

Dances with the facts: the historical accuracy of dances with wolves essay



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When you ask a person to picture being on the Titanic the night it sunk, they will likely have no problem doing so. It was dark and a bit foggy. The band sounded wonderful and the dining room was beautifully decorated. Jack painted Rose's portrait. Movies are powerful means through which people can imagine times and places that they will never visit. It is through films that many people develop their understanding of the past. Thus, we must carefully evaluate the accuracy of historical representations in movie to separate truth from fiction. This allows a better understanding of history while still letting us enjoy fictional films about the past. This paper will examine Kevin Costner's 1990 directorial debut, the much acclaimed film, *Dances with Wolves*, to evaluate its faithfulness to the historical record.

Dances with Wolves is a work of historical fiction set primarily in South Dakota during the Civil War. It follows the exploits of Lt. John Dunbar (Kevin Costner), an accidental army hero who requests a new posting at Fort Sedgwick on the western frontier, and upon arriving at the deserted post befriends a wolf and names it Two Socks. Dunbar eventually encounters members of a local Lakota tribe and slowly gains acceptance into their group and is christened Ugmánitu Taka Ob'wahi or *Dances with Wolves*. When they invite him to accompany them to their winter camp, Dunbar returns to the Fort is arrested and accused of desertion by the newly arrived soldiers. As he is being taken to a neighboring Fort for execution, a group of Lakota warriors attack and help him escape to the winter camp. While he is happy to return to life with the tribe, Dunbar realizes that his presence will put the tribe in danger and decides to leave and go "speak to those who would listen" on behalf of himself and the Native American people. The film ends with he and

his wife, *Stands With A Fist* (Mary McDonnell), leaving the camp and his one time enemy, *Wind In His Hair* (Rodney A. Grant), declaring that they will always be friends.

Since this film is a fictional work, rather than evaluating the accuracy of specific events, we can examine it for its faithfulness to the historical record in terms of what we generally know about the time period and the Lakota people. One of the primary sources of praise offered to *Dance with Wolves* was that it successfully resisted what had been the two historic methods of depicting Native Americans: the kill crazy other and the noble savage (Entertainment Weekly). Rather than accept this simplistic dichotomy and create yet another caricature of Native American people, Costner attempted to walk a fine line in which he created Native characters with depth, complexity, and diversity. In short, reflecting the increasingly complex attitudes toward and depictions of Native Americans in the late twentieth century, Costner's Native Americans are individuals and humans with both hearts and flaws.

The difficulty of this balancing act is made clear though in the attitudes of the Lakota people toward guns. As historian Joseph Roquemore has noted, in the film, "the Sioux refuse to use guns in the movie." Whereas, in reality, "the Sioux would do anything to get guns. In fact, they were better armed than Custer" (67). In the film, their distaste for guns highlights the traditional lifestyle that the Lakota people are striving to cling to even as the world around them was rapidly changing. Thus, their desire for guns, while historically accurate, does not serve this end in terms of the film makers' agenda.

In some cases historical inaccuracies are mere passing issues that do not significantly impact the understanding of history from the film. This is the case in *Dances with Wolves*, in the case of language. The Native American characters converse in a Sioux, and at several points the film depicts Dunbar learning and speaking in Lakota Sioux language also known as Lakota. While Lakota dialoged coach, the language spoke is not completely accurate. As spoken in the film, the language it is a simplified version of the Lakota that the people would have actually spoken (Baird, 158).

While there are no actual historical figures in the film, the Lakota chief, Ten Bears (Floyd Red Crow Westerman) was based on a real Comanche chief of the same name. The film was originally supposed to be set in the Southern Plains, but because of financial incentives offered by the state of South Dakota, the names of the tribes and some of their practices were changed to reflect the Lakota Sioux people of that region. While most of the film is generally accurate about the time, place, and people, the overall premise is not completely realistic because there were no aggressive army campaigns against Native Americans during the winter until 1868, four years after the close of the film. Additionally, there is no record of an army officer deserting his post and joining a Native tribe (Roquemore, 73). Whether or not these instances, which are clearly vital vehicle for the plot, are serious violations of the historical record, is debatable however, since the film is first of all a work of fiction.

Even explicitly fictional films can inform viewers about the nature of the past. I think *Dances With Wolves* does a excellent job at this, because it not only provides a fairly accurate representation of the what life on the South
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Dakota plains looked like in 1864 (from the herd of buffalo to the costumes worn by both the soldiers and the Lakota), but also for its depiction of Native American people during that time. While many films feature only two-dimensional Native Americans often using generic images of teepees (sometime in regions where no teepee ever stood) and generalizing about what were very diverse people, *Dances with Wolves* resists this impulse and gives a more accurate portrayal of one tribe. This provides for a much better historical understanding of the tribe and their conditions that would be possible otherwise. *Dances with Wolves* is a model of what a historical fiction film should be.

Bibilography

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