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Jay C. Flippen Rube
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Jack Elam Frank Newberry
Kathleen Freeman Grits
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CREW

Directed by **Anthony Mann**
Produced by **Aaron Rosenberg**
Written by **Borden Chase**
Editor **Russell F. Schoengarth**
Director of Photography **William H. Daniels**
Art Directors **Alexander Golitzen, Bernard Herzbrun**
Costume Designer **Jay A. Morley Jr.**





THE FAR COUNTRY WESTERN AS LEGEND

by Phillip Kemp

During the 1950s Anthony Mann directed ten westerns: six of them, by general consent, among the finest ever made. Given his seemingly innate instinct for the genre, his feel for its textures and his highly personal take on its conventions, one might imagine that, like John Ford, he'd been drawn to making westerns right from the start of his career. But in fact, he had already directed eighteen films before the idea of making a western came to him – and even then, it seems to have been only at someone else's suggestion.

Mann's directorial career began in the lower reaches of the industry: the B-movie units of the Hollywood majors or, even more cash-strapped, the Poverty Row studios like Republic. Born in San Diego in 1906 (as Emil Anton Bundsmann), his bent for the performing arts had manifested itself early. He was a child actor in San Diego and continued to act in school plays after his parents moved to New York when he was 11. After he left school in 1923, he took a night job with Westinghouse while looking for theater work during the day. Over the next few years he worked with various companies in and around New York, taking small roles, before joining the Theater Guild as their production manager in 1930. He directed eight Broadway productions, besides forming his own summer stock company which toured on Long Island and around New England. One member of the cast was the young James Stewart.

In 1938 Mann was hired by David O. Selznick to work as a talent scout and casting director for the Selznick company. In this capacity he shot screen tests for *Gone with the Wind* (1939), *Rebecca* (1940) and *Intermezzo* (1939); one of the actresses he tested was the 19-year-old Jennifer Jones. After a few months Mann moved to Paramount as an assistant director, working with – among others – Preston Sturges. “He let me go through the whole production, watching him



direct,” Mann recalled, “and I directed a little. I’d stage a scene and he’d tell me how lousy it was.” Then in 1942 Mann got his first chance to direct a whole film. MacDonald Carey, who’d been a member of his stock company, had been cast by Sol Siegel to star in a comedy-thriller, *Dr. Broadway*, for Paramount, and asked to have Mann direct it.

It wasn’t an impressive debut. The plot was a piece of sub-Runyonesque hokum and Mann’s attempts to make the most of it were stymied by *force majeure*. “They promised me three whole days for the street scenes, so I made my shooting plans accordingly, and marked off some interesting angles. At the end of the first day they ordered me literally to get off the stage, C.B. DeMille having decided to set up his cameras there.”

The next ten B-movies that Mann was assigned to direct – mainly at the RKO B-unit and the B-minus studio Republic – showed little improvement. Cheaply made, clumsily scripted, and for the most part indifferently acted, they would probably have sunk without trace long ago but for his name on the credits. Only now and then do they prefigure themes and stylistic traits in his later, more accomplished work. In *The Great Flammarion* (1945), a sub-*Blue Angel* (1930) melodrama made for Republic, critic Phil Hardy noted “the prototype of the Mannian hero, a man wounded in the past who carries the scar with him into the present.” Said wounded hero was played by Erich von Stroheim, with whom Mann had his problems. “He was a personality, not really an actor... He drove me mad. He was a genius. I’m not a genius; I’m a worker.”

Asked in an interview whether these early films were “of interest,” Mann responded, “No, I don’t think so. It’s just lucky they got made. They cost nothing so there were no losses... In terms of skill and ability I don’t think they have much. In terms of experience I learned a lot.”

Quitting Republic with few regrets (“Grim, grim days”), Mann embarked on the first of his seven-movie film noir cycle, *Desperate* (1947). These showed a marked improvement – tighter scripting, moodily intense cinematography, a more assured approach to character development – and a growing sense of fatalism that foreshadowed the psychological darkness of his westerns. And for

the last-but-one of them, *Border Incident* (1949), made for MGM, Mann for the first time was allowed to escape from studio sets and shoot on location. It was a change he immediately responded to, not least for its effect on the cast. “Actors achieve far more truth on location,” he maintained. “In a studio everything’s quiet, everything’s set up for the scene, the lights are lit. But when the actor has to play it on top of a mountain, by a river or in a forest, you’ve got the wind, the dust, the snow, the creaking of branches interrupting him, forcing him to give more; he becomes that much more alive.”

It also enabled him to explore what would become one of his prime strengths as a film-maker: his feeling for landscape. In his classic 1969 study *Horizons West*, Jim Kitses wrote that in his western cycle, Mann took “an unparalleled opportunity to explore through the dialectic of landscape and hero the interior and finally *metaphysical* conflict of his characters... The terrain is so colored by the action that it finally seems an inner landscape, the unnatural world of a disturbed mind.” For it was now, at the beginning of the 50s, that Mann turned his attention to the genre in which he would achieve his greatest work – the western.

The impulse came from Nick Nayfack, producer of *Border Incident*, who had perhaps spotted elements of the western in that film. “Nick called me and said, ‘How would you like to make a western? I’ve got a script that looks interesting.’ In fact, it was more than interesting, it was the best script I had ever read.” The script, by Guy Trosper, was for *Devil’s Doorway* (1950), in which Robert Taylor played a Shoshone war veteran, decorated with the Congressional Medal of Honor, who returns home to find that a Native American, war hero or not, has precious few legal rights. Ahead of its time both racially and politically, it carried over much of the noir style into its western setting. The film did relatively poorly at the box-office, but from then on Mann knew he had found the genre that suited him above all others. As he later explained, he saw the western as “a primitive form. It’s not governed by rules; you can do anything with it. It has the essential pictorial qualities; has the guts of any character you want; the violence of anything you need; the sweep of anything you feel; the joy of sheer exercise, of outdooriness. It is legend.”



Mann's next film launched the great series of classic westerns on which his reputation now rests. *Winchester '73* (1950) was originally planned for Fritz Lang, with James Stewart starring. When Lang pulled out, Stewart, recalling their stock company days together and having been impressed by *Devil's Doorway*, suggested Mann as a replacement. Mann readily accepted but, disliking the script, called in the screenwriter Borden Chase, who had scripted *Dr. Broadway* (and, more impressively, co-scripted Howard Hawks' *Red River* [1948]), for a complete rewrite.

Winchester '73 was the first of eight films Mann would make with Stewart, five of them westerns. They marked a decisive change of direction in Stewart's career, which had been faltering, trapped in a prolonged adolescence. But beneath the "Aw, shucks!" shuffling hick of Stewart's comic persona, Mann detected a colder, edgier individual: a neurotic, selfish to the point of obsession, with a deep mistrust of society. (Hitchcock would later pounce on this darker side of the actor, exposing further aspects in *Rear Window* [1954] and *Vertigo* [1958].) Critic Robert Horton observed that Stewart "moves through Mann's films with the exuberant commitment of the matinee idol who finally gets to play the villain," though he also noted earlier hints of this alternative persona, instancing "the driven, sour loner glimpsed in George Bailey" from Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946).

Stewart came to embody the ambivalent, morally flawed Mann hero, whom the director once defined as "a man who could kill his own brother." This hero – or anti-hero – is often driven by unexalted motives of gain or revenge to destroy a villain who mirrors all his own worst impulses, and who is spiritually, and sometimes physically as well, his own brother. As Kitses put it, "the revenge taken by the [Stewart] character is taken upon *himself*."

The run of five Mann/Stewart westerns – *Winchester '73*, *Bend of the River* (1952), *The Naked Spur* (1953), *The Far Country* (1955), *The Man from Laramie* (1955) – all play variants on this quasi-fraternal confrontation. Like Hitchcock, Mann recognized the value of giving his villains attractive traits, and several of them – the engagingly duplicitous Arthur Kennedy in *Bend of the River*, the humorous Robert Ryan in *The Naked Spur* – seem at first sight to be as likeable as the hero, if not more so.

These five films – plus the last of the great Mann westerns of the decade, *Man of the West* (1958), which starred Gary Cooper – allowed the director to develop his key strength: his distinctive, near-expressionistic use of landscapes. Repeatedly in his films, the terrain through which the protagonist travels reflects his state of mind and the psychological situation in which he finds himself, while the journey, or quest that he's engaged in not only provides the framework for the story but echoes his own internal development. In *Winchester '73*, it's Stewart's pursuit of the eponymous rifle, stolen from him by his murderous brother (who killed their father). In *River* he's the leader of a wagon train, guiding a band of settlers over the mountains to the Oregon Territory. *Spur* finds him as a bounty hunter tracking down an outlaw with a \$5,000 prize on his head. In *Laramie* he's seeking the gunrunners who caused the death of his brother. And in *Man of the West* Cooper is forced back into his own past to destroy the gang of train-robbers of which he was once a member.

As Jeff Webster in *The Far Country*, Stewart plays the coldest and most emotionally withdrawn character in all of his five Mann westerns; his dour refusal to engage ("I take care of me... that's the only way") and stubborn rejection of any form of social goodwill ("Nobody ever did anything for nothing") are mirrored in the frozen mountain landscapes of the Yukon through which he and his partner Ben (Walter Brennan) travel. He's at his most chillingly antisocial when, approaching a mountain pass with the supply-train he's undertaken to lead, he announces that he and Ben will be taking a long detour through the valley. Ostensibly, his reason is that he needs grass for the herd of cattle he's driving; what he neglects to mention is that he thinks an avalanche is likely on the higher route. When the rest of the company stick to the original plan, Jeff simply watches them go, with no attempt to warn them. And when an avalanche does indeed strike, he shows not a trace of remorse. "I figured it'd happen and it did," he comments laconically.

For all this darkness in the hero's character, and no shortage in the plot of violence and death, *The Far Country* is – as Jeanine Basinger suggests in her study of Mann's films – in some ways the most light-hearted of his westerns; even if, in Basinger's words, it reveals "a deeply veined, ironic sense of humor." This is largely thanks to Borden Chase's dialogue (this was the last of his four films with Mann) and the interaction it sets up between Jeff and the various



other characters – not least the villain, Mr Gannon (inspired, it would seem, by the notorious Judge Roy Bean), played with saturnine affability by John McIntire, one of the most reliably watchable of character actors in westerns. (He also played a gunrunner in *Winchester '73*, and showed up again in one of Mann's lesser westerns, *The Tin Star* [1957].) As “the law in Skagway” – seemingly self-appointed – Gannon immediately recognizes a kindred spirit in Jeff, cheerfully announcing “I’m gonna like you. I’m gonna hang you, but I’m gonna like you.”

Jeff finds a kindred spirit, too, in Ronda Castle (Ruth Roman), the film’s “bad woman” who enjoys flirting with him. An exchange between them hints at the origins of Jeff’s cynical world-view. “I trusted a man – once,” Ronda says. “That’s quite a coincidence,” growls Jeff. “I trusted a woman.” This shared wariness infects the mutual attraction between them, as they warily circle verbally around each other. And at some points, as Basinger notes, Chase’s dialogue becomes “unrealistic, almost satiric.” Francophone Dr. Vallon (Eugene Borden), father of the movie’s “good woman” Renee (Corinne Calvet), visiting Jeff in jail, complains “Oh, the medical profession, it is most difficult in Alaska.” “Oh yeah? Why’d you come here?” asks Jeff. “Because I’m going to Vienna!” comes the response.

Jeff’s closest relationship is with Ben (and Brennan’s performance suggests an almost homoerotic attachment), but even him Jeff doesn’t wholly trust – as it turns out, not without reason, since Ben’s inability to keep his mouth shut brings disaster on them. The link between them is symbolized by a small bell Ben gave Jeff, which he keeps suspended from his saddle. This bell figures in a key scene, when the villains are waiting to ambush Jeff; to mislead them, he sends his horse riderless down the dark street while he lurks behind, letting the bell distract their attention. The horse was Stewart’s own, Pie, a sorrel stallion whom Stewart called “one of the best co-stars I ever had.” Pie appeared as Stewart’s horse in seventeen westerns, and the actor developed a strong personal bond with the animal, who he recalled would often “act for the cameras when they were rolling. He was a ham of a horse.” For the “riderless horse” scene (which anticipates the climax of a later Mann film, the epic *El Cid* [1961], when the body of the dead Cid [Charlton Heston] is strapped to his horse to lead the Spanish charge against the Moors), assistant director John Sherwood asked Stewart if Pie could do the scene. Stewart replied, “I’ll talk to him,” took the horse aside and whispered to

him for several minutes. When Stewart let the horse go, Pie walked perfectly down the middle of the street to his trainer, who was waiting with a sugar cube just out of camera range, and did the scene in one take. When Pie died in 1970, Stewart had the horse buried at his California ranch.

The shooting of the film largely took place, as the end credit acknowledges, in Jasper National Park, Alberta, in the Canadian Rockies. Mann enjoyed shooting in the remote locations above the snowline; as he later observed, “The studio isn’t on your neck, nobody can control you, so you are at least able to do what you want to do... They don’t come up and see you because it would be too much hardship for them.” To back up his stars, Mann had assembled a practiced crew of veterans of the genre: along with McIntire, the line-up included Jay C. Flippen, Harry Morgan, Connie Gilchrist, Jack Elam, Steve Brodie and Royal Dano, several of whom had appeared in Mann’s previous movies.

On its release *The Far Country* was received, as were most of Mann’s westerns, as little more than another pot-boiling effort by most of the American critics; as Andrew Sarris noted, “Mann, like [Douglas] Sirk, was overlooked by the American critical establishment until it was too late for his career to find a firmer footing than obscure cult interest.” The film found a far more appreciative audience in France, where the *nouvelle vague* critics hailed Mann as a master. Jean-Claude Missiaen considered *The Far Country* “the masterpiece of the [western] series,” and in *Avant-Scène Cinéma*, Jean Wagner called it “the most ambitious of Mann’s successful westerns.” “When [Mann’s] camera pans, it breathes,” rhapsodized André Bazin, and Jean-Luc Godard wrote that his westerns presented “both beautiful landscapes and the explanation of their beauty, both mystery of firearms and the secret of their mystery, both art and the theory of art.” In Henri Agel’s 1961 book *Le Western*, Claude-Jean Philippe observed that “the beauty of Anthony Mann’s westerns is not that of a fluid classicism, but of a romanticism shot through with lightning flashes.”

In recent years, critical evaluation of Mann, and in particular of his westerns, has moved closer to the French position. In his 2015 study *The Noir Western*, David Meuel suggests that “his ability to present psychologically nuanced characters and morally complex stories through stunning visual images might just – with the



possible exception of John Ford – be unmatched by anyone who has ever directed westerns.” Phil Hardy, if anything, rates him even higher: “Other directors such as Ford and Boetticher use landscape expressively, but their landscapes never have the symbolic depth of Mann’s.”

Like most Hollywood westerns – indeed, one might say, most Hollywood films – *The Far Country* plays fast and loose with the facts. There was no possible route between Skagway in Alaska and Dawson City in Canada (the two towns are some 450 miles apart) along which a herd of cattle could be driven; and even at the height of the Gold Rush, Dawson was never a hotbed of criminality and violence, being law-abiding and well-policed under the care of the Mounties. Still, westerns were never for a moment intended as factual documents but – as Mann himself said – as “legend.” And as a legend, *The Far Country* has lost nothing of its potency.

Philip Kemp is a freelance reviewer and film historian and a regular contributor to Sight & Sound. He also teaches Film Journalism at the University of Leicester.





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where gold was the lure
and the fanciest woman
in Dawson,
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THE FAR COUNTRY REVIEWED

This anonymous review was originally printed in *Monthly Film Bulletin* v21, n248, September 1954, pp. 132.

The part of Jeff Webster was apparently intended to show the development of a tough, independent, lone hand into a law-abiding citizen. James Stewart underplays artfully, but fails to convey much depth of character; the abrupt change of heart after Tatum's death seems much more like revenge than a real desire to establish a lawful community in Dawson. The supporting cast, however, is strong, and John McIntyre [sic] gives a particularly fruity performance as the sinister Mr. Gannon. On its own level, this is an enjoyable and exciting Western. The settings are often beautiful and the colour good.



ABOUT THE RESTORATION

The Far Country has been exclusively restored by Arrow Films and is presented in both original aspect ratios of 1.85:1 and 2.00:1 with mono sound.

The original 35mm camera negative was scanned in 4K resolution at NBC Universal's Studio Post facility. The film was graded and restored at Silver Salt Restoration, London. The original mono mix was remastered from the optical negatives at Deluxe Audio Services, Hollywood.

Restoration supervised by James White, Arrow Films.

Silver Salt Restoration:
Anthony Badger, Steve Bearman, Mark Bonnici, Lisa Copson, Simon Edwards, Tom Wiltshire

NBC Universal:
Peter Schade, Tim Naderski, Jefferson Root, John Edell

Deluxe Audio:
Jordan Perry

All original materials supplied for this restoration were made available by NBC Universal.

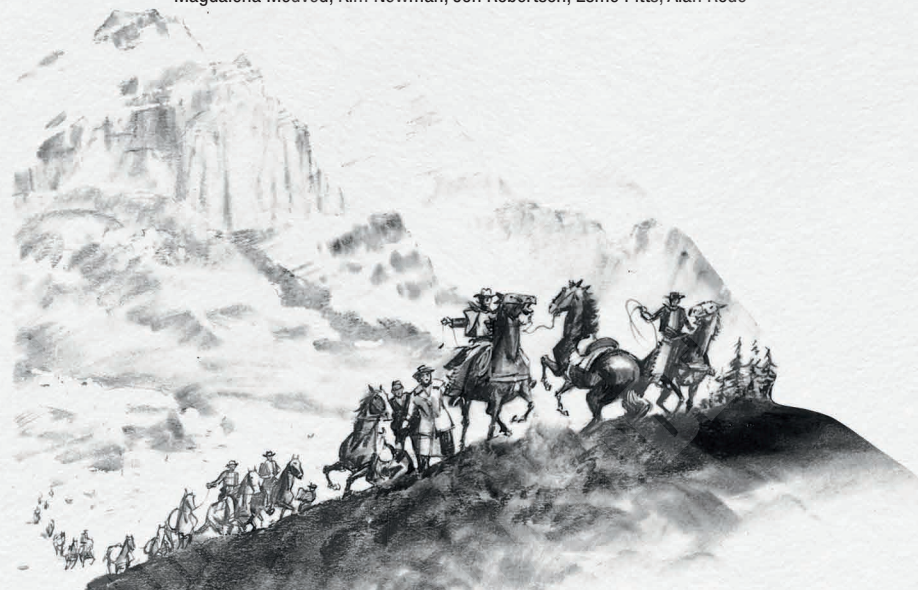


PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by **James Blackford**
Executive Producers **Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni**
Technical Producer **James White**
QC **Nora Mehenni, Alan Simmons**
Production Assistant **Samuel Thiery**
Blu-ray Mastering and Subtitling **The Engine House Media Services**
Artwork by **Graham Humphreys**
Design **Obviously Creative**

SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, Pat Bauman, Ewan Cant, Daniel Griffith, Philip Kemp, Adrian Martin,
Magdalena Medved, Kim Newman, Jon Robertson, Esme Pitts, Alan Rode





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