiere the series on Australian television. Unfortunately such an unfriendly timeslot limited the potential audience such a fine series would command. I for one, waited patiently for the release of the series on DVD, and anecdotal evidence suggests many ordered copies online from the United States before the DVD of the series was commercially released with Australia. Hopefully the ABC will address their error by replaying *The War* at a time when people might actually be watching. Just as *The World at War* made a profound impact upon a generation of television viewers, *The War* may well remain an important document in detailing the American experience of the Second World War for some time to come.

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