

The legend of Gary Cooper

by Alistair Cooke

When the word got out that Gary Cooper [who died on Saturday, aged 60] was mortally ill, a spontaneous process arose in high places not unlike the first moves to sanctify a remote peasant. The Queen of England dispatched a sympathetic cable. The President of the United States called him on the telephone. A Cardinal ordered public prayers. Messages came to his house in Beverly Hills from the unlikeliest fans, from foreign ministers and retired soldiers who never knew him, as also from Ernest Hemingway, his old Pygmalion who had kept him in mind, through at least two novels, as the archetype of the Hemingway hero; the self-sufficient male animal, the best kind of hunter, the silent infantryman padding dutifully forward to perform the soldier's most poignant ritual in "the ultimate loneliness of contact."

It did not happen to Ronald Colman, or Clark Gable, or—heaven knows—John Barrymore. Why, we may well ask, should it have happened to Frank James Cooper, the rather untypical American type of the son of a Bedfordshire lawyer, a boy brought up in the Rockies among horses and cattle to be sure, but only as they compose the unavoidable back drop of life in those parts; a schoolboy in Dunstable, a college boy in Iowa, a middling student, then a failing cartoonist, failed salesman, an "extra" in Hollywood who in time had his break and mooned in a lanky, handsome way through a score or more of "horse operas"? Well, his friends most certainly mourn the gentle, shambling "Coop," but what the world mourns is the death of Mr Longfellow Deeds, who resisted and defeated the corruption of the big city; the snuffing out of the sheriff in "High Noon" heading back to duty along the railroad tracks with that precise mince of the cowboy's tread and that rancher's squint that sniffs mischief in a creosote bush, sees through suns, and is never fooled. What the world mourns is its lost innocence, or a favourite fantasy of it fleshed out in the most durable and heroic of American myths: that of the taut but merciful plainsman, who dispenses justice with a worried conscience, a single syllable, a blurred reflex action to the hip, and who must face death in the afternoon as regularly as the matador, but on main street and for no pay.



Cooper from a run of agreeable and handsome parts, some of them (in the Lubitsch films for instance) too chic and metropolitan for his own good. At the time of "Mr Deeds," an English critic wrote that "the conception of the wise underdog, the shrewd hick is probably too Western, too American in its fusion of irony and sentimentality, to travel far." He was as wrong as could be, for the film was a sensation in Poland, the Middle East, and other barbaric regions whose sense of what is elementary in human goodness is something we are just discovering, perhaps a little late.

It is easy to forget now, as always with artists who have matured a recognisable style, that for at least the first dozen years of his film career Gary Cooper was the low-brow's comfort and the highbrow's butt. However, he lasted long enough, as all great talents do, to weather the four stages of the high-brow treatment: first, he was derided, then ignored, then accepted, then discovered. We had seen this happen many times before; and looking back, one is always shocked to recognise the people it has happened to. Today the intellectual would deny, for instance, that Katharine Hepburn was ever anything but a lovely if haggard exotic, with a personal style which might enchant some people and grate on others, but at all times what we call a serious talent. This opinion was in fact a highly sophisticated second thought, one which took about a decade to ripen

and squelch the memory of Dorothy Parker's little tribute to Miss Hepburn's first starring appearance on Broadway: "Miss Hepburn ran the gamut of human emotions from A to B."

Marilyn Monroe is a grosser example still. Universally accepted as a candy bar or cream puff, she presented a galling challenge to the intelligentsia when she married Arthur Miller, a very sombre playwright and indubitably *un homme sérieux*. The question arose whether there had been a serious miscalculation about a girly calendar that could marry a man who defied the House Committee on un-American Activities. The doubt was decided in Miss Monroe's favour when she delivered pointed ripostes to dumb questions at a London press conference.

At least until the mid-thirties there was no debate about Gary Cooper because he presented no issue. He belonged to the reveries of the middle-class woman. He reminded grieving mothers of the upright son shot down on the Somme; devoted sisters of the brother sheep ranching in Australia; the New York divorcee of the handsome ranch hand with whom she is so often tempted to contract a ruinous second marriage in the process of dissolving her first. To the moviegoer, Cooper was the matinee idol toughened and tanned, in the era of the outdoors, into something at once glamorous and primitive. He was notoriously known as the actor who couldn't act. Only the directors who handled him had daily proof of the theory that the irresistible "stars" are simply behaviourists who, by some nervous immunity to the basilisk glare and hiss of the camera, appear to be nobody but themselves. Very soon the box-offices, from Tokio to Carlisle, confirmed this theory in hard cash. Then the intellectuals sat up and took notice. Then the Cooper legend took over.

For the past quarter century

Thursday, May 18, 1961

Cooper's worldwide image had grown so rounded, so heroically elongated rather, that only some very crass public behaviour could have smudged it. There was none. After a short separation he was happily reunited with his only wife. He spoke out, during the McCarthy obscenity, with resounding pointlessness and flourished the banner of "Americanism" in a heated way. Most recently, there has been a low-pressure debate in progress in fan magazines and newspaper columns about whether his "yup-nope" approach was his own or a press agent's inspiration, like the malapropisms of Sam Goldwyn another happy device for blinding mockers to the knowledge that they were losing their shirts. This was decided a week or two ago by the "New York Post," which concluded after a series of exclusive interviews with his friends, that Cooper's inarticulateness was natural when he was in the presence of gabby strangers, that gabbiness was his natural bent with close friends.

He could probably have transcended, or dimmed, bigger scandal or more public foolishness than he was capable of, because he was on the company of Chaplin, Groucho Marx, W. C. Fields, Bogart, Louis Jovet, two or three others, give or take a personal favourite. He filled an empty niche in the world pantheon of essential gods. If no cowboy was ever like him, so much the worse for the cattle kingdom. He was Eisenhower's glowing, and glowingly false, picture of Wyatt Earp. He was one of Walt Whitman's troop of democratic knights, "bright eyed as hawks, with their swarthy complexions and their broad-brimmed hats, with loose arms slightly raised and swinging as they ride." He represented every man's best secret image of himself: the honourable man slicing clean through the broiling world of morals and machines. He isolated and enlarged to six feet three an untainted strain of goodness in a very male specimen of the male of the species.