"Home, Sweet Home" by Winslow Homer, 1863
Calvert
The Civil War


Emily Calvert

Emily Calvert is a senior from Hutchinson, Kansas, in the Honors Program and majoring in English. During the 2013-2014 academic year, she decided to add a History major. Emily will be eligible for induction into Phi Alpha Theta in the fall of 2014.

In the sweeping textual narrative of The Civil War, experienced documentary filmmakers and writers Geoffrey Ward, Ken Burns, and Ric Burns replicate their previous success with the eleven hour PBS documentary film Civil War. As they recount the preeminent events of the four years of the American Civil War, they draw on many of the same techniques that enlivened their original documentary – reliance on a multitude of interwoven voices, a focused treatment of individuals to express the ramifications of a larger event, and a masterful balance of panoramic survey and humanizing minutiae. Tracing people, places, and objects through their dynamic roles in the causes of union and secession enables a broad overview of the enormous scope and impact of the war from North to South, East to West, and in international concern and involvement. Throughout their work, the authors maintain their compelling presentation of the war as the seminal moment in formulating American identity, heritage, character, and legend; Ward and the Burns brothers argue that the war stands as “the focus of myth and the anchor of meaning for a whole society” (ix). With their treatment of the Civil War and its iconic figures, the authors chronicle the unique and irrevocable shaping of the United States’ national consciousness.
Through *The Civil War*’s chronological organization of historical summary, anecdotes, and personal writings, the years 1861 – 1865 become strong narrative characterizations of the gradual journey to American identity. Although the recount of events ostensibly begins with 1861, the authors detail significant happenings in the abolitionist movement prior to that date in their concerted objective to establish the issue of slavery as the crux of the Civil War’s causes and significance. Within the text, the issue of slavery and emancipation provide a coherent thematic issue as Ward and the Burnses delineate the escalating tensions between free and slave states in 1861, the process of writing the Emancipation Proclamation in 1862, the enlistment of the first black troops in 1863, the journey of slaves with and to the Union Army in 1864, and the collapse of the South’s system of slavery in 1865. While the beginning of freedom and equality for blacks remains celebrated as a central quality of the American character resulting from the war, the authors do not neglect the issue of states’ rights, nor the military engagements, political maneuvering, and social and economic effects of the war. Indeed, the diverse subjects of the five essays dividing the five years provide historical perspectives on topics that range from causation to politics to the aftermath of the war. By dividing each consecutive year with a focused examination of a particular element, the essays contrive to both provide the inquiring reader with additional information and intentionally break the flow of the narrative in order to proffer a moment of synthesis and reflection on the Civil War’s historical impact. However, while the presence of five other historians’ work may initially indicate an unbiased inclusion of alternate and varied perspectives on the issues of the war, each essay adheres closely to the viewpoint set forth in Ward and the Burnses’ wider narrative.
With an intention of educating and appealing to a mainstream audience, the authors present their work in an accessible format devoid of footnotes or bibliographic information. Yet they still manage to depend heavily on primary sources in narrating the events by incorporating selections and quotations from historic individuals directly into the text. Their swift pace and natural flow through the multitude of events that surround the Civil War prevent the authors from always fully contextualizing the individuals from which they draw their accounts and quotations; with quite judicious and effective choices of quotations and lore, however, they maintain their lively and involved perspective despite the reader’s ignorance of characters and their roles. As the resultant conversational style promotes an effortless bricolage of the extraordinary and the mundane, *The Civil War* offers a varied selection of information that permits a widespread appreciation and interest in its examination of history. Although readers from the academic world may regret the lack of footnotes and endnotes, the authors have achieved an engaging work for the general audience.

With Ward and the Burns brothers’ evident passion for the exploration of history, *The Civil War* convincingly illustrates the importance of the quintessentially American war. While the authors, in their venture to hold the public’s interest, at times succumb to the impulse to idealize and even glorify the emotional drama of the Civil War, their forays into sensationalism do substantiate their claims that the war functions as a central moment of heroic identity and national imagination. In their creative amalgamation of bare facts, individual accounts, and interpretive passages, Ward and the Burnses have fulfilled their stated objective “to put an arm around the whole war, to embrace happenings large and small” (xi). For Ken Burns, the ability to capture each moment yet
maintain the great arc of events echoes his inspirational focus on Matthew Brady’s photographs of the Civil War. Through Brady’s model of documentation for both small moments and significant events, Ward and the Burnses once again employed the technique of telescoping focus, moving from the panorama to the close-up and back. Their passion for history and talent in narrative construction proves just as effective in the written text of *The Civil War* as their original documentary.