

# Paste

## TV Rewind: AMC's *Hell on Wheels* and Our Need for More American Period Pieces

By Lacy Baugher | March 26, 2021 | 10:17am



*Photo Courtesy of AMC*

**Editor's Note:** Welcome to our TV Rewind column! The Paste writers are diving into the streaming catalogue to discuss some of our favorite classic series as well as great shows we're watching for the first time. Come relive your TV past with us, or discover what should be your next binge watch below:

Generally speaking, American audiences love period dramas—as long as they're of a particular stripe. Shows like *Downton Abbey*, *Bridgerton*, and *Outlander* feed our love of high-end costume series centered on romance and class issues. Dramas like *The Crown*, *The Spanish Princess*, and *The Tudors* speak to our national obsession with messy (usually British) royals. And there's no

bad time for a Jane Austen adaptation, as evidenced by the recent arrival of *Sanditon* and the new feature film version of *Emma*.

Every so often a prestige cable outlet will turn out a fascinating, if often overly bloody historical epic, like *Rome* (HBO), *Black Sails* (Starz), or *Vikings* (History), series whose liberal inclusion of sex and violence are clearly meant to attract more male viewers than another rumination on the unfair fate of the bulk of Henry VIII's six wives might. But rarely do we see stories about America's own history depicted in the same way as we do stories about virtually any other place or period. Sure, there are a handful of shows about the colonial era (*Turn: Washington's Spies*), the tumultuous Wild West (*Deadwood*), or even the Civil War (*Mercy Street*), but few last for very long, and even fewer manage to really interrogate the difficult and often painful elements of America's past.

AMC's *Hell on Wheels* somehow managed to break this cycle on multiple fronts, running for five full seasons despite its bloody, often painstakingly slow plot. An overlooked and wildly underrated series that dramatized the construction of competing cross-country railroads in a place still reeling from the Civil War, its story is the dream of Manifest Destiny realized, with all the good and ill that necessarily entails. It is a rich, painfully realistic depiction of America's expansion West, full of the sort of jaw-dropping scenery and endless vistas that make you repeatedly wonder why we don't see more stories set in this time period more often.

It is also a series that is uncomfortably specific, and not just when it comes to the dirty realities and uneasy tensions that accompany life in an ever-moving town camp with few outlets for its male denizens beyond alcohol and prostitutes. *Hell on Wheels* is also unflinchingly honest about the dark underbelly of both the sprawling railroad world and the nascent America that is coalescing around it, fueled by cutthroat capitalism and the gleeful exploitation of those somehow deemed as "other," be they Black freedman, Native Americans, or Chinese workers.

The story centers on Cullen Bohannon (Anson Mount) a former Confederate soldier who originally heads West, not for a fresh start, but revenge. He ends up working on the Transcontinental Railroad in search of the men who murdered his wife and child, and though his reasons for staying evolve over the course of the series, they are never any less complex or compelling. Seemingly unable to put the horrors of the war fully behind him or properly grieve his personal losses, Bohannon is messy in the ways you'd expect from a Western hero: he drinks too much, has a bad habit of getting in fights, is usually covered in grime, and generally struggles to understand—or even fully realize—what kind of man he wants to become.

Mount's remarkable performance is undoubtedly the glue that holds the series together, and a key part of its overall success. His Bohannon is marvelously layered; occasionally heroic, sometimes tragic, and often unlikable, this is a man whose journey repeatedly takes him to very dark places. Yet, he not only manages to survive but finds something ultimately redemptive in his journey to the other side of America.

But the series also boasts a surprisingly ethnically diverse cast, thanks to the melting pot of different backgrounds brought together to build and manage the railroad. From Elam (Common) and the other ex-slaves-turned-freedmen who provide physical labor alongside white immigrants

from Ireland and Germany, to Cheyenne Christian convert Joseph Black Moon (Eddie Spears) attempting to exist in an uncomfortable liminal space between his native and adopted peoples, this is a story full of people writing—and often rewriting over again—their own histories in real-time.

*Hell on Wheels* is a story of constant reinvention, both large and small. The show also went through multiple evolutions over the course of its run, as did Bohannon himself and the bulk of the series' central characters. But is there a better encapsulation of the appeal of the myth of the American West than the idea that you can remake your life? That fresh starts and new beginnings are possible? It's what has driven people across the country for generations. (And still does, to some extent.)

The promise of a “land without the limits” is a big part of the myth that defines America, and even though that idea has never actually been entirely true—see also our nation's history of slavery, horrible treatment of Indigenous tribes, and ready exploitation of immigrants—it still makes for a powerful and unique story. And it's honestly surprising that more period dramas don't try to take advantage of it.

*Hell on Wheels* isn't perfect, by any stretch. Its later seasons are stronger than its earlier ones and, as a series, it doesn't always give its women the depth its men are afforded, and it has a bad habit of simply killing off characters it no longer knows what to do with. But its consistent ability to identify what's not working and course-correct accordingly is a skill every subsequent prestige television series could stand to emulate.

Though the show looked a bit different by the time its final season concluded than it did when it first started, *Hell on Wheels* managed to stick its final landing, embracing those all-too-American ideals of freedom, independence, and hope in the face of what seem impossible odds. It continues looking forward to a future the show itself will never reach, even as it foreshadows many of the struggles and hopes waiting for a country that's always looking for what's next.