

Geoffrey Ward

Several techniques characterize Ken Burns' idiosyncratic filmmaking style: the super-slow-moving panning shots over black-and-white photographs, the judicious choice of music, and the savvy "talking heads" who steal the show (like Negro League star Buck O'Neil in "Baseball").

Another constant in Burns' work, from "The Civil War" to "Jazz," are the writers whose intelligent words bring still images to life. Historian Geoffrey Ward has been one of Burns' go-to writers since 1984, when he consulted on the film "The Shakers: Hands to Work and Hearts to God." His numerous writing credits for Florentine Films — the name of Burns' production company — include "The Civil War" (1990), for which he won an Emmy; "Baseball" (1994), and another Emmy; and "Jazz" (2000).

Born in Ohio, Ward graduated from Oberlin College before becoming the senior picture editor at the Encyclopaedia Britannica. He then co-founded and edited Audience Magazine before serving as the editor of American Heritage Magazine from 1977 to 1982. He turned to writing books in the 1980s. He is the author of "A First-Class Temperament: The Emergence of Franklin Roosevelt," nominated for a Pulitzer Prize, and has co-written several books with Ken and/or Ric Burns, including "The Civil War: An Illustrated History" and "Baseball: An Illustrated History."

His latest project with Burns is "Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson." The two-part documentary, which airs on PBS stations on January 17-18, 2005, examines the turbulent life and times of boxing's first African-American heavyweight champ. Ward has also completed a full-length biography of Johnson, what his publisher (Knopf) describes as "the first full-scale biography of Johnson in more than 20 years." In the Washington Post, reviewer Bruce Schoenfeld writes that Ward "has drawn a portrait of a fascinating figure, whose oversized personality fills every page."

Hard at work on his next project with Burns — what he describes as “the last episode of a series about World War II,” to be called “The War” — Ward, 64, spoke with SportsLetter via telephone from his home in New York City.

— David Davis

SportsLetter: When did you first work with Ken Burns?

Geoffrey Ward: After I left American Heritage, Ken needed someone to look at the rough cut of his film on the Shakers. I went up and did that, and he asked if I had ever thought of writing a film. After that, I wrote “Huey Long” for him - and it was great fun. That was 21-22 years ago.

SL: What’s the difference between writing books and writing for documentary films?

GW: Film is a narrative medium, and so are books. But they’re very different forms of narrative story-telling. With books, you can put in everything you run across in your research. With film, you have to learn to be very spare.

SL: Was the Jack Johnson project your idea or Ken Burns’?

GW: It was neither of ours. Dave Schaye, who worked with Ken on “Baseball,” came to him a long time ago - I think it was over 10 years ago — with the idea. We did some other things in the interim, but it was an idea we always kept on the back-burner because of Dave’s enthusiasm for the project.

SL: When did you start researching and writing for this project?

GW: I wrote the script two-plus years ago. As soon as I finished, I started in on the book. I got real interested in this guy and just read through mountains of material.

SL: You co-wrote books based on “The Civil War” and “Baseball” shows

with Ken Burns. How come you didn't co-write this book with him?

GW: The books we've done together have always been illustrated histories. Initially, with Jack Johnson, we thought of doing an illustrated history, but this guy is so interesting that we felt he deserved the full treatment. And Knopf agreed.

SL: Was it difficult to find photos of Jack Johnson?

GW: No, we found plenty because during his prime he was the most famous black man on earth. Everything he did was covered thoroughly and was captured on film. I just wish we could have used more photographs in the book.

SL: What's it like to work with Ken Burns?

GW: It's a pleasure because I'm a big believer in public history. Today, so many people get their information from television. These documentaries — this body of work — give ordinary people access to a reliable source of history.

SL: How long does the process take?

GW: Basically, I take a couple of months to write the script. We do the interviews separately and fold them into the script. Meanwhile, the staff starts searching for images. Usually, they try to find images to match the words, although very occasionally we will change something to match an image they've found. The average documentary takes 2 1/2 years to make, with the editing and the score.

SL: With the Jack Johnson project, how did you find primary research material about his life?

GW: Over the course of his life, he wrote four autobiographies. I was just the second historian to have access to the one that was published in France, in magazine and in book form. I also got very lucky. Through Tim Rives, an archivist at the National Archives office in Kansas City, I was able to read through material Johnson wrote in his own hand while he was

a prisoner at Leavenworth. All of that material is in the book because it is so clearly his voice. He wrote about everything in his life up to when he won the title. Then I think he got bored with the project. But in that material is where I found what I believe is the real key to his character. He wanted people to know that he was, first and foremost, “a pure-blooded American” whose ancestors were born here. And, that’s how he acted all his life — he saw no reason to accept any limitations on himself. Everyone knows about the book Johnson did in 1927, “In the Ring and Out,” written with a hack ghost-writer. That’s the one that gets cited all the time — and it’s probably the least reliable.

SL: Were there parts of his life that were difficult to research?

GW: I wish I could have found out more about the women who married him and the women who traveled with him. About all we know about them is that they married him; their fame was that they were his companions.

SL: In your research, did you watch any of the previous documentaries produced about Johnson?

GW: I didn’t look at them. I had seen them years ago, except for the one that Miles Davis wrote the music for. I don’t like to look at films about the subject we’re working on because every film requires narrative choices. There are an infinite number of stories to tell. So, I don’t like to see them before we create our own film. I looked at endless footage of Johnson in action hundreds of times. What’s great about the magic of digitalization is that now we can view the fight footage much better than previously. Before, we had to take people’s word that Johnson talked to opponents while they were fighting. Now, in the film on PBS, you can see him doing that. It’s magnificent.

SL: Do films of all his fights exist?

GW: There’s footage of all of the big fights once he became champ — Burns, Jeffries, Willard. Unfortunately, there’s no footage of him when he fought other black fighters, like Sam Langford. That’s a shame.

SL: Was there anyone that you interviewed who personally knew Johnson

or had seen him fight?

GW: No. We didn't find anyone who had seen him fight.

SL: You write that he was the most celebrated and reviled African-American of his age: why did he so upset white America?

GW: I think it's largely because of his sex life. He not only consorted with lots of women, but he was with numerous white women. He married three of them and traveled with half a dozen others. At that time, that was enough to get you hanged. There was a crazy courage to the life he led. Of course, he was just acting the way that other heavyweight champions and athletes acted — it was just that he was black. John L. Sullivan was surrounded by women, he traveled with women who weren't his wife, he drank too much and beat up women. [Jack] Dempsey married a prostitute. Babe Ruth worked his way through whore-houses. But they were white, and no journalist would write about their behavior.

SL: You point out that many blacks viewed Johnson unfavorably. Why?

GW: I think for a number of reasons. Most of the objections were that his behavior would rub off on them and they would be hated and vilified because of it. He wasn't interested in being a representative hero-role model because he didn't see himself as a part of any group. He was Jack Johnson.

SL: Johnson broke through the "color line" in that, previously, no white heavyweight champ would fight black opponents. Was John L. Sullivan the Cap Anson of boxing?

GW: That's a good parallel — or else Cap Anson was the John L. Sullivan of baseball. In sports, all the doors were closing for blacks at the same time. Sullivan was the first to make it a matter of racial principle, but really he was afraid to be beaten by a black boxer like Peter Jackson. He and his successors, including Jim Corbett, who fought Jackson before he became champion, managed to duck black contenders for 22 years.

SL: What was Jack London's role in Johnson's career? Was he the

“worst” of the white commentators against Johnson?

GW: No. London wasn't near the worst. The standard view was much worse: cartoonists who drew Johnson depicted him as an ape. London was a socialist, but he was very much of his times. The actual tone of his writing is less blatantly, hopelessly racist than others. It's just that he was a better writer.

SL: Pundits have called the two Louis-Schmeling fights the most significant heavyweight fights of the century: How does that match-up compare with Johnson versus Jim Jeffries?

GW: Everything's always the greatest and the biggest in sports — and especially in boxing. I never make claims — there are lots of fights of the century, including the “Thrilla in Manila” and Ali-Foreman in Zaire — but up to its time, Johnson-Jeffries was the most important fight there had ever been. There were something like 300 reporters in Reno, and the wire accounts of the fight went all over the world. As for Louis-Schmeling, the first fight was not that big a deal even though the result shook up boxing because it was an upset. The second one, of course, was more than just a fight, and it ranks among the biggest sports events of all-time.

SL: Your description of Johnson before the fight — and, in contrast, Jeffries' dour demeanor — reminded me of the descriptions of Ali before he fought Sonny Liston and George Foreman.

GW: You bet, including Ali, when he's sparring, doing a running commentary. That's what Johnson would do: 'Here Johnson throws a left, then comes the right.' Ali came to that separately, but when he learned of Johnson, he became this huge figure in his mind. He once told a reporter, 'You think I'm bad? Well, Jack Johnson was the baddest cat of them all.' Ali went to see the play “The Great White Hope,” with James Earl Jones as Jack Johnson, on Broadway, and he was just bowled over. He said something like, 'If you took the women out of this play and replaced it with religion, that's my story.' It's interesting because most people don't know that this was the second Broadway play based on Johnson's life. Back in 1926, in a play called “Black Boy,” Paul Robeson played the character that was based on Johnson.

SL: In 1913, Johnson was brought down by federal authorities via the Mann Act: Was he guilty by the letter of the law or was the entire case trumped up?

GW: It depends on how you define “immoral conduct,” but even his worst enemies never accused him of pimping. They didn’t have any evidence for that, and that’s essentially what he was put away for. It didn’t matter what he said, the Justice Department had him set up. They put him away because of racism, not justice. When he was in prison, he tried to win parole. After a hearing, the Leavenworth Parole board recommended that he should be paroled. But the Justice Department invented stuff to deny him parole. They just made up stuff.

SL: Ken Burns has begun an effort to win a presidential pardon for Johnson’s conviction — what’s the status of that?

GW: With Senator John McCain, the Senate resolution has passed. It now goes to the House. With this administration, I don’t know about its chances. A posthumous presidential pardon has only been awarded once before.

SL: While Johnson was in exile, he fought and lost the title to Jess Willard. You believe that the fight was on the level and not fixed — why?

GW: All anyone remembers from that fight is the famous still photograph of him lying on the ground shielding his face. It was an image that hung in white bars across America for years. That’s because the films of the fight were not allowed to be shown. The interstate shipment of films was illegal — a law prompted entirely by Johnson because no one wanted to see a black man beat up a white man. But that image is just one frame of a long sequence. In the film of the fight, you can see that he didn’t want to go down — he was clutching at Willard and trying to stay up. When he got up, he didn’t know where he was. So I think that’s pretty good evidence that he was beaten up by a younger man who was much larger than he was.

SL: How would you rate Johnson as a boxer? Was he a great fighter or was he overrated?

GW: He was a great fighter. The proof of that comes from [Ring Magazine editor] Nat Fleischer, who saw every heavyweight champ in action from Jim Corbett to Muhammad Ali. To Fleischer, Jack Johnson was the greatest he ever saw. He was smaller than today's athletes — Willard was too big for him, and I don't know whether he could have handled someone as large as Lennox Lewis. But he was so skilled as a boxer — he was a master at defense who could adjust to any style — and he was a master of psychology. As Stanley Crouch put it, "He made his opponent a participant in his own ass-whipping."

SL: How would you compare him to, say, Joe Louis and Mike Tyson?

GW: Comparing fighters from different eras is impossible to do because the style of boxing has changed so much over the years. Because Johnson fought just after the bare-knuckles era, there was a lot of wrestling around in the ring that the referees didn't break up. Johnson had a weapon for that: he had a wonderful uppercut that he could throw with no room at all — what we call today "hitting on the break."

He certainly would have beaten Tyson. What he knew best in the ring was how to find the psychological chink on the other guy's armor. He knew what to say to the other guys to drive them nuts. Plus, Tyson is not very large physically.

Johnson thought he could beat Joe Louis in part because he knew what Louis did wrong in the ring. After Louis would throw his left jab, he tended to drop his arm coming back, allowing a fast opponent to come over the top with his right hand and hit him in the jaw. In the first Louis-Schmeling fight, Johnson predicted that Schmeling would win and made a lot of money betting against Louis. Johnson hated Jack Blackburn, Louis' trainer. They had a long-standing grudge. In 1930, Johnson tried to become Louis' trainer. He was looking for a meal ticket. They turned him away and insulted him. They told Louis to act as much as possible unlike Jack Johnson, to become the anti-Jack Johnson. So Johnson went around denigrating Louis, and in so doing lost a lot of his black following.

SL: Do you consider Johnson a civil rights advocate?

GW: No. He was a civil rights symbol against his will. He saw boxing for what it was: two guys fighting each other in the ring. The rest of the world saw it as blacks and whites fighting each other. He saw that as stupid. But he was a great seller of seats. He knew that fight fans who could afford to buy tickets were almost all white, and they wanted to see whites beating up blacks.

SL: How should we remember Johnson?

GW: To me, it's not a boxing legacy. What saves him from his flaws is his unbelievable courage and audacity. I'm convinced that he was the most audacious American who ever lived. At his fights, there were thousands of white people on hand shouting crap at him and praying that he would lose. He went ahead and fought the best and walked out with his head held high. You've got to admire that spirit.