



# Searching for John Ford

*Joseph McBride*

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John Ford's classic films---such as *Stagecoach*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *How Green Was My Valley*, *The Quiet Man*, and *The Searchers*---earned him worldwide admiration as America's foremost filmmaker, a director whose rich visual imagination conjured up indelible, deeply moving images of our collective past.

Joseph McBride's *Searching for John Ford* surpasses all previous biographies of the filmmaker in its depth, originality, and insight. Encompassing and illuminating Ford's myriad complexities and contradictions, McBride traces the trajectory of Ford's life from his beginnings as "Bull" Feeney, the nearsighted, football-playing son of Irish immigrants in Portland, Maine, to his recognition, after a long, controversial, and much-honored career, as America's national mythmaker. Blending lively and penetrating analyses of Ford's films with an impeccably documented narrative of the historical and psychological contexts in which those films were created, McBride has at long last given John Ford the biography his stature demands.

## Searching for John Ford Details

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# From Reader Review Searching for John Ford for online ebook

## Rob says

This is the third biography of John Ford that I have read and easily the best. McBride is one of the premier historians of American film, with an earlier book that contains some of the best analyses of Ford's work ever written. I found the early chapters of *Searching* slow going, in part because I never enjoy that section of a biography, but as soon as Ford arrived in Hollywood and especially after he became renowned in the 1930s the book was riveting. McBride deftly approaches Ford's complex political views and alliances, showing how he became more conservative in the 1950s while simultaneously growing more and more sympathetic to the outsider in American culture. This is one of the great film biographies.

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## Robert C Mayho says

The definitive biography of the great film director, by one of the foremost film historians. A great combination. McBride does not flinch from some of Ford's less than attractive character traits, nor does he lionize. But the respect for this most influential of directors shines through; a perfect book for someone with a passing interest in Ford and his work, but equally valuable for the more serious cinephile.

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## F.C. Schaefer says

SEARCHING FOR JOHN FORD was another tome that sat on my shelf for too long without being opened, but after reading Glenn Frankel's excellent book on the making of *THE SEARCHERS*, I thought it was time to read Joseph McBride's in depth look at man who routinely makes every Top Five list of greatest American directors of all time. At more than 700 pages, it is truly an in depth look at the man and the dissection of a career that began in the early days of silent movies and ended in the tumult of the mid 1960's. In between we get the lowdown on the making of such classics as *THE INFORMER*, *YOUNG MR. LINCOLN*, *STAGECOACH*, *THE GRAPES OF WRATH*, *HOW GREEN WAS MY VALLEY*, *MY DARLING CLEMENTINE*, *FORT APACHE*, *THE QUIET MAN*, *THE SEARCHERS* and *THE MAN WHO SHOT LIBERTY VALANCE* along with a host of other films beloved by movie buffs the world over. The book is also the portrait of a man who could be called "difficult" on his best days as the reader is treated to stories of his legendary irascible temperament on the set.

McBride is a critic and film historian who clearly did exhaustive research for this biography, truly doing a search for the man behind the image, a search that included speaking with the director himself late in his life despite Ford being a notoriously bad subject for an interview. Far more revealing were the many friends and close associates of Ford that McBride was able to talk to while they were still alive, many of whom, like Olive Carey, the widow of actor Harry Carey, and Admiral John Bulkeley, the real life hero who *THEY WERE EXPENDABLE* was based on, were able to offer truly revealing insights into Ford's character and his life, often seeing through the public persona the man worked so hard to project and giving us a glimpse at the vulnerabilities and insecurities that lurked underneath. McBride does offer a lot of opinion on Ford's work, breaking down and deconstructing his films to reveal what this most visual of film makers was trying to convey. There is a lot of supposition and arm chair analysis, and if I didn't necessarily agree with all of it, I will give McBride credit for backing up his arguments.

The book begins in Ireland, the land from which his parents immigrated to America from in the 1870's, and the place that gave Ford his firm identity as an Irish American; born in Portsmouth, Maine, in 1894 with the name John Martin Feeney, his origin would bequeath him an outsider's keen eye for hypocrisy and injustice, as well an understanding of human nature and its attendant flaws. He was also a young man with a sensitive artistic streak, one that he would spend a lifetime trying to hide behind a macho facade. He followed an older brother's path to the stage and from there to the fledgling film industry, where he learned the business from D.W. Griffith himself – Ford is a Klansman in *BIRTH OF A NATION*. He eventually settled into directing and found his niche, making his first classic western, *THE IRON HORSE*, in 1924. By the time sound arrived, Ford was well on his way to becoming a one of the top directors in Hollywood, winning the first of his record four Academy Awards for *THE INFORMER* in 1935. He would come to see himself as a chronicler of American history with such films as *DRUMS ALONG THE MOHAWK* and *YOUNG MR. LINCOLN*, but it would be the western genre where Ford's talent would really shine, starting with *STAGECOACH* in 1939, the movie that made John Wayne a star. It would be the western where Ford would really shine, ultimately producing a string of classics in the years after World War II that would seal his reputation as the foremost master of the horse opera. Yet one of his greatest films, and the one for which he won his second Academy Award, *THE GRAPES OF WRATH*, was set in contemporary times and tackled an urgent social issue. When asked about his films, Ford would shrug them off as “a job of work” as if he were nothing more than a journeyman director.

One of the revelations of this book is Ford's service during World War II; he had joined the naval reserve in the mid 30's and was commissioned an officer after Pearl Harbor. During the war, he would come under fire at the battle of Midway and on D-Day, in both cases leading teams of film makers on the front line to get some of the finest and most harrowing footage ever taken from combat, footage used in documentaries made to boost the war effort and to explain to the public in a pre television era what the war was all about. His years of service to his country were undoubtedly the high point of Ford's life and would cast a shadow over his work for the remainder of his career. It would also color an increasingly bleak vision of America in the post war years.

For film buffs like me, McBride's book gives us a fascinating look at Ford's creative process and his collaborators, including frequent screen writers Frank Nugent and Dudley Nichols, along with producers Merian C. Cooper and Sonny Whitney, not mention studio heads like Daryl F. Zanuck. We are treated to such tidbits as how Ford would routinely cross out lines exposition from each script as soon as it was in his hands; how he instinctively knew how to stage a scene, whether it be set around a table in a log cabin or an Indian attack in the open country of Monument Valley; the tricks he would use to make sure a movie would be edited in the way he wanted it be by the studio. We meet the many beloved members of the “John Ford stock company,” including Victor McLaglen, Ward Bond, Maureen O'Hara, Barry Fitzgerald, Harry Carey Jr., Mildred Natwick, John Qualen, Hank Worden, Ben Johnson, Woody Strode, Jack Pennick, Andy Devine, George O'Brien, Ken Curtis, not to mention the biggest star in the history of Hollywood, John Wayne, who started out a prop man on one of Ford's silent movies in the late 20's. In his director's role, Ford clearly saw himself as the commanding officer, there to lead his crew of actors, stuntmen, and technicians to the successful completion of their mission. And in this he was not a gentle commander, for to work for Ford was to feel the lash of his sharp tongue and be on the receiving end of his short temper; the two most frequently y to get the rough treatment being Wayne and Bond, “Pappy” Ford's surrogate sons. Yet there was always a method to the man's madness as he made one classic movie after another and got terrific work out of all of his actors, who always returned for the next picture because to work for Ford was a guarantee you'd do your best. With few exceptions, he was loved by all who worked with him and considered their films made with him to be the high point of their careers.

The family is often at the center of many of Ford's films, and it figures in the themes of most of them, yet in

real life, he was a failure as a husband and father, a man who only felt at home on a movie set or the deck of his yacht; as the years went by, his increasing alcoholism would result in benders once a film was completed. The close bonds of the Joads in *THE GRAPES OF WRATH* or the Mogans in *HOW GREEN WAS MY VALLEY* could not be replicated in reality. It was one of the many contradictions McBride documents well. So too Ford's politics, for the man could be a staunch liberal, voting for FDR and Truman and publicly taking a stand against loyalty oaths in Hollywood during the McCarthy era, yet becoming conservative enough later on that he remained silent as Wayne and Bond led efforts that blacklisted many in the movie industry and overseeing the production of a pro Vietnam War documentary for the Johnson Administration in 1968.

In the later years of his career, Ford took an increasingly pessimistic view of modern America, his last great western, *THE MAN WHO SHOT LIBERTY VALANCE* is one of the saddest movies to ever come out of Hollywood, yet unlike The Duke and Ward Bond, he did not retreat into reactionary super patriotism and publicly support politicians who promised to turn the clock back, he seemed to sense that what was lost was gone for good. But to his credit, he took chances in his old age, starting with *THE SEARCHERS* and continuing through *CHEYENNE AUTUMN*, he tackled to subject of racism in his own way. And for this director who is most famous for his male dominated films, his last movie, *7 WOMEN*, has a mostly female cast, with one character clearly suppressing lesbian tendencies; hardly the stuff of an old man chasing past glory. Even though Hollywood considered him over the hill and no longer box office, Ford was still trying to get back behind the camera and get another project going right up until terminal illness struck him down in the early 70's.

Yet as his career behind the camera faded into the sunset, his influence only grew larger, as a new generation of directors watched and learned from the master; Sergio Leone, Peter Bogdanovich, George Lucas, Francis Ford Coppola, Steven Spielberg, Martin Scorsese are among the few who would openly pay homage to Ford in their films, many made long after the man had left the scene. For us movie buffs, his gallery of vivid characters, live and breathe still, as real today as the first time we were introduced to them: Gypo Nolan from *THE INFORMER*; The Ringo Kid and Dallas from *STAGECOACH*; the Joads from *THE GRAPES OF WRATH*; Huw Morgan and his coal mining father from *HOW GREEN WAS MY VALLEY*; Ole and Drisk from *THE LONG VOYAGE HOME*; Wyatt Earp, Doc Holiday and Chihuahua from *MY DARLING CLEMENTINE*; Colonel Owen Thursday from *FORT APACHE*; Kirby and Kathleen Yorke from *RIO GRANDE*; Travis Blue and Elder Wiggs from *WAGON MASTER*; Sean Thornton and Mary Kate Danipher from *THE QUIET MAN*; Ethan Edwards and Martin Pauley from *THE SEARCHERS*; Liberty Valance and Tom Doniphon from *THE MAN WHO SHOT LIBERTY VALANCE*. In the course of reading this book, I ran across most of them at one time or another on TCM, AMC or any of the other movie channels in my cable package. Blu Rays and DVDs of his films can found in every true cinephile's library. More than that, when I saw *HELL OR HIGH WATER* (released in 2016) a few months ago, I could see echoes of John Ford's poetry in nearly every scene. In the great hereafter, I'm sure Ford would be mightily pleased by all this, not that he would ever let you know it.

Joseph McBride's biography, first published in 2001, is the definitive book on John Ford, truly doing justice to the man and his vibrant legacy. A must read for anyone who loves movies.

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**Tristram says**

**“What made Ford a great popular artist is that he reflected so many facets of the people he addressed.**

He was able to do so because he had so many warring factions within himself. [...] What made him such a flawed human being was also what made him such a great artist. Those who expect artists to be ideal human beings fail to understand the nature of art. Often the greatest art comes out of torment, and some of the most important artists, such as Mozart and Tolstoy and Ford, lived in a riot of complication and frequent public absurdity. In Ford's case, his films are usually far more complex than his public stands were on the issues of his time.

William Butler Yeats could have been commenting on Ford when he wrote, 'We make of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry.'" (pp.714 – 15)

This is basically the mystery of John Ford's inimitable power and depth as an artist according to Joseph McBride, and when you follow the author's account of Ford's eventful life, you have ample opportunity to discover the inner conflict and inconsistencies that may have contributed to making Ford the incredibly masterful visual poet who made films like *The Searchers*, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* or *How Green Was My Valley*. A lot of people probably know the story of how Ford was accosted by an old actor during the Depression and asked for help because this man could not pay for an operation his wife had to undergo. Ford, in front of all the bystanders, went furious, asking the old man how he could dare come to him and ask him for money, and he even struck him down. Yet the same evening Ford had his manager give the old man a cheque for \$1,000, and he even saw to it that the wife was operated on by a specialist. After that he bought the couple a small house and gave them a lifelong pension. This story shows that Ford, in his heart of hearts, was a very sensitive man but he would not for the life of him have wanted anybody to realize this. McBride, however, digs even deeper and sheds some light on the miserable family life of the man who was called "Pappy" by many members of his Stock Company, on his complex political attitudes and his opinions on American minorities. You might probably find it difficult to like John Ford after reading this book – I, being a dyed-in-the-wool Ford aficionado, of course, still do – but you will certainly understand this man better and even respect him for what he was and what he did (for most of the things, at least). McBride abstains from sensationalism and from the smugness of the modern contemporary judging the decisions and mindset of someone who grew up in a completely different era, and for all that he is still inexorably honest. That being said, you nevertheless sense the biographer's respect and admiration for John Ford.

In my opinion, this is the best biography on Ford next to Tag Gallagher's *John Ford. The Man and His Films*, and I would say it is best to read McBride before Gallagher. Firstly, this is because McBride succeeds in dealing with Ford's life and his films – whereas Gallagher predominantly focuses on the movies – and in showing how Ford's personal experience was often mirrored in his films. Secondly, I think that Gallagher's style is a bit showily erudite and therefore murky at times, whereas McBride uses refreshingly unpretentious language, which allows you to enjoy his book without stopping to re-read certain sentences. At least not for comprehension.

Maybe it is the Irish streak in McBride, but he also manages to slip in anecdotes and little excursions on people that played a role in Ford's life, such as John Wayne, Ward Bond, Jimmy Stewart, Woody Strode, Anna Lee and, yes, Katharine Hepburn. He does this without becoming unduly chatty, and the effect is an extremely multi-faceted picture of John Ford's life.

All in all, this is a most enjoyable book even though it made me sad when McBride described how near the end of Ford's career he found it increasingly difficult to get job offers in the industry which he helped establish and which he had shaped from its very roots in the silent era. This was partly because he was losing touch with public tastes in the 1960s and he also had difficulty adapting to the changes within the film industry. Paradoxically it was in his own country that Ford was often spurned by myopic critics while European directors and scholars usually saw his greatness and tried to emulate him. Even today, but this comes as an afterthought, you can find an over-estimated American director like Tarantino revile Ford as

racist, which is as unfair and ignorant a statement as you can think of. But then Tarantino and his gory trash will probably long be forgotten when people still enjoy the rich poetry of a Ford movie.

So even if you are not going to read the book, I can only advise you to (re-)discover the great movies directed by this bloody Irish genius!

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### **Stuart says**

<https://riobravado.wordpress.com/2016...>

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### **Larry says**

Fascinating look at my favorite director. Loved it.

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### **Dermott Hayes says**

McBride's biography of John Ford is exhaustive. It covers every stage of Ford's career and life in meticulous detail, even examine his Irish roots, school and college days as an Irish Yankee in Portland, Maine. As a fan of Ford's contribution to cinematic history, I've always wondered about this man who is one of American cinema's great pioneers yet one who managed to live and work within the studio system, without much creative conflict. The trick, of course, lay in Ford's background, first, as a carpenter and stuntman for his brother, Francis in the early days of silent movies and then his own grounding as a jobbing director. Everything he made was made within budget. He used a cast of actors who became his go-to crew. Of course, all the compromise required and all the attention to detail meant he was tyrannical towards the people he worked with and when he wasn't working, he was a phenomenal drinker, a bad father and a philanderer. Halfway into this exhaustive and exhausting tome, I began to wonder was McBride getting a little too repetitive in his attempts to rationalise and explain (and excuse) Ford's behaviour? But by then, the story was in the early '30s and the films Ford is best known for, Stagecoach, Rio Grande, The Searchers, Fort Apache and The Quiet Man, amongst others, were still to come. Ford was, in many ways, the epitome of the clichéd Hollywood director while, at the same time, kicking against the pricks, swimming against the tide and going against the grain and these conflicts, and often the thematic conflicts addressed in his films, were the same conflicts that tore him and his personal life apart.

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### **Padraic says**

What a pain in the *tucas*. And he made great films. Irish America meets the American West, and blinks, but not before signing off on The Searchers.

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## **John M. says**

Long, in-depth biography of America's greatest movie director, full of insights into both the man and his films.

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## **Peter Burton says**

Very good,detailed biography by a true lover of his movies.It makes you want to see them again to fully understand the author's analysis and comments.It turns out that Ford was a very unpleasant man,cruel ,rude but sometimes kind and thoughtful.An enigma.

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## **Jim says**

It's a good thing I'm writing a review of the book and not an assessment of the subject of the book - Mr FORD was not a very pleasant person at the best of times, and often he went way past unpleasant behaviour and was guilty of conduct that was downright despicable. Mr McBride has gone to a lot of trouble to attempt to open Ford up so the reader can see what makes him tick. The result is this book, a large volume that I wasn't sure I would be able to finish this year.

Ford was a very strange man indeed...in spite of being born in the USA he affected a strong tie to Ireland. Not that there's anything wrong with Ireland, but it was an affectation that made no sense to me. My ancestors came from Scotland, but I don't run around in a kilt. Maybe if I had better legs and it wasn't so darn cold...! In any event, he liked to use actors of Irish descent and filmed as much as he could in Ireland. It doesn't bother me but just seemed...phony! Like so many other things Ford did, confusing and fraudulent. Like displaying great courage in WWII, but also fraudulently claiming to have served in WWI. His accounts of his actions and whereabouts over the years would vary depending on audience. Mr McBride refers to this as mythmaking (p.142) and I sure wish I had read that passage as a boy. I seem to remember getting my britches tanned for a couple of prevarications I might have passed off as myths.

Another aspect of Ford's personality that amazed me was his ability to inspire loyalty in the actors he directed. This in spite of the fact that he abused and ridiculed and sometimes even assaulted them. Actors cutting his toenails? Woody Strode massaging his back? Really way beyond the call of duty as far as I am concerned.

I have been a big fan of Ford's films since early childhood. Knowing that Ford had a few bats in his belfry hasn't changed that for me. McBride's book has actually given me a lot more interest in Ford's movies, and opened my eyes to a lot of literary work to which I had been oblivious. I couldn't possibly summarize such a vast and complete volume here; suffice it to say that he has done a great job of research and his writing holds your interest, even if your hands can't hold this monster of a book!

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## **Clint says**

An excellent, thorough, and as close to authoritative biography of the great filmmaker as is ever likely to be written.

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## **Paul Bauer says**

The biggest surprise is that Ford bullied John Wayne, sometimes to tears. It's a reminder that being a great artist is completely unrelated to being a good person. I call that the Picasso rule.

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