

My Search for John Ford

Reviewed by Vera 8T

In his youth John Ford was mainly a football player. At school instead he was a creative, ironic, and artistic student, but also a rebel, with 'tremendous potentialities' as he remembers his teacher saying, and never participated in class with much interest. During lessons he used to always sketch caricatures of his teachers and class-mates or heroic profiles of cowboys and Indians.

At school the subject that interested Ford the most, and the only one he paid attention to was American History, that was taught by the principal, whom he particularly liked. He followed the lessons with great interest because he discovered that most of the soldiers that fought in the American Revolution were Irish immigrants, just like his parents.

In Ford's school often the ethnic differences led to fights; for this reason he created a really harsh mask in order to defend himself from any possible attack to his Irish origins. He was known to everyone as 'Bull Feeny', and his character was extremely aggressive and pugnacious.

Bull Feeny's character that Ford had built over his years of high-school remained with him always, even though in all of his movies we have evidence of that great sensitivity which he apparently hid in his real life, and was ashamed of.

According to Ford a viewer should always look at the eyes of the characters when watching a film. This suggestion is rather ironic because in his life he always used to cover his own eyes (with glasses or eye-patches), probably for the reason that he was ashamed of not being as tough as he wanted people to believe he was. He believed that through his eyes his sensitivity would be shown, and also in his movies if the viewer looked at the actor's eyes he would discover the character's inner feelings and secrets.

John Ford's personality was very mysterious; he was both tough and gentle, and probably even he couldn't understand which one of these character traits was predominant in his personality. From the various insights provided by those who knew him closely we can understand that his behaviour differed greatly from time to time. An actor he worked with remembers him being incredibly selfish and mean, but he was able to get tremendous performances out of people thanks to his tyrannical manner. Some say that his reason for acting that way was probably that he feared to be hurt that badly himself. His daughter Barbara says instead that if he had been more gentle, people would have probably taken advantage of him. The writer Darcy O'Brien described Ford as "the old sentimental cruel genius (****), who knew what he was doing, always and for fifty years, and without whom there would be no American cinema as we know it."

Ford used the process of film-making as his refuge from reality; a place where he was privileged and respected, and where everybody followed his rules, and where he could be in control of everything. He enjoyed the film sets because he had the role of 'Boss'. There he would be the 'Coach', the 'Skipper', and the Navajo Indians would call him 'Natani Nez' which meant 'Tall Soldier'. He had a strong devotion for his work.

An important aspect present in all of Ford's films is the strong value he gave to the idea of 'traditional family' even though his own family appeared to not really work out since he

wasn't a faithful husband or a caring father. Another contradiction that became evident between Ford's movies and Ford's private life was alcohol. He tended to idealize this in his movies, showing it as a solution to all problems and a way to make life better. In the reality of his life instead, his abuse of alcohol only led to negative consequences.

John Ford was afraid that if people would study and analyze his film-making techniques, and reveal his secrets for directing a movie, he wouldn't be able to maintain his independence in Hollywood, and would be forced to conform with the rest of the film-making world. He feared that his talent would be taken away if he revealed his techniques.

Ford was very insecure about his masculinity for the reason that at that time, all artistic activities were generally considered feminine. In all his films he projected both sides very strongly and very distinctly. The fact that he was drawing such a clear line between the two sexes was probably to reassure himself about his virility.

Ford was very humble about his private life and never wanted any scholars or biographers to learn about him. He claimed that it was an extremely dull subject - not at all exciting, and yet to many his life appeared a very interesting theme to write about. He began his career in silent-film making, took part in the Irish Rebellion against the British, filmed the D-Day landings on Omaha Beach, and served as an admiral in the US Navy.

Ford's western classic 'My Darling Clementine' was inspired by the legendary Wyatt Earp.

McBride became a 'Fordian' when he saw Fort Apache on his winter break from university. He remembers being stunned by the breath-taking shots that made him an 'ardent Fordian'. McBride also describes the way Ford conveys the superiority of eternal over temporary and how he understood the way Ford saw the world.

Interviewers many times search for an explanation of how to view the movies from the filmmaker himself. Ford though wants the audience to discover the movies themselves; he wanted the audience to find their own message in his films. McBride respects this because he also believes that the only way to interpret a movie is in your own way.

Previous biographers saw Ford's personal life and his work as two completely different and separate factors, McBride however, wants to demonstrate that indeed the two are strongly connected.