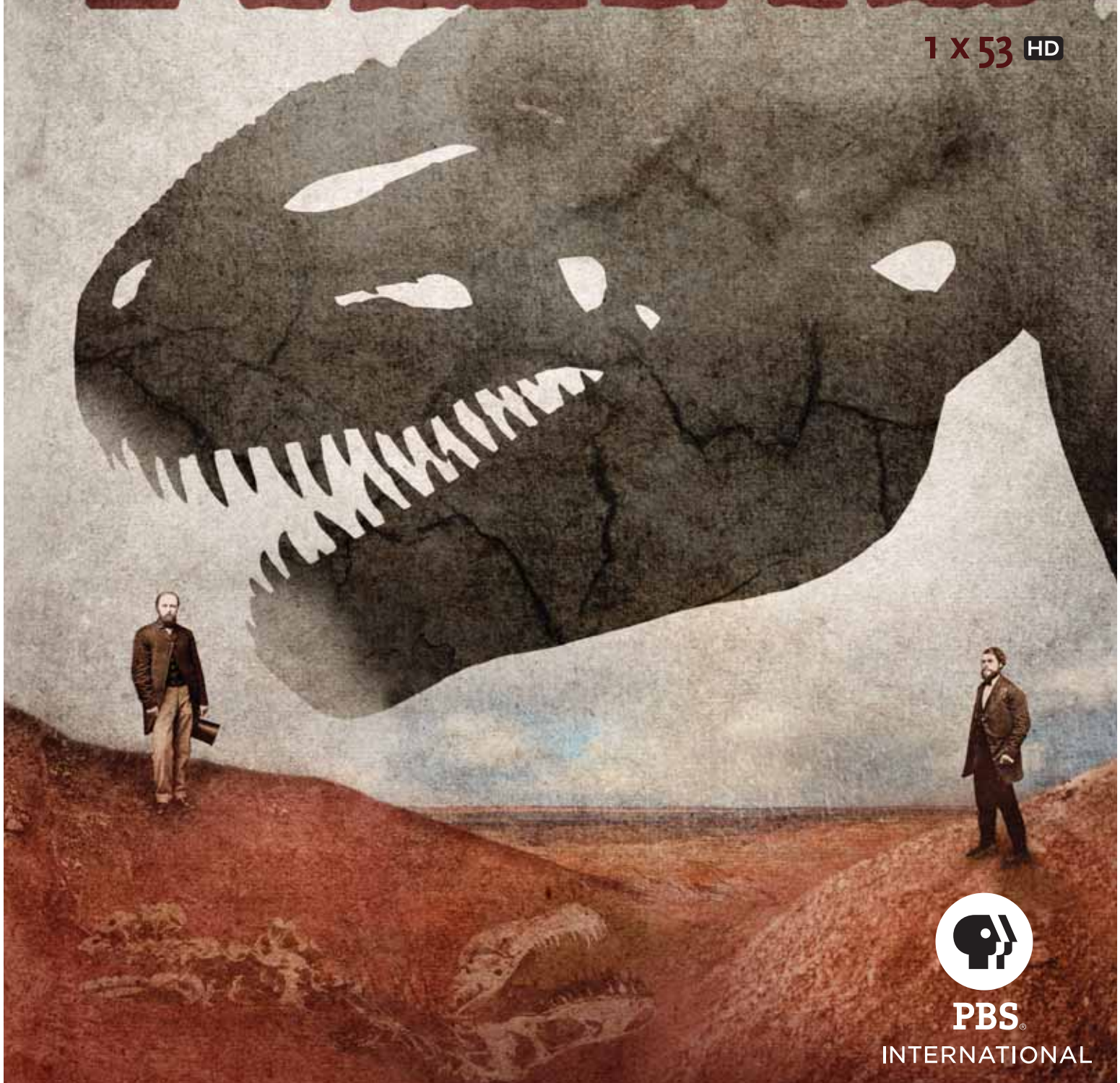


DINOSAUR WARS

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CONTACT

Tom Koch, Vice President
PBS International
10 Guest Street
Boston, MA 02135 USA

TEL: +1-617-208-0735
FAX: +1-617-208-0783

jt Koch@pbs.org
pbsinternational.org

In the decades following the Civil War and the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of the Species*, "survival of the fittest" came to define both the science and the business of the day, as ambitious men scrambled for control of unclaimed wealth on the western frontier. For Edward Cope and Othniel Marsh, the prize was not timber, land, or metals, but fossil bones—dinosaurs, sea monsters, and primitive mammals embedded in the rugged landscapes of the American West. The new transcontinental railroad put the ancient bone yards within reach of science for the first time. At stake in the vast and varied fossil fields of the West was an opportunity for *someone* to piece together and explain nothing less than the history of life on Earth. For almost thirty years, Cope and Marsh competed ruthlessly for that distinction; together, they launched America's love affair with dinosaurs and the prehistoric past that continues to this day—but they also managed to destroy each other in the process.

Edward Cope was born to a prosperous Quaker family in Philadelphia. A self-taught prodigy, he grew up in the world of amateur, gentlemen naturalists, as did most American scientists in the years before the Civil War. Though he lacked formal training, he was a brilliant scientist.

Othniel Marsh was a poor farm boy in rural New York until he was plucked from obscurity by his wealthy uncle, George Peabody, the great Victorian philanthropist. After staking his nephew to an education at Andover, Yale, and European universities, Peabody endowed a science museum at Yale College where Marsh was installed as the first professor of paleontology in America. Marsh was a skilled institution builder and an imperious competitor who could not tolerate being second to anyone.

Cope and Marsh proved to be a lethal combination of ambition and temperament. By the early 1870s they were competing head-to-head in Kansas and Wyoming, piecing together the story of life that evolved in what is now the western plains and Rocky Mountains 50 to 70 million years ago. Their discoveries revolutionized the young field of paleontology and drew praise from Darwin himself. However, in professional journals, their scientific rivalry grew increasingly bitter to the dismay of their colleagues. The mad scramble for dinosaurs near Como Bluff, Wyoming, brought out the best and worst in Cope and Marsh. And there, their feud turned poisonous.

Over thirty years of intense competition, Cope and Marsh laid the foundations of modern paleontology and in the end, all but ruined each other. Cope died in 1897 at the age of 56, and Marsh followed in 1899 at the age of 68. Neither man lived to see the work of his lifetime discovered by the public. After their deaths, museums in New York, Washington, New Haven, and Pittsburgh began mounting the fossil skeletons collected over the previous thirty years and putting them on public display for the first time. Monsters of the past were not just for scientists any more, and they continue to enthrall new generations to this day.

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CREDITS

Producers: Mark Davis & Anna Saraceno

Writer, Director: Mark Davis

Executive Producer: Mark Samels



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