FEATURE REVIEW

Pictures at an Exhibition: Woodrow Wilson Portraits


The American Experience on PBS celebrates both political and cultural achievements in the nation’s history. Here it takes up the difficult challenge of Woodrow Wilson in a two-part program. Unlike the case with others in the series, in this program an actor is used at various points to represent Wilson as he moves about his home at Princeton and in the White House. One suspects that it is the advent of motion pictures that prompted the creators of the documentary to introduce this innovation. We are, after all, with Wilson on the verge of media intrusion into private lives via the communications revolution.

However that may be, the story the documentary has to tell centers on the transition from the end of the Civil War, with the small boy Wilson watching as Jefferson Davis is transported as a prisoner through the streets of the defeated South, to the leader of a nation hoping to change the very nature of international relations. Over and over again, the historians who interpret the visual scenes stress the “Mission Impossible” nature of Wilson’s great effort. It comes as something of a surprise, then, that so much emphasis is placed upon the Edith Wilson/Colonel House “feud” and the notion that Wilson’s closest adviser betrayed his cause. There should have been at least some discussion by the historians on this controversial point, but it is probably beyond the intention of the series’ creators to attempt to engage their audience at that level.

Several minutes in part 1 are devoted to the wooing of Ellen Axson and her conflicting desires as a serious young artist, an issue of interest to today’s society—as well as to Wilson personally—concerning the ways such questions were beginning to become (if still unacknowledged back then) an agenda for the future. It is an oblique but effective way to discuss the era and coming

changes. Unfortunately, on the other hand, Wilson’s academic career and how his contributions to the study of the presidency contributed to his own understanding of that role when he was elected are slighted, again probably because of the difficulty of successfully engaging the written word with the visual image. The familiar struggle over graduate education at Princeton gives only a hint of Wilson’s determination to make the university (and by example not only Princeton) into a national and nationalizing institution.

When Wilson runs for the presidency in 1912, as historian Thomas Knock points out, he is championing the potential of the man on the make as against two Republicans—though one calls himself a Progressive—who accept the world of the trusts, and seek, in one way or another, to adapt society to its rule. Wilson seems to stand out against that vision of the future. Set against the photographs of Jacob Riis and other visuals, his fight against child labor and other abuses is well documented. Less well presented, however, is Wilson’s determination that the tariff provided the central issue in the struggle, a traditional Southern view of the injustice of the privileged interests, or how experience with the Mexican Revolution in his first administration seemed to set the tone for behavior in foreign policy. An opportunity was missed here to suggest, as well, how Wilson saw the issues of privilege at home and in Mexico as intertwined matters.

One of the best sections in the documentary deals with Wilson’s reversion to traditional southern attitudes about the role of blacks in government jobs and in society. He proved not to be a harbinger of change in terms of race relations, but instead something of a reactionary. Historian David Lewis is remarkably gentle in his brief discussion of Wilson’s racial attitudes. Dr. Grayson’s diary of the trip on board the U.S.S. George Washington might have been used to good effect here, as it shows a President Wilson worried not only about the trials of making peace, but also what the changes the war had wrought in expectations of blacks in America—and elsewhere—might do to postwar stability.

If the Mexican Revolution and Wilson’s agonizing over that issue are barely touched upon, the familiar story of American entrance into World War I and the president’s efforts to devise a peace that would replace old-world diplomacy with a structure for overcoming the next likely round of seismic shocks is, perhaps inevitably, all too familiar. This is the fault not of the historians interviewed—John Cooper, David Kennedy, and Walter LaFeber—but of the format under which they must try to condense important issues to thirty seconds or less. Perhaps the greatest surprise of the entire production is that while we are introduced to the “sharks” Wilson faced at Paris, David Lloyd George and Clemenceau, there is not a single mention of Lenin or the Bolshevik Revolution.

What must one say, finally, about the general problem presented by programs like The American Experience? Should we expect them to do more, to delve into issues about which historians argue—or should we simply be grateful that PBS has undertaken this series, which may stimulate viewers (and presumably
our students as well) to think about questions only briefly raised? In reviewing the CNN series on the Cold War some time ago, I was struck by the absence of commentaries by historians in favor of the attempt at verisimilitude by showing only actual participants. I commented critically on that aspect of the series. But they still lend themselves to classroom use. *The American Experience*, like Ken Burns’s *Civil War*, may best be regarded as a family photo album.