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Garry Wills. *John Wayne's America: The Politics of Celebrity.* New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997. 380 pp. $26.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-684-80823-9; $14.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-684-83883-0.

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More than any other Hollywood icon, John Wayne continues to resonate in the American psyche. As recently as 1995, Garry Wills notes in *John Wayne's America*, Wayne was voted America's favorite movie star–even though he had not made a film in nearly twenty years and had been dead since 1979. But John Wayne is much more than a movie star. For fifty years, his name has been intoned, like a reverent chant, by leaders from Douglas MacArthur to Ronald Reagan: to some, he has been the very image of the American Century. In *John Wayne's America*, Wills–best known for his incisive, well-written analyses of the lives and meanings of American political icons–sets out to show the history of the "idea" of John Wayne. Tracing Wayne's career on screen, Wills purports to present how John Wayne the icon not just reflected America, but shaped political attitudes in the United States in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Unfortunately, Wills never really gets around to it. Focusing on filmography while ignoring cultural context, he delivers, not the penetrating insights that we have come to expect from such a skilled essayist, but a sketchy and disappointingly familiar overview of Wayne's career and the influences that shaped it. Instead of offering up a detailed portrait of–as one Vietnam-era critic Wills quotes excessively calls him, the most dangerous man in America–Wills presents a predictable sketch of an actor who retains his tight grip on our collective imagination.

Like many other books on Wayne, Wills' quickly traces his rise to stardom, and the myths later constructed around that rise. Wills correctly notes that, for all the emphasis that has been placed on the supposed pupil-tutor relationship Wayne had with director John Ford, it was up to others–most notably directors Raoul Walsh and Howard Hawks and stuntmaster Yakima Canutt–to define and shape the iconic and emotional core of "John Wayne." That icon–the swaggering, rugged individual serving the greater good while still free to roam–"is the most obvious recent embodiment of that American Adam" in Melville's image of the West (311). However, after solidly establishing his premise, Wills lapses, for the bulk of *John Wayne's America*, into a film-by-film look at Wayne's image, frequently putting himself at cross-purposes. Wills expends a great deal of energy belittling Ford's role in the actor-icon's career, but he spends just as much time showing how the director exploited and magnified Wayne's star power. He stresses the psychic importance of Wayne's malevolent Sgt. Stryker in *The Sands of Iwo Jima*–citing the character's influence on numerous high-profile political figures–then all but dismisses the actor's non-Westerns, including *Sands*, as aberrations from the "true" Wayne.

Similarly, Wills shows how Wayne took charge of reinventing his image with *True Grit*, only to ignore all but a couple of the movies Wayne made (and, for the most part, produced) in the last, elegaic decade of his career. Wills does a serviceable job analyzing key films in the Wayne canon, but another serviceable analysis, as Wills himself acknowledges, is hardly necessary. Instead of delivering on his promise of a history of the "idea" of John Wayne, Wills offers up another "and then he made" perusal of Wayne's movies, with a handful of interesting insights and excerpts from new interviews with Wayne's contemporaries sprinkled throughout. In the process, Wills presents scant evidence that Wayne's iconic impact was felt beyond the theatre lobbies of America. By largely sticking to the big-screen image, Wills neglects the impact that "John Wayne" has had in American life. True, the movies tell much of the story, but rich veins of material on Wayne's public persona, from a study of his non-film appearances to the way his image has been used since his death, remain largely unmined here. What makes this result particularly disappointing is that Wills has done such a terrific job with this kind of approach before: in *Cincinnatus: George Washington and The Enlightenment, Images of Power in Early America*, Wills cleverly dissected depictions of Washington and showed how those images helped reflect, and shape, a fledgling nation. Maybe the fact that Wills has come up short this time around will embolden others to take on the challenge. For now, though, a thorough exploration of John Wayne the icon remains to be written.

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