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Randy Roberts, James S. Olson. *John Wayne, American.* New York: The Free Press, 1995. x + 738 pp. $24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-02-923837-0.

Reviewed by Kenneth R. Dvorak (American Culture Studies)

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John Wayne: American Icon and Football Player

For Randy Roberts and James S. Olson, John Wayne is an important American cultural icon. Their book, *John Wayne, American*, explores the reasons why John Wayne became one of Hollywood's greatest film heroes. Nearly two decades after his death, Wayne's popularity continues unabated–astonishing his critics while pleasing his fans. Many of Wayne's films dominate video rental sections and appear regularly on cable television. The cable channel, American Movie Classics, features Wayne in their "Duke Nights of Summer" while Turner Broadcasting plays twin bills of Wayne's westerns on Saturday nights.

The authors state unequivocally that for millions of Americans Wayne symbolizes what is right about America. Wayne loved his country and its flag, its people and the potential he believed America offered the world. His films portray him as a pathfinder, a cowboy, a military hero, and a defender of American values. His opponents view him otherwise, seeing him as a tool used to glorify American history tainted with imperialism and racism. Whatever the judgment one makes on Wayne's film and personal life, I agree with the authors that he was foremost a fine actor. In their efforts to unravel the "reel" John Wayne from the "real" individual, Roberts and Olson succeed in capturing the essence of Wayne's complex personality and his magnetic film image.

They begin by tracing Wayne's dysfunctional family life and his strained relationship with his mother. They poignantly retell the story of how Wayne became Marion Mitchell Morrison at age five solely at the whim of his mother. They follow Wayne's personal battles to prove himself as a youth and his emergence in the early 1930s as a shy, young film actor. Surviving for years as a "B" film actor, Wayne emerged as a star in John Ford's classic 1939 film "Stagecoach." However, this success was fleeting and Wayne again plunged back into the depths of "B" movies.

From this experience the authors trace Wayne's eventual rise to stardom and popularity with the American public. He became a military hero fighting America's wartime enemies. Later roles have Wayne fighting Communists, extinguishing oilfield fires, and becoming a quiet man living in an idyllic Ireland. Wayne's Western films, the authors argue, forever placed the character of John Wayne into American popular culture. Films such as "She Wore a Yellow Ribbon," "Rio Lobo," "The Cowboys," "Rooster Cogburn," "The Sons of Katie Elder," and "The Shootist" constructed the image of John Wayne, achetypal American hero.

Roberts and Olson also recreate the most controversial aspect of Wayne's career, his absence from military service during World War II. This story is not new, and the authors avoid sentimentalizing Wayne's reasons for not enlisting. Portraying Wayne as an individual caught trying to make a living and seizing the chance of a lifetime making feature movies, the authors leave the reader to speculate why Wayne did not enlist.

Concluding chapters chronicle, in compassionate and vivid detail, Wayne's battles with cancer and his death in 1979. The authors do not criticize Wayne's personal lifestyle, noting that he lived a full and robust life. Combining analysis of Wayne's marital, financial, and political battles, they also trace how millions of Americans followed Wayne's final days. To achieve the balance needed in examining Wayne's life, the authors interviewed many individuals who knew Wayne, offering their personal insights about someone they simply called "Duke."

John Wayne, American will not please everyone, nor, I suspect, is that the authors' intent. Roberts and Olson state categorically that their intention is to write a biography of John Wayne. They do not evaluate or criticize his films, personal life, or political views. Their work limns one of the most popular film idols of all time, and they succeed in their objective. Although the book examines Wayne's rise as a cultural icon, there is no attempt to delve more deeply into why Wayne culturally remains so important to Americans. From my perspective this is perhaps the weakest aspect of the book; after plunging into the story, it seems irresponsible to not take a stand.

John Wayne, American will anger and inspire individuals taking the time to read and reflect on the rise of a controversial/revered individual. Wayne's entire film career was a struggle for recognition. He succeeded for over twenty years as Hollywood's greatest box office draw. Randy Roberts and James S. Olson's collaborative effort is highly recommended reading; *John Wayne, American* is a welcome addition to the literature examining America's best-known film hero.

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