

The Movie Treasury

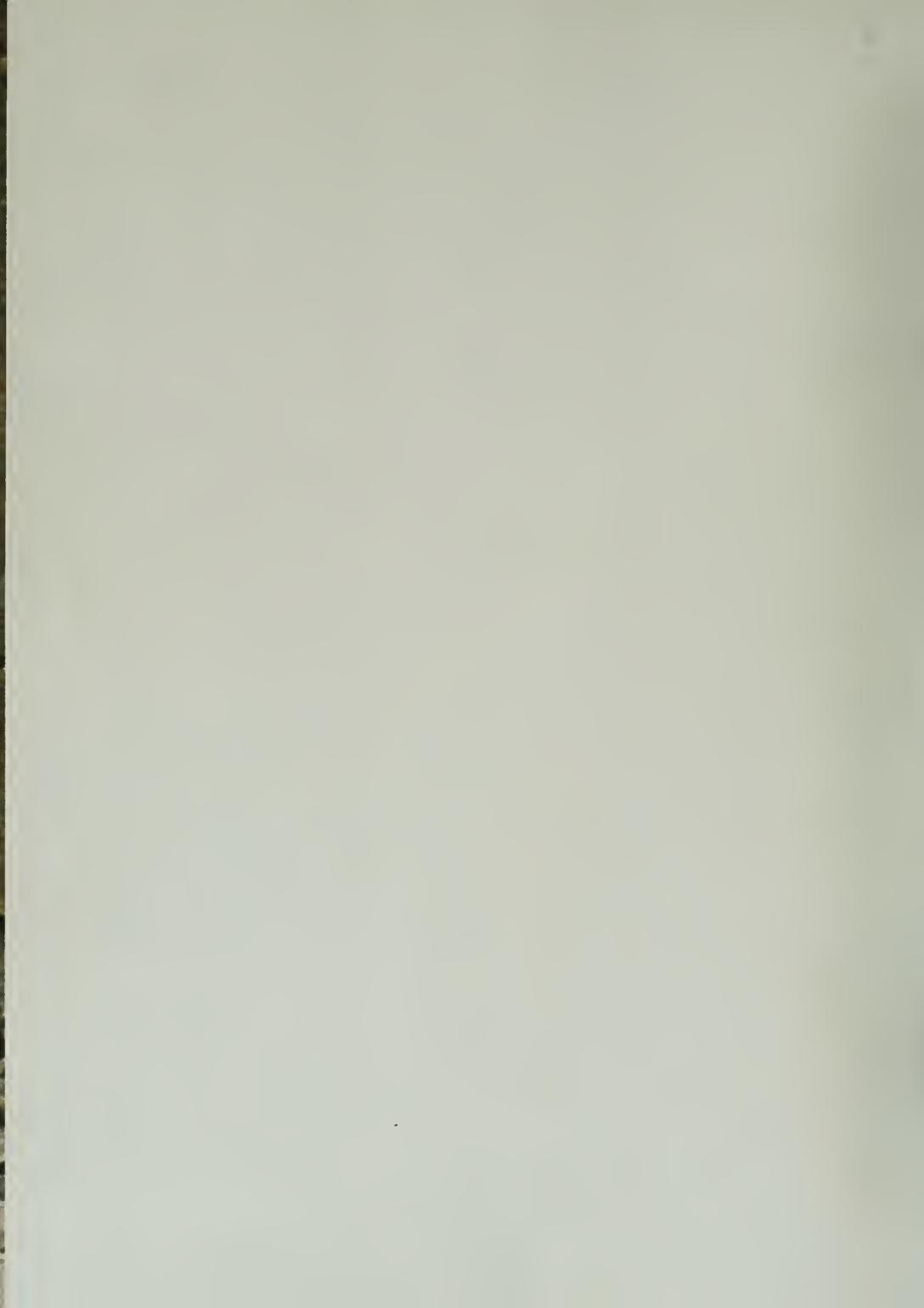
WESTERN MOVIES

The Story of
the West on Screen

WALTER C. CLAPHAM







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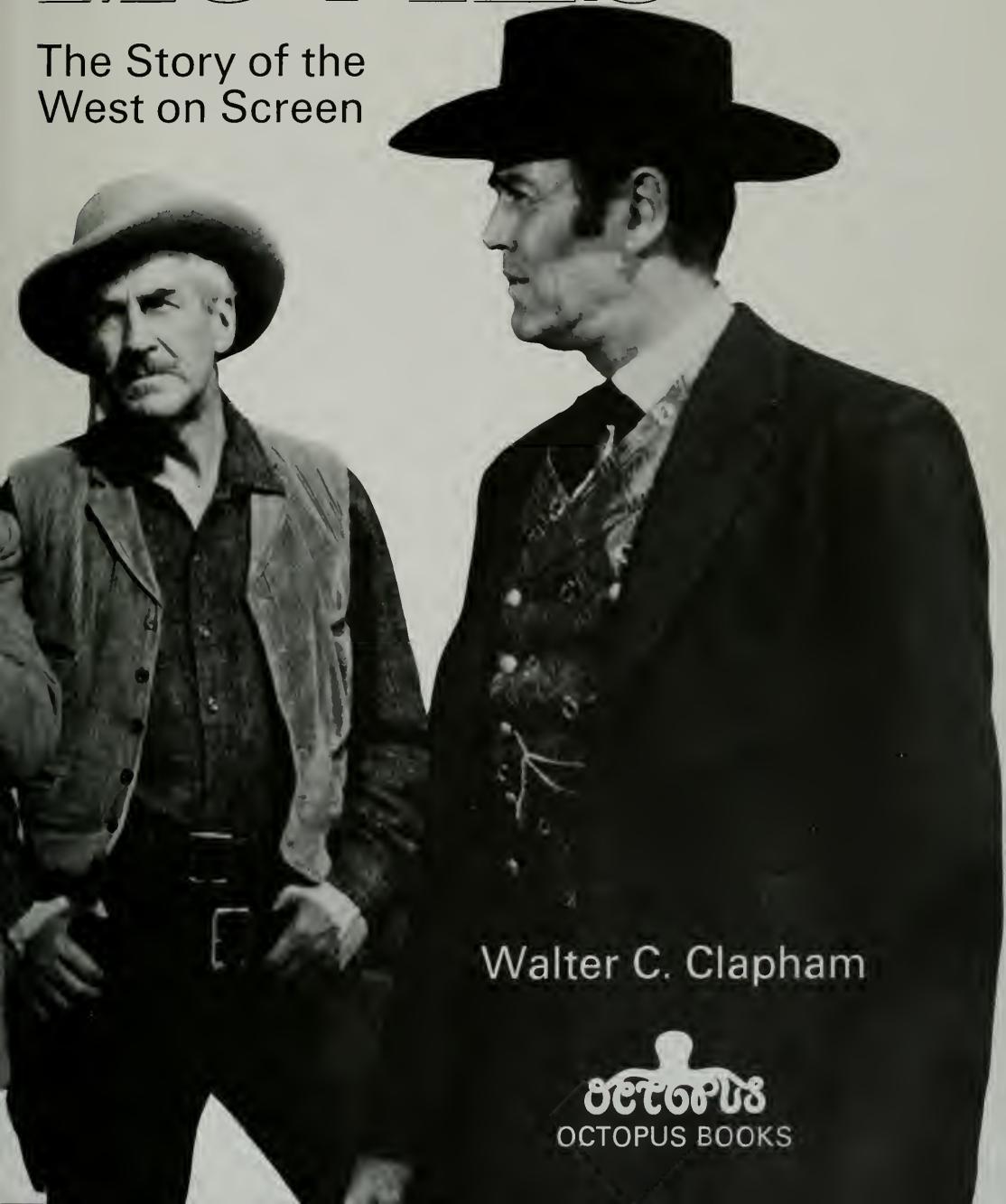
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West on Screen



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OCTOPUS BOOKS

Introduction

Imagine for a moment a whole month's festival of superlative Western movies screened in those Happy Hunting Grounds to which all keen filmgoers with a weakness for Westerns hope to be safely gathered in.

Which pictures would you choose—if the Heavenly Selection Committee were prepared to listen to your choice?

It's a fascinating thought and it occurred to me after I had seen *The Gunfighter* for the fourth time. I voiced it aloud that evening and around the fire we took it from there. Which films would we put alongside *The Gunfighter* (all of us agreed on that one) in our great indulgent celestial movie show?

Out came ballpoints and scruffy bits of paper and from that moment on this book began.

No two lists of 'musts' agreed. Very few lists will agree when you play the game. There will, however, be a good deal of common ground and the purpose of this book is to provoke discussion about this area—to examine Westerns of high entertainment and artistic merit, not in an obsessive way, but rather from the standpoint of the film-goer of catholic tastes who is interested in all forms of cinema and, indeed, in matching the best of each and every form.

A book, also, about the making of Westerns, the people who make them, and the whole historical

backcloth to the Western film, a knowledge of which I personally consider essential to its true understanding, and, anyway, vastly exciting.

My opinions will, of course, be challenged—it was ever thus on the Western movie battlefield—but they do, at least, come from long appreciation. It started at the age of four in a tin hut when Tom Mix on a dim and flickering screen reined back his horse Tony with such élan and such a flash of daunting teeth and hooves that the whole place rocked.

The retired schoolmarm, eking out her paltry pension with 'boots and saddle' thumpings on the piano, was stricken by temporary paralysis. My last memory of her before plunging in my excitement from the backless bench was of her one hand frozen over the keys and the other clutching at her skimpy bosom.

As for me, I was lost amid a sea of hobnailed boots, no less daunting than the hooves, until rescued by my irate cousin Elsie. Short of temper and heavy of hand was Elsie.

The experience changed my life, coloured it enormously through the formative years. My tastes have altered but my affection abides. It still seems to me that there is a kind of magic in the harmonious movement of a man and a horse and in words like sagebrush, sierra and mesquite.

NOTE The dates of films given throughout this book are approximate. This is because of varying lengths of production-period, the intervals between production and distribution and differing dates of distribution in various territories. In most cases the date given is the year of principal production.

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Why the Western?

‘THE WESTERN,’ James Stewart once observed with pride, ‘is an original. An American feels “this is ours!”’

In these few words a man who has contributed much to the Western film put his trigger-finger unerringly on the main source of its appeal. At its best it is imbued with a feeling of one nation’s history communicated by players and directors who have a vested national interest in the theme. They may feel pride or misgiving, they may have a mixture of feelings, but they are concerned.

It is this concern that is communicated to the audience. And it doesn’t matter that truth has become heavily encrusted with legend. At the back of it all there’s a grain of truth and this is what is being interpreted. The audience goes home pondering: ‘Was it something like this?’ and the ‘it’

exerts a never-failing fascination—less than 30 years of highly compressed, turbulent history, unique in its sweep and tensions, and the bizarre backcloth against which it was played.

The backcloth gives it its potency. Successful scenes from a Western that aims high—even though it may fall by the wayside—ensure that it is never entirely forgotten. The opening sequences of *The Big Country* (1958) with that high, wide and handsome buggy ride, open up a whole visual concept of Texas as never realized before. If one were compiling an anthology of impact-making opening sequences, then *The Big Country* would surely be included, as, incidentally, would John Huston’s *Moulin Rouge* (1955), a film in another genre that also promised much and broke the promise.

Gregory Peck (left) and Charlton Heston (right) starred in The Big Country (Anthony-Worldwide 1958), a Western that started well but ran out of steam.





LEFT Joel McCrea, a Western stalwart, with Maureen O'Hara in *Buffalo Bill* (20th Century Fox 1944).
RIGHT James Stewart up against one of 'the baddies' in *Firecreek* (WB) *Seven Arts* 1967).
OVERLEAF A battle scene from Ralph Nelson's horrific *Soldier Blue* (Avco-Embassy 1970), a film that dealt with the Westerners' inhumanity to their 'red brothers'.

When a Western aims high and succeeds completely it leaves behind a whole legacy of scenes that seem printed on the eyeball. When the naïve and brashly brave Elisha Cook Jun. challenges the arch-professional Jack Palance in *Shane* (1953) and dies, he is so palpably, terribly dead that the moment is imperishable. How often the mind returns to and lingers on the domestic scenes in *Shane*—Van Heflin, Jean Arthur, Alan Ladd and Brandon De Wilde, transfixed in the humble cabin like subjects in Dutch painting interiors.

It could be argued that once the movie-camera had been invented the Western was well-nigh inevitable. Once the camera was in the hands of a nation whose creed was mass-production, and among whose talented immigrants were a number, highly gifted in nosing out mass-market trends and needs, it could only be a matter of time before eyes looked westwards.

A great new medium of mass entertainment beckoned invitingly. But the invitation was also

daunting. In terms of pure production, in terms particularly of mass production, it was also a maw that had to be constantly fed and satisfied.

Stories and situations involving movement and action—this was the demand of the newly-born camera. Where to find them?

This didn't really require any vast leap of the imagination for the trails had already been blazed. The dime novel writers had opened up the West and in no time at all had created a whole new mythology out of the Western frontier story and notably a few highly-coloured characters. The younger generation, and hosts, too, of the perennially young at heart, had new romantic names to conjure with—Buffalo Bill Cody, Wild Bill Hickok, 'Calamity Jane' Cannaray. In the week by week issue of the Western 'libraries' their deeds and experiences would have confounded Hercules himself. This kind of conveyor belt Western fiction had been started almost simultaneously with the frontier situation.











LEFT *Clint Eastwood in 2 Mules for Sister Sarah (Universal/ Malpaso 1969).*
 ABOVE *Buffalo Bill (20th Century Fox 1944) was about a frontiersman, who finished up touring the world with his own Wild West Show.*

In some ways the dime novel writers and their publishers could be likened to today's pop group promoters. The prime case is of William Cody, who was certainly a buffalo hunter, Indian scout and frontiersman of some considerable repute, but was nevertheless 'discovered' and transformed into the hero of a serial in a New York publication.

From then on success bred success and no doubt the recounting of partially true experiences bred a multitude of others for which the kindest word is legendary. As far as William (Buffalo Bill) Cody was concerned he struck it rich in the West in a way that he would probably never have done had he tried his luck in Nevada or the Black Hills of Dakota, or wherever the prospect of gold was timely and convenient. He exploited the West in much the same way that he himself had been initially exploited. He formed his own Wild West Show and

toured the world with it for much of a highly profitable lifetime.

The early film producers therefore knew that they had a ready-made and popular theme right on their doorsteps. Whatever qualms they might have—if they had time or concern for them right at the beginning—about there being only so many permutations of plot and situation, these qualms were to be dispelled later when they found that Western fans, far from being affronted by predictability, actually seemed to appreciate it. In other words, the Western took on the ritual element that has never forsaken it, best expressed, perhaps, in its duellist-gunfighter ingredient.

The climactic set-piece of this law-and-order brand of Western is as predictable as it is in a bullfight. The aficionado likes it this way! All depends on interpretation and style.



ABOVE *George Barnes in The Great Train Robbery (Edison 1903).*

BELOW RIGHT *A scene from this trail-blazing Western.*

ABOVE RIGHT *Dustin Farnum (right) in another early Western The Squaw Man (Jesse L. Lasky Feature Co. 1913).*

Keystone of the whole extraordinary edifice was an Edison Films production—*The Great Train Robbery*—made in 1903. Directed by Edwin S. Porter, and shot in New Jersey, it can fairly claim the honour, since it was obviously based on the none too distant exploits of Western train robbers such as Jesse James and the Wild Bunch. Murder on the Express, a chase on horseback, an ultimate gunfight 'twixt goodies and baddies . . . here was the original outlaw picture.

From then on, the assembly line, as it were, got under way. . . .

An entirely new character, or romantic image, came into the lives of millions, and captured many of them for keeps.

This was the 'cowboy', who was based on the hard-working drovers who herded longhorns from Texas to the Kansas railheads and later became

the ranching cowhands. It was only a brief period of glory but the cowboy has long outlived the actuality.

As he appeared to cinema audiences he was not only cattle-drover, rounder-upper of strays and horseman-virtuoso. He was also a sort of latter-day Sir Galahad, righter of wrongs and general expression of a new sort of derring do, with his spurs and chaps and ten-gallon hat.

Audiences saw him personified through the years by a gallery of stars who played nothing but cowboys' parts. Each star was, in fact, The Cowboy to the faithful fans, whose loyalty was unquestioning and never particularly demanding. It was enough that he should come riding once more through sagebrush on a familiar starry horse—a cue for hard-pressed cinema pianists to extemporize boot and saddle themes.

First of a long line was Broncho Billy Anderson, who had already appeared in *The Great Train Robbery*. Anderson, whose real name was Max Aronson, was a chunky former vaudeville actor who had never really made it on the stage. The Broncho Billy character emerged in a 1908 one-reeler and proved immensely popular. Thereafter Anderson worked his lucky seam through eight years and some 400 films. He could truthfully claim that he was the first real 'star' in a great industry that would make much of the word. Hefty, intrinsically likeable, competent enough for the simple requirements of his films, he presented to audiences a character that they found immensely sympathetic and wanted to see again and again. Max, for his part, saw that they did.

The Western was in at the very birth of Hollywood. In 1913 three remarkable men set off for what was to become the film capital of the world. They were Samuel Goldfish, a glove salesman, later to be known as Samuel Goldwyn, Jesse Lasky, a vaudeville producer, and Cecil B. DeMille, a former playwright and actor. They went as partners and their first project was a film version of the Broadway success, *The Squaw Man*, starring Dustin Farnum.



It was inevitable that Anderson would have a successor. In fact, there were two, whose careers ran almost simultaneously. In their different ways they probably spell 'cowboy star' more than any other actors who have concentrated entirely on Westerns. The illustrious names are W. S. Hart and Tom Mix.

Hart was born in the West, loved it and its traditions, and was a stickler for accuracy when it came to Western detail. His work therefore had both integrity and realism. It was also endowed with a certain poetic quality that earned and still earns respect. He took his Westerns extremely seriously—perhaps a little too seriously for the circumstances of his time. Judged in a broader concept, he was a technical initiator since, in his favoured strong, silent persona, he gave us the first experience of what we now call dead-pan acting.

Tom Mix couldn't match him either for acting experience or ability—Hart had come to films from the stage—but the former horse-wrangler and rodeo rider certainly had the edge when it came to riding ability. It was his stunts and horsemanship—and, perhaps, especially his rapport with his horse Tony, as showy a performer as he was—that made him into the most financially successful of all genuine one-track cowboy stars.

Mix could hardly have been called a plastic cowboy when his physical skills were so apparent, yet what he stood for, and what the others stood for, who followed his particular trail, smelt of the assembly line, a mechanical, gimmicky catering for a mass market. It would be churlish to deny that he meant much to millions, particularly youngsters, in the early nineteen-twenties, but it would also be unrealistic not to admit that his formula was largely responsible for the failure of the Western to rise from the dumps in the thirties. Certainly Mix never pointed the way to a Western of real stature, something in concept and execution that would put it on terms with more ambitious cinema.

That attempt was to be made in 1923, when the world duly sat up and took notice of James Cruze's *The Covered Wagon*, which starred J. Warren Kerrigan and Lois Wilson, although it would hardly figure now in anyone's list—however personal—of great Westerns. Still, it was a big deal in all ways. It was conceived in 'epic' style—a spectacular story of early pioneering—and this is important in itself. It's a milestone movie despite its imperfections. You can pick holes in it, mainly because of its plotting. W. S. Hart, speaking as Western 'authority', found other holes to pick. His

meticulous mind was appalled by the sight of a wagon train camping in a vulnerable canyon and of cattle trying to cross a river while handicapped by neck yokes. He said they were 'errors that would make a Western man refuse to speak to his own brother'.

But it had cost over 750,000 dollars, which showed an awful amount of faith for those days in a Western and it justified this faith by grossing about 4,000,000 dollars.

Following hard on the heels of *The Covered Wagon* came *The Iron Horse* (1924), which was the work of a young director whose name, above all, was to be associated with the classic Western. John Ford was already a well-established Western director by the time he came to this pioneering railroad epic. Westerns were to return to this theme again and again, acknowledging the role that railways had played in opening up the West.

There had been typically bizarre and flamboyant touches to the building of these railways. Union Pacific had been given the charter to go westwards and the Central Pacific company was similarly chartered to head east from California. The old saying that the eastern portion of the track was built on booze and the western on tea is, in fact, another way of admitting that it was Irish and imported Chinese labour that made the whole project possible.

It was an epic enterprise, deserving of the epic treatment that some films were to give it. Desert, snows, Indians and constant toil (four rails were laid a minute) was the lot of the labourers. For weekend relaxation there were mobile brothels, gambling hells and dance halls.

Work was started in 1863. The Civil War naturally delayed it, but in May, 1869, the two tracks neared at Promontory Point in Utah. On May 10 a gang of Chinese put the final Central Pacific rail into place and a gang of specially spruced-up Irishmen performed the same task on behalf of Union Pacific. Ceremonial spikes were driven in, the champagne flowed, and directly the news was telegraphed throughout the nation cannons were fired on the shores of both oceans and cities celebrated in a variety of ways. Chicago held a procession seven miles long.

It was altogether an extravagant celebration but not really out of keeping with the importance of what had been achieved. Years had been pared from the laborious business of opening up the West.

'Epic' is possibly an understatement for Ford's vast treatment of the railroad theme in *The Iron Horse*.