

My Search For John Ford

By Lavinia 8T

John Ford was given the nickname '*Bull*'. He was six feet tall and weighed 175 pounds. Ford was a greatly admired football player and played in the Portland High Bulldogs during his senior year. The squad had climbed its way to the championship with the '*Bull*' playing as the fullback. But once in the classroom his attitude quickly switched. He wasn't a great student, but no slacker either. His work and grades would depend on the different subjects. In some he was much better than others. So even though his father wanted him to take the Holy orders, '*his son was an erratic student, with an unchangeable future.*'

During most classes, John Ford would seem to be more interested in drawing instead of listening to what the teacher had to say. But there was one exception and that was the History of America. This subject particularly interested him because it talked about how most of the soldiers who fought in the American Revolution were Irish immigrants. He being Irish felt a special connection.

In the school that John attended, there were many discussions on where you came from. This environment affected Ford a lot seeing as many 'discussions' ended in fistfights. Because of this Ford felt the need to create a pugnacious image in the school. Hence the name '*Bull*'.

When John Ford joined the cinema, he became Hollywood's most celebrated filmmaker. As he began his new life his two personalities started to show. Mary Aster an actor starring in John Ford's '*The Hurricane*' said that even though he had a very dark personality he was also quite sensitive and very secretive with his life. When watching a film you should always look in at the actor's eyes. This is because according to him it's your eyes that show the emotions you're feeling, whether you like it, if you think it's funny or even if you hate it. This is quite ironic seeing as John Ford always hid his eyes behind glasses or even a patch.

At times it seems as if John Ford was two different people. Like everyone he had two sides to his personality. He could be the kindest man on earth or your worst nightmare. Many people though think that his real personality was his sensitive side but almost as if he was afraid of that he'd hide it under a tough mask. While on set he'd act strong and stern but once off he'd return to being kind. Actress Olive Carey described him as being a 'pussycat in a lion suit'.

Ford used his work as a shelter from reality. There he could escape from any problem he'd have. He was the superior one, the director. He would be referred to, as 'Boss' or 'Coach' and this made him feel important.

The Navajo Indians called him 'Natani Nez' which even though correctly translated meant 'Tall Leader', Ford liked to think of it meaning 'Tall Soldier'.

When he was working as a director he had the power to create his ideal world. He could make it anything he wanted it to be and no one would tell him right from wrong.

He had even created a community inside the movie theater. He would choose perfect actors that suited the role they were given perfectly, and then he wouldn't let them go. Instead he would put them in film after film. So the audience could see them grow. At the end it was like they were their old friends as much as they were John Ford's.

Many of Ford's films concentrated on showing traditional family life. Even though in his movies he showed the importance of family he himself was never a *good* father or an *excellent* husband. His grandson confirms this and admits that he was very absent in his family's life. Sometimes his personality could vary, according to how much he had drunk that day. But the amazing thing is that when he was on set and they needed to direct a scene he would instinctively stop drinking. This goes to show that for Ford his work came before anything; the cinema was his true family, the world he controlled.

Ford talked about his life, as being as boring as watching paint dry, but was this the truth? No! In fact Ford did many different things throughout his lifetime that would certainly make you see it as the opposite of dull. His lifetime events had the tendency to range, so some may not have been as exciting as others, but I wouldn't call them boring either. His *early days* were spent in Hollywood filmmaking, and then in 1921 he left to participate in the Irish rebellion against the British. Later he filmed the D-day landings on Omaha Beach and then served as an admiral in the US navy. Not only but later on he made a very interesting documentary on Vietnam and then even kissed a man while being drunk. So I wouldn't say that his life lacked adventure, because that's pretty much all his life was made out of. But it was as if Ford didn't want biographers to find out and so he would make up cover stories tricking them.

What Ford did was that he took a complicated legendary character such as Wyatt Earp and he was able to turn it into a simple wonderful movie called, '*My Darling Clementine*' presenting it in a romantic western mythological style.

In 1948 Ford's film *Fort Apache* started coming on television. It was just around the time that McBride was on winter break from the University of Wisconsin. McBride was in Milwaukee back home when he first saw this film and according to him this film was what made him become a *Fordian*. It fascinated him to see the way Ford looked at the world. And it astounded him how Ford could convey a very important message through such simple imagery.

At first like many vampires thirsty for blood, Mc Bride was thirsty for information from Ford. He wanted Ford to tell him his secrets. He wanted to know all the skills that Ford kept all to himself. And one time Ford told McBride, '*Everybody asks the same questions, all of you people, and I'm sick and tired of trying to answer them, because I don't know the answers!*' Obviously for someone eager to get information this would seem maddening but McBride (a biographer that used to be like that) began to understand Ford. As he got older he understood that it wasn't that Ford was mean and refused to tell them the information, it was because he wanted his work to speak for itself and that

would be impossible if he revealed everything he knew and started telling the audience 'how' to watch the film.

Ford lived a complicated life, filled with surprises and adventures. The job he had as director was the best job that suited him perfectly. And in fact he did it far too well, almost perfectly. To his family he was absent and disloyal and put his work before them. McBride believes that another biography is needed because many writers like himself, that have attempted a biography of Ford have all made one common mistake. They separate his life from his work and films. But the truth is that his films were the key to completely understanding Ford's secretive inner thoughts and feelings. It was the missing piece of the puzzle. His emotions and thoughts were expressed through the images of his films, which people like critics could easily misunderstand. One main thing that was missing from McBride's previous book was the connection and link between his work and his life. But for Ford his work was his life and his family. He had established a world inside the cinema that he could command and manipulate.