Ken Burns’s *The National Parks: America’s Best Idea*: Compelling Stories and Missed Opportunities

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Abstract: Burns’s documentary *The National Parks: America’s Best Idea* offers compelling portraits of “American originals,” including John Muir, Gifford Pinchot, Stephen Mather, and Horace Albright. It offers breathtaking “god’s-eye” views of national park landscapes. It offers fascinating biographies of Yellowstone and Yosemite, in particular the enduring tension between processes of preservation and commercialization. However, there were missed opportunities to focus on so-called historic sites, to inform viewers of the many enduring threats to the “park idea,” and to help viewers appreciate the creative potential of this idea in a new century.

Key words: National Park Service, Yellowstone, Yosemite, Civil War sites, Second Century Commission

I have long been a fan of the films of Ken Burns, starting with his 1985 documentary, *The Shakers: Hands to Work, Hearts to God*, to my mind still one of the best films about American religious traditions. I hope I have not been an uncritical fan, for I share some of the criticism of Burns’s films, raised, for example, in the collection edited by Robert Toplin, *Ken Burns’s The Civil War: Historians Respond*. But the virtues of Burns’s work far outweigh, in my
view, the weaknesses. Given the lamentable state of what passes for serious history anywhere on television, how can we not be thankful that, warts and all, Burns offers viewers the opportunity to engage seriously with important and challenging subjects presented in such a visually compelling manner?¹

In his insightful study of Burns’s films, Gary Edgerton finds a number of “underlying common denominators.” Burns, he argues, uses “documentary films as morality tales, drawing upon epic events, landmarks, and institutions of historical significance, populated by heroes and villains who allegorically personify certain virtues and vices in the national character.” Edgerton believes that Burns “reveals his abiding faith in the ability of individuals to initiate historical change and assert a profound impact on the national culture.”²

I certainly saw these “common denominators” in The National Parks: America’s Best Idea. Throughout, dramatic morality tales pit the rapacious energies of commercial interests against those inspired by convictions of protection and preservation. The film offers marvelously colorful portraits of American originals—John Muir, Gifford Pinchot, Stephen Mather, and Horace Albright, for example. These individuals, and so many others, did indeed assert a “profound impact on the national culture” by engaging in a tireless crusade to protect and preserve. The film offers viewers a bounty of god’s-eye views of park landscapes, breathtaking in their spectacular and diverse beauty. These landscapes are understood as essentially sacred sites in the film’s narration and by many of those interviewed by Burns. Chapter 1, for example, is titled “The Scripture of Nature,” and viewers are not only taken to sublime sights, but also transported imaginatively back in time to the “morning of creation.” Here, Burns offers a vision of nature as pure beauty, rarely contaminated by humans.

Viewers hear a multitude of voices talking about what parks mean to them and to the nation’s past, present, and future. With the articulate guidance of historian William Cronon—who provides the intellectual glue for the series—any attentive viewer will, it seems to me, come away from this film moved by the power and beauty of place and curious to learn even more about the rich and tumultuous history of the “park idea.” Attentive viewers will also learn that which is too often forgotten or assumed—and government-haters take note—that the federal government has played a significant role in the preservation of the nation’s natural and historic landscapes.

I also think, however, that some very important opportunities were missed. I understand that a film, like a museum exhibition, is not a monograph or an encyclopedia. It can’t do everything. But just as this film successfully offers viewers biographies of Yellowstone and Yosemite, it almost completely ignores National Park Service (NPS) sites that mark important people, events, and

movements in the nation’s history. This omission is hard to fathom. Why was there not substantial time allotted to a biography of a so-called “historic site”? There are, quite clearly, several appropriate points of entry. In one, we learn about Japanese-American artist Chiura Obata, who had an enduring love affair with Yosemite and was imprisoned in a detention camp after Pearl Harbor. Obata continued to paint and to teach painting to others in the camp. His story is expanded in an accompanying book, *Untold Stories From America’s National Parks*, and while similarly interesting stories about historic sites can be found in the “special feature” section on the DVDs of the series, the film is the centerpiece of this project. Everything else is peripheral, and the location of these stories offers a clue to what Burns and Dayton Duncan consider most important. This is a wonderful opportunity missed, to use this story as a bridge to tell, even briefly, how the NPS has dealt with different constituencies, and to dramatize for viewers some of the difficult interpretive issues NPS personnel struggled with at Manzanar National Historic Site, for example. As the dramatic story of Hetch Hetchy is rooted in a particular place and occupies a central place in the series, so too could Obata’s story be located in the biography of place.3

Even more difficult for me to understand is the wonderful opportunity missed with the appearance—several times—of retired NPS Superintendent Gerard Baker, whose story is deeply rooted in a long history. The NPS began administering the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument, for many years one of the most controversial sites in the NPS, in 1940. In 1993, Baker became its second Native American superintendent. Readers of *Untold Stories* will learn about Baker’s fascinating career, but in the film, Baker is not given time to talk in detail about his efforts to excavate Native American presence at a variety of sites. Viewers get no sense of Baker as a superintendent doing this work at the Little Bighorn. There is no mention, for example, of his day-to-day struggle to balance passionate constituencies deeply invested in clashing senses of ownership of the site and its message. While the film succeeds in portraying conflicts at places such as Yellowstone and Yosemite, it does not succeed in bringing viewers into the gritty on-the-ground realities of interpretation at an entirely different order of volatile NPS sites. Expanding Baker’s story in the film—a natural expansion—could have accomplished this.

There seems to me a lost opportunity to spend a few moments on the history of NPS stewardship of Civil War sites, which date to the last decade of the nineteenth century. Just as viewers learn that the natural beauty of parks often hides bitter battles brought to light in the film, so too could viewers learn

that there have been similar struggles at Civil War sites. What are the arguments regarding altering historic landscapes to resemble their appearance at the time of a battle? What is the proper balance between commercial interests, preservation, memorialization, and expansion? Further, given Burns’s passionate conviction about educating viewers about how race runs throughout so many of the American stories he tells in his films—the Civil War series of course, but also the series on baseball and jazz—viewers could learn through a short interview with any number of NPS colleagues about the evolution of interpretation at a number of Civil War sites. Such interpretation must, argued a group of NPS Civil War site superintendents, “establish the site’s particular place in the continuum of war; illuminate the social, economic, and cultural issues that caused or were affected by the war, illustrate the breadth of human experience during the period, and establish the relevance of the war to people today.”

Surely it is not asking too much of a long series to include one or more of these stories which, to my mind, are more central to the essence of this film than the many “this is what the park means to me” statements scattered throughout the film. I was sometimes irritated by being told, more than once, what “we” felt (or were supposed to feel) when visiting a park. I agree wholeheartedly that these sites have the power to lift one beyond one’s self, to connect us more intimately to the complex and sensitive ecologies of landscape and wildlife. But visitors engage these sites in complex ways, and there is no correct or orthodox way to “feel” about these places. No one, after all, unless they are fortunate enough to own their own plane or hitch a ride with someone who does, gets to experience the god’s-eye view of spectacles of beauty presented in the film. The hunger for the sublime experience of these places may exist, but some people yearn to consume these sites as a touristic accomplishment rather than experience the sublime—“Well, dear, we did Yellowstone, now let’s go do Yosemite”—and the sublime can certainly disappear quickly amid the daily realities of park visitation. Isn’t it a daunting challenge to experience sublimity on a hot, humid day with screaming children, sweaty clothes, jostling crowds, or lines of traffic? And beyond physical discomfort, there are often challenges to the expertise of NPS interpreters from visitors who are certainly not listening in reverential awe nested in a sublime landscape to an NPS presentation. Instead, they are thinking and perhaps stating, “I know more about this than you do, and you are dead wrong.” It is all to the good, therefore, to be reminded that a sense of reverence and awe can be awakened by just a visual engagement with the spectacular beauty of these places. But “the park idea” is much more than just that. A number of NPS colleagues have echoed the observation of Rolf Diamant, superintendent at Marsh Billings Rockefeller National Historical Park: “Well told as it is, we

are still left with a primarily nature-oriented and big western park narrative. These are stunningly beautiful places and they are important to the nation, but they are not representative of the full breadth of the system as it exists today.  

I also think this film could have jarred viewers into a troubled realization of the ongoing threats to parks and the park idea, as well as to the promise of the park idea in a new century. Why not some words from an NPS biologist or park superintendent to help viewers appreciate these sites as the miner’s canary for climate change? What could be more of a threat to the permanence of the park idea? And why not some mention of the sober on-the-ground economic realities that NPS faces? In a 2007 essay, former NPS Chief Historian Dwight Pitcaithley observed, “the national parks have been operating on only two-thirds the funding required to preserve, research, and interpret to the visiting public their collection of incomparable resources,” and, he noted, NPS estimated it would cost eight billion dollars to “attend to the deferred maintenance of visitor centers and other administrative buildings, roads and trails, housing, water and wastewater systems, as well as archeological sites and monuments.” Might viewers be interested to learn that NPS has been greatly impoverished during the first eight years of the new century, that few parks have historians anymore, that our national parks, like any other treasured resource, must be given enough resources to fulfill their potential as crucial components in the civic life of the nation? Like democracy itself, the park idea is both enduring and fragile, robust and endangered at the same time.

The last item on my wish list for this film has to do with crucial elements of the enduring promise of the park idea. I suspect that viewers would have been interested to learn that several NPS sites are members of the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, dedicated to the “obligation of historic sites to assist the public in drawing connections between the history of our site and its contemporary implications.”

I conclude with the compelling words of Rolf Diamant, who served as an NPS liaison to the National Parks Second Century Commission. For me, hearing this story would have been a most fitting way to conclude the film, for it fits so well into the master narrative. Members of the commission visited a number of NPS sites in 2008, among them Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area. Commission members met volunteers characterized as “eco-helpers,” and recruited, Diamant wrote, “from inner city East Los Angeles.” Park Superintendent Woody Smeck spoke to commissioners about “managing beyond park boundaries” and described for Diamant and other commissioners “the seamless network of private, local, state, and national parks pro-

5. Rolf Diamant, e-mail communication to author, July 26, 2010.
gramatically and physically linked to communities throughout metropolitan Los Angeles.” Through such outreach, Smeck said, a whole new generation of those previously untouched by parks “are gradually becoming their most committed stewards and advocates.”

For Rolf Diamant, the lesson was clear, and his conclusion remains a clarion call for the park idea: “If a national park can make such a transformative and meaningful contribution in this most challenging of environments . . . perhaps there is reason to believe that national parks will not only survive but thrive in the dynamic terrain of their second century.”

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