

VIDEO REVIEW

A Biography of America. Twenty-six 30-minute video programs on thirteen videocassettes. (Washington, D.C.: Annenberg/CPB, 2000.) \$389.

Much is being made these days of the inability of American high school and college students to learn about American history (or at least to retain important facts and dates several years after they took their last history course). Last year, the Department of Education (DOE) made grants totaling \$50 million to sixty school districts to embark on a three-year program for the professional development of less-than-prepared U.S. history teachers. In this "Teaching American History" initiative, DOE is scheduled to make additional grants of \$100 million this year and equal amounts for several years to come. All the recipients of these grants, including the Philadelphia Unified School District, will have to face the question of what constitutes historical literacy—itself a contested matter. Most educators are convinced that by themselves facts are not very useful and will not be retained until students learn them as part of engaging in questions about our past that have resonance in their own lives. As Richard Rothstein writes in a *New York Times* column on education (March 6, 2002), the American history worth learning is not about dates, places, events, and particular figures but a history that "presents students with moral dilemmas, alternative perspectives and theories of cause and effect that even adults cannot resolve."

A Biography of America, one of the latest ventures of Annenberg/Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a partnership that for several decades has been using media and telecommunications to improve the teaching of nearly every subject presented in American schools, can play an important role in the DOE's Teaching American History program. (All Annenberg/CPB materials can be previewed at www.learner.org). In this curriculum package, teachers will find twenty-six half-hour programs on thirteen videocassettes. The program is available as a licensed telecourse, suitable for course credit for distant learners, and targeted at high school and college learners.

This mini-American history course is weighted toward the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Program number one begins with "New World Encounters," stretching back to the Columbian voyages, which is entirely proper, but the long colonial era of nearly three centuries gets only three programs. Thirteen programs are devoted to the nineteenth century and ten to the twentieth century. This shortchanges the colonial era, leaving entirely untouched (to cite just a few examples) the Salem witchcraft trials, the first Great Awakening, Quaker pacifism and its role in Pennsylvania's Indian relations, the Anglo-French competition for

eastern North America, French and Spanish settlements in many parts of North America, and many other topics that are standard parts of early American history. The coverage of the twentieth century peters out after 1972 with the twenty-fifth program racing through the last three decades of the twentieth century. The series, then, is at its best in delving into U.S. history from about 1800 through World War II.

Most of the twenty-six programs are standup lectures sprinkled with slides and moving pictures. The bulk of the visual material is drawn from the Library of Congress, the National Archives, and the archives of WGBH in Boston, the producer of the series. In a few segments, the team of historians contracted for this series debate particular episodes of American history. They lounge in deep couches while logs burn merrily in the fireplace and a wall of bookcases provide an authoritative aura. The historian team is led by Donald L. Miller, of Lafayette College, who gives twelve of the lectures and participates in all the others as host and discussion leader. Pauline Maier (MIT), Louis P. Masur (CCNY), Waldo E. Martin Jr. (University of California, Berkeley), Virginia Scharff (University of New Mexico), and Douglas Brinkley (University of New Orleans) give two lectures each. Stephen Ambrose (University of New Orleans) makes an appearance in several segments where group discussion substitutes for a standup lecture but disappears after program number ten. The other segments are group discussions of particular eras. All of the podium historians are clear and capable, often eloquent, sometimes even passionate. Miller is the star. With salt and pepper hair, rimless glasses, casual dress, and rugged good looks, he would do nicely on the cover of *GQ* magazine. One imagines that students at Lafayette College fight to get a place in his classes.

One of the strongest elements of the series is the insistence that all written history is interpretative, always subject to reexamination, and constantly changing as each generation asks new questions about the past. A corollary tenet, implicit in the way the scripts are constructed, is that laying facts, dates, and names together does not constitute serviceable history—and will bore students to tears. At the beginning of the series, Miller explains the nature of written history and dwells on the never-ending quest for a fuller comprehension of the past; intermittently, he revisits these philosophical underpinnings of the series. For example, in the segment on World War II, he explains that the historian's job is not simply to recreate the past but to convince students and citizens that a knowledge of American history can help us create a better future. The final segment, "The Redemptive Imagination," is an attempt to nail down this point, as its title implies. His discussion with four storytellers—Esmeralda Santiago, a Puerto Rican novelist; Arthur Golden, the author of *Geisha Girl*; the African American novelist Charles Johnson; and Kurt Vonnegut Jr., writer of historically based novels such as *Slaughterhouse Five*—leaves the viewer with the notion of the malleability of written history, the contingency of events, and the agency of people large and small in historical outcomes. "History is a crippled discipline," says Miller. "It can't get at the whole truth." "Every history

is an interpretation," Charles Johnson reminds the viewers in this series-ending dialogue.

In spite of the underlying philosophy of the series—that scouring the past for new understandings of our own society is the hallmark of the historian's work—students will see historians disagree only occasionally. This is too bad, as explained more fully below, because the team of historians was chosen, apparently, with some thought about obtaining different angles of vision on the American past. But because twenty-two of the twenty-six half-hour segments are individual lectures, students usually get only one point of view on most chapters of American history. For example, on the nature of the American Revolution, the character of antebellum reform movements, or the causes of the Civil War and its Reconstruction outcomes, no dialogue, interpretive differences, or differing emphases are portrayed. Overall, then, we are implicitly presented with an agreed-upon history. It is only in the four segments where the historians reflect and argue, in round-table fashion, on particular eras that interpretive clashes occur. For example, students viewing these tapes will see spirited discussion about the period of rapid expansion into the trans-Mississippi West and how democratic the Americans were as they surged across the continent, crushing Indian nations that stood in their way. They will see how historians argue passionately about how the nation was changing after the Civil War, about whether idealism wavered as Americans left the Civil War behind them, whether African American leaders were less forceful and effective once the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments were ratified, and whether the national narrative is couched in victor's terms and rarely from the perspective of the losers.

Less illuminating is the penultimate thirty-minute segment, on "Contemporary History" (1972 to the present) where the on-camera historians argue not so much about the high and low points of Nixon or Reagan's presidency, or whether the Civil Rights movement balkanized the American people, or the degree to which women gained equality in American society, but rather about whether contemporary history is worth studying! Pauline Maier exclaims "I don't find contemporary history very interesting" because "it doesn't have the complexity of an earlier period." The notion that the last third of the twentieth century—with the Civil Rights and women's movement, the end of the Vietnam War, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the rise of global terrorism, the computer revolution—is uninteresting and not very complex brings amazed dissent from Virginia Scarff. But this is not a fruitful discussion and certainly not a reason for ending the study of American history, in high school and college courses, at 1960 or 1970.

A second mark of the series is the attempt to provide flesh and blood vignettes through which students can gain historical empathy. The promotional material provided by Annenberg/CPB promises that the series "will bring you and your students closer to American history by placing you inside the mind of a slave,

introducing you to the women working in turn-of-the-century skyscrapers, and driving you around Los Angeles in Ford's new Model T." This goal is accomplished in some segments of the series, but Miller, by linking his own family history to the broad sweep of events—the experiences of his immigrant grandparents in coming to America and of his father and uncles in World War II, is unusually effective. These poignant family vignettes, not used by the other lecturers, provide an opportunity for students to reflect on how they, too, are part of the flow of history, how their parents and grandparents were involved in building the country and creating a national narrative.

A third, important feature of this series is forthrightness about the dark chapters of American history. This will not please those who believe that crowing about the successes of American history is the best way to produce committed young citizens. Miller minces no words in describing English brutality against Indian peoples in the colonial era. The treatment of immigrant labor in Chicago's meat-packing industry is characterized as industrial slavery in which each worker was regarded as a disposable product. The Sand Creek Massacre of peaceful Indians in Colorado after the Civil War is candidly presented as genocide (though the *g*-word is never used). The awful life of anthracite miners and the extensiveness of environmental damage wreaked in the era of heavy industrialization comes across strongly in "Capital and Labor," the seventeenth program. In his lecture on World War II, Miller deplores the Allied firebombing of Dresden and the dropping of the second atomic bomb on Nagasaki and asks students to consider "what kind of behavior is morally justifiable to defeat a ruthless enemy?" In the last segment of the series, Kurt Vonnegut Jr. has the last word: "Human beings are much too vile for a planet as salubrious and enchanting as this one has been for millions and millions of years now. We do not deserve to live here." This is strong medicine, and many teachers will not think the final segment on "seeking truth" will do much for their students.

While the series is generally sturdy, teachers will have to cope with some segments which are so partial that they cannot be said to be in touch with the scholarship of the last generation or are so idiosyncratic as to warrant caution by teachers who will have to provide students with counterbalancing material. Pauline Maier's two lectures—on "The American Revolution" and "A New System of Government"—seem eerily out of touch with the last half century of scholarship. Students will learn that the Revolution was nearly a seamless, unified colonial movement for independence (loyalists get one sentence and are said to be one-fifth of the population). Entirely missing is the internal struggle to redefine and reconstruct America. The Revolution, as portrayed here, has nothing to do with the one-fifth of the population that was African American. Dunmore's Proclamation goes unmentioned and not one word is said about the choices a half million African Americans made during seven years of war, in effect, creating the greatest slave rebellion in American history. Nor does Maier's American Revolution have

anything to do with Native Americans, either as combatants on both sides or as a people drastically affected by the war's outcome. Women are whisked off the stage, given no role as key participants in and enforcers of boycotts; as nurses, camp followers, combatants, fundraisers, and managers of farms and shops while their husbands were on the battlefield; as pamphleteers, dramatists, and publicists of the "glorious cause"; or as heralds of a women's rights movement in its earliest stage. Nor does the Revolution, in Maier's presentation, have much effect on politicizing common people, who called for broadening the franchise, more equitable taxation, public education, abolishing slavery and indentured servitude, and for a host of other social and economic reforms.

From her second lecture, "A New System of Government," students will learn a good deal about political theory and constitution-making, and they will be inspired by Maier's account of how much of a gamble the revolutionary leaders thought they were taking by putting power in the people while rejecting kingly and aristocratic political power. But they will learn little about the soil from which the state and federal constitutions arose and how the people argued fiercely, depending on their own backgrounds, experiences, and social conditions, about the kind of state or federal constitution they wanted to live under. For example, Maier presents the Massachusetts Constitution of 1780 as a triumph of political theory where the people at large (actually property-owning white males) have the final say on whether to ratify or reject the constitution written by their elected delegates. But she says nothing about how, six years later, the same Massachusetts citizenry teetered on the brink of civil war. Shays's Rebellion is passed over in a single sentence where it is called a "debtors uprising" and is not seen as a precipitant for calling a convention to reorganize and strengthen the federal government. Students will have no idea about how frightened Federalists, meeting in Philadelphia in the summer of 1787, built into the U.S. Constitution clauses that would curb or cripple the populist sentiment expressed in agrarian insurgencies such as that led by Daniel Shays. Likewise, not a word is said about slavery as an issue at the Constitutional Convention of 1787 or about the regional tensions that surfaced in Philadelphia; Maier's lips are likewise sealed about the Constitution's infamous three-fifths clause or about postponing a decision on abolishing the slave trade for twenty years. Nor will students learn a thing about how the two-party system emerged in the context of bitter arguments about the French Revolution and how its lessons might apply to the new nation's experiments in a republican form of government. Nor is anything said about the volcanic Haitian revolution that created the first black republic in the Americas and inspired African Americans, both enslaved and free, in their struggle against slavery and racism while frightening Jefferson so much that he would not recognize the new nation. Gabriel's Rebellion of 1800, inspired in part by the Haitian Revolution, goes unmentioned. Of course, not everything can be mentioned in a thirty-minute program covering a broad swath of American history.

But Maier's two programs on the revolutionary era are so narrowly conceived that teachers will have to remind students that they are being taught about the experiences of only a small minority of the people of the new nation.

Waldo Martin's lecture on Progressivism, "A Vital Progressivism," is another case of a partial treatment of a broad era. However, Martin's lecture cuts historiographically in the opposite direction from Maier's. Whereas Maier's treatment of the American Revolution ignores the voluminous revisionist scholarship of this generation, Martin's portrayal of the Progressive period is deeply revisionist. There is another important difference that the unknowing teacher may not discern. Maier presents the American Revolution magisterially as if she was reflecting the accumulated wisdom of today's historians. Martin, on the other hand, tells the viewers at the outset that he is giving a personal view of the Progressive era and intends, deliberately, to be very selective in order to focus on how racial minorities in the American democracy experienced Progressivism as distinctly unprogressive and hence tried to construct an alternative way forward. In this candid approach, students are forewarned that they will not learn much about the Progressivism of Golden Rule Jones, Fighting Bob LaFollette, Jane Addams, Upton Sinclair, and a host of other Progressives who figure in most textbook accounts. (However, they will have learned something about Teddy Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson from the previous segment, and something as well about Eugene Debs and his "gas and water socialism"). But Martin's lecture shines the light on African Americans, Mexican Americans, Native Americans, and Asian Americans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, presenting race and the "color line" as the central problem of the era and white Progressivism suffused with a racial supremacist mentality.

A third kind of selectivity, what teachers call post-holing, is brilliantly practiced by Donald Miller. Rather than cruising across the surface of the complicated Civil War, with its many battles, shifting strategies, and many generals, Miller zeroes in on the Union campaign to capture Vicksburg, Mississippi, in order to show Union and Confederate military tactics and strategy, the horrendous carnage of the war, the horrific prisoner camps, and the resort to total war. My guess is that students will be gripped by this in-depth view of one campaign among many and consequently will want to learn much more about the war. At the very least, they will be engaged, will see the importance of the Civil War, and will understand its relevance more than a century later. It is too bad that Miller did not spend some time on the homefront, with its food and draft riots and women's efforts on both sides as nurses and producers of war materiel. Yet, he slices deftly into the heart of the war by spending most of the thirty minutes on a single campaign designed to obtain Union control the Mississippi River.

Miller applies the same technique in a program on "Industrial Supremacy." Here he focuses on meatpacking. This is unconventional since steelmaking usually gets the limelight in treatments of the rise of Smokestack America. But Miller lays bare

the key factors involved in the rise of large-scale industrialization: the advent of assembly line industries (in this case, organization rather than technological innovation is most important); the ruthless exploitation of immigrant workers (in this case, the Polish and Italian workers living wretchedly in the "Packing Town" part of Chicago); and how capitalists tried to crush labor protesters (in this case, Philip Armour's use of Pinkerton agents and influence with state government to demolish the unions). This is a very partial treatment of industrialization, but it is a case of doing more by doing less. Those who want a triumphalist American history will not like this program because it is sprinkled with grim pictures of exploitation, environmental ruination, and an entirely unlovable meatpacking titan.

Miller uses the same case-study technique in presenting the rise of the city in the late nineteenth century. In a segment entitled "The City: Planned Order and Messy Vitality," he focuses on Chicago. A few maps and charts could have indicated the geographical locations of the top twenty cities and how rapidly they mushroomed in the era of mass immigration and heavy industrialization. But singling out Chicago as a case study works well, drawing the viewer into this important chapter of American history and establishing a balance between positive and negative aspects of this city's sprawling, tumultuous growth. Miller is very good at this: case studies focusing on a single battle, a single city, a single manufacturing process, a single man. His deftness overshadows the other lecturers, making this almost "Donald Miller's America"—a latter-day version of Alistair Cooke's personal history of America produced three decades ago.

Can high school classroom teachers profitably use this filmic version of American history? If so, how? My sense is that the videocassettes can whet the appetites of teenage students and serve to introduce particular eras of American history. The series was not intended to substitute for a textbook; in fact, it is designed to accompany the sixth edition of *A People and a Nation*, a Houghton Mifflin Company textbook written by six distinguished American historians. However, this textbook was designed for the college undergraduate survey course and for advanced placement high school classes; therefore, it may be beyond the capabilities of many high schoolers. Some of the new U.S. History textbooks designed for middle schools and high schools are very good—the most comprehensive, inclusive, and visually stimulating that we have ever had. Thus, in conjunction with a good textbook, the videocassettes can serve to warm up students as they approach several weeks of studying a particular era of American history. The producers of the series aim to encourage students "to think critically about the forces that have shaped America" and "see the human side of American history—how historical figures affected events, and the impact of these events on citizens' lives." They accomplish this admirably in most of the thirty-minute segments, and teachers should welcome the care that is taken to present written history as an ongoing search for a fuller understanding of the past.

Teachers who find they can engage students more effectively with visual material of the sort presented in this series will probably want to compare the *Biography of America* with other similar presentations. For example, Philadelphia's Schlessinger Video Productions produced a similar series on United States history, aimed at middle and high school students, that has been used successfully in many schools in recent years. It devotes fewer segments to the nineteenth century but more on the colonial period and many more on the late twentieth century (six segments cover the decades after the 1960s compared to one in the *Biography of America* series).

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