



Transcript: "A CONVERSATION WITH BRUCE CATTON"

copyright 1974, Educational Broadcasting Corporation

FROM WNET

304 WEST 58 ST
NEW YORK, N.Y. 10019

Executive Producer: JEROME TOOBIN

Producer: JACK SAMETH

MR. MOYERS: Bruce Catton is America's best-known chronicler of the Civil War, but he's never really accepted the term "historian" to define his career. As a young man, he set out to be a reporter, and that's what he still considers himself to be at the age of 74. We have more than his word for it, because his classics on the terrible conflict that almost tore the nation asunder read as if he had been there. Tonight, he talks about the Civil War, the lessons he draws from it, and its yet unfinished agenda. I'm Bill Moyers.

(TITLES)

This is Bruce Catton's latest book, Waiting for the Morning Train. It's a look back at his boyhood in the small town of Benzonia, on the edge of the great woods of Michigan's Lower Peninsula. There he met, and heard, for the first time the veterans of the Grand Army of the Republic as they marched in Fourth of July celebrations, and told, and re-told their tales of steel and smoke and victory. He wouldn't forget these stories when he left Michigan. He attended Oberlin College, and, after a stint in the Navy in World War I, reported for newspapers in Cleveland, Boston, and finally Washington, D.C. During the Second World War he served as a press agent for the War Production Board and for the Department of Commerce. But those memories of the old soldiers in their fading blue wouldn't die. In 1951, although he was past the age of 50, he wrote his first book, Mr. Lincoln's Army. Soon thereafter, he began a long association as an Editor with American Heritage Magazine. His first trilogy, Mr. Lincoln's Army, Glory Road, and A Stillness at Appomattox culminated in 1954 in a Pulitzer Prize for History, and a National Book Award. Bruce Catton never stopped. The mighty drama, the petty bickering and the conniving of generals and politicians alike, the genius and luck and tragedy, all come alive at the touch of his pen. His books are not only to be read, but felt. Bruce Catton spends as much time as he can now, back in Michigan. The old soldiers are gone, but not from his memory, or from the pages of these books. I met him recently at his apartment in New York City.

It's being said that the political institutions of this country are under their greatest crisis since the Civil War. Do you think that's a fair comparison?

MR. CATTON: I think it probably is, so long as you understand that the Civil War, in itself, was a crisis equal to anything we've got right now. But I don't think between the two there's been anything comparable.

MR. MOYERS: Was it primarily a political crisis in your judgement?

MR. CATTON: Yes - a political crisis that got out of hand. Clausewitz, the Prussian commentator on military affairs, remarked that war is an extension of politics. And that was certainly true of the Civil War. It was politics that got away from the politicians.

MR. MOYERS: I had been struck with what appears to be a monumental classic failure of politics in this country in the 1960's and even now. Do you see any comparisons between the two periods?

MR. CATTON: Yes. Only I think it was probably worse in the 1850's but the political mechanisms all failed. They had a great dispute then that was dividing the country. There were various mechanisms set up to handle such disputes - National Conventions, Congressional elections, Presidential elections, debates in Congress - all of these dodged that issue. They failed to meet it.

MR. MOYERS: Why?

MR. CATTON: Because they were afraid of it. It was too hot. You couldn't - or, they conceived at the time - you couldn't handle it, politically. In politics, you're trying to make votes. Here is an issue where, if you handled it politically, somebody was going to lose a lot of votes, and nobody knew just who it was going to be. So they dodged it. Everytime it came to a head, they put it off. They evaded it. And, finally, they started shooting.

MR. MOYERS: That was the only alternative?

MR. CATTON: It was the only way out, and it was a very expensive way out.

MR. MOYERS: What does the Civil War have to say to us usefully today?

MR. CATTON: It had a great deal to say. It did two things. It, first of all, determined there would be one country, rather than several, between Canada and the Rio Grande. In other words: unity. There was going to be one United States. In line with that, it determined that there were no longer any degrees of citizenship. There was one citizenship, open to everybody. It wasn't what color you were, or where you came from. It was: do you live in America? If you do, you're an American, and there are no degrees, no grades.

MR. MOYERS: What about Lincoln in that period as a politician? Politics failed prior to the war, but he seemed not to lose contact with what politics was all about.

MR. CATTON: He was able to grow with it.

MR. MOYERS: Do you think he was a good politician?

MR. CATTON: He was an extremely good politician, which is a point worth remembering, because the Presidency is, first and foremost, a political office. The man who holds it has to be a good politician. The great presidents have been good politicians. Lincoln was one, and he grew as the war progressed. His ideas, at the end of the war, were not at all the same as they were at the start.

MR. MOYERS: How do you account for that?

MR. CATTON: He learned something. This war was long. He started out with one idea, which was to preserve the Union; and he made up his mind he would do that in any way that he could. But that was the only thing that mattered. As he told Horace Greeley: he would save the Union any way he could. If he had to free all the slaves to do it, he would save it that way. If he had to save it without freeing any slaves, he would do it that way. If he had to free some slaves, and leave others in slavery, he would do it that way; but he was going to save the Union. And presently, he came to see that the only way he could save it was by harnessing the anti-slavery sentiment - not so much the anti-slavery sentiment, but, harnessing the original American concept of freedom, liberty and equality, about which the Declaration of Independence has some eloquent words - harnessing that to the drive to preserve the Union, which made the Union worth preserving.

MR. MOYERS: You've said that the Civil War is an unfinished story. Where are we in that story today?

MR. CATTON: Well, the Civil War left us with an enormous commitment. It freed the slaves, but it did nothing much more than that. It freed the slaves, and left us committed to fitting them into the national life. We didn't do very much about it for a long, long time. Along about the end of the Grant administration, we turned our back on it entirely, and decided that we wanted to get on with our business and make money and have peace and quiet rather than integrate the black man into American society. So we left him alone. And it's just within the last 20-25 years we've begun to realize that we can't. That commitment that we shouldered at Appomattox is still good.

MR. MOYERS: How can you be certain, however, that our politics, now, won't fail to deal with that very tough issue just as you were describing a few moments ago?

MR. CATTON: You can't. You can't be certain about anything. All you can be certain about is that they had better, they had better succeed in grappling with this.

MR. MOYERS: We were talking about Lincoln, and I remember your writing that both Lincoln and Jefferson Davis took to themselves enormous powers - personal powers, political powers, during the war. And yet, you said, neither one became a dictator. How do you account for that?

MR. CATTON: Well, they weren't the dictatorial type, in the first place. And, in the second place - let's talk about Mr. Lincoln, because Mr. Davis was on a losing course, and he had no aftermath of victory to pick up. Lincoln did, or his successors did. He did what he thought was necessary to win the war. He rode roughshod over some liberties, in many cases. He suspended the privilege of the writ of habeas corpus without the permission of the Supreme Court. In fact, the Supreme Court said that he could not do it. And he did it. He committed Congress, in the Spring of 1861, to make all-out war on the Confederacy, long before Congress was able to convene, and have anything to say about it. He did various things like that, confident that, in the end, if the war was won, the good sense of the American people and their impulse toward liberty, would knock down the wartime restrictions, and return to the liberties that we had known before. And that was what happened.

MR. MOYERS: Contemporary presidents are fond of referring back to Mr. Lincoln on habeas corpus, and other repressions of civil liberties when they refer about the need to protect the national security. Do you think there's any basis for that analogy?

MR. CATTON: There probably is. I think we ought to go just a little bit slow in our bigger complaints that the presidency is getting too strong. You may not like the president, but the presidency, as an institution - I don't think it's getting the least bit too strong. I think it has to be strong. I think all of our good presidents, the ones that we remember, believed in a strong presidency, and helped make it stronger.

MR. MOYERS: But the presidency really failed as an institution in the 1850's, didn't it?

MR. CATTON: Yes, it did.

MR. MOYERS: Why?

MR. CATTON: I think, mostly, because the presidents, chiefly President Buchanan, had a defective concept of the idea of the presidency. Buchanan, for instance, was so gifted at seeing both sides of a question, that he was quite unable to pick his own side. For example, when the secession of the Southern States began, and the whole mess was dumped on his desk, as president, early in 1861, he took what he considered a very sound position - that, in the first place, secession was illegal. A State could not secede from the Union. In the second place, it was illegal for the President of the Federal Government to try to prevent it, so that there was nothing anybody could do about it. You couldn't do it, and you couldn't keep it from being done.

MR. MOYERS: I remember in 1966, when President Johnson was beginning to be severely criticized for his policies in Vietnam, he had a meeting of about 20 Congressional leaders, and read a long passage from your book, Never Call Retreat.

MR. CATTON: Is that so?

MR. MOYERS: Yes. And the gist of what he read had to do with Lincoln, when he was getting divided council about the course of the war and finally decided that he was going to do what he thought was best and he went ahead and did it. And President Johnson would say: "If Lincoln can do it, I should do it." Didn't Lincoln leave an impossible standard for presidents to judge themselves by?

MR. CATTON: I think it's a pretty good standard. I think you have to judge yourself by the highest standard you have available. Any president who tries to live up to Lincoln has set a pretty good standard for himself. Sure, Lincoln used authorities that, up 'til that time, nobody quite realized the president had. But the way in which he used them, and the reasons for which he used them, were good; and any president, nowadays, who takes the Lincoln approach, I think is entitled to use the Lincoln methods.

MR. MOYERS: Well, what were the characteristics of his leadership during that wartime crisis that most commend themselves to you?

MR. CATTON: He was trying to save the Union of the States, the freedom of the American people, the country and its values as people knew them then. And his idea was that to save them, you might, occasionally, have to overreach some of the barriers that you're not supposed to touch, ordinarily. But that - if you did it, knowing that it was a temporary measure, and that you're doing it in order to preserve these liberties, then you could depend on yourselves and your fellow countrymen, to get back on the rails as soon as the emergency was over.

MR. MOYERS: Is that another way of saying he had a profound faith in the people?

MR. CATTON: Yes, I think it is. A great faith. He remarked once - I think it was in connection with his suspension of the writ of habeas corpus, when the Supreme Court said that he had no right to do this - and, in effect, he said: "Must I let the entire Constitution of the United States collapse under assault

in order to save one section of it intact?"

MR. MOYERS: What's the danger in that?

MR. CATTON: That the man who's doing it may have faulty judgment, or a faulty character, if you wish. But the point is, you get into situations like that where you have to trust the president. It's up to the president. And, if he's wrong, you can catch up with him later.

MR. MOYERS: History never caught up with the failure of the 1850 presidents.

MR. CATTON: No, but it got settled. Now, if you've got a failure today, there are various remedies. You can't pick up a daily paper without reading about some of them which are being proposed or argued or urged. At the very least, you'll have another election in three years. Sooner or later, things will get settled.

MR. MOYERS: What about Grant, Mr. Catton, why did he make such a good general and such a lousy president?

MR. CATTON: I think, mostly, because he was a West Pointer.

MR. MOYER: A West Pointer?

MR. CATTON: Now, I have the highest admiration for West Point. But here's what I mean. He was the first West Pointer that ever became president. He had been trained religiously, from the moment he entered West Point, to look upon Congress as the source of authority, and the final arbiter on policy making in Washington. The president was simply an executive officer who carried out the will of Congress. It was Congress that declared war, Congress that ratified treaties of peace, Congress that voted money for the army, Congress that did this and did that. The president was simply a supernumerary who followed Congress. Well, in a sense, that was correct. But it's a very bad attitude for a president to have. And when Grant became president, he followed that. In other words, he permitted, in fact encouraged, Congress to take the lead. And once that got established, he never could regain it himself.

MR. MOYERS: Who was the best general? I know that's an old saw. But now, after all these years of looking back at the Civil War, who do you think was the best general?

MR. CATTON: Well, you can get different answers to that depending on whom you asked. I think Grant was. As the Broadway sports character said when he was asked that question: "I understand they paid off on Grant."

MR. MOYERS: What was there about Grant? He was slovenly, he didn't dress neatly, he drank too much, he was uneven in his manners. What was there about the man?

MR. CATTON: Two or three things. In the first place, on this subject of his drinking too much, I want to raise one little point. I've known a number of regular army officers, and I've never known one yet who was a teetotaler. Maybe there were some, but it's not a common trait among the regulars. Grant, I think, drank much less than he was supposed to have drunk. And there's this about him: you can go through his Civil War record with a fine tooth comb, and you won't find

any case where he made a mistake that you can attribute to drinking. Also, the man was elevated to the top spot by Abraham Lincoln, who was one of the keenest judges of character that ever occupied the White House. And the chief reason Lincoln wanted him in there was that he was utterly dependable. You give him something to do, and he would do it. And that, if you've ever known any, is the last trait you'll find in an alcoholic. Now, he was a reliable man, a dependable man, and he also was the first Union general Lincoln could find who would use the superior resources which the North possessed, and apply them constantly to the enemy's weak points. Anybody else would make war at half stroke - strike a blow and then sit back and recuperate, and call for reinforcements, and so on, and give the enemy a chance to get set again. Grant just kept going.

MR. MOYERS: We've romanticized the war in this country - the Civil War ...

MR. CATTON: Oh, I think the passage of years blurred the ugliness and the horror of some of the episodes. The old soldiers, themselves, I think, contributed to that. When they got on into their old age, they themselves blotted out the bad parts. And all they ever talked about was the comradeship, and the bravery, and how nice it was to sit around the campfire in the evening, and - you know - I caught that when I was a kid listening to them.

MR. MOYERS: You said, in fact, in Waiting for the Morning Train that those old soldiers taught you what patriotism is. Well, what is it?

MR. CATTON: Well, I don't know if I ever tried to describe it before, or define it. I suppose it's having, to begin with, a love for your own country and an understanding of what it's all about - a belief in what it does stand for, such as freedom, human unity, the rights of the individual. All of those things. And a willingness, down inside, to do whatever you can in its service if you're needed. Now, of course, that feeling can be perverted. Designing people can take advantage of it. You can be led astray. But, I think, you have to have it.

MR. MOYERS: Do you think anything has fundamentally changed about the meaning of patriotism in the last 50 years?

MR. CATTON: No, so long as we don't understand that patriotism requires us to go half-way around the world and change the government of some people who never did us any harm, at all. So long as it has to do, simply, with our own country, our own people, our own institutions. I think it's the same now, and makes the same demands as was the case a century ago.

MR. MOYERS: The folks who lived in your small town of Benzonia believed, as you say in the book, in the perfectability of society. Did you believe as they did, and do you now?

MR. CATTON: I did then, certainly. I'm not sure but what I have a little trace of it still left.

MR. MOYERS: I can sense some of it. Do you ever feel like you were living much of your life in the last century because of being immersed in the war?

MR. CATTON: I get mixed up occasionally, yes. I've caught myself speaking of myself as a veteran of the Civil War. You know, I remember what it was like on such and such a campaign.

MR. MOYERS: Which side would you have fought on?

MR. CATTON: Usually the Union side. Although I occasionally get over on the other.

MR. MOYERS: I grew up in a small town in the South, just as you grew up in a small town in the North, and I remember my fellow Southerners living under the Myth of the Lost Cause. They made a genre of literature out of it. They made endless tradition out of it. They need it, it seems to me. Do you think that's been exaggerated?

MR. CATTON: I don't know whether it's been exaggerated or not. But I think it was an extremely good thing for the entire country that that Legend of the Lost Cause developed. Here's why I say that. The people of the South fought the Civil War for four years. They fought up to the very limit of their endurance, of their courage, their hardihood. They were finally defeated. They had to lay down their arms. Normally, you would expect - and a soldier like General Grant was very much afraid of this - that the thing would taper off into an unresolved guerrilla warfare state, with violence at the crossroads, and assassination, and barn burnings, and the whole sad tale of things that happened in countries like Ireland and Poland. That never developed in the South. And, I think, the chief reason was the Legend of the Lost Cause. When Lee surrendered at Appomatox, and his soldiers laid down their arms, he rode away, and they marched away, straight into myth, into legend. They were the valiant heroes of the Lost Cause. They were immediately enshrined in Southern memory. They have stayed there ever since, and, by now, they're practically enshrined in Northern memory as well. But here's the point. The undischarged emotions, the tremendous emotional tension that was left in the South when the Confederacy was destroyed, I think, largely, discharged itself through that legend - that what might otherwise have been enduring bitterness, and hatred, and violence, went off that way.

MR. MOYERS: An impossible and really unfair question - but if Lincoln were, in 1974, looking at what has happened in race relations since the war, on the basis of your own study, what do you think would be his judgement about the progress?

MR. CATTON: Well, it's every man for himself on a question like that. But I think he would feel somewhat encouraged. If anybody ever knew it, he did - you make progress in a democracy slowly. You need general agreement on things, and the general agreement, sometimes, is a long time coming, and you have to coax it and nurse it along. He understood that surely as well as anybody that ever occupied the White House. And I think, understanding that, you can see that much progress has been, and is being made.

MR. MOYERS: Do you think that it took the Civil War to actually consolidate what America is all about?

MR. CATTON: Yes, I do. It needed it to pull the sections together. It needed it to destroy slavery, because, for the life of me, I can't see how slavery would have died a natural death. It just wasn't the kind of institution that does die a natural death. In addition, underneath the whole thing, underneath slavery, supporting slavery, was the race problem. As long as you had slavery, you didn't have to face the race problem. There wasn't a race problem. It didn't exist. You had one race way up here, and another one way down below. No problem.

Once you get rid of slavery, the two have got to learn how to live together. I think it took a war to bring the country to a point where it would face up to that.

MR. MOYERS: You talk in Waiting for the Morning Train about these old soldiers in Benzonia having been lifted beyond themselves by the experience of the war. I wonder, does it take a war to create such heroism and transcendent courage?

MR. CATTON: I don't suppose it does, necessarily, but it does do it. There probably are other ways, but that is the one obvious, assimilable, ever-present thing that does it. It also does the reverse - it lowers men, and brings out the worst. But it does have that one characteristic.

MR. MOYERS: The war brought out the worst, but the country seemed to recover.

MR. CATTON: The human race has a great deal of resilience. It has a way of recovering from the worst that you wouldn't expect. Whether the worst is the bloodshed and suffering of an ordinary war, the havoc raised by an invading army, the things that happen in concentration camps - the race does rebound. Don't ask me why or how, but it does.

MR. MOYERS: What's ahead for Bruce Catton?

MR. CATTON: Waiting for the night train.

MR. MOYERS: Well, on that very realistic note, I'd like to thank you for spending this much time with Public Television. Good luck to you.

MR. CATTON: Thank you.

MR. MOYERS: I've been talking with Bruce Catton. I'm Bill Moyers. Good night.

NOTE: This transcript is to be used for news and review purposes only. It has been edited to eliminate interruptions and garbled speech.