

# John Ford's *Stagecoach*

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Edited by

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## I **Stagecoach and Hollywood's A-Western Renaissance**

“When the legend become fact,” the newspaper publisher famously opines in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962), “print the legend.” That sentiment certainly applies in the case of *Stagecoach*, which according to legend singlehandedly resuscitated the Western as a viable A-class Hollywood genre in 1939, elevating it to critical and aesthetic respectability in the process. That legend persists in many quarters, although it has been challenged for decades. More recently, in fact, critics and scholars have come to see *Stagecoach* in far more objective and complex terms with regard to changes not only in the Western at the time but also in the Hollywood film industry at large.

Among the historical facts about *Stagecoach* are these: First, the film was part of a fairly widespread resurgence of the Hollywood A-Western during the prewar era. Various estimates put the output of A-Westerns from 1939 through 1941 at about thirty, with the crop in 1939 also including *Jesse James*, *Dodge City*, *Union Pacific*, *The Oklahoma Kid*, *Frontier Marshal*, *Stand Up and Fight*, *Man of Conquest*, as well as Ford’s own *Drums Along the Mohawk*.<sup>1</sup> Second, this A-Western resurgence had less to do with the remarkable vitality of the B-Western at the time (then in its heyday, numbering well over one hundred per annum) than with the currency of other A-class production trends, cycles, and genres, from Technicolor spectacles and “outdoor” pictures to historical costume epics, biopics, swash-bucklers, and Foreign Legion films. And third, although *Stagecoach* appeared early in the A-Western renaissance, others like *Jesse James* and *Dodge City* were released at about the same time and were more

successful commercially and far more influential in the short term, spawning the dual strain of outlaw biopics and historical epics that dominated the A-Western through the prewar era.

Notwithstanding these facts, however, there is still basis enough for the *Stagecoach* legend. While the film was scarcely an isolated genre phenomenon, it was altogether singular among the era's A-Westerns on several counts – particularly its canny reformulation of B-Western elements, its disdain for historic in favor of more timeless mythic appeals, its renewal of Ford's investment in the genre, and its pronounced long-term impact on the form. Moreover, *Stagecoach* was quite simply an excellent film, the one Western of the period routinely singled out by critics – then and now – as a work of exceptional narrative and cinematic quality. Remarkably, *Stagecoach* was the only Western released from 1939 through 1941 to be nominated for a Best Picture Oscar (in an era when the Academy nominated ten per year) or to be listed among the top ten films by the National Board of Review and the *New York Times*.

This essay aims to reconcile the fact and legend of *Stagecoach*, to assess the quality of the film and to situate it within the larger context of 1939 Hollywood – not only in relation to other key renaissance Westerns but also to the wider genre landscape and the rapidly changing mode of production in the halcyon prewar era. Indeed, the film epitomized classical Hollywood during its so-called golden age, and its production speaks volumes about Ford's career, the status of the Western genre, and the general state of independent production, "prestige" pictures, and the authority of top directors. Thus we begin by charting the creation of the film and the contemporary industry conditions, although the ultimate objective is to examine *Stagecoach* itself as the consummate renaissance Western – as a film in which, as André Bazin so aptly put it, "John Ford struck the ideal balance between social myth, historical reconstruction, psychological truth, and the traditional theme of the Western *mise-en-scène*."<sup>2</sup>

### JOHN FORD'S STAGECOACH

Bazin's auteurist bias here is reasonable enough. In terms of Ford's own career and the general workings of the industry in the late 1930s, *Stagecoach* was altogether exceptional in its stature as a

“director’s film.” Ford orchestrated virtually every phase of its development and production, and his creative control proved crucial to the film’s distinctive quality and revitalization of the Western genre. The nominal producer of *Stagecoach* was Walter Wanger, but he too endorsed Ford’s authorship of the film. Wanger publicly admitted that he financed the film “without having a hell of a lot to do with it,” and he privately informed a United Artists marketing executive just prior to its release, “While I am proud to be the producer of ‘Stagecoach,’ will you please do everything in your power to see that the picture is known as John Ford’s achievement.”<sup>3</sup> Dudley Nichols received sole screenwriting credit for *Stagecoach*, but he actually collaborated closely on the script with Ford, whom he told in a personal note after the successful New York premiere: “If ever there was a picture that was a director’s picture, it was that one.”<sup>4</sup> Even the New York film critics took up the auteurist chant, with Frank Nugent of the *New York Times* – who later would turn to screenwriting and in fact would script several of Ford’s postwar Westerns – arguing in a February 1939 column that the cinema was a “director’s medium” and citing *Stagecoach* as a case in point.<sup>5</sup>

The actual development and production of *Stagecoach* support this view. Ford at the time was under a long-term studio contract (to 20th Century–Fox) that allowed him an occasional “outside” picture on a freelance basis, and he initially planned *Stagecoach* as an outside project. He paid Ernest Haycox \$2,500 for the screen rights to his short story “Stage to Lordsburg” after it appeared in the April 10, 1937, issue of *Collier’s*<sup>6</sup> and then took it to the independent producers Merian C. Cooper and David Selznick. Ford earlier had signed a two-picture deal with Cooper’s Pioneer Pictures, before a merger with Selznick International Pictures (SIP) transferred the contract to SIP.<sup>7</sup> Cooper was keen on Ford’s Western project, but Selznick balked because of the uncertain market for A-Westerns as well as Ford’s determination to cast John Wayne and Claire Trevor as co-stars. Both were B-grade players without the “marquee value” that SIP required, and Wayne carried the added stigma of having starred in *The Big Trail* (1930), an early sound Western that along with *Cimarron* (1931) had seriously undermined the A-Western’s currency. Selznick pushed for top stars but really had little faith in the project, insisting that SIP “must select the story and sell it to Ford instead of him picking some

uncommercial pet of his.”<sup>8</sup> Cooper backed Ford, however, dissolving the SIP–Pioneer partnership over the dispute; a short time later, he and Ford decided to create their own independent operation, Argosy Pictures. But the newly formed company was without funding, which left “Stage to Lordsburg” dead in the water.<sup>9</sup>

With his own project stalled, Ford directed *The Hurricane*, an outside picture for Sam Goldwyn, and then two routine action dramas for Fox, *Four Men and a Prayer* and *Submarine Patrol*. But he continued to pitch “Stage to Lordsburg.” Darryl Zanuck at Fox passed on the project, as did top executives at Paramount and Warner Bros.<sup>10</sup> – not that they weren’t interested in the A-Western. The recent success of Technicolor “outdoor pictures” and two rather conventional A-class Westerns from Paramount in 1936, *The Texas Rangers* and *The Plainsman*, augured the resurgence of the A-Western, and soon several studios joined the pursuit – notably Fox with *Jesse James*, Paramount with *Union Pacific*, and Warner Bros. with *Dodge City*. Rather than take on an outside project like Ford’s, these studios clearly preferred to convert their established resources and house styles to the Western genre.

Consider, for instance, the development and production of *Dodge City*, which provides an especially illuminating example of such conversion because Warners, the only major studio besides MGM without a B-Western operation, actually took the lead in the prewar A-Western trend. Moreover, Warners was known for its factory-based operations and its commitment to rigid star-genre formulas, and in fact the studio looked to two other very different genre-bound stars for *Dodge City* before settling on Errol Flynn. The project was initiated (in early 1938) for resident biopic star Paul Muni as a biography of Wyatt Earp. When Muni resisted, deeming the genre beneath his dignity, Jack Warner and production chief Hal Wallis considered a Western reformulation of the studio’s signature gangster genre with James Cagney as star. But the producer Robert Lord, who by now (summer 1938) had the film ready for production, insisted that Cagney was “all wrong” and began pushing for Errol Flynn. Flynn at the time was among Warners’ biggest and highest-paid contract stars (at \$4,500 per week), having surged to stardom in a succession of costume adventure-romances co-starring Olivia de Havilland, including *Captain Blood* (1935), *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (1936),



and *Robin Hood* (1938). The last of these was a Technicolor hit and Flynn's first teaming with the director Michael Curtiz, and its success set the stage for *Dodge City* as a Flynn-de Havilland vehicle. Warner, Wallis, and Lord agreed that Flynn's swashbuckling persona was ripe for conversion to the American West while Cagney and frequent co-star Humphrey Bogart were cast in a gangster-Western hybrid, *The Oklahoma Kid*.<sup>11</sup>

The script for *Dodge City* was reworked to feature Flynn as Wade Hatton, a roguish but upright wagon master and trail boss of Irish origin who fought for the Confederacy before coming west. Circumstances in *Dodge City* induce Hatton to pin on a marshal's badge and clean up the town, winning the heart of de Havilland's independent-minded newspaper reporter in the process. The story ends with the newly wed couple heading farther west for Virginia City, another unruly town in need of law and order. *Dodge City* was shot over a forty-eight-day period from November 1938 to January 1939 on the Warner lot and on location in nearby Modesto at a cost of \$910,000.<sup>12</sup> Released in April 1939, four weeks after *Stagecoach*, *Dodge City* was a hit, setting off a quick succession of Warner Bros. films – *Virginia City* and *Sante Fe* in 1940, *They Died with Their Boots On* in 1941 – featuring Flynn as a bona fide Westerner. With his portrayal of George Custer in the latter film, Flynn's star persona was thoroughly Americanized and the studio's transformation of a key star-genre formula was complete.

Ford, meanwhile, managed to sell "Stage to Lordsburg" to Walter Wanger, an independent producer who had a financing and distribution deal with United Artists. Wanger announced the Ford Western project in July 1938, stating publicly that it would be a million-dollar production but securing Ford's assurance that the film would cost half that – and in fact Ford already had budgeted it at \$490,700.<sup>13</sup> Once the deal was set, Ford took *Stagecoach* through scripting and production with remarkable speed and efficiency, continuing to maintain complete control over the picture. He went to work on the script with his frequent collaborator Dudley Nichols (in their twelfth teaming as director and writer) while attending to myriad other tasks, from casting and set design to preparing for location work in Monument Valley, Arizona, then a remote and inaccessible area scarcely amenable to movie production.

Nichols and Ford hammered out the screenplay in a few short weeks, an impressive feat given its radical departure from "Stage to Lordsburg." Haycox's spare tale did supply the three plot lines – a stagecoach journey through hostile Indian country, a romance between a cowboy and a whore, and a revenge saga – and provided many of the principals as well. The stagecoach occupants include a driver and his shotgun guard, along with six passengers: the fiancée of a cavalry officer; a whiskey drummer from St. Louis; an Englishman carrying "an enormous sporting rifle"; a "solid-shouldered cattleman"; a gambler; a mysterious blond cowboy, "Malpais Bill" (en route to Lordsburg to "settle a debt" with two men named Plummer and Shamley); and "a girl known commonly throughout the Territory as Henriette" (who "runs a house in Lordsburg"). The threat of Indian attack and budding romance between Bill and Henriette supply most of the dramatic interest, with the attack finally coming just outside Lordsburg. Several passengers are killed in a furious running gun battle, but the stage does "get through" – and without the aid of nearby cavalry units. In Lordsburg, Bill escorts Henriette to her "house," reiterating his intention to marry her while rebuffing her pleas to avoid the showdown. "A man can escape nothing," he says. "I've got to do this. But I will be back." He then goes to meet Plummer and Shamley while the focus remains on Henriette, who hears four gunshots and then (in the words that end the story) sees Bill "coming toward her with a smile."<sup>14</sup>

While preserving Haycox's main story elements and pulp-populist tone, Nichols and Ford substantially altered the ensemble and fleshed out the overall narrative. The whore is unchanged except for her outcast status, but the cowboy becomes an escaped convict and local legend, the Ringo Kid, out to avenge the murder of his kin. The hunter with the large rifle is replaced by Doc Boone, a drunken philosopher who supplies both commentary and comic relief. The shotgun rider is replaced by Curley, a lawman on Ringo's trail who brings legal authority and a complex sense of democracy and justice to the narrative. The upstanding cattleman becomes Gatewood, the embezzling banker. The cavalry officer's fiancée becomes his pregnant wife, Lucy Mallory, whose childbirth substantially changes the story, while her connection with the gambler Hatfield, here a doomed southern gentleman, is far more complex. The whiskey drummer scarcely

changes, except that he now has the alcoholic Doc Boone to contend with. The adjustments in characterization allow for a much richer narrative, and in fact each of the three main plot lines plays out quite a bit differently than in the original story, particularly the cavalry rescue and the lovers' final escape to Ringo's ranch across the border. Moreover, the film is far more concerned than is Haycox's story with social class and community, which in many ways become the central concerns as the narrative develops.<sup>15</sup>

The apparent influences on the Nichols–Ford overhaul of “Stage to Lordsburg” were many and varied, although the dominant sources seem to be Ford's previous films. Other influences have been identified over the years, with Ford himself propagating the notion that the French short story “*Boule de suif*,” by Guy de Maupassant, was an important inspiration.<sup>16</sup> This scarcely holds up to scrutiny, however, and in fact a more likely and obvious – albeit less impressive – literary influence was “The Outcasts of Poker Flat,” Bret Harte's classic Western tale (first published in 1892) that Ford had adapted in 1919 and was remade by RKO as a B-Western in 1937. The social outcast theme only implicit in Haycox's work is central to Harte's story (and to *Stagecoach*), and what's more, Harte's outcasts include a gold-hearted whore, a gentleman gambler, and a crusty philosopher-drunk – obvious models for Dallas, Hatfield, and Doc Boone, respectively.<sup>17</sup>

Another model for Doc Boone was the drunken doctor in Ford–Nichols's most recent collaboration, *The Hurricane*, also played by Thomas Mitchell. Another film about a disparate group in desperate circumstances, *The Hurricane* is influential in other areas as well. *Stagecoach* was often referred to as “a *Grand Hotel* on wheels,” write Joseph McBride and Michael Wilmington, and thus “bears a family resemblance to the popular omnibus films of the 1930s (*Grand Hotel*, 1932; *Shanghai Express*, 1932; *Lost Horizon*, 1937; *The Lady Vanishes*, 1938; and the Ford–Nichols collaboration of 1934, *The Lost Patrol*), in which a colorful collection of characters from different social strata are thrown together in dangerous or exotic circumstances.”<sup>18</sup> *The Hurricane* could be added to the list, not only as an “omnibus film” but also, like most of those just mentioned, as a drama of imminent disaster. *The Lost Patrol* is also pertinent here because it involved a stranded British patrol (during the First World



*Stagecoach* was like a “Grand Hotel on wheels.” (cast publicity photo; collection of the editor)

War) under relentless Arab attack in the Mesopotamian desert who are saved in a last-minute rescue.<sup>19</sup> Nichols and Ford clearly borrowed this motif for *Stagecoach*, although the cavalry-to-the-rescue angle had been a Western cliché since the early silent era.<sup>20</sup>

Another blatantly derivative aspect of *Stagecoach* involves the interplay of casting, characterization, and B-Western convention. As Ed Buscombe has shown, “Ford’s casting in *Stagecoach* is virtually a resumé of Western film.” The signal example, of course, is the Ringo Kid, clearly modeled on John Wayne’s B-Western persona, but other instances abound. Tim Holt, who played the cavalry officer, was the son of veteran B-Western star Jack Holt. Francis Ford, John’s older brother and his mentor as a director of silent Westerns, played the proprietor of the Dry Fork station – a drinking companion for Doc whose few scripted lines were cut (by brother John during production). And Berton Churchill, who made a career of playing arrogant blowhards, was ideal for Gatewood’s blustering pro-business, anti-New Deal conservative. Even more to the point,

Churchill had portrayed an embezzling banker in the 1933 B-Western *Frontier Marshal*.<sup>21</sup>

Ford's use of B-Western icons was a key factor in keeping the budget down, although even the top talent involved worked for less than their usual fee. Nichols earned \$20,000 for his screenplay, and Ford allowed himself only \$50,000 for directing – well below his norm, although Wanger did agree to add 20 percent of any net profits. The entire cast cost only \$80,000, with Wayne by far the lowest paid of the principals – at \$3,000, less than one-tenth of Flynn's earnings from *Dodge City*. Claire Trevor parlayed her recent success in *Dead End* (1937) into a \$15,000 salary, and Thomas Mitchell earned \$10,000. Another economy measure was the schedule, with Ford planning the shoot for only thirty-three working days, with three days for travel despite the remote location. He also planned to do much of the studio-based work on the Republic lot, where he could work quickly and cheaply.<sup>22</sup>

Ford and Nichols finished a first draft in early October, then revised as Ford completed pre-production. Principal photography commenced in late October, on location in Monument Valley. This was Ford's first use of the locale, and thus he had not yet established a routine for working at – or even getting to – the Arizona location. But production there went fairly smoothly, and after two weeks the company returned to Hollywood. By then it was apparent that the talent involved, the quality of the script, and the project's ties to Ford's earlier films had put him in a "comfort zone" that enabled him to work with remarkable ease and confidence. He liberally revised the script during production, cutting dialogue to create a more "economic" (his term) drama and to enhance Wayne's performance, but also adding bits of action or dialogue when inspiration or necessity warranted it.<sup>23</sup> One such instance was the final exchange between Doc and Curley about the runaway lovers' being "saved from the blessings of civilization" and their ensuing decision to have "just one" drink – a coda worked out between Ford and Mitchell on the set that adds immeasurably to the story (more on this later). Production closed with the Indian attack, the only real action sequence in the entire film, which Ford shot on a dry lake near Victorville, California, relying heavily on the seasoned Western stuntman (and his second unit director) Yakima Canutt.<sup>24</sup>

The picture wrapped on December 23, only four days behind the thirty-three-day shooting schedule. The one phase of production that Ford did not closely control was editing, but he deemed that unnecessary. Dorothy Spencer, an editor on *Stagecoach*, later said that Ford “cut in the camera. He got what he wanted on film, and then left it to the cutter to put it together. Unlike most other directors, he never even went to the rushes.”<sup>25</sup> A sneak preview in early February at the Fox Westwood Theatre went extremely well, as did premieres in New York and Los Angeles later in the month. By then the film’s cost exceeded Wanger’s half-million-dollar ceiling – just barely at \$531,374 – but with a hit on his hands he was scarcely complaining. *Stagecoach* went into widespread release in early March and was a sizable commercial hit, with net revenues of \$1.1 million in 1939 alone, thus giving Ford a good deal more via his profit participation deal than he had earned in salary.<sup>26</sup>

#### THE A-WESTERN AND HOLLYWOOD’S GENRE LANDSCAPE

With the early-1939 release of *Jesse James*, *Stagecoach*, and *Dodge City*, the A-Western renaissance was underway, and in the ensuing stampede of big-budget Westerns, the narrative and thematic contours of the revitalized genre quickly took shape. It’s remarkable, in fact, how rapidly the A-Western trend developed and the range of films, Western and non-Western alike, that contributed to that development. The trade and popular press fueled the trend, not only in gauging its popularity but also in providing a template of sorts for both the industry and the audience to identify and assess the trend. What passed for genre analysis in the press and trade discourse was superficial at best, however; only much later would critics and scholars really glean the contours and complexities of the A-Western renaissance.

Judging from both the trade and popular press, the A-Western stampede caught the industry unawares. *Variety* in its January 1939 survey of the industry, for instance, clearly did not detect the coming trend. One article noted that “the public appetite was ripe for more pictures of the spectacle, outdoor type,” especially historical epics and biopics,<sup>27</sup> and another identified the only significant Western trend as “guitar strumming and vocalizing dude cowpokes” – that

is, singing cowboys.<sup>28</sup> This view typified the press discourse just before the A-Western stampede, although a few observers did sense the prospect of the genre's resurgence. In late December 1938, Douglas W. Churchill wrote a *New York Times* piece on Hollywood's "New Series of Grand (Horse) Operas." Providing an inventory of the A-class Westerns then in development or active production, Churchill stated: "Most of the pictures are worthy; all provoke more than casual interest."<sup>29</sup> The point is well taken, although the typical use of the term "horse opera" suggests an obvious stigma, a guilt-by-association with the B-Western and particularly the ubiquitous singing cowboy films.

That stigma would vanish in the coming weeks and months with the A-Western onslaught. January 1939 saw the release of *Jesse James* and *Stand Up and Fight* (MGM's epic saga of the Cumberland Gap starring Robert Taylor). February saw the New York and Los Angeles premieres of *Stagecoach*, which went into widespread release in March along with *The Oklahoma Kid*. In April came *Dodge City*, *Man of Conquest* (Republic's "near-A" biopic of Sam Houston), and *The Return of the Cisco Kid* (Fox's revival of the series starring Warner Baxter). DeMille's *Union Pacific* was released in early May, and by that point the trend clearly had reached critical mass, and the Western genre had reestablished its cultural and industrial currency. In fact, the press discourse already had changed noticeably after the release of *Stagecoach*. A *Variety* piece in early March, "Pic Cycle on Horseback," noted that the output of "major budget Westerns" was greater than anything "the picture business has witnessed in a decade." It was a "toss up" in *Variety's* view whether *Union Pacific* or *Jesse James* had "revived the cycle," but "it did not take long for the other studios to fall in line."<sup>30</sup> Days later in the *Times*, Frank Nugent wrote, "We've formed the habit of taking our horse operas in class B stride. . . . But all that has changed now. The horse opera is on its high horse" – thanks largely, said Nugent, to *Stagecoach*, "one of the best horse operas ever filmed."<sup>31</sup>

Critics were understandably dubious at the prospect of Flynn and Cagney as Westerners. Nugent's March 1939 review of *The Oklahoma Kid* in the *Times*, for instance, wrote that Cagney on horseback "is almost the only thing that distinguished his film" from the usual gangster melodrama. Still, "there's something entirely disarming

about the way he tackled horse opera, not pretending for a minute to be anything but New York's Jimmy Cagney all dressed up for a dude ranch." The following day, in a general piece on the A-Western resurgence, Nugent wrote: "Errol Flynn, in spite of his training in piracy, Robin-Hooding and being a perfect specimen, is going to look mighty strange on a bronco's back in 'Dodge City.'" <sup>32</sup> Nor was Nugent impressed with *Dodge City* when it was released in early April. His review praised Curtiz's direction as "flawless part by part" but criticized the film's lack of "dramatic unity" and dismissed it as "merely an exciting thriller for the kiddies." Other critics (and later historians and film scholars) would be kinder, and the public clearly was taken with the film and Flynn's performance. *Dodge City* was Warner Bros.' second biggest money-maker in 1939 at \$1.5 million in revenues, on a par with *Jesse James*, and it vaulted Flynn into the exhibitors' poll of top ten box-office stars.

The A-Western surge was further fueled by a heavily publicized trend toward "location premieres," lavish world premieres of prestige pictures that highlighted their status as both historical spectacle and vintage Americana. The premieres of *Dodge City* in its namesake Kansas town and of *Union Pacific* in Omaha helped spark this trend, and in fact *Stagecoach* was among the few 1939 A-Westerns that enjoyed a more customary world premiere in New York City. <sup>33</sup>

As the A-Western resurgence progressed, critics began to note the distinct strains and subgenres involved, although these generally were posited in vague association with other prestige forms – principally the biopic, the costume drama, and the historical epic. Only in retrospect would critics and film scholars begin to distinguish the dominant strains and cycles that both informed and developed within the A-Western renaissance. Among the first of these were George N. Fenin and William K. Everson in *The Western* (first published in 1962), who saw the A-Western surge in 1939–40 as a distinct extension of the "renaissance" of the historical epic in the mid-1930s. For Fenin and Everson, the epic impulse continued in "the tremendous upsurge in historical Westerns" like *Dodge City* and *Union Pacific*. Even more important in their view was "the cult of the outlaw," a distinctive amalgam of historical epic, biopic, and gangster film. This strain was spurred by Henry King's "somewhat pedestrian but enormously successful" *Jesse James*, leading to the 1940 sequel, *The Return*



of *Frank James*, and a rush of biopics portraying the James Gang, the Daltons, Billy the Kid, Belle Starr, and various other Western outlaws. While *Stagecoach* clearly displays elements of both strains, Fenin and Everson regarded the film as “overrated” and far more important “in the development of Ford than in the development of the Western itself.”<sup>34</sup>

Fenin and Everson may have misjudged *Stagecoach*, but their view of the A-Western’s dual trajectory during the prewar renaissance would shape the general reading of the genre for decades to come. Few critics and scholars have gone beyond their same level of generalization, however, with the notable exception of Richard Slotkin in his monumental *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*. After acknowledging his debt to Fenin and Everson, Slotkin advances and substantially refines their analysis of the historical epic and outlaw Westerns, then challenges their view by noting a “third type” – a strain “promulgated in John Ford’s *Stagecoach*, . . . the antithesis of both the progressive epic and the Cult of the Outlaw, since it eschews the insistent historicism of those forms for the formal austerity and poetic allegory of the W. S. Hart tradition.” Slotkin suggests the terms “classical” or perhaps “neo-classical” to identify this type, “because of its knowing use and modernistic adaptation of traditional and relatively ‘archaic’ styles and story-structures.”<sup>35</sup>

Whereas *Stagecoach* in Slotkin’s view was shaped mainly by Western genre traditions, he views the epic and outlaw strains as exemplary forms of genre blending, cross-fertilization, and recombination. He deems the historical epic the “most imposing and important” of the “new Westerns,” because it “inherited the market niche” of the historical romance and epic biopic. Two crucial historical events endlessly reworked in this epic Western strain are the Indian Wars of the 1870s and ’80s and the building of the transcontinental railroad. Another key genre development in the mid-1930s involved the “Victorian Empire” film, a sort of world-scale Western in which the civilized world is threatened by marauding foreign savages. In Slotkin’s view, films like *Lives of a Bengal Lancer* (1935), *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (the 1936 Flynn–de Havilland film), and Ford’s *Wee Willie Winkie* (1937, with Shirley Temple as mascot to a British unit in India) are essentially Westerns in exotic masquerade, “well designed to absorb the concerns and symbols associated with the Myth of the

Frontier and the Western and to recast them in a new, more exotic and spectacular and even more timely disguise."<sup>36</sup>

This view is consonant with Tino Balio's study of 1930s Hollywood, *Grand Design*. Balio argues that the reformulation of the Western "costume-adventure" cycle was motivated by the failure of epic-scale Westerns in the early 1930s and later by the deepening foreign crises, especially in England. He also notes that the surge of Americanism later in the decade, along with the increasingly troubled European marketplace, induced Hollywood to return to the American West as the preferred site of its epic spectacles.<sup>37</sup> But it is worth noting that even as the A-Western renaissance took hold, the Victorian Empire cycle enjoyed a surge of its own in 1939 with *Gunga Din*, *Beau Geste*, *Stanley and Livingstone*, and *The Four Feathers*, with the last three of these released in the same week (in August 1939).

Meanwhile, epic Westerns in the tradition of *Dodge City*, *Union Pacific*, and Ford's *Drums Along the Mohawk* (November 1939) celebrated America's past as crucible for current events and, in the process, became increasingly political and progressive. "True to the canons of the 'historical romance,' 'costume epic,' and 'bio-pic,'" writes Slotkin, "the ideological thrust of these films is relentlessly 'progressive' in its reading of history, celebrating all persons, tendencies, and crises that yield higher rates of production, faster transportation, more advanced technology, and more civilized forms of society."<sup>38</sup> *Dodge City* celebrates the spread of civilization via not only commerce and technology, but even taxation and government regulation, all facilitated by Flynn's Wade Hatton in his capacity as lawyer. Indeed, a crucial ideological move here is the utter subordination of the hero's rugged individualism – Hatton's past as expatriate Irishman and former Confederate soldier – to the collective good of corporate capitalism, civic order, and domesticity. Hatton's decision at film's end to "tame" Virginia City comes at the behest of civic leader Colonel Dodge on behalf of the mining interests of that community, and only after Hatton is given explicit permission by his bride (de Havilland), herself now dutifully committed to patriarchy.

While Flynn's maverick nature was channeled into pro-social action in *Dodge City* and subsequent historical epics, *Jesse James* provided something of an antithesis. "The new 'outlaw Western' addressed the dark side of progressive history which the epic evaded

or subsumed," writes Slotkin, "and which had hitherto been the province of the gangster film."<sup>39</sup> And in much the same vein, Ed Buscombe notes: "Besides the triumphalism of conquest and empire-building, there is another tradition in the Western, the tradition that in the legend of Jesse James supports the poor sharecroppers against the banks and railroads."<sup>40</sup> Both underscore the fact that the outlaw strain of A-Westerns was keyed to the same historical events, conditions, and iconography as the progressive epics but formulated a systematic critique of progress and a celebration of the renegades who opposed it. Indeed, the protagonists in these films invariably turn outlaw as the direct result of some egregious personal or familial assault by corrupt local agents of powerful institutions such as the government, the railroad, and the banks. In *Jesse James* and *The Oklahoma Kid*, for instance, the hero "goes bad" because of the murder of an upstanding parent, which provides not only strong motivation but also considerable audience empathy and the prospect of redemption.

This prospect is not realized in *Jesse James* or many other outlaw biopics, because of their basis in not only historicized legend but also in the gangster genre. The historical and structural cross-fertilization between the Western and gangster genres is a complex affair – far more complex than is suggested by the routine dismissal of *The Oklahoma Kid* as simply a gangster film in Western garb. The gangster film was undergoing a surge of its own in the late 1930s, thanks in part to motifs borrowed from the Western – most notably, the hero as "good-bad man" in the William S. Hart mold. Moreover, gangster sagas like *They Made Me a Criminal* (1939) and *High Sierra* (1940) depict the hero's quest for freedom and redemption via excursions outside the urban jungle and into a revitalizing wilderness that invokes the Old West.

The complex symbiosis of gangster and Western outlaw is also evident in the prewar rise to stardom of Henry Fonda in *Jesse James* (second billed to Tyrone Power), and then in the three films that Ford directed immediately after *Stagecoach: Young Mr. Lincoln*, *Drums Along the Mohawk* (both 1939), and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940). By the time he played the lead in *The Return of Frank James* (1940), Fonda not only was a top star but had developed a persona that effectively amalgamated the gangster and outlaw types, and the epic figure as

well. Slotkin aptly notes that Fonda's portrayals of Frank James and Tom Joad coalesce into "a single heroic figure agrarian, Lincolnesque, a fugitive and an outlaw – who is finally able to articulate the social and political meaning for which the outlaw has been a metaphor."<sup>41</sup> Fonda's performance and emergent persona noticeably distinguish *The Return of Frank James* from its precursor, as does Fritz Lang's more somber, unsentimental direction and the story's looser ties to history and biography. As Lang himself said at the time, the Western "is not only the history of the country, it is what the saga of the Nibelungen is for the European" – that is, a foundation myth and epic revenge saga endlessly reworked, retold, and reinvented. In this sense, *The Return of Frank James* owes less perhaps to *Jesse James* than to *Stagecoach*, that earlier saga of an outlaw-hero's quest for redemption and revenge.<sup>42</sup>

#### **STAGECOACH: THE RENAISSANCE WESTERN PAR EXCELLENCE**

The ultimate accomplishment of *Stagecoach*, simply stated, is its deft synthesis of the epic-historic and outlaw-biopic strains of the renaissance Western, yet without the claims to novelty, historical validity, and critical respectability of films like *Jesse James* and *Dodge City*. On the contrary, *Stagecoach* presents itself from the outset as utterly conventional, unabashedly mythic indeed, positively antique and as audience-friendly as the pulp story that inspired it. The resulting paradox, of course, is that *Stagecoach* has come to stand as the most original, socially astute, and formally accomplished of Hollywood's new breed of A-Westerns.

While Ford's shrewd use of genre convention is crucial to the film's appeal, it does raise interesting questions about the presumed genre literacy of the audience in 1939, given the limited play of A-Westerns at the time. The majority of first- and second-run moviegoers in 1939 – that is, those who saw movies in downtown urban theaters – were likely to be semi-literate at best in terms of Western genre convention. The singing cowboy had expanded the genre's clientele, mainly because of its appeal to women (as well as to men and boys), but still the genre's circulation was limited mainly to subsequent-run theaters in small towns and rural areas. Thus urban audiences may

have seen *Stagecoach* as even more novel than the epic and outlaw A-Westerns, given the ties of the latter to other prestige cycles. That doesn't change the derivative, recombinant, and convention-bound nature of Ford's film, however. From casting and characterization to plot structure and theme, virtually nothing in *Stagecoach* is actually new, not even the use of Monument Valley. Yet Ford manages to use convention and cliché in the service of a narrative that, in the words of McBride and Wilmington, "defined Western archetypes and created a new frame of reference rich in irony and sophistication."<sup>43</sup> A consummate case of revitalizing a long-established but moribund form, *Stagecoach* is at once a product of other Westerns, of other Ford films, and of other genres, while also standing as an internally coherent and organic work unto itself – a far cry, finally, from the blatantly synthetic, patchwork pastiche of films like *Dodge City* and *Union Pacific*.

Using genre convention as narrative shorthand, Ford creates a story of remarkable economy, efficiency, and simplicity. The film's opening immediately establishes these qualities. Notably devoid of even a dateline after the credits, let alone the elaborate historical exposition featured in *Jesse James* and *Dodge City*, *Stagecoach* begins with stark understatement. Two riders in the distance, bare specks on the vast desert landscape, approach the camera. A series of dissolves takes them into a cavalry camp and a telegraph office, where a group of men receive a single coded word before the lines go dead: "Geronimo." Consider the economy and complexity of this communiqué, which situates the action in 1880s Arizona when renegade Apaches plagued the area while eluding U.S. and Mexican troops but does so without belaboring or even clarifying the point.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, that single word not only motivates the action but invokes the Apache warrior in terms of myth and legend as well as American history. It also presents the West not in progressive terms but as a savage wilderness whose outposts of civilization are held together tenuously by telegraph lines, military patrols, and, we soon learn, stagecoach lines.

The ensuing Tonto sequences, which introduce all of the main characters except for the Ringo Kid, are similarly efficient. A succession of genre-coded stereotypes, stock figures, and character actors fleshes out the ensemble. But these formulaic characters immediately



The stagecoach in Monument Valley: a tenuous foothold of civilization in a savage wilderness. (collection of the editor)

take on a richness and complexity – indeed, a distinct individuality – that is altogether unique among renaissance Westerns. Moreover, the themes of class conflict and social prejudice that will deepen throughout the film are clearly drawn before the stagecoach even leaves Tonto. And once it enters the vast expanse and genre dreamscape of Monument Valley, the terms of the narrative become completely clear. This entails the stark contrast between town and desert, between bustling civilization and primal wasteland, and also between the interior and exterior of the stagecoach itself – the claustrophobic microcosm of frontier society versus the spectacular and vaguely prehistoric landscape that visually overwhelms the stage (often depicted in long shot, dwarfed by the monuments and vast, open sky).

It is in this wilderness that Ford presents the Ringo Kid in an archetypal flourish – a true epiphany of star-genre iconography, punctuated by a rare (for Ford) dolly-in on Wayne as he hails the stage and cocks his rifle. Despite his belated introduction, Wayne's Ringo Kid is the dramatic epicenter of *Stagecoach*, the prime motivating force for the narrative. His escape from prison and quest for

revenge spurs the action far more than Geronimo's raiding parties, although a curious parallel exists between the two renegade warriors, both escapees who are obsessively driven by vengeance.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, Ringo's quest propels the stagecoach out of Tonto in the first place when the lawman Curley, determined to capture Ringo, learns that the Plummer brothers are in Lordsburg and hence induces the cowardly driver Buck to press on, despite the Apache raids. Wayne's performance drives the narrative in a more immediate sense as well. His B-Western pedigree and obvious limitations as an actor become assets under the sure hand of Ford, who minimized Ringo's dialogue and elicited from Wayne a minimalist performance that is vital to the film's understated effect. Wayne's inexperience and uncertainty in an A-class role further inform his character – indeed, Ringo comes off as far younger than Dallas, although Wayne was actually two years older than Claire Trevor, and his naïve innocence counters the cynical ennui of fellow outcasts Doc and Dallas. But Wayne's callow youth is also a tight-lipped, determined killer, and in this sense Ringo is as complex a figure as any in the film.

The revenge saga provides the narrative spine of *Stagecoach*, with the "larger" ensemble drama framing that subplot while remaining somewhat distinct from it. To put it another way, Ringo is simply another passenger on the stagecoach – albeit one of the principals along with Doc, Dallas, Curley, and Gatewood. Lucy Mallory, the officer's pregnant wife, is a more secondary figure, along with Buck, Peacock the whiskey salesman, and Hatfield the gambler, although the birth of her baby is a key narrative event. The plight of the ensemble intensifies throughout, less because of the threat of Indian attack than of the social and interpersonal dynamics of the group itself. What begins as a loose amalgam of distinct individuals becomes in the course of the journey a coherent, self-contained, and self-reliant unit – all except Gatewood, the obvious antagonist in the social drama. The group steadily develops into an idealized social community, forged by a combination of necessity, travail, and democratic action. The catalyst here is the birth, which provides both a climax for the social drama and redemption for Doc and Dallas, who successfully deliver the baby and care for its mother. In the ensuing Apache attack the group's communion grows so intense that, by the time the stage reaches Lordsburg, it has become more than an idealized social



The Ringo Kid (John Wayne) first appears in an archetypal flourish. (frame enlargements)

microcosm – in fact, it has become a counterculture of sorts, acutely at odds with the other social communities encountered. But this ideal community proves fragile indeed, dissolving all too quickly upon returning to the “real world” of Lordsburg.<sup>46</sup>

The birth of Lucy’s baby at the last desert way station marks the first of several climaxes that punctuate the last thirty minutes of the film – followed close-on by the Indian attack (and cavalry-to-the-rescue payoff), Gatewood’s arrest, Ringo’s gunfight with the Plummers, and the lovers’ final escape to Mexico. These climaxes are themselves as conventional as the plots that require them, particularly the cavalry rescue and the final showdown. The former dates back to the dime novel and Wild West show; and in fact a major spectacle in Buffalo Bill’s legendary show, which began touring in the early 1880s and continued for some three decades, dramatized an Indian attack on “the original Deadwood Coach, the Most Famous Vehicle in History” (as described and graphically depicted in advertisements for the event). Whatever its basis in historical fact, Ford’s treatment of the attack flouts the edicts of verisimilitude in various ways – the violations of screen direction, for instance, and the oft-noted failure of the Apaches to simply shoot the horses. But the scene is altogether effective and credible, providing sufficient action in what is otherwise a rather weighty social drama.

Ringo’s gunfight with the Plummers also involves violent action, of course, although it occurs offscreen. Here again credibility is