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Mountain Men on Film

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This document was published with permission from the journal. It was originally published in the *Studies in the Western.*
Postscript: This article is closely connected with the founding of our association in 1990, the centennial of the closing of the frontier. It was first published under a different title in Literatur in Wissenschaft und Unterricht XX No. 3 (1989). It should be now made available to the readers of our journal. A revision was not deemed necessary because Studies in the Western (1992ff.) and its forerunner, The GASW Newsletter, have done a continuous updating.

The mountain man of American folklore and history is a man between cultures. Like Janus, the doorkeeper god of the Romans, he is bifrontal, looking back at European, white civilization, and forward toward Indian civilization and culture. Like Janus, he has several attributes. One of the mountain man’s attributes relates directly to his bifrontal nature: his ability to work within white and Indian cultures while belonging fully to neither. Like the “Yankee Indian” of Cooper’s masterpieces of early American settlement, mountain men like Hugh Glass, Jim Bridger, and their fictional counterparts like Bill Tyler (Charlton Heston, The Mountain Men) glide between these cultures but feel at home in neither. Although some, like Flint Mitchell (Clark Gable, Across the Wide Missouri) and Tyler find happiness with an Indian woman, that happy situation either ends tragically or is threatened by outside forces. Even male companionship is at risk, with the arc of the mountain man’s life tending always toward

1 According to Doug Williams, the term was a Cooper coinage and referred to “fallen pilgrims” (see Williams 101).
loneliness and isolation. The most extreme example of this may be the story of Hugh Glass, or at least the fictionalized version presented in the recent film *The Revenant.*

In his incarnation as trapper and explorer, the mountain man displays an impressive variety of skills from marksmanship to survival in harsh conditions, often crossing rivers and icy mountain passes. Again he bears similarities to the ancient Janus figure, who was sometimes associated with water: “According to L. A. Holland, Janus in prehistoric times not only had associations with doorways and gates, but had special power over the crossing of streams. By virtue of this power, he was given some of the attributes of a water deity” (Taylor 8). Watery environments are particularly emphasized in *The Mountain Men,* since the primary motivation for the journey undertaken by the two men is to locate a fabled pass to a place replete with beavers, an important source of fur and thus of wealth for the trappers. *The Big Sky,* the Howard Hawks adaptation of A. B. Guthrie’s novel, also focuses heavily on rivers as it concerns the fur trade, including a conflict between trappers and the fur company. Unlike the situation in many Westerns, the mountain man lives in relative isolation from settled communities, usually only contacting them to resupply and to trade. A close analogy to these films might be Budd Boetticher-directed Westerns starrning Randolph Scott, which are usually set in very isolated desert regions and involve journeys through those areas, with the Scott character (often a sheriff or bounty hunter) typically a man who chooses to live apart from established society for his own reasons.

*The Big Sky* illustrates several aspects of the mountain man complex of themes. The film follows the fortunes of two outdoorsmen, Jim and Boone, who are not directly shown to be trappers but rather fine marksmen, trackers, and eventually riverboat men. They accompany an avuncular, experienced riverboat man and general outdoorsman, Zeb Calloway (Arthur Hunnicutt, solidly playing a familiar role), who actually is the uncle of Boone Caudill (Dewey Martin), on a river journey to deliver furs and cargo to the Blackfeet, bypassing the mendacious fur company with its predatory outriders. The riverboat is piloted by an affable, crusty, volatile Frenchman (the usual stereotype), not surprisingly nicknamed Frenchy (Steven Geray). The new crewmen soon discover that the boat is also transporting a Blackfeet woman, Teal Eye (Elizabeth Threatt), whom Frenchy and his associates plan to return to her tribe as leverage or protection from attack. Predictably enough, romantic tension soon develops between the feisty, beautiful Indian woman (a “Hawksian woman” character, independent-minded and rather tomboyish) and the two young men, Jim Deakins (Kirk Douglas) and Boone Caudill.

The overall narrative is in fact rather like one of Hawks’s more familiar films, one of his greatest, *Red River,* from only four years prior to this release. Both films are journey narratives, the earlier one narrating a cattle drive with wagons as conveyance, and this one a trading mission with a riverboat as means of travel. Each film includes voice-over narration at intervals in the film, in the case of *Red River* the voice of Groot (Walter Brennan), one of the main figures on the epic journey, and in the present film the voice of Zeb Calloway. Groot and Zeb are both amusingly crotchety avuncular figures, mentoring their younger counterparts, in *Red River* Matt Garth (Montgomery Clift), and in this film, Jim and Boone. Both narratives

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4 A later role for Hunnicutt, also for Hawks, was a gentle parody of a mountain man type, as Bull, sidekick to Cole Thornton (John Wayne) in *El Dorado* (1966).
5 The term Blackfeet referred to northwestern plains nations who sometimes wore black moccasins dyed with paint or darkened with ashes. J. Cecil Alter, *James Bridger* (Columbus, OH: Lang’s College Book Co., 1951), 6” (Buckley 161n).
6 The phrase is Naomi Wise’s; as critics have often noted, the woman in Hawk’s action films is likely to defeat stereotypical roles and instead to “play consequential roles” (Wise 111–12). These characters are exemplified for Wise (and for the present writer) in Feathers (Angie Dickinson) in Hawks’s *Rio Bravo.* Wise downplays the “Hawksian” character of Teal Eye, observing that “women play conventionally peripheral roles” in much of Hawk’s work in the 1950s (Wise 115). Nevertheless Teal Eye exhibits characteristics of independence and forthrightness that identify her, however provisionally, as a “Hawksian woman.” See also Springer, who discusses Wise’s article at some length.

7 In his autobiography, Douglas relates a rather strange story about his erotic encounter with Ms. Threatt, whom he notes was “half Cherokee” and thus “perfect for her part” though without acting experience (Douglas 191).
present a love triangle, an odd one in Red River among Tom Dunson (John Wayne), Tess Millay (Joanne Dru), and Matt Garth; a more standard one in The Big Sky, among Jim, Boone, and Teal Eye. Both films, being roughly contemporaneous to each other, stress the importance of initiative and cooperation not only among Anglo-Americans, but with outsiders (in Red River, the cattlemans in Abilene [Harry Carey, Sr.] serves both as trading partner and as an “outsider,” that is, a town-dweller), particularly in the case of The Big Sky with the French, of whom more later. As noted, the importance of initiative is emphasized, with both crews taking big risks to circumvent the usual trade routes or methods. It is no coincidence that the late 1940s-early 1950s was the period of great expansion in American business enterprises, the postwar boom period which saw the Marshall Plan revitalize Europe (and its markets). This was also the era of the early Cold War, in which traditional, or recent, alliances were re-evaluated and formed or broken.

Critics have noted that films such as Broken Arrow (Delmer Daves, 1950) displayed a softening attitude towards the Indian, reflecting not only changes in racial attitudes but also, on a less obvious level, changes in posture regarding international conflicts. The Big Sky could be included here as well, since the Anglo-French fur trappers seek peaceful coexistence (a term of political art which was well-worn by the end of the 1950s) with the Indians, although there are some recalcitrant Indians (and whites) who simply will not cooperate. This situation also reflects a more complex view of Indians than was often put forth in earlier Westerns, in which the Indians tended to be presented as a monolithic threat. So in this film, the Blackfeet are allies, or potential allies, of the trappers-boatmen, while the Crow, their ancestral enemy, are depicted as rampagers (as are the Sioux, another of their enemies). Similarly, the greedy minions of the fur company, led by the violent and duplicitous Streak (Jim Davis) - called a “fake Indian” in the film - but bossed by Louis MacMasters (Paul Frees), try to destroy the traders’ boat and to disrupt any chance of an alliance or rapprochement by them with the Blackfeet. The fur company in this film might be placed into a 1950s context as a corporation resisting international agreements and cooperation such as the Marshall Plan represented at that time.

A less positive appraisal of Indian-white relations is provided in the recent Oscar-winning film The Revenant. Based on the novel by Michael Punke and following some of the storyline of the film Man in the Wilderness (Richard C. Sarafian, 1971), which in turn draws on the historical figure of Hugh Glass (ca. 1780-ca. 1833), the film follows the

8 The Blackfeet were not always so accommodating to trappers:
Next to grizzly bears and Mother Nature, the most feared enemy of American fur trappers traveling along the upper Missouri River were the Nitsitapi or Blackfeet. ... The Blackfeet Confederacy comprised the dominant military power on the northwestern plains. Blackfeet sought to maintain their hegemony by preventing American traders and trappers from trading with and strengthening the Shoshones, Crow, Flatheads (Salish), and Nez Perces. They accomplished this by harassing and attacking American trappers and stealing their horses and furs. (Buckley 8)

For more on the Blackfeet (or Blackfoot) Confederacy, see Ward.
arc of the protagonist’s betrayal by his Anglo partner, his near-death from a bear attack, and his quest for revenge. Although certainly adept at wilderness survival, this character, actually named Hugh Glass and played by Leonardo DiCaprio in an Oscar-winning performance, veers from the Janus type because he does not seem particularly conflicted by the duality of civilization versus barbarism, or wilderness. His motivation for revenge is bound with his drive for survival after his abandonment. He is driven to kill his former partner and friend who had killed his young Indian companion, left him for dead and had tried to conceal the facts of his accident. In a Ben Hur-like scenario, Glass undergoes unimaginable trials and finally comes face to face with his betrayer, a common feature of the Hugh Glass narratives. In this case the confrontation ends in an ambiguous fashion.

*Man in the Wilderness* is a less complex narrative than *The Revenant.* More of a straightforward wilderness tale, it is akin to *Jeremiah Johnson* in its detailed highlighting of the survival methods employed by the main character, named Zach Bass (Richard Harris) in this version of the Glass tale. Directed by Richard C. Sarafian (*Vanishing Point*), and burdened with pretentious flashback sequences shot through lens filters, the narrative purports to be a factual account of the Captain Henry expedition of the 1820s but is actually quite fictionalized, although it does convey the core of the Hugh Glass story: abandonment by partners after a bear attack, survival, and planned revenge. In the film Captain Henry is a tyrannical commander of a boat being dragged overland, filled with furs and other cargo, in an attempt to reach the Missouri River and to head south down that river with the cargo. Played with his usual broad gusto by director John Huston, Henry is ruthless although not sadistic like, for instance, Wolf Larsen from *The Sea Wolf* (Michael Curtiz, 1941), based on the Jack London novel and perhaps an inspiration for the Henry character. Larsen (a superb Edward G. Robinson) is, like Henry, a rather intellectual ship captain, ruthless with his crew and with its unwilling passengers, but capable of odd intervals of compassion. Henry lacks Larsen’s mad, sadistic side, in Larsen’s case abetted by mysterious and debilitating headaches. Unlike Henry, Larsen dies with his ship; at the end of the Sarafian film, Henry and his surviving crew arrive at the river only to find it too shallow for their draft, and after a fierce battle with the Arikara (chiefed by veteran actor Henry Wilcoxon), they arrive at a truce of sorts with the Indians and with Bass, who decides not to take revenge and walks off to head home, where he has a son being cared for by a family friend after his wife’s death.10

Early in the film, as in *The Revenant,* Bass is attacked by a bear. His injuries are so severe that the ship’s surgeon does not think survival is possible, but in a typically quirky decision, Henry orders him stitched up before he dies so that he will not be buried as a body coming to pieces. After the repairs, Henry orders two men to stay behind with him until he dies and then to bury him. These men are Fogarty (Percy Herbert) and the young trapper Lowrie (Dennis Waterman). Asked what to do if he is not dead by the next day, Henry replies, “Kill him.” After Bass survives the night, Fogarty is about to kill him but runs out of time as approaching Arikaras are too close for comfort. The two men leave him to his fate. The Arikara chieftain notices that he has an Indian amulet on his person (an Indian with the ship had placed it there) and so spares his life, but the Arikaras leave him by himself near the water. Gradually he recovers and begins to provide for himself, trapping game and finding or creating places to hide from intruders, especially roaming bands of Indians. His ingenuity and his life in solitude are contrasted in flashbacks to his domestic life with his wife, now dead, of which union a son was born.

Eventually Bass reaches the site where Captain Henry’s ship is beached near the Missouri River, whose water level is too low for navigation. Henry and his men are engaged in a fierce but losing battle with the attacking Arikaras. The Arikara chief sees Bass approach Henry as if to kill him, and the attack halts. But Bass tells Henry that he is going home to see his son. As he walks away, the

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9 The expedition in the film is a fictional version of the actual Major Henry expedition which ended in 1824 (see Myers 104–07; Algier 55; Oman).

10 For the Arikara and the fur trade, see Nichols, “The Arikara Indians And The Missouri River Trade: A Quest For Survival”; Nichols, “Backdrop for Disaster: Causes of the Arikara War of 1823”; Woodard, “William Ashley and Jedediah Smith and the Arikara Battle of 1823”; and Tennant. The Arikara were later to provide scouts for the Army, famously at the Battle of the Little Bighorn in 1876 (see Philbrick 10, 19, et passim).
Arikara chief waves in a sign of truce and farewell, and Henry and his men follow Bass on foot. This contrived and rather implausible ending differs markedly from the ambiguous ending of the most recent Glass film, in which the viewer is left with a sense of desolation and perhaps impending death for the protagonist.

The critically acclaimed Hugh Glass reworking *The Revenant* (2015) is, like its predecessor, a mix of fact and deliberate fictionalizing. In this version, Glass (Leonardo DiCaprio, Academy Award, Best Actor) works for the Captain Henry expedition as a scout, and early in the film an Arikara attack on the expedition is shown in which several trappers are killed and many pelts robbed. The Arikara will later trade these pelts to the French for horses (to the Arikaras' credit, with an element of threat on their part); the French are treated here as onedimensional villains who kill and rape without much reserve.

Glass is accompanied by his son Hawk (Forrest Goodluck), the product of his union with a Pawnee woman, whose death in an attack by whites is shown in flashback or vision scenes—much more mysterious and technically accomplished than those in the Sarafian film, whose flashback scenes showed Bass's white wife and son in domestic life back East. The addition of such a family in both films has no historical grounding, but the newer film has the virtue of highlighting Glass's important connection with the Pawnee, with whom he lived for some time as a young man (see Myers 53–58). This background allows him in the 2015 film to fall in with a lone Pawnee who helps to heal his wounds but who is eventually killed by the perfidious French trappers.

The film also takes some liberties with the biographies of two important characters, Captain Henry and John Fitzgerald. Henry is shown being shot and killed by Fitzgerald as Henry and Glass pursue him near the end of the film. The historical Major Andrew Henry was a partner with William Henry Ashley in the fur trade; both of them retired from the fur business in 1824 after many mishaps (Myers 63–64, 194). And John Fitzgerald was pardoned, so to speak, by Glass after Glass learned that his rifle, stolen from him by Fitzgerald after the bear attack, was to be returned to him. Fitzgerald had joined the army, and his commanding officer did not want him to die at the hands of a civilian and so required him to return the rifle. Apparently this satisfied Glass (Myers 184–85).

*The Revenant* is also more specific than *Man in the Wilderness* about the identity of the other trapper who stayed behind with Fitzgerald (or Fogarty, in the earlier film) to keep vigil over Glass. As the historical record shows, he was the young Jim Bridger (played here by Will Poulter), a man who would attain fame in his own right (for Bridger, see Wiltsey). The film depicts him accurately enough as a relatively inexperienced, though not inept, youth who wrestles with his conscience about leaving Glass to his fate and who leaves a water flask with him which will achieve importance in the narrative, like the amulet in the earlier film. When Glass returns to the fort near the end of the film, Bridger is arrested (Fitzgerald runs off), but Glass speaks up for him and places the blame squarely on the older Fitzgerald. This outcome roughly follows the record in the sources about Glass (Myers 173–75).

A significant departure in the film from the historical record is the fate of John Fitzgerald. *The Revenant* has him escaping from the fort at the end and being pursued into the wintry landscape by Glass and Henry. Fitzgerald kills Henry and then engages in a running battle with Glass in which both are wounded, Fitzgerald more seriously. Noticing that a band of Arikaras is approaching, Glass repeats some sentiments, already expressed by the unfortunate Pawnee wanderer, about vengeance being left “in God's hands” and allows Fitzgerald to be dispatched by the Arikaras. Glass thus sees his revenge carried out without having to carry it out himself, a rather disingenuous and

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11 The younger man who stays with Bass in *Man in the Wilderness*, Lowrie, is clearly a substitute for Bridger, much as Bass and Fogarty are substitutes for their historical models.

12 Summarizing some of the historical sources about Glass's return and encounter with Bridger, Myers observes: “The picture given of Jim Bridger... is one of a youth whose troubled conscience had come face to face with a horrifying embodiment of hidden sin, sprung by Hell to exact punishment. If others thought Glass was a revenant, Jim was sure of it...” (Myers 173).
convenient ending to his search. Unlike a modern-day avenger like Parker (Mel Gibson) in Payback, who has his revenge without qualms, or the well-known example of Ethan Edwards in The Searchers, who foregoes his vengeance in the last few minutes of the film, this would-be avenger has it both ways.

As a coda, we are shown Glass following the apparition of his dead Pawnee wife either out of the forest or to his own death. Perhaps the thrust of the shot is for Glass to survive yet again so that he wander the wilderness. This Hugh Glass appears to have little or no inclination to rejoin white civilization. In this respect he is actually closer to the historical Glass, who appears to have drifted into the Western wilderness only to die in an Arikara ambush, probably in 1833 (Myers 208-24).

Jeremiah Johnson (Sydney Pollack, 1972) presents a character who, though based on a historical figure (John “Liver-Eating” Johnson) (Bender 2-4), seems a composite of famed mountain man figures including Glass and Jim Bridger. Like several other mountain man

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The film’s antiwar positioning is noted by McAllister as “an unmistakable parallel to contemporary America” (McAllister 39).
He nearly dies early in his foray, despite the most current armament (another Vietnam echo), until he comes upon the little cabin inhabited by Bear Claw, played with his usual scene-stealing verve by the inimitable Will Geer. This aged mountain man has a reputation for fighting, or running from, grizzly bears. His ironic, deadpan instruction of Jeremiah in wilderness ways proves highly effective, and he becomes an unofficial father figure for Jeremiah.

An instructive analogue to the relationship between Jeremiah and Bear Claw is the link between “part-Indian” Hondo Lane (John Wayne), also a Pastoral hero figure who lives in and between the white and Indian worlds, and the young boy Johnny Lowe (Lee Aaker). Here it is the Pastoral hero who is the older father figure for a boy living on the fringes of civilization (much like Joey in Shane). Like Bear Claw, Hondo is a rather rough taskmaster. When Hondo and Johnny are next to a pond, where Johnny is fishing, Hondo discovers that Johnny doesn’t know how to swim. Hondo heaves him into the pond, much to the horror of his mother Angie (Geraldine Page). Of course Johnny survives the ordeal and even enjoys the challenge.

McAllister puts this point, “The first half-hour of the film illustrates the life of the mountain trade and Johnson’s ineptness as a self-reliant free trapper” (McAllister 40).

*The mountain man frequently travels in company with an older man ... These relationships are akin to those of father and son and the father figure is frequently idealized* (Stouck 215-16). Here and in The Big Sky, the older men are idealized or at least made into amusing curmudgeons. One of the departures from the model in Man in the Wilderness is the emphasis on “father” Captain Henry as a terrible, driven and seemingly coldhearted figure.

Much of the film Jeremiah Johnson concerns the running fight between Jeremiah and the vengeful Crow chief Paints His Shirt Red (Joaquin Martinez), who has vowed to kill him for violating Crow tradition by crossing through a sacred burial site. The chief’s warriors kill Johnson’s family, including his Flathead wife Swan (Delle Bolton). Paints His Shirt Red has sent out warriors to try to accomplish this, and these Crow are adept at springing up from unexpected hiding places to attack Johnson. The repeated attacks provide a surreal element for the otherwise rather straightforward narrative. Though not at all comic, the attacks are reminiscent of the unexpected attacks on the Green Hornet (Van Williams) by his sidekick Kato (Bruce Lee), a humorous means of training the Green Hornet in martial arts techniques, with some one-upmanship by Kato thrown into the mix. Johnson survives the ambushes by guile and by sheer fighting skill and is apparently pardoned by Paints His Shirt Red, who waves at him from a distance.

To a greater extent than the other mountain man films dealt with here, this film concentrates closely on the weapon of choice of the hunter at that time, the Hawken rifle. Johnson’s rifle (inherited from another mountain man) evokes admiration and envy among other mountain men. This famous rifle model was developed by gunsmith Jacob W. Hawken, in St. Louis, as a response to requests from mountain men for a rifle more suited to their needs. The rifle needed to be very sturdy, to have a rather short barrel length (in comparison with the Kentucky rifle), a large caliber, and a barrel capable of withstanding increased charges of powder. Hawken’s product met all these challenges and was chambered in the .50 caliber range, a significantly larger caliber with greater powder load capability than the standard Kentucky rifle (Schuster 172-74).

McAllister, whose exegesis and summary of the film have assisted me in my discussion, notes the enigmatic nature of the chief’s “gesture” and finds the ending of the film unfortunate because its “tragic dimension ... shrinks when it descends to a concluding freeze-frame ambiguity” (McAllister 47).

Aaron Robert Woodard cites Charles Hanson’s conclusion that about 25% of trappers owned a Hawken. Woodard actually attributes some of the belief in the popularity of this rifle (an excellent rifle but not for the cash-strapped) to the film Jeremiah Johnson, noting that Johnson calls “a genuine Hawken” “the best rifle there was” but also observing that “this is a case where a free trapper such as the one portrayed by Redford may indeed have owned such a fine weapon” (Woodard, “Tools of the Trade: Trappers and Their Accoutrements” 5). (Woodard’s Hanson
Across the Wide Missouri is a more traditional film, focusing on the efforts of a determined trapper and entrepreneur (Clark Gable) to establish a working concession at a trading post in Blackfeet country. He is assisted by a Frenchman, Pierre (excellently portrayed by Adolphe Menjou), an Indian partner (the fine actor John Hodiak, somewhat miscast), a Scots officer (or perhaps just an adventurer), played by Alan Napier (later of *Batman* TV fame), and other French and Anglo trappers. The film establishes from the outset a bifrontal perspective for Flint Mitchell (Gable), who does not wish so much to escape from civilization as to attain the freedom and independence to follow his own interests. As can be seen from the beginning of the film, though, the Mitchell expedition is clearly “international,” uniting Anglo-Americans with Frenchmen, Scotsmen, and Indians. Or, from another perspective, the trapping crew unites former rivals in war—British and Anglo-Americans and Indian allies on one side, French and other Indians on the other—into an international force for peace and commerce, a timely message for the period (1951), when the French and the British had recently survived the Axis threat with help from the Americans and the United Nations and other international bodies and agreements were much in vogue. As in *The Big Sky*, Flint plans to return a Blackfoot woman, Kamiah (María Elena Marqués), kidnapped by Nez Perce, to her tribe and her aged grandfather (a shift in tribes compared to the Hawks film), and as in the Hawks film, Flint ends up marrying the woman and finding happiness with her, including the birth of a son—the narrator of the film in retrospect—until she is killed in pursuit of a party of Blackfeet.

The Blackfeet band had raided the post headed by Flint, stealing horses as was their wont.21 The Blackfeet are led by the vengeful Ironshirt (Ricardo Montalban, compelling as usual), and in a climactic scene after Kamiah is killed and her horse runs wildly away with the boy strapped to him, Mitchell kills Ironshirt and rescues his son. The coda shows father and son engaging in outdoor activities while the narrator comments approvingly, but a rather troubling aspect of the son’s biography is obscured by the happy scene. The son is also a Janus-figure who does not fit well either in the civilized or the wilderness world; perhaps this fact helps to explain the narrator’s remark that “those years [with his father] were the happiest in my life.” Like Charles Eastman (Adam Beach) in *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, the Apache who became a celebrated physician, Flint’s son will be sent away to get an Eastern education.

The nostalgic tone in the Wellman film similarly colors *The Mountain Men* (Richard Lang, 1980), starring Charlton Heston and Brian Keith as aging trappers drawn into conflict with Crows and Blackfeet when they try to expand the range of their operations. The elegiac perspective of the film is doubtless due at least in part to the date of its release, as other “late Westerns” released from the 1960s, such as *The Shootist*, *Will Penny*, and *True Grit* featured aging Western stars—particularly John Wayne—implicitly commenting on, revising, or just rehashing their earlier personas (as for instance in *The

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21. “... the Blackfeet excelled at horse larceny. ... Many skirmishes during the rendezvous period consisted of Blackfeet attempts to take horses and furs from Americans” (Buckley 14).
Comancheros). Both Heston and Keith were veterans of Western films—The Big Country and Nevada Smith, for example—and so their pairing in this rather unusual Western is not surprising.

What is rather surprising is the relative accuracy of the historical setting of the film. Bill Tyler (Heston) and Henry Frapp (Keith) refer to Fort McKenzie (Montana) as still operating. It was burned in 1844 by a fur trader named Chardon after he and his men had killed some Blackfeet and its “site thereafter became known as Fort Brule (‘burned fort’)” (Roberts 473). This places the film in the vicinity of the fort and dates its setting to the 1830s. The film is also quite detailed in its depiction of the methods of trapping beaver, of survival skills, and of the relationships among Anglo and French trappers and the local Indian tribes. Some comic notes in the narrative revolve around the two trappers’ repeated mock disputes over the identification of Indians and their weaponry as Crow or as Blackfeet.

The friendship of the two “grumpy old men” must endure the predictable inclusion of a Blackfoot woman, Running Moon (Victoria Racimo, another in a line of Hispanic actors playing Indians onscreen) as traveling companion and eventual lover of Tyler, who is determined to cross a mountain pass said to lead to rich beaver trapping grounds. The trio are attacked by Blackfeet and Frapp is scalped; Tyler and Running Moon must leave him for dead in order to escape. Later Running Moon is kidnapped by her Blackfoot husband Heavy Eagle (Stephen Macht) and Tyler, now reunited with Frapp, who had survived the scalping, vows to find her, having more or less given up on his apparently unrealizable dream of a beaver-fur paradise. After a final encounter with Heavy Eagle in which Frapp is killed, Tyler and Running Moon, now free of Heavy Eagle, whom Running Moon kills while he is fighting Tyler, find peace in a somewhat reduced life of trapping and hunting.

The trend towards isolation or withdrawal from society prevalent in mountain man films is significantly varied in The Last Frontier (Anthony Mann, 1955). Although a weaker entry in Mann’s catalogue than his famed efforts with James Stewart and his great noir work,

12 See also Chronister. The fort was the occasion for an unintentionally spread epidemic of smallpox among the Blackfeet in 1837 in which as many as 6,000 Blackfeet perished (Buckley 16).

does not surprise, and so their pairing in this rather unusual Western is not surprising.

this film features a strong cast, and it does display the complexity of character and situation associated with the output of this German émigré director. Set during Red Cloud’s War (1866–67), the narrative centers on the conflict between trapper and would-be soldier Jed Cooper (the often underrated Victor Mature) and the Custer-like commander of Fort Shallan, Colonel Marston (Robert Preston). This personal conflict intersects with the friction between Marston and his subordinate, the ethical and fair Captain Riordan (Guy Madison), and also with the budding and dangerous romance between Marston’s Eastern-mannered wife Corinna (Anne Bancroft) and the unlettered and very wild Jed. The film gradually peels away Jed’s associates Gus (James Whitmore, playing the older man figure familiar to mountain man narratives) and the Indian partner Mungo (Pat Hogan; a character clearly based on the Mohican Uncas and his association with Natty Bumppo). Gus is killed in a Sioux attack and Mungo leaves for the wilderness.

Before these events, Marston and his troopers (minus the contingent left at the fort) are killed in a massacre paralleling the Fetterman ambush of Red Cloud’s War. As McGinnis summarizes,

On December 21 [1866] [Colonel Henry B.] Carrington sent the arrogant Captain William J. Fetterman (who had boasted that with 100 men he could ride through the entire Sioux nation) and eighty men to defend a wood cutting party being attacked outside the fort [Fort Phil Kearny].

Fetterman’s entire contingent was ambushed and killed (McGinnis 457). In a sunny ending unusual for a Mann film especially of this

13 For Red Cloud’s War, which preceded the 1876 battle of Little Big Horn and included the famous Fetterman ambush and massacre, see McGinnis 457–58. The Fort Shallan of the film is likely a Hollywood version of the real Fort Phil Kearney.

14 The Marston character recalls the doomed and inflexible Col. Thursday (Henry Fonda) of Fort Apache (John Ford, 1948), who, like Marston, thinks his Indian opponents unworthy savages and laments his posting in a frontier fort despite his distinguished paper background in the Army. This film is more specific, though, about the doomed commander’s history: he had headed a reckless attack on the Confederate artillery at Shiloh which resulted in many deaths among his men and led to his being dubbed “the Butcher of Shiloh.”

15 For Fetterman, see McDermott; for a revisionist view of the Captain, see Calitri. Red Cloud later became a peace advocate in opposition to men like Crazy Horse, following the Little Big Horn battle. For a nicely done film account of some of Red Cloud’s activities after 1876, see Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee (Simoneau).
period, Jed becomes a hero by helping to save the fort, winning the hand of Marston's widow and becoming a sergeant under Riordan's command. So he is assimilated into civilized society through the mechanism of the military, differing not only from the isolationist message of typical mountain man films but also from the dark hues of Mann films such as *The Naked Spur* (1953) and *The Man from Laramie* (1955), which feature disillusioned, even unbalanced, veterans of the military. This mountain man film decides to turn the Janus image squarely towards civilization, opposing the almost purely isolationist imagery of *The Mountain Men* and resolving, even if in a facile manner, the dilemmas of Hugh Glass and Jeremiah Johnson.\(^{26}\)

**Works Cited**


26 The website at www.proimdb.com has been of great assistance in this article for verification of film details.


