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*John Ford - An analysis of his Westerns (1939 -
1964)*

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INTRODUCTION

The cliched idea of one's granny bringing you to a Saturday matinee forcefeeding you smarties and nurturing an addiction, as the narcotic effects of the visuals engulf you are not totally unfounded. My affection for things John Ford style began not in the striking vistas of Monument Valley, Utah, but in Galway the setting for the most celebrated of "Oirish" films - The Quiet Man.

The only Irish Western ever made and not a stetson or Winchester in sight. The romanticised tale of ruralised, hypocritical Ireland is idyllic and contrived, on first viewing it incensed movie watchers of the 90's, insults and degrades your very Irishness. The farce ridiculing and perpetuating misinformed myths, just what market was this director trying to appeal to? Yes what is that directors name? Bet you he's American, wouldn't have a notion about Ireland, it's heritage, it's years of oppression, it's civil war, it's,...it's....it's...

John Ford is a man driven, motivated and controlled by characteristics - Orson Welles once said "He has a chip on his shoulders like epaulettes imprisoned by his biological chemistry, what he is, is where he came from. This philosophy, though fundamentally simplistic is one I firmly believe in, it determines my artistic output and subsequently it's content, Ford suffered the same torment. His socio-economic background was an infinite source of inspiration and subject matter.

Initially I considered an analysis purely from a political angle however his politics, like his thought process were a minefield to navigate or negotiate properly. He was politically fickle, highly unstable fluctuating from both extremes of the spectrum, once claiming to be a "Social Anarchist".

The reasons for the Westerns, simply the most complete materialisation of the essence that is Ford, containing every facet of the structure that maketh the man.

Chapter One

"The Not Quite Man"

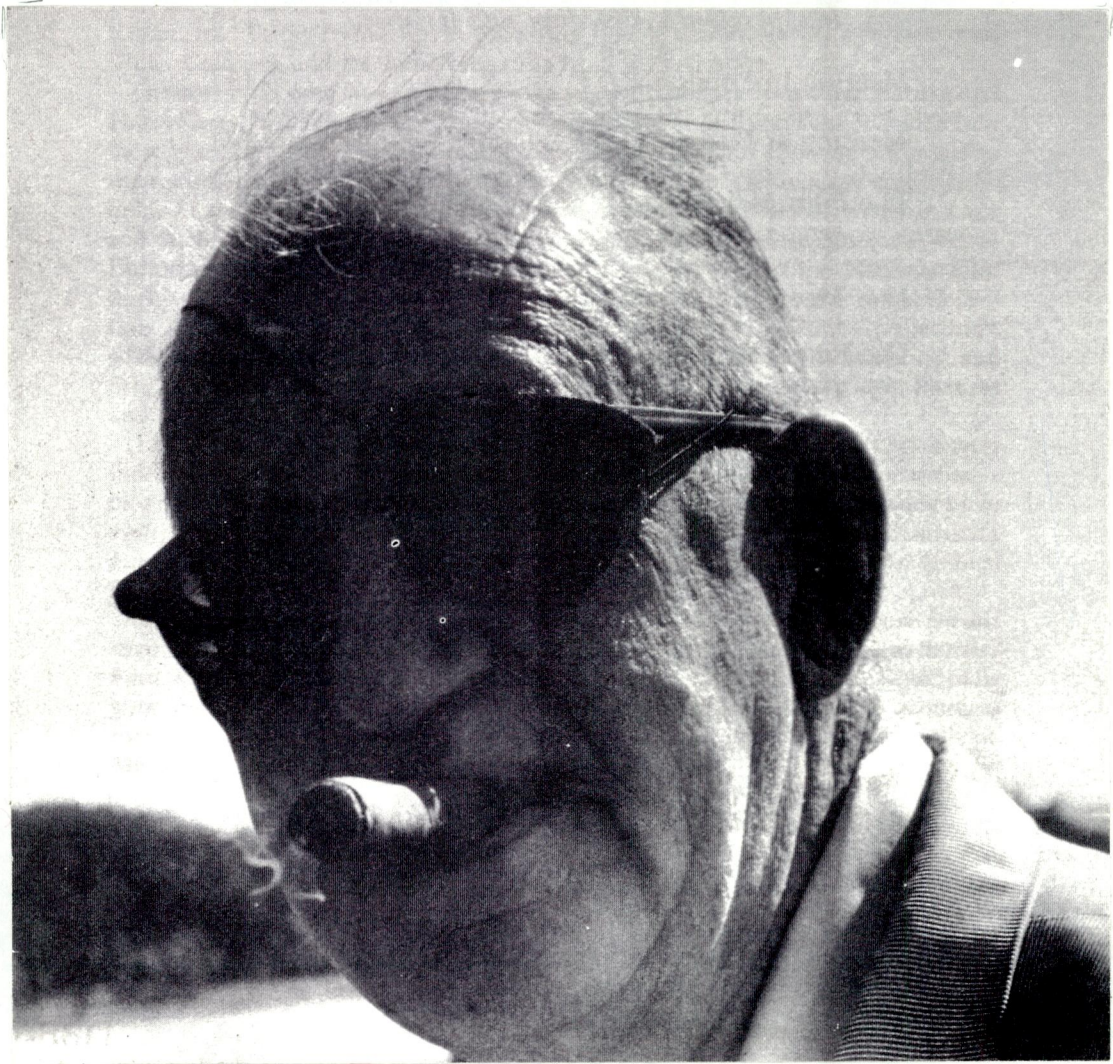


Fig 1. John Ford

"John is half tyrant, half revolutionary, half saint, half Satan, half possible, half impossible, half genius, half Irish...."

*Frank Capra
(McB / Wil 1974, p138)*

America a nation of nationals, races, creeds, religions -the eclectic melting pot. Old world refugees, their of-spring, genetic mongrels many slavishly retaining their inherited characteristics some like John Ford distilling these inherent traits into lifelong obsessions.

Described as an Auteur, a poet of classic Greek proportions, John Ford director, producer, enigma, projected or almost bodily transfused himself into his films.

The infinite adjectives lavished upon him were equally apparent in his work his every fascination permeating, practically oozing from the scenes of over one hundred accredited filmic ventures.

The American born thirteenth child of Irish immigrants, other sources quote eleven. The year of his birth, 1895, February 1st the date. Christened Sean Aloysius O'Feeney, his name like many emigrants was to evolve to accomodate convenience in a modern state.

His father was a native of Galway, his mother born on the Arran Islands, both travelling west to escape the aftermaths of a disastrous famine that blighted Irelands western sea-board for the ensuing generations and decades.

They settled in Cape Elizabeth, Portland, Maine and with religious zeal began to increase the towns population. Biographical details for Ford's formative years, his youthful endeavours, his relatives outcome are scarce, sources unsure and shrouded in myth, Hollywood propaganda and Ford's own tendency for enhancing the fact.

However all of the factors influential in forming his character recur repeatedly within his films content. To understand their structure, essence, latent and overt message one must examine the influencing elements that determined his direction through maturity.

The strongest strain in his pedigree was his Irishness. A quality so commonplace in all of his movies regardless of subject matter and irrelevant of context. He was enthusiastically proud of his Celtic Heritage, an elite membership he revelled in, wielded craftfully, manipulated expertly and indulged in with xenophobic relish. He possessed a fervour for things Irish, often insisting County Galway his real birthplace (1).

He seems to have cherished the traditional habits of his forebears, their fondness for mystification, mischievousness, evasive ambiguity, poetry, hyperbole sentimentality, a sense of occasion and collective Catholic guilt, all profoundly inherent in the national temperament.

Ford's 'Irish' interpretation of Irishness verged recurrently almost on the 'Lepricony' status. Although incredibly nationalistic his treatment of things Irish descended into ribaldry, farce and 'blarney theatrics' on innumerable occasions. A paradoxical man. a dicotomy of values constantly contradictory and sometimes controversial. These elements are fundamental in understanding the man, the artist and subsequently his films. -- A professional schizophrenic.

The reason for his parents emigration was most probably a better standard of existence, promises of better lifestyles and a new beginning. From a socio-economic or geographic angle they were victims for the failure of Irelands premier crop, the potato, the mass exodus to escape death and pestilence burst an artery in the county's lifeblood, which became bled voraciously for the remainder of the 19th Century. The blame for the Famine in Fords opinion lay in the hands of Irelands occupying guest - Britain. Her Majestys forces, an empirical, colonial oppressor guilty of a litany of unspeakable sins.

Whether his hatred was manifested by tales of starvation, eviction and courageous yet futile rebellion, obviously related by his expatriate father. Ford cultivated this further throughout the duration of his life. On numerous occasions during interviews he is quoted as pronouncing vehemently his hatred for England and it's tyrannical past.

"You know the two things I hate the most anti-racialism and the English."
(And.1981.p28)

As related to Lindsay Anderson in 1952.

Faint, illegible text, likely bleed-through from the reverse side of the page.

Fig 2. *Ford's Devoted Pre-occupation.*



His treatment of English characters in film plots is equally dismissive and biased, anything aristocratic or blatantly anglicised was severely portrayed.

"Were a smart, poor race" (McB / Wil.1974.p.89)

His allegiance to the place of his parents birth never receded but exploited to the extreme. The mad Irishman label allowed freedom in Hollywood and a license to incense.

Living on the eastern coastline created more facets important in his character profile construction.

His boyhood passion for sailing, hence a desire to be a sailor, began when young. On leaving highschool he failed appointment to the Naval College at Annapolis. Devastated at not fulfilling his initial dream he attended the University of Maine, his venture into third level education was however brief. Three weeks into the course, Sean O'Feeney aged nineteen repacked his bags and migrated west to Hollywood.

Ford's pre-occupations with military establishments and the collective bodies of instituted men appears to have begun from rejection, nurturing into a healthy obsession. It materialised itself in his films and private life, his war service and eventual promotion by Richard Nixon to Rear Admiral. A full cycle of events that were to epitomise Ford's meteoric rise from prop boy to four times Academy award winner.

Ford's jingoism, that surfaced unashamedly in plentiful supply was analysed as a newcomer's compulsion to prove his love of country. A search for dutiful obedience to a power much greater than oneself. This was true, but his loyalties were split between his present home and that of his forefathers.

A patriot in the purest form, no apologies procured no excuses given, no explanation required his work was self explanatory.



Fig 3. *Captain Nathan Brittles (Wayne).*

New England, Bostonian virtues, East Coast moralities, a strict code of ethics, personal discipline were all ingredients evident in Ford as an individual, resultantly perceptible in his films were these traits. His heroes are shown as strong anglo-saxon white males, virtuous, intrepid, gallant and full of unrestrained resolve to achieve their goal. Theirs is a life existing by a code, unwritten yet known, inherited and preserved unquestioned.

In the Western context, the land is savage and the native is savage, survival is not reliant on dexterity alone, high moral fibre must prevail to overcome and sustain. Culture must expand with territorial gains. Those with the powers to educate must do so responsibly. The White Man must spread his Christian principles and embrace the heathen aboriginal.

Ford's parents being of Irish extraction in all probability were Roman Catholic whether their piousness was strengthened or diluted by an arduous transatlantic journey by coffin-ship some vestiges of their religious beliefs must have filtered down to their offspring. What ever form of eroded Catholicism Ford adopted, it still played a part in his integral movie ingredients.

Filmically Ford was enchanted by the ritual, wakes, burials, weddings, births, dances and event that insured a conglomeration of people. A focus point to resolve, disturb or redirect a plot situation. Maybe the highly ritualised occasion of Mass inspired this hang-up thus incorporating the biblical factor, the sermon and the celebration, with reverence.

Biblically, references regurgitate frequently. Film characters, plots and scenarios are infused with testamental qualities. The films become parables or fables suggesting meaning of further connotations or insights. Analogies are drawn between events in ancient Israel and occurrences in the rugged West. The Promised Land awaits the bedraggled travellers in *'Wagon master'* (1950) driven on by blind faith and religious persecution left behind. Visual metaphors are in abundance, Ward Bond minus the long beard and stone tablets.

Domestic family values featured strongly in Ford's cinema. The family unit self-sufficient, its strength in its unity, its defense in its love, was the core factor in Ford's sense of community. The community was representative of the civilized, the civically minded the politically just and the morally sound, exponents of all the virtues Ford held dear and supported whole heartedly.

In opposition to this utopian dream was the uncivilized savage, the unrepentant, the ostracised, the social outcast and those on the fringe that negotiated the emotional minefield between the 'Settlers' and those nomadic flux. Ford's heroes appear in a favourable light, he renders them capable of reintegration and attempts to marry the loner to acceptable society behaviour. Repatriation is a painful difficult process hindered by prejudices on both parties' account.

Ford has justly been accused of excessive sentimentality and milking emotive angles in the extreme. Many excellent projects have suffered consequently, a decline that only was halted by the demise of his career. He was a traditionalist, an errant knight hellbent on glorification and perservation.

One can only surmise that the reasons for this particular constituent in his character stems from a complete and satisfying upbringing within a closely knit entity.

All of the afore mentioned characteristics in John Ford's psychological make-up became engendered in him and obviously his style of film-making. The former is the intellectual facet of his processes the latter I now discuss - the practical.

Ford's apprenticeship in Hollywood began under the competent tutorage of his older brother Francis. He had flown the nest previously and altered his name to Ford on arrival in California.

Sean O'Feeney accordingly became John Ford and, as Jack he set to work as a prop boy earning twelve dollars a week. His initial employer his brother the location University City Studios. His formative years in this most virgin of aesthetic pursuits possessed no guidelines, no restrictions other than technical and a brilliantly youthful naivete.

Whether through typically gut determination, providence or unadulterated brilliance Ford elevated himself through the ranks of this infantile industry. He capitalised and profited from the ignorance and incompetence of his peers, a man motivated, incited by the insatiable appetite of the public, which instilled a frenzied excitement in this fledgling artform stuntman, actor, cameraman no job too big or too insignificant to require Ford's total dedication. Hollywood not even an adolescent, had experienced no puberty pains and lacked the inhibitions, corruption, internal strifes, trench warfares and snobbish ideologies that were to dog it's progress and expansion. Jack Ford the unscrupulous amoral film-maker revelled and flourished.

By 1917, a directorial debut introduced him to his mentor and possibly greatest tutor, Harry Carey. Carey was a rugged, popular actor, and already established lead player with a penchant for Westerns. Their partnership was to be a fruitful one, teacher and student both travelling the same path of discovery. Historically the 'West' still survived in isolated bases littering the states. Early cinema perpetuated and exalted the myth before it's actual demise guaranteeing it immortality and perpetual adulation (2)

Ford and Carey were conscientious int he extreme, their production outlay was phenomenal, content consolidated for entertainment value. Films were churned out, scripts rehashed, repackaged, released for gleeful consumption. These projects were 'two-reelers' cinematic hors-d'ouvres, the appeasement brief, the addiction long term.

At this early stage Ford displayed an inclination that was to never fade or disappear, that was the life time habit of employing and working closely with the same production team and actors repeatedly. The Fordian stock Company was engendered form his partiality for familiarity in professional relationships and possibly his mistrust of things, all things. Basically his initial associations were simply contractual, their continuance a yearning for allegiances and camaraderie.

Evidence of Ford's juvenile endeavours are scarce and untraceable, unfortunate in the sense that it offers little indication of his stylistic evolution, a vanished opportunity to assess a developing mode.

"Almost a style - hacking away the inessentials, in order to enclose the movement of film in a violent dynamic continuity, each image like a blow from a clenched fist..." Jean Mitry (E.U. 1954)

Swedish and German film exposed Ford to their post-war expressionistic style, not a major watershed but significantly influential in his forthcoming projects. What he derived from these European sources was a more expressive approach, no longer content with quantity maximum and quality minimal, artistically Ford no longer Jack on the credits arrived. The 'Iron Horse' (1924) his fiftieth film, approximated was the most critically acclaimed of his silent films. The story told of the construction of the first transcontinental railroad, an important hallmark in America's history. The film, with its theme of enterprise, endurance and tenacity on a grand scale, in a setting of a vigorous pioneering past, stimulated Ford's talent to the best of his then present abilities. It achieved nationwide popular success and acquired for its producers and directors fiscal and reputable rewards, respectively. The young John Ford was established as one directors within the industry, a reputation than galvanised by the onset of sound.

Ford relapsed into the chasm of commercial production while awaiting the 'talkies' to revolutionise the business. The advent of this technical breakthrough insured the continued survival of an elite few of previously unheard orators whose careers blossomed. Alas for many great stars of the golden silent era the transition was treacherous and casualties high. The cinematic 'body-count' did not include Ford as a victim but awarded him a fresh challenge to overcome and master.

Ford's formation in silent cinema gave him an observed expertise and superb mastery of the visual narrative. It offered more. It gave a wonderful comprehension that a film director is a person that created worlds or rather an entity and that film in this scenario is merely poetic. It was to be his great achievement that after being, similarly others, sidetracked by the introduction of sound, and the required necessity for reality in dialogue, he found his way back to myth, to poetry.



Fig 4. Ford and Victor Mc Laglen on set of
'The Informer'.

The Fordian style was enjoying a gradual emergence, maturing and developing confidently in leaps and bounds. Filimic trademarks had naive humble beginnings, but acknowledged results. The relation of a tale through images solely formed skills imperative in translation ideals lucidly. Ford was intrinsically a bard, a story-teller dialogues justly reinforces this attribute. Language being essential, 1929 saw Dudley Nichols being introduced to the director. Journalist turned scriptwriter their collaboration was bountiful, the riches they received, were widespread admiration, and deserved respect for Ford directoral potency. The 1930's saw Ford and co-conspirators notch up an impressive oeuvre of projects that elevated them to the top of their chosen profession. Fame, commercial success and an evolved sophistication of manner promised a certain level of immunity. An independence, a freedom, the liberty Ford hungered for. Its labour of love was *'The Informer'* (1935), a novel by Liam O'Flaherty, a joyous, ecstatic return to things Irish. The story tells of Gypo Nolan (Victor Mc Laglen) a gullible, foolish ox of a man, discharged from the I.R.A. during the war of Independence in Ireland. His incompetence raised doubts about his dedication and loyalty to the cause, causing his expulsion from the organisation. Without the umbilical cord of the rebels, his fortunes reverse dramatically. Bitter and starved he informs Judas-like to enhance his existence the twenty pounds exchanged was intended for his passage to America. The level of his degradation declines rapidly.

After the death of the fugitive rebel. His own stupidity incriminates him, execution decided for his treacherous actions. He dies theatrically, partly reconciled and cleansed of his sins.

This pet project of Ford's was highly stylistic with atmospheric lighting creating a dreamlike qualities. A deliberate aesthetic experiment it was above all full, of precise and pre-determined style. Ford the artist painted his first real canvas exuding his personality, it was totally unlike any of it's contemporaries. It was awarded four Academy Awards, the director's first and was to represent the paradox that was John Ford's technique.



Fig. 5.
*Sheriff (Bancroft), The Ringo Kid.
(Wayne) and Dallas (Trevor).*

The adult film maker had metamorphosed with the acquisition of the industry's highest credit. The personality that was to direct the films that I intend to concentrate on in the remainder of this treatise, had evolved, similar to the cliched escape of the adult butterfly from a chrysalis cocoon, Ford incubatory apprenticeship had also acquired a ferocious sting in it's tail.

John Ford was deceptive to initial interpretation equally aggressive and defensive, gentle and abrasive, generous and bloody-minded, verging on sadistic, courageous, obstinate yet endlessly loyal. The strict professional but self-controlled anarchist, a paradox of emotive impulses, primed and waiting for ignition. The variegated attributes I have just enumerated were to expand, mutate and distort with age, the progress of time producing a persona intoxicated by it's own self-image. This larger than life character was however responsible for contributing some of the best cinema, to come out of that small suburb in Los Angeles.

The 1939 adaptation of the story short '*Stage to Lordsburg*' by Ernest Haycox, by Ford was his first Western since the early thirties. "*Stagecoach*" scripted by Dudley Nicols is an apt end to a successful decade, a suitable finish to chapter one and a perfect embarkation point for the analysis of his more recent Westerns.

The stagecoach en route from Tonto to Lordsburg is populated by a prostitute, Dallas (Claire Trevor), a gambler, a romantic Southern gentleman of aristocratic bearing, Hatfield (John Carradine), a salesman from Kansas - a whiskey drummer, Peacock (Donald Meek) an alcoholic doctor, Boone (Thomas Mitchell), a dishonest banker, Gatewood (Berton Churchill), a snobbish well-bred wife of a cavalry officer, heavily pregnant, Mrs Mallory (Louise Platt), and piloted by the driver, gormless Buck (Andy Devine) and protected by the sheriff, riding shotgun. He was played by George Bancroft.

Social tensions exist among the passengers, further enhanced by the addition of the Ringo Kid, who quite spectacularly charts a ride to town and eternal fame. The shot of John Wayne revolving his rifle, rescued his career, rewarded stardom and lended the post-war Western it's most important player.



Fig 6. *Monument Valley in 'Stagecoach'.*

Fig 7. *The Stage from Tonto to Lordsburg.*



The arrested outlaw, Wayne joins the party devoid of their cavalry escort. All the characters reveal the true self, the revelations occurring as the plot was propelled along as tirelessly as the horses pulled the coach. The unexpected labour of Mr. Mallory unifies the antagonising parties, the pains of birth, a baby dispelling all differences, the child's arrival a great social leveller.

A sobered doctor aided by Dallas the 'Tart with a heart' deliver it safely. En route again, the fearsome Apache finally attack. The Indian war party pursue the stagecoach wildly, the passengers gallantly; y defending their collective survival. After a prolonged chase the sound of charging bugles herald their saviours, ammunition exhausted, the cavalry arriving from Lordsburg are a welcome sight.

The chivalrous gambler is the only casualty, his antiquated romanticised values have no place in the democratic West. Social outcasts all, the reveal an innate nobility by their actions shaming the snobbery of the fellow passengers. However it is Wayne, an escaped convict who is the hero. His dexterous gymnastics and magnificent shooting saves the day. Hell bent on revenge, his reason, for flight from prison. Wayne tracks down the Plummer boys, the executors of his father and brother. He kills the three men with a carbine as he falls to the dusty street, one of the most memorable moments in film. The Ringo Kid, his blood-lust satiated, willingly returns to his incarcerator the sheriff. However his bravery in the face of numerous adversaries wins him his liberty and Dallas in a package deal. The 'forgets' to re-arrest him, instead sending the pair into the wilderness to love in togetherness. "*Stagecoach*" is arguably the most significant sound Western ever, the first truly modern Western a prototype for future projects. It was a hazardous adventure that became a landmark in the genres development.

It was Ford's first film in Monument Valley (his own film reserve for the following twenty five years). It's first time to involve the Seventh cavalry and most importantly the lifeline he extended to Marion Michael Morrison. A gesture that retrieved Wayne from the doldrums of B Westerns. This creative relationship between a director and an actor must rank as one of the most fruitful in cinematic history and it began in earnest despite much resistance from Hollywood's hierarchy.

'I don't want Wayne'

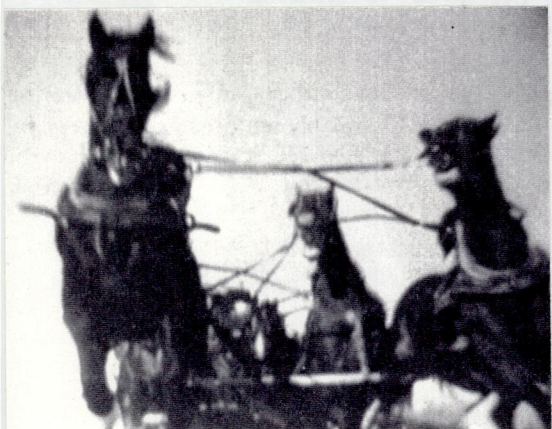
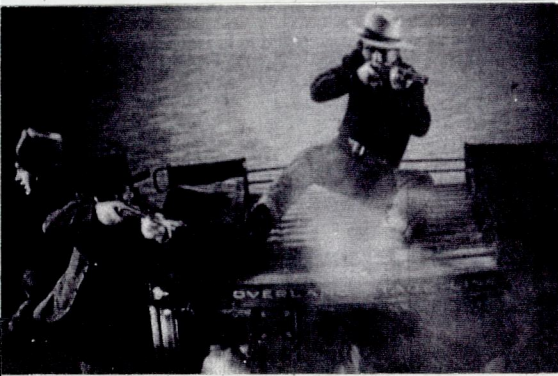
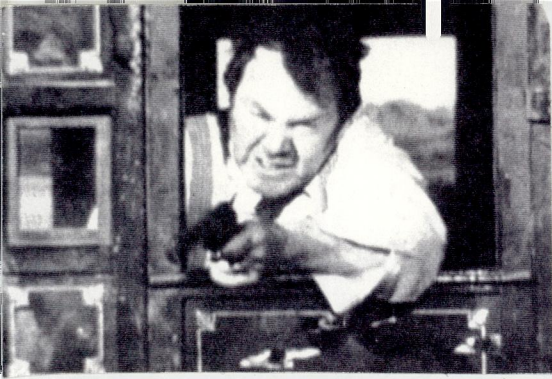


Fig 8.

The Apache's Savage Attack on the Stage.

Walter Wanger an independent producer/financier who adopted the financing after David O'Selznick insisted Gary Cooper and Marlene Dietrich play the lead.

'I want somebody with more class'- Wanger. 'No Wayne : No Picture' - Ford - economical, blunt and curt. (M.B.1970 p.14)

This faith in Wayne's abilities though two dimensional in the company of thespians, captured the actor a prime slice of movie action. *'Stagecoach'* proved to be crucial in establishing the Western as something capable of carrying more serious thematic content within it's adventure narrative. Ford presented his players in his mobile situation piece with a sharpness, an eye for the detail and interplay of personality, which infuses continual colour and variety to the steadily mounting tension of the action.

In *'Stagecoach'*, it is above all the action which is premium. In this sense, it is not a poetic film. It is not concerned to achieve existence on anything but this single level; it's excellence is the excellence of masterly narrative prose, taut, dynamic and irresistibly holding. These virtues are of course indicative of Ford the swinging rhythm, the broad landscapes the hectic excitement of the chase across, the flats, the double image ; the alternation between close-ups of emotional intimacy, zoom ins to establish character status and long shots of epic involvement for contrasting effects.

Through my research many schools of thought and sources of criticism have surfaced. Critics dissect, examine and analyse the Fordian style the Ford films and their results with unrequited passion. Very few of the afore mentioned tend not to agree on much, the conflict, of one becomes involved sterilises and makes impotent one's basics honest appreciation of the directors films, it distorts your perception, the comprehension too profound. John Ford was a manipulative bully, a tyrannical employer, obsessively fastidious, a torturer of minds, yet unavoidable deservant of the begrudging affection he receives. I dislike him as an individual but love his films, thus the forthcoming opinions will prove objective.

END NOTES

1. When choosing locations for the *'Quiet Man'* in Galway Ford was accompanied by a flock of Hollywood moguls eager to assess the expenditure of their finances. The project was still at a precarious stage, support for this Irish American venture had thin foundation. Ford on a remote road in the depths of the county stopped abruptly, the entourage followed briskly behind. A whitewashed cottage stood before them in all its peasant splendour, a tearful Ford convinced his fellow travellers it was the place of his birth, the statagem practically securing the deal.

2. Ford befriended Wyatt Earp prior to the famous Marshalls death. Insisting that the gunfight scene at the OK Corral in *'My Darling Clementine'* was shot according to Earp's vivid recollections. Old Man Clanton actually died after the gunfight, Ford chose to kill him.

CHAPTER TWO

"TEXIKANS ARE JUST MEN OUT ON A
LIMB"



Fig 10. *Henry Fonda's Wyatt Earp.*

Ford directed 13 Westerns after 'Stagecoach' the final one 'Cheyenne Autumn' was filmed in 1964.

For me they fall into two categories with sub-sections and cross-references in both. The first was the 'Classic' Western, it's leading characters cowboys striving against the hardships of frontier life, facing insurmountable odds, usually in the form of marauding natives threatening their basic existence.

The second was the 'Military' Western, the horse operas depicting the varied endeavours of the 'second best cavalry in the world' the mobile U.S. army *avec chevaux*. The force than protected the advancing settlers and policed the deserted outposts of the Federal Government.

Ford was the darling of the industry by the time America entered the Pacific campaign in World War Two. His proposal to set up a Navy film unit consisting of volunteers from Hollywood gave him military status, missed, so many years previously. However to establish affairs chronologically and explain his absence from Monument Valley Utah. I have included this fact as thus.

The war did change Ford, another Oscar heavier and happily influenced by the whole occasion, his dreams and aspirations militarily had been physically satisfied, filmically these were to be fulfilled. The flag-waving patriot with 'apple pie' tattooed on his forehead was to lace his Westerns with jingoistic Fascist manifestos.

His return to Westerns was in 1946. His first choice of subject matter '*My Darling Clementine*' the epic tale of Wyatt Earp frontier marshall, his desire for love, and revenge for the death of his family members. Result - the famous confrontation at the O.K. Corral. Ford's interpretation was a free one of the classic showdown between the Earps and the Clantons.

It starts with the moonlit murder of the marshall's youngest brother and ends suitably in the refreshing sequence of dawn approaching. Truly Ford's most poetic rendition, a film wholeheartedly celebrating the arrival of law, order and civilization, epitomised in Henry Fonda's Earp and the expulsion of the criminal element from Tombstone.



Fig 11. Victor Mature's Doc Holliday.



Fig 12. One of Ford's Heroes.



The film is peppered with romantic imagery and biblical connotations - the Clantons representing the serpent removed, banished, hence ushering in a new era, paradise lost and found. Ford's remake produced a rich and elegiac picture, as freshly evocative as ever, enlivened by a deep and sensuous sympathy with the values and code of behaviour of its vanished world. It was a Fordian vehicle to express his innermost feelings, the convention he prevailed by all ultimately revealed exposed for universal scrutiny.

The film's structure is superbly orchestrated in scenes of intriguing yet simple events. The drunken Shakespearian actor, Victor Mature's Doc Holliday - timely intervention - pure self indulgence on Ford's part, Earp's visit to the barber, the dance in the unfinished church, temper the pace yet heighten the awareness of the inevitable violent collision - a simple moral framework of sentimental fiction.

The town's bleakness possesses a certain abstract equality, positioned on the flat, undulating plains. The dance sequence similarly interrupts or abstracts the plot flow. It appears as an obtrusion in the development of the narrative. Yet it is partly the reduction of narrative interplay that galvanises and lends weight to the passage's particular force. It increases the dimensionality of the characters whilst still retaining cohesion at a high enough level to communicate the plots underlying solidity as presented.

Ford exhibits a bold configuration of elements with strong metaphorical relevance to construct the complexity of the scene - symbolised aspiration. The landscape of Monument Valley is barren and inhospitable yet beautiful. The desert coming right to the edge of the town, the partly built church, the stars and stripes, the dance itself. All disparate factors with strong associations of their own, together they suggest a rich conglomeration of ideals. At the simplest level we see the dedication of Tombstone's first church one milestone in the town's growth. But the church is also a tangible sign of community identity and solidarity and of the faith of the settlers in the future. The flag is the emblem that embodies their sense of national identity. These ideas are fused with the more personal human values of family and community in the dance, while the stark juxtaposition of desert and town suggests broader ideas of the conquering of the wilderness, frontierism and the Americanisation of the vast Western expanses.

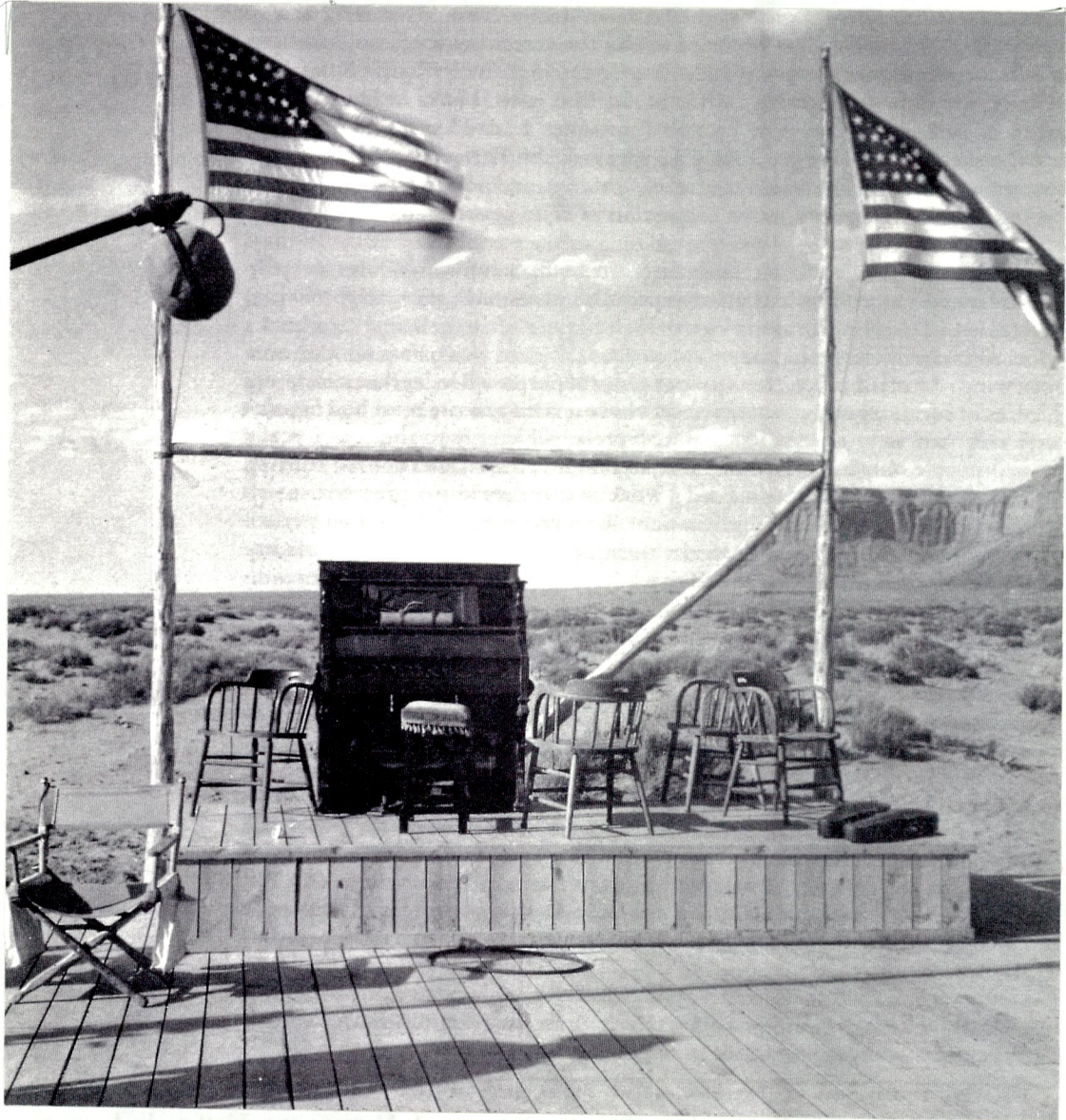


Fig 13. The Half-finished Church in 'My Darling Clementine'.

The whole scene is highly emotionally charged by the dance itself, the naive enthusiasm, the inexperienced musicians (another Fordism) the lack of pretensions and the homeliness of dances and dancers, concretizes the scenario.

Earp and his beau Clementine's (Cathy Downs) introduction to the sequence has individual and representative significance both. They are players within the narrative and representations of East and West - Clementine the harmonious embodiment of Eastern refinement, Earp of the "natural", untutored virtues of the frontier. Their bearing and the visual presentation a formality and dignity that inevitably suggests a couple walking down the aisle, but a couple that unites the traditional East/West opposition.

The 'dance' unlike future westerns of Ford is not a prelude to evil or disastrous outcomes, but a premonition for increased integration and harmony in the perfected society.

The Ringo Kid was riding again this time taller in the saddle, confidently pronounced, artistically matured and inebriated by the post-war fervour of patriotism.

Continuing in category one the next 'Cowboy' western Ford made was *'The Three Godfathers'* produced the same year as *'Fort Apache'* (1948). A remake of a Peter B. Kyne short story, Ford's original attempt of 1919 entitled *'Marked Men'* was repeated at the peak of his career. The opening dedication best remembers the film. "*To the memory of Harry Carey - Bright Star of the Western Sky.*"

Ford's dedication to one of his best known collaborators, who starred in the 1916 and 1919 versions, six efforts in total have been made to date. This association, like a lot of Ford's regular stock company members was strained and weakened due to Ford's angry temperament, reparations were made, but never fully repaired.

Three bank robbers escape from Welcome, Arizona into the desert, pursued by sheriff Buck Sweet. The 'Godfathers' are John Wayne, Pedro Armendariz and Harry Carey Jr. making his debut for Ford. Their horses drink poisoned water they lose their supplies and begin wandering hopelessly, searching for their saving grace.

They stumble upon a covered wagon containing a heavily pregnant sheriff's niece. She dies during childbirth. Godfathers and baby head for New Jerusalem, tracked all the more vehemently by the posse, who mistakenly blame them for the tragedy since discovered. Only the hallucination Hightower (Wayne, naturally) survives the arduous journey thanks to the assistance of a miraculous appearance of donkeys that materialise and enable him to deliver the infant safely on Christmas day to town. He receives a minimum jail sentence, a token punishment, retains custody of the child and finally intrigues the banker's daughter once more. "There are basically two parables in *'Three Godfathers'*. More explicit of the two is the Christmas story with the birth of the baby on Christmas day, the following of the star and the safe arrival in (New) Jerusalem. By becoming his godfathers and dedicating their lives to him, all three men are redeemed through the child.... The second parableclosely woven with the first, is the parable of the prodigal son..... It is as though redemption means infinitely more to someone who has had a choice, who has known the attractions, the power, and the dissatisfaction of a life of crime, cynicism or immortality.....'*Three Godfathers* is thus unusual in Ford's oeuvre in that it's not the individual who sacrifices for the rest of society, but they who sacrifice for his redemption. Perhaps it is this important difference that make *'Three Godfather'* a less substantial film than many of Ford's other Westerns. (Place 1973 pg.211) A finely shot, photographed film containing remarkable scenery from Death Valley and portrayed well, considering it's low action content, from it's leading players. But however it's entertainment measure, it's Biblical parallels clumsy, over stressed and blatant. It's overall impact is weak it's effect disappointing. The impression, it gives is one of regression, considering the present company's previous and future productions. The fable of the Magi reworked humorously reprieves the film fractionally, it's strongest point is the ridicule satirizing the genre's masculine preoccupation, as the alien imagery of cowboy holding baby takes on quite comic proportions. An early *'Three Men and a Baby'* I sincerely wish Mister Ford excuses my comparison.



Fig 15. Travis and Sandy, The Wagonmasters.

Fig 14. Mormons Heading for The Promised Land.



Ford I fear was bathing languorously in self indulgence his intuitive skills drowned by a reverential monument to his mentor, a tribute though comparatively inexpensive (thirty - seven days shooting time) is aesthetically unappetising. It is a pleasant experience but quite justifiably labelled a minor Ford. The Biblical reverences take too much precedence, the plot sacrificed for the ritualistic details receiving undeserved prominence. This outing however was to prove to be a prototype for arguably Ford's most celebrated and renowned work within the genre - *'The Searchers'*.

Ford's next western was *'Wagonmaster'* a 1950 production that lacked any big stars of his 'stock'. An independent since *'The Fugitive'* of 1947 this effort appears to have made for personal satisfaction between larger ventures.

It is the *'Stagecoach'* saga enlarged in a more sympathetic rendition. The story tells of a Mormon community in transit, a mobile town, a travelling community attempting to flee their collective persecution. The film displays their endurance and will as society's outcast to cross hazardous terrain. Their rite of passage comprising of internal strife and external threat.

Ben Johnson and Harry Carey Jnr. being conveniently employed as the function of the title exhibit their horsemanship and leadership qualities with equal dexterity. Ward Bond as Elder Wiggs is staunch and reliable as the nomadic religious leader/mayor.

This is the most lyrical of Ford's Westerns, economic and harsh towards the dialogue, almost neglected as a device to establish the dramatic mood and situation. It's initial tempo is lethargic increasing cautiously, Ford's attempt to depict life's pace in the west of the time. Conversation is slow, deliberate, wary, trust is a rare commodity in these times. Once the pace again begins Ford concentrates on capturing the atmosphere and a sense of movement.

The stubborn unrelenting progress of the wagon train reminds one of a parade, a pageant, a soap opera on the prairies each wagon a sub plot within a plot, if one appears to exist at all? Incidents are plentiful, the characters affectionate, one forming a fondness, trying to reciprocate their warmth. A succession of events encountered are cheery, sinister and quite malicious, the musical score of tuneful ballads improving the overall effect.

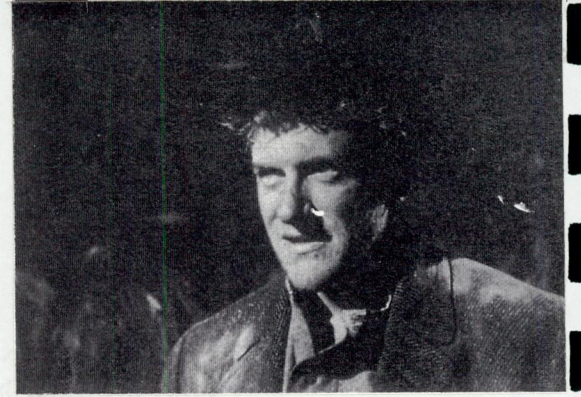
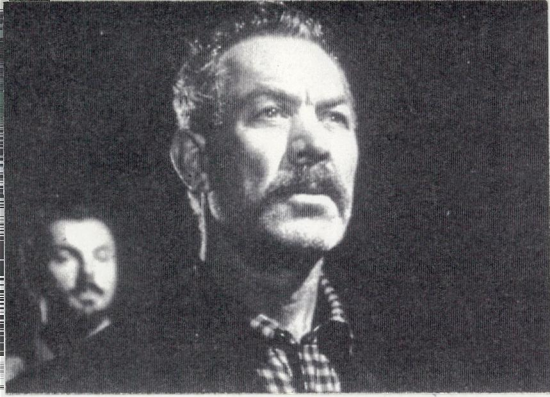


Fig 16. Character Framing by Ford - Dancers and Intruders.

The characters are a rich tapestry of personalities from puritanical pilgrims, charitable, conscientious and disciplined to Dr. A. Loxley Hall's doctor, dentist and general quackery practise, also a fugitive but retaining some of the finer attributed he strives to escape from. He injects comedy by insisting to display his shabby dignity amongst the barren lands of their route. Accepted gladly into the Mormons ranks he enriches the occasions by his preposterous garb and attitudes about personal hygiene.

"Singing and dancingsure to be christian folk.....good God fearing stock..."

Old Man Cleggs announces to mark the entrance of himself and his half-starved, half-witted moronic bois. A dance is proceeding, happy interaction, an occasion of joyous celebration, ominously, a prelude to disaster. The discovery of water had alleviated the mounting tension, maybe inducing complacency, the arrival of the murderous Cleggs the sobering effect for all. They slouch in, uninvited their shevelled apparel and uncouth behaviour illuminated by the firelight. A sequence of framing close-ups by Ford contrasts these essentially destructive desperadoes with the simple and courageous pioneers whose goodness make them vulnerable as well as strong. The classic 'stand-off' the teasing moments prior to a confrontation or settlement however brief.

The lecherous gang of criminals join the wagon train, eventually annexing it's intentions and tormenting it's members. Their expulsion though necessary is delayed and when implemented is bloody, this human trash is disposed of mercilessly.

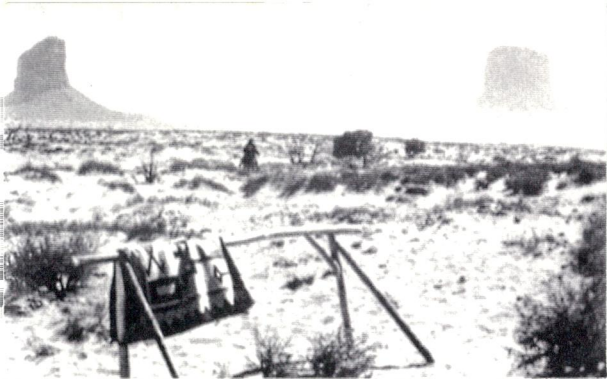
"I thought you never used a gun on a man" questioned a relieved Elder Wiggs, his life just spared by the Wagonmaster. *"I don't"* answers Travis. *"only on snakes"*.

Those that live by the sword die by the same instrument of death. John Ford the director is akin to a master chef or baker possessing all the basic ingredients and implementing them according to the differing structure recipes. Deviations in the narrative, latent intent or constitution on a film are circumstantial in determining required applications constituent elements. The same basic cake with different decorations of a surprise hidden centre all having a common unifying factor - Ford.

In '*Wagonmaster*' though his Catholicism is replaced, religion and especially biblical references are abound. The crossing of the desert, halting at the water's edge before deliverance into the promised land. The approved retribution of punishment upon the transgressor - Thou shalt not kill...unless threatened and Ward Bond's status as spiritual and community figurehead herding his flock onwards and upwards.

CHAPTER THREE

"..YA SPEAK GOOD ENGLISH FOR A
COMANCHE"



'*The Searchers*' released in 1956 was a much plagiarised tale like so many of Ford's great moments in film. A Spacious Western, magnificently exploiting the familiar landscapes of Monument Valley, starring John Wayne and featuring many of the old stock company faces, this had a reassuring appeal which won it popular success. Darker more sinister themes lurked beneath the spectacular surface but these were scarcely remarked ; at any rate the film does not seem to have attracted much 'serious' attention at the time of it's release.

Ford had become untrendy, uncouth and considered too much of a traditionalist, the Western genre and the director were out of favour. Admiration was deemed eccentric. Unless the films (like *High Noon*) could be justified in the terms of a progressive parable and contained political clout. Films were not expected to exist on the entertainment plane alone.

It is only in recent years that the auteurs and semiologists have descended to claim for '*The Searchers*' in the perspective of Ford's whole career the status of masterpiece. The tributes are lavish and remarkably consistent. The film has become a cult, particularly among those latterday critics of Ford who see in the work of his last ten years see no decline or loss of vigour, but rather a matured vision, a deepened understanding of history and of life. Unhappily this is not a view which can be supported by evidence on the screen.

Ex-confederate Ethan Edwards (Wayne) returns to his brothers house on the Texas frontier two years after the civil war and Mexican conflict are finished. Neither cavalry officer nor community leader, possibly a criminal, he is John Ford's first anti-hero. Maybe he is the Ringo Kid, embittered and returning from the wilderness. The opening sequence shows a closed door, swung open, the bright light illuminates the room and the landscape reveals a lone rider still brandishing a sabre and adorned in a 'Johnny Reb' overcoat.

"...Come to think of it I didn't see you at the surrender, blurts the Reverend Captain Clayton. I don't believe in surrender, not now....not never....I signed and oath of allegiance to the confederates states....which is more than you...."

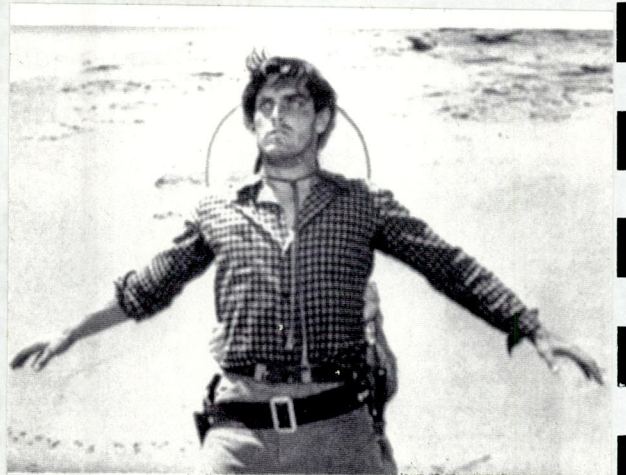
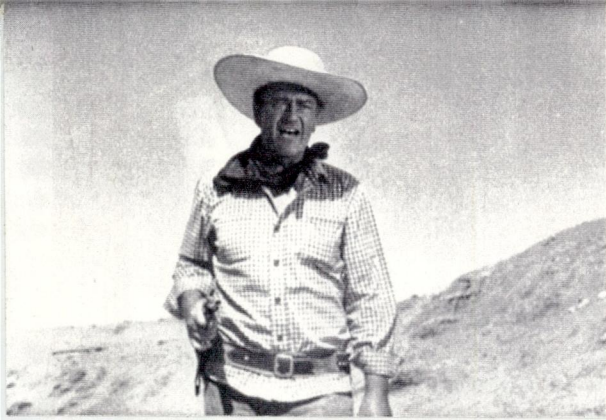


Fig 19. Martin shielding from the prejudiced gun.

Retorts Ethan angrily before being calmed by Aaron's wife. A suppressed love is implied between Ethan and his brother's spouse, a lingering tender kiss hello is evidence enough - this is unthinkable in earlier Ford.

Recruited into the Texas Rangers to follow rustling indians Ethan and Martin Pawley leave the spread and take chase. This was only a feign to entice the defenders away from the homesteads.

"A human rides a horse until he's dead and then goes on foot. An Indian rides him another 20 miles and then eats him"

- Martin first piecemeal of advice from his(uncle) Ethan.

Brother, wife and a son are killed horribly by Comanches, who also abduct their two daughters. Ethan's obvious disgust upon the discovery if his sister-in-law reveals his secret desires and abject hatred for the savages. The settlers give chase but soon turn back and forget - they lack the sacred cohesion of earlier Ford groups. Joined by Martin, an orphan with Cherokee blood adopted by the dead couple and Brad Jorgenson (Carey Jnr.) Lucy Edwards beau. Ethan finds the older girl dead, Brads response - practically suicide, and pursues the younger Debbie, until snow covers the Indians tracks.

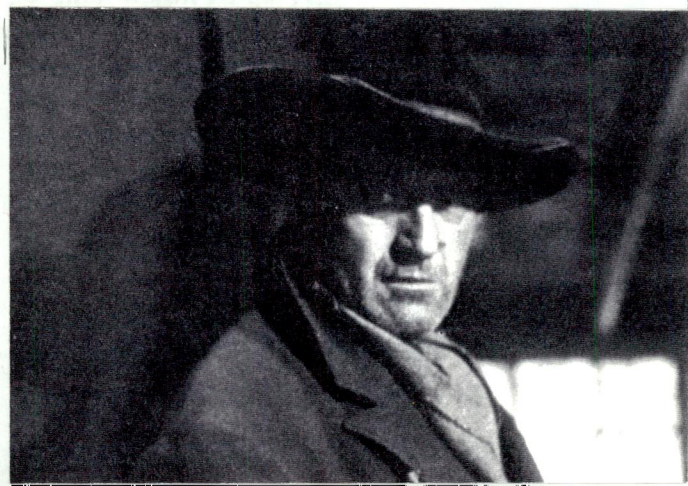
When he sets out again, the Indian - hating miscegenationist Ethan plans to cleanse/kill Debbie - she is old enough to have married within the tribe - and Martin follows to stop him. The two wander for five years, posing as traders, until a Mexican takes them to Chief Scar.

The whole section of the film dealing with their cyclical wanderings is recalled via a letter Laurie Jorgensen receives from a barely literate Martin. Debbie however wants to stay with her people. Ethan tries to shoot her and Martin intervenes. Ethan is wounded by a Comanche but he and Martin escape eventually arriving home to find the latter sweetheart marrying another - the rivals fight and the wedding is called off. A cavalry officer reports that Scar is camped nearby. Martin sneaks in alone to save Debbie and kills Scar as the rangers attack. Ethan rides down a terrified Debbie (Natalie Wood) but lifts her up as he did long ago and takes her home. Martin rejoins Laurie but Ethan, for whom there is no one and no home, rides off.



Fig 18. The Rev. Clayton (Ward Bond) senses Ethan's (Wayne) feelings for Martha (Dorothy Jordan).

Fig 20. The Anti - Hero.



'The Searchers' stunning colour and monumental vistas are perhaps the most beautiful in cinema but belong inseparably to its fictional world. Max Steiner's score, is so integral to the action it is rarely noticed. Wayne maps Ethan so closely to his own gestures that it seems non-acting.

Ethan Edwards is presented as a dark ambiguous character : a man condemned to exclusion : loving those he loves, but dangerous to all others : mean in his prejudice with a grim dedication to revenge, that suggests a festering bitterness against life itself. Martin Pawley realises only gradually of their quest, it is not rescue, but death. Martin should be a hero in the Fordian tradition because of his genuine sacrifice, but in terms of dramatic emphasis Martin is never given equality with Ethan : the hero of *'The Searchers'* is an outsider redeemed by the conclusion of the plot but still ostracised.

'The Searchers' sets out to be and needs to be much more than a spectacular Western with a happy rescue at the end. A more complicated theme is crystallised in the character of Ethan whose craving for vengeance motivated the search and whose bitterness at last surrenders, to compassion. *'A Loner'* Ford told Peter Bogdanovich. Not entirely true a more immediate personal motive for Ethan's profound sense of exclusion is provided by the clear indication of his love for his brother's wife and hers for him.

Ethan's exclusion from the idyll of family certainly tells us something about Ford himself hinting at a sense of isolation an unappeased longing that gnawed at his innermost heart : but the idyll itself is not thereby shadowed or discredited. Indeed, its intensity and its persistence are explained. There is a lot of John Ford in *"The Searchers"* a lot of his splendid craft and his ambiguous, divided personality : but the sense of harmony of resolution and faith which gives his work at its best a special grace is not there.

"The Searchers" marked a watershed for Ford, his decline became evident and pronounced exaggerated by the sagging standards of his film output.

'When the legend became fact - print the legend'



Fig 21.

Ford's Stock Company on location of
'Liberty Valance'.

The message from the *'Man who shot Liberty Valance'*. Rance Stoddard (James Stewart) built a career in politics based on his supposed execution of Liberty Valance (Lee Marvin) the town of Shinbone's tormentor and destructive aggressor. Tom Doniphon (Wayne) a local cattle rancher perpetuating Stoddards claim to eternal fame. On Doniphons death he returns as a senator willing to admit his indiscretion and restore some dignity to the now forgotten rancher who had fallen on bad times prior to his demise.

It is Ford's analogy for the breakdown of the West, the crumbling icons of frontierism subjected to the barrage of modern times, their professional consequent effects. Doniphon represents the organic natural elements of the land, withering diminishing a species of the west, rare and threatened. Stoddard is his antithesis upwardly mobile, educated, cultured and informed. Information and knowledge are his weapons. He is associated with intangible ideals such as chivalry, etiquette, education and the law. He presides over the transition to an order based on conceptual authority rather than brute strength. Stoddard ultimately defeats Valance and wins the West through education. This encroachment on the cowboy's domain and his nomadic lifestyle is repeated often, never more strongly in Peckinpah's *'Wild Bunch'* (1969) their solution ritualistic communal suicide.

'Two Rode Together' again starring Stewart and Richard Widmark as the idealistic, naive young cavalry officer. These are new members of the stock company another indication of Ford's slow decline. This is another upturning of the genres traits, it depicts a bleakly despairing vision of the darkerside of the frontier. Intrinsically different characters both, they are unified by their helpless disgust at the brutalising treatment of the captured children by the civilized world governed by greed, hypocrisy and double standards.

Ford's love affair with the U.S. Cavalry saw the west structuralised in a military fashion. They featured in most of Ford's Westerns in premier positioning or secondary interplay as the later modes, the instructed aggressors. Tools of the hierarchy - *'the dog-faced soldiers, the fifty cents- a-day professionals, riding the outposts of the nation'* The trilogy of *'Fort Apache'* (1948), *'She Wore a Yellow Ribbon'* (1949), and *'Rio Grande'* (1950), was a eulogy to these forgotten servants of the state stranded in microcosms dotted precariously along the frontier.

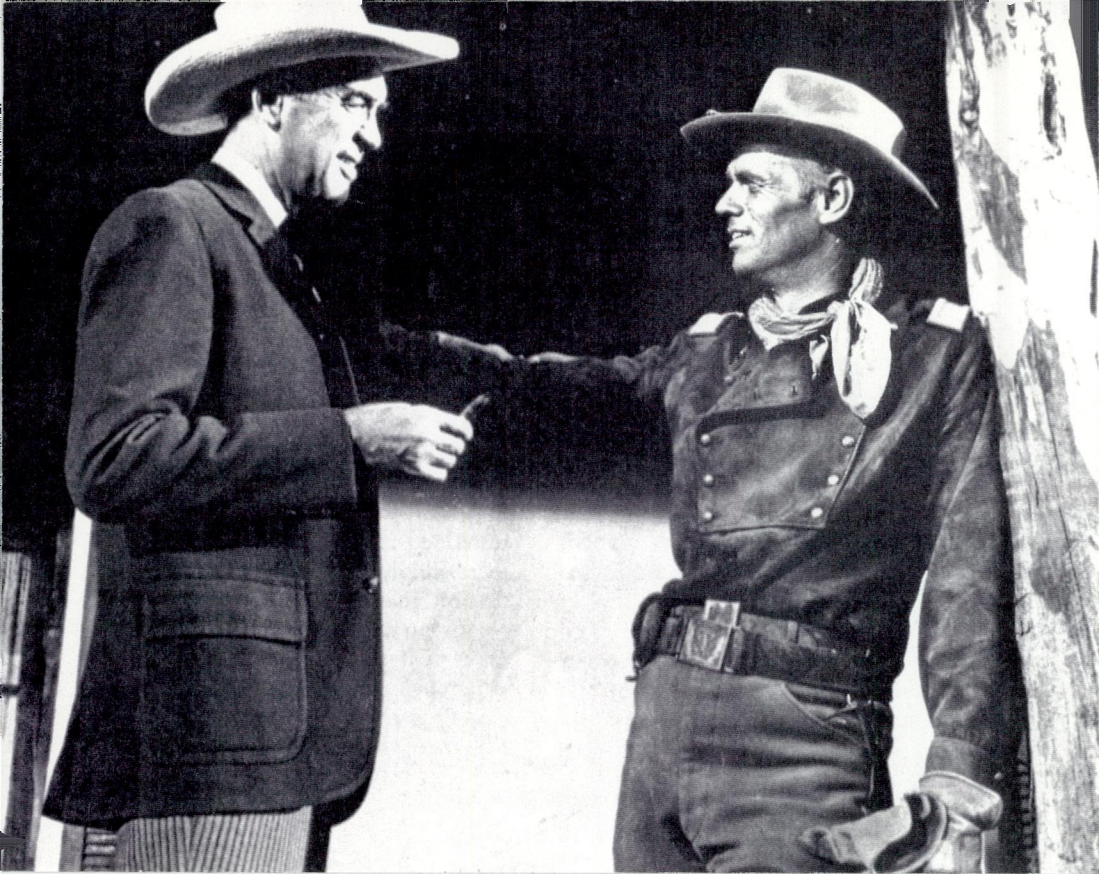
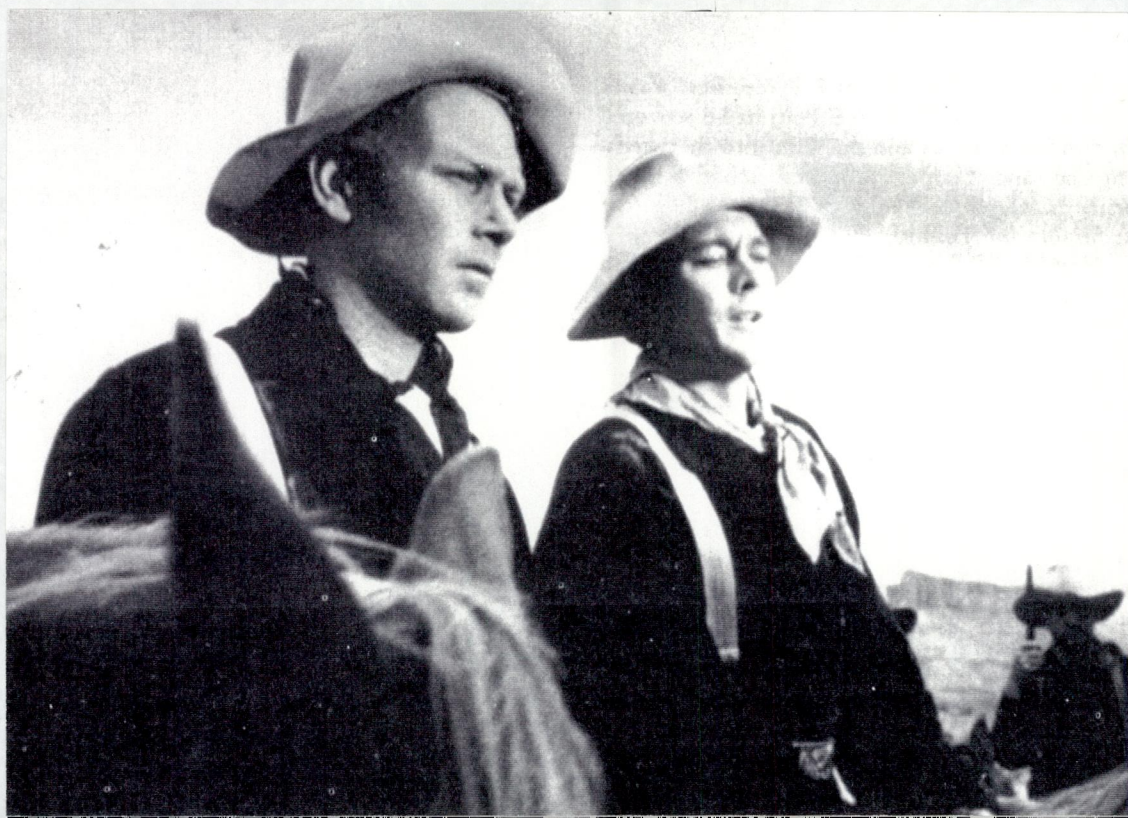


Fig 22. Latter day Heroes - Stewart and Widmark
-"Two Rode Together".

Fig 23. Troopers Daniel Boone and Tyree - Dog
- Faced Professionals.



Ford's love affair is beautifully evident and his affection brilliantly treated. *'The Horse Soldiers'*(1959) a return to history is a tale of Union Cavalry raiding into Confederate positions. This is most memorable for it's stilted ending, the last filmed sequence was excluded in respect for the death of a stuntman incurred during filming.

'Sergeant Rutledge'(1960) is Ford's tribute to America's Buffalo Soldiers - the blacks serving in the 9th Cavalry his contribution to the Civil Rights campaign - Woody Strode the first black hero of the genre *'Cheyenne Autumn'*(1964) ended Ford's lifetime enchantment with the genre, he rebukes all previous ideals about militarism and futility attempts to make reparations for visual atrocities and the industry's negligence of the Indian.



Fig 24. Wayne in "Horse Soldiers".



Fig 25. Constance Towers and Woody Strode
in 'Sergeant Rutledge'.

CONCLUSION

John Ford died on the 31st of August 1973, his gravestone read O'Feeney a concise summation of his life and how he lived it - an existence, a breathing, walking paradox. A contradiction in every format possible, from his personal existence to this public persona. His politics to his pettiness, all attacked with ferocious zest. He was horribly flippant yet devotedly fastidious, always the loyal compatriot and the personification of evil as an employer.

His legacy is viewed by millions worldwide, his reputation as renowned as his exploits. His story was a one of providence that was capitalised upon with no gentlemanly terms of engagement. Fortunate for Sean O'Feeney was his timely arrival at the birth of the Hollywood film industry, to witness, enjoy and become involved in it's infantile failings and grand achievements. Early success guaranteed universal respect and afforded him the luxury of liberal artistic expression . Ford created the guidelines and formed the rules based on intuitive reactions that went unquestioned by his fellow novices of the genre. Conventions didn't exist to be broken they simply didn't exist. Ford's career peaked at the height of America's communist witchhunt by the House of Un-American Activities Committee. Senator McCarthy using a national hysteria as a vehicle to better his political career. Ford's response to inquiries about his patriotism was blunt and typically unpredictable.

"I make Westerns", surely, this is not the sort of occupation Uncle Joe would approve of to project the communist manifesto to the masses. Ford definitely hid safely behind a genre, as American as 'apple pie' he cared more for dwindling box office receipts than unfounded accusations. Politically he was a liberal but highly tolerant of his comrades' ultra right-wing tendencies, Wayne and Ward Bond didn't have to extensively research certain qualities of some of their characters, the qualities were quite inherent.

'The Searchers' was indeed the crest of his bell curve, his eyesight and subsequently his career declined, his films unfortunately reflecting his diminishing powers. His slowly sinking vessel was abandoned by some star stock company players purely to sustain their marketability, in an industry with a short memory and a long list of candidates.



Fig 26. 'Cheyenne Autumn' - Dolores Del Rio, Sal Mineo.



Fig 27. Himself.

The qualities I painfully enumerated in chapter one obviously permeated into Ford's oeuvre but from influences to the influenced the effect is more remarked. The director nurtured, aided and fought off many Prince Pretenders. 'The Alamo' a pet project of the jingoistic Wayne displays many Fordian traits and an equal amount of claims that verify Ford's presence on the set and aboard a second unit directors seat of action.

Three types of Fordian pupils emerged in the shadows of his successes. First was the son of Victor McLaglen a favoured actor of Ford. Andrew V. was an assistant director of Ford's almost attaining a position of Sorcerer's apprentice. McLaglen was unashamedly and without reservation a direct plagiarist, emulating and happily regurgitating old texts, techniques, methods and preferred actions of his great master. His attempts, though entertaining, are a weak substitute for the real thing.

Sergio Leone, rescued and revolutionised a knackered genre injecting a European flair for the macabre, for the historically incorrect, for the sensationalism and the slickness. He borrowed heavily from the American classic tradition, it's best exponent Ford whom he revered, respected and paid homage to. Finally the third bastard son of Ford, the biggest bastard of them all - Sam Peckinpah. He Americanised the 'Spagetti' immobilised the censors and immortalised the greats in front of and behind the cameras. He was the most resolved yet complex of these students, shocking a lethargic genre and galvanising for the future. Ford, the personality, encouraged a genre, revelled in it's peak, nursed it single-handedly, affectionately and guaranteed it's eternal survival.

Ethan Edwards and Martin Pawley according to one critic reviewing 'The Searchers' maintained their revengeful trek appeared to have taken a matter of weeks to complete instead of the five years implied by the seasons of change. It has taken me innumerable months of literary commuting to arrive here, saddle sore and sand in my boots, however I sincerely hope the tale of my journey was informative and worthwhile not just exploratory surgery that left open wounds, horrific scars or butchered features.



Fig 9.

*Brittles and Sergeant Major Quincannon
(V.McLaglen) Policing the Frontiers
Outposts.*

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Fig 28. Will the real John Ford stand up ?

Faint, illegible handwritten text.

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