

# **My Search for John Ford**

## **By Gaby 8C**

### **What kind of a student was Ford at school?**

Ford was a football player, broad shouldered and rugged. He was a tackle, and they called him Bull for his tendency to lower his helmet and 'charge'. When he wasn't a football player Jack Feeney was a rebel, an unreliable student with a dubious future. He wasn't attentive in school, he was always sketching, and his artistic side began to develop in his stories.

### **Which subject particularly fascinated him at school? Why?**

The only subject Ford didn't sketch and doodle in was American History. It was taught by his principal, who he particularly liked. But most of all he liked the subject because he discovered that man soldiers that fought in the American Revolution were Irish. This awakened in him a sense of connection to American History.

### **How did the school environment affect his behaviour?**

Ford's classmates discriminated him because of his Irish roots. This created a hard shell around Ford, since he needed to create a tough personality to defend him. In his eyes there was a sensitivity, which was contrasted by his rowdy conduct. Later in his life these two personalities grew even more, and Ford hid his sensitivity under glasses, as if he was ashamed of it, and grew a very harsh shell to protect himself.

### **According to Ford what should a viewer look at when watching a film and why is this suggestion rather ironic?**

Ford thinks that the viewer should look at a character's eyes, because they show the secret in people's faces. It's ironic because even looking in Ford's eyes we understand his true character.

### **What was John Ford *really* like? In what ways was he tough, in what ways was he gentle?**

### **What insights are provided by those who knew or worked with him?**

Ford was a very tough guy. He was, in all ways the 'ruler' on the set, a tyrant. He was unapproachable by everyone except those people of his 'inner circle', his actors and actresses, his camera-men and friends. He was a selfish guy, many people recall, and he really showed no feelings for his actors. He was known for being very harsh, and Milburn Stone recalled him jumping on an old actor, a friend. He "destroyed the guy". His daughter Barbara and many others think it was a shell, a protection, because really he was very sensitive, very kind, but he was too afraid to show this, because "they would have walked over him on the set". Even to his family, to his brother, to his daughter, he remained a mystery, he was always cryptic. He could be the meanest man in the world, or the kindest. Many actors and actresses who had worked with him in various films and knew him well admitted that he wasn't tough, he was kind and sensitive, but he did put up a huge act of being tough, a layer to protect himself. He could walk over everyone else, but he didn't want to be walked over.

### **Explain how/why film-making became a refuge from reality for John Ford?**

Film-making was a refuge for Ford because he could create his own world where he was the leader, the ruler, where everything went exactly how he wanted it. He continuously casted the same actors and actresses, and he made a community around himself that functioned how he wanted it to.

### **What contradictions became evident between the images projected in his films and the reality of his own life?**

Two main contradictions became evident throughout his movies. One of them was that in his movies he always idolized family, but in real life he wasn't a good family man. He ignored his family; he was an unfaithful husband and a self-absorbed father. His only family was his cast and crew, who he could control and manipulate. In fact he was very self-absorbed and controlling, and this also blighted his kids Patrick and Barbara. Another difference between movie and reality was alcohol. He always romanticized alcohol in his dreams, he made it seem like when you drank

alcohol the world was a better place, everyone was happy, content. But Ford was an alcoholic himself, and when he was drunk, he was far from happy. He only drank out of his film-making career, in between pictures. He would close himself up with a bottle of alcohol, only to be usually hospitalized. The only time he was truly happy was when he made films.

**Can you suggest reasons for Ford's hostility towards those who delved into his film-making techniques?**

Ford was mean and hostile towards people who tried to understand and study his filmmaking because he was afraid of losing the artistic independence he had worked so hard to gain. At the time (and probably even now) Hollywood was very machinelike, controlled by the producers with little liberty for the directors. Ford had managed to gain space and independence with his movies, and he was afraid that if he gave away his secrets perhaps he would be controlled again, and not left to his own ways.

**In Ford's films, masculinity and femininity are strongly projected. From your reading, viewing and reflecting, where do you think he stood?**

Ford has insecurities about his masculinity, and how he was perceived by the audience. Artists were thought to be very feminine, and so was what he talked about in his films (family, tradition...). So in his films he projected masculinity and femininity very strongly, making them very stereotypical and drawing a clear line between the two. By drawing a clear line between the two sexes, he also tried to prove he was masculine.

**Although Ford often claimed that his life/work was a dull subject, most cinema scholars do not agree. Besides film making what were some of the things Ford did during his lifetime?**

Ford was very modest about his life: he often claimed it was a dull subject, and tried to shun biographers away from learning about it. But instead Ford's life was anything but dull. He had started his career in silent film-making, and then gone into the Irish Rebellion against the British. He had also filmed D-Day landings on Omaha Beach, had been a rear admiral in the US Navy and made a documentary about Vietnam. He had even been in the OSS during World War II

**Which film inspired McBride to become a 'Fordian'? Why?**

McBride became a Fordian when he saw *Fort Apache* on his winter break from university. He says that during the credits Ford's use of image and knowledge of how to intercut scenes and choose breath-taking shots made him an 'ardent Fordian'. He later goes on to describing the visual frisson and Ford's way of conveying the superiority of eternal over temporary and how McBride understood how Ford saw the world.

**Why does McBride respect Ford for refusing to explain his work to interviewers?**

Interviewers many times search for an explanation on how to view the movies from the film-maker himself. Ford though wants the audience to discover the movies themselves; he wanted the audience to find their own message in the movies. If a person wanted answers on Ford, watching his movies was a way to find these, since he could express himself much better in his movies than he could ever in his interviews. McBride respects this because he also believes that the only way to interpret a movie was your own way.

**Why did McBride feel that another biography of Ford was necessary?**

McBride believed that Ford's personal life and his work was strongly interconnected. Previous biographers and critics saw these two as completely different and separate. McBride wanted to show that these two were in fact connected. Another reason was that Ford's public persona had confused people about what he stood for in his movies, and McBride wanted to explain it.