

VULTURE

DEVOURING CULTURE

Hell on Wheels Series Finale Recap: The Last Stop

By Kenny Herzog



Tim Guinee as Collis Huntington. Photo: Michelle Faye/AMC

Say what you will about Thomas Durant — surely, it'd be more than he had to say in response to charges of bribery, fraud, and corruption — but that was one impassioned speech in the closing minutes of *Hell on Wheels*. And why wouldn't the final oratory go to a man who longed for a legacy that history couldn't erase? It's a thoroughly

defensible bit of bravura shaming, a Hail Mary meant to ensure he's forever remembered as a titan of industry who got his hands dirty building the American Dream while Washington fat cats played hot potato with people's lives. It's not as if Cullen Bohannon would storm in and clarify Durant's grandiose delusion. When it comes down to it, our weary protagonist is a simple Southern man. The call of duty and subsequent determination to endure thrust him into an iconic role, but he shuns it all to find Fong and pursue happiness in the here and now, rather than get lost in the fog of war or anything else.

And so, there goes our mangy, moody, future unsung legend, heading off into the Pacific Ocean to find his lady love, with little more than an address and aspiration to leave his tenuously united nation way back in the distance. Sure, his heated romance with the androgynous forewoman of his Chinese labor crew came on suddenly, in a soapy course of events that could only be outdone if Cullen first had to rescue and reconcile with his Mormon wife and their ill-conceived son. You get the gist. It's been a weird couple of seasons. It's been a bemusing run for *Hell on Wheels* as a whole. Why not call it a day by sending one guy halfway across the world (Cullen), a whore-turned-horse-enthusiast toward the horizon with a stack of cash (Eva), and a gritty Irish barkeep and secret softie off to San Francisco with nary a flower in his hair (Mickey)? Why not top it all off with the aforementioned robber baron, Durant, offering a thundering final sermon on ethics and freedom as if he were a prototypical Donald Trump feigning kinship with the middle class?

Amid all that, "Done" does its due diligence, coming full circle by letting Bohannon step inside the right side of a confession booth for a moment of Zen. The scene is a bit

melodramatic, but an effectively far cry from the man who masqueraded as a compassionate priest before killing a Union soldier to avenge his family's deaths. As the show has readily acknowledged in its waning episodes, Cullen got a tad off track (pardon the pun) from his early reasons for heading west, so it's a wise idea to reconcile the gunslinger we first met with this introspective soul setting off for Asia.

A slow clap is also in order for outing Louise as a cultural tourist who'd been lurking behind a crusader's façade. Granted, a gal's gotta be somewhat self-interested and given to sensationalism in male-dominated, post-Civil War society if she stands a chance in journalism. Still, her twin admonishments to Eva about exploiting her tragedy in the form of a scandalous and misleading memoir — "This can be a way in for you," and "This is the best you could hope for," — are aptly petulant. If anything, Eva is a saint for not slapping her in the kisser. (Pun on their short-lived lesbian affair very much intended.)

One shudders to think what Eva would have made of General Custer's remarks concerning the sexual bloodlust of Apache women. Though it follows the finale's 19th-century spin on a slob-versus-snobs motif, this version of Custer is just the right amount of slimy to serve as Cullen's foil *and* all but guarantee Bohannon would spurn President Grant's proposal to kill Native Americans like a good soldier. Cullen's turnabout in the face of Custer and Grant's regressive, divisive rhetoric is a bit pat, but p'shaw to anyone who's watched this far and still wanted an ending that didn't involve our hero breaking the cycle of servitude and self-hate.

Besides, who cares what the president and his shotgun-toting lapdog have to say about Cullen Bohannon? Does it

really matter how they choose to negate his contributions to industry? Durant's monologue hits the golden spike on the head: "Truths delivered by lies are no less true." That much has been driven home by these last few episodes, as milestone moments were orchestrated, manipulated, and reverse-engineered to narrowcast hundreds of lives so they fit into a primitive camera lens or telegraph wire. *Hell on Wheels* has made its final stop, but a freeze-frame of where it pulled in would shine bittersweet light on a country moving full-speed ahead like a train in vain.

Apart From All That:

- "Doesn't have the romance of the transcontinental, but don't write her off." Subtle.
- Oh, that randy Margaret.
- That was a fun last scene for Psalms.
- Still don't care about Eva's horse.
- The slow-march soundtrack over Grant's spiel is a touch much.
- I have absolutely no feeling on Collis, one way or the other.
- Cullen Bohannon ain't gonna die for no one else's sins.
- No nod to Elam in the finale. Cold.

So, where does this show fall on the all-time ranking of

Western dramas?