



Cagney

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Cagney came from a poor Irish-American New York family but once he found his metier as an actor, it was not long before he was recognized as a brilliantly energetic and powerful phenomenon. After the tremendous impact of Public Enemy - in which he notoriously pushed half a grapefruit into Mae Clarke's face - he was typecast as a gangster because of the terrifying violence that seemed to be pent up within him. Years of pitched battle with Warner Brothers finally liberated him from those roles, and he went on to star in such triumphs as the musicals Yankee Doodle Dandy (winning the 1942 Oscar for best actor) and Love Me or Leave Me. Even so, one of his greatest later roles involved a return to crime - as the psychopathic killer in the terrifying White Heat. He retired from films in 1961 after making Billy Wilder's One, Two, Three, only to return twenty years later for Ragtime. But however much Cagney personified violence and explosive energy on the screen, in life he was a quiet, introspective, and deeply private man, a poet, painter, and environmentalist, whose marriage to his early vaudeville partner was famously loyal and happy. His story is one of the few Hollywood biographies that reflect a fulfilled life as well as a spectacular career.

Cagney Details

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From Reader Review Cagney for online ebook

Lenny says

First rate book about a "Top of the World" kind of guy. Told all of the intimate little snippets of his life that you would want to read about. Well done!

Matt says

"This is a definitive bio of one of my faves. McCabe does a good job of both illuminating Cagney's onscreen performances and explaining all the complexities of his personality (if only he didn't rely so much on long, long quotes). Cagney was a street kid who aspired to be a song and dance man like Fred Astaire, a faithful and loving husband who sequestered his two children in their own separate living quarters, and a famous actor who found his deepest fulfillment in farming. A very interesting man, I'd say." - Scrubbles.net review, November 16, 2008.

Travis Whirl says

I call Cagney the "normal" actor- no drinking, drugs, adulteries plagued his life. It was refreshing to read about his life, but a little dull at times. It certainly is biographical, however, much of the book is filled up with intricate details of his movies, the characters, costars who were in those movies, and the pages devoted to its reviews. One chapter towards the end is completely devoted to the subject of acting. An enjoyable read nonetheless. Other Hollywood stars would of fared much better in following Cagney in his integrity.

Jim says

Well written. There isn't enough to go on in terms of his kids. What caused the huge rift? Why were they both left out of both parents' wills?

The childhood part was good but the best part was the mini sections on the films themselves. When he retires, not much happens. And that part goes on for quite awhile.

Fantastic comeback with Ragtime, another film where he has to be dubbed over by another actor because he can't be understood and then the final curtain.

I've read worse and there were enough anecdotes - particularly the Merle Oberon story - to hold my interest. Some good pictures too.

George Paterson says

Exhaustive study of a meticulous actor.

Butch says

A great life..www.

We should all try to be more like Jim... The world would be better place for us all. Live long and prosper..

J.J. Lair says

This book was just a listing of awards or films. The author got into Cagney's background and what motivated him to success. Who he worked with and why. Why he made certain movies and based on others. Why George M Cohan was such a big inspiration.

I researched and wrote a bio on Cohan on my blog--mixtapeshistoryremix.blogspot.com

I was surprised by profanity, street life of 1910s. There were hookers, pimps, gangs, all things that you never heard about back then.

Cagney stayed loyal in marriage, even his movies didn't have love scenes. Its sad he that didn't have children and his wife was unable to be a mother, so the children they adopted stayed away from him.

His health was really bad in his last years. I had known that he had knee problems from all the dancing, but how bad health got in later years was surprising. One of the most heartbreaking things to read was that all the dialogue in his last movie was dubbed in by another actor. Cagney's voice and mind were off and he couldn't do his lines correctly.

Cagney was this street-smart tough guy in the movies, but outside of that he became an environmentalist in later years.

Author criticizes movies that are classics like Roaring Twenties, Mister Roberts. I really like 123 Go, but Cagney didn't. Weird that in early years he could've walked away to start own dance school or work farm, but in later years did roles that he didn't think highly of.

Cagney was more than a working actor, he was complex and loyal. I'm happy that I read this book and that I was a fan of his work.

Judy says

A fascinating read, much better than McCabe's ghosted autobiography of Cagney... but I'd still have liked more about the movies!

Kate says

Didn't quite finish this.... After he stops making movies it really becomes dull. It's mostly about Cagney's performance life after he reaches adulthood. Good background on his upbringing, but after that, is more about what he was in, how he felt about.

Cagney seems like a good guy in many ways, but not big on sharing on how he's feeling, other than to evoke a good work ethic. It felt a bit repetitive after a bit.

Michael Smith says

<http://mikesfilmtalk.com/2012/12/28/c...>

Charles Matthews says

This review appeared in the Washington Post in 1998:

"CAUTION: Contents under pressure" would have been a good label for James Cagney, though he needed cautionary labeling about as much as dynamite wired to an alarm clock. A reviewer of his very first film noted his "fretful tenseness," and when that tension was released, Will Rogers once observed, Cagney was "like a bunch of firecrackers going off all at once." For almost three decades his energy and volatility were unequaled by almost any other screen actor. So one turns to his biography to find out where the fire and the fizz came from.

John McCabe would seem uniquely qualified to write James Cagney's biography. McCabe has published biographies of Charles Chaplin, Laurel and Hardy, and George M. Cohan, whom most of us know chiefly from Cagney's Oscar-winning portrayal in "Yankee Doodle Dandy." A former actor himself, McCabe has taught acting at several universities, and as a member of the Lambs Club became buddies with Cagney's old Hollywood cronies Pat O'Brien and Frank McHugh. And most important, McCabe ghosted Cagney's 1976 autobiography, "Cagney on Cagney."

McCabe tells us his new book is meant to be an "autobiographical biography." This means, I take it, that he's trying to tell Cagney's life story the way Cagney would want it to be told. He also explains that he has kept a pledge not to "go beyond the limits of confidentiality (Cagney) occasionally set" in the interviews for the earlier book. In the age of the tell-all biography, "Cagney" is a "don't ask, don't tell" book, an act of posthumous fealty to the man McCabe calls "Jim." ("Jimmy," McCabe tells us, was the nickname studio publicists gave Cagney; his friends and family didn't use it.)

"Cagney" begins darkly, with Jim as a child comforting his agonized, wailing father, "his brain half rotted with alcohol." But denial becomes second nature for children of alcoholics, so in presenting Cagney's life through Cagney's eyes, McCabe is soon forced away from this harrowing experience into the nostalgic picture of life on the Lower East Side that Cagney would create for himself. It's as sentimental as anything a Warner Bros. screenwriter could dream up. Cagney would describe his father as "the most lovable guy who ever lived," his childhood as full of "songs and laughter," and himself as a two-fisted altar boy -- an angel with a dirty face. "We were poor, but didn't know it," he claimed.

But obviously they did know it. William Cagney, more candid than his brother, said of Jim, "All the unhappiness of his childhood was inside him."

It's elementary psychology that what's inside is trying to work its way out. Bottled up in Jim Cagney were the characters he would become on screen. Tom Powers and Rocky Sullivan and Cody Jarrett and Martin "The Gimp" Snyder -- the vessels of wrath that made Cagney an icon. Shortly after Cagney became a star in "The Public Enemy," Lincoln Kirstein noted that he expressed "the delights of violence, the overtones of a semiconscious sadism, the tendency toward destruction, toward anarchy which is the basis of American sex appeal."

You can't be a star without sex appeal, but of all the major movie actors of the '30s and '40s -- Gable, Cooper, Bogart, Stewart, Fonda, Tracy, Grant, Wayne, Boyer, Astaire -- Cagney was the only one who never

paired up memorably with a leading lady. We may think of Gable with Crawford or Harlow or Leigh, of Bogart with Bergman or Bacall, of Tracy with Hepburn, but there's no comparable pairing with Cagney. Given the right script, Cagney and Bette Davis might have sparked an inferno, but they were teamed only twice, in two of the worst movies either ever made. Usually he was matched with forgettable players like Margaret Lindsay or sweet ingenues like Joan Leslie. Though he had two major female co-stars in "The Strawberry Blonde," they only showed his limitations more clearly: Rita Hayworth was too much the goddess for a scrappy mortal like Cagney, and Olivia de Havilland seemed more like his sister than his wife. "Funny, he never liked to kiss leading ladies," Virginia Mayo recalled for McCabe. "He'd grab you and kiss your forehead but almost never on the lips." Most of our enduring images of Cagney with women are perverse ones: shoving a grapefruit in Mae Clarke's face, roughing up Mayo in "White Heat," brutalizing Doris Day in "Love Me or Leave Me."

Elia Kazan, who played a supporting role in one of Cagney's films before becoming a director, wrote, "Scenes with men came naturally with Jimmy; his love scenes with Ann Sheridan, a lovely girl, were perfunctory. I don't know if Jimmy had a problem with women."

To that McCabe responds, "Jimmy's 'problem' with women was a simple and traditional one: He adored his wife." But does McCabe really mean to imply that Cagney allowed his marriage to seriously handicap him as an actor?

In any case, Cagney seems to be the only one who adored Frances Willard Vernon, known as "Willie," whom he married in 1922. Their union lasted till his death in 1986. She gave up her own stage career to become Cagney's "unofficial agent" and pushed and prodded him on his way to the top.

The Cagney family disliked Willie, McCabe tells us, but he backs off from suggesting why. The antipathy obviously stemmed from a rivalry as old as the human family: Cagney's mother, Carrie, was also a formidable woman. Mated with a feckless drunk who died when Jim wasn't quite out of his teens, Carrie became the driving force in her children's lives.

If Willie usurped Carrie's role in mothering Jim, that seems to have exhausted her maternal impulse. After 18 childless years of marriage, McCabe tells us, the Cagneys discovered that Jim was sterile, so they adopted a boy and a girl. "Of the two parents . . . the one closer to the children was Jim, although he saw them less. Willie devoted herself to making her husband comfortable."

One of the ways she made Jim comfortable was by treating the children as distractions: "In view of Jim's need to study his roles -- he insisted on being letter-perfect in his lines, even though he knew he tended to paraphrase them -- Willie decided that it was impractical to have the children live in the house. Accordingly she had another, smaller house built on their property, perfectly fitted out, where James Jr. and Casey would be raised." The kids weren't allowed to have friends over when Jim was home learning his lines. Not surprisingly, the Cagneys and their children were often bitterly estranged in later years.

Between Carrie and Willie, then, James Cagney had no lack of mothering. It's easy to feel the resonance here with the oedipal attachment of Cody Jarrett, the character Cagney played in "White Heat," and Jarrett's mother, played by Margaret Wycherly. McCabe shies away from exploring even that rather obvious point. Cagney, McCabe keeps reminding us, detested method acting, so McCabe rejects the notion that Cagney's own emotional experiences went into his performances.

Still, it seems pretty clear that Kazan was onto something: Cagney had a problem with women. Whatever this problem was, it seems not to have involved philandering. The only instance of marital infidelity that McCabe reports is a one-night fling with Merle Oberon when she and Cagney, along with other stars, were on a tour entertaining troops during World War II. McCabe's source is "one of Cagney's closest friends who does not wish to be identified in this instance." (Two guesses will do: McCabe tells us that McHugh and O'Brien were on this tour.) As his source tells it, the story, in which Oberon is the sexual aggressor, sounds like a teenager's fantasy about making it with the prom queen, except for Cagney's claim that in the midst of the act "he thought of his wife and felt sick with shame."

As for the "outing" tales that no celebrity can escape these days, an old rumor links Cagney with Noel Coward, who is said to have written the song "Mad About the Boy" for him. McCabe dismisses this, perhaps

rightly, as a case of "wishful thinking," citing Cagney's "hearty heterosexuality." Though plenty of gay men have been able to maintain an image of "hearty heterosexuality," if Cagney had any homosexual impulses it's likely they remained as bottled up as the rest of his off-screen emotional life.

In fact, it's the sense that something's bottled up in Cagney that gives him such a dynamic image on screen. The well-timed release of repressed energy in his best pictures -- "The Public Enemy," "Angels With Dirty Faces," "The Roaring Twenties," "Yankee Doodle Dandy," "White Heat," "Love Me or Leave Me" -- made him an enduring model, acknowledged by actors as different as John Travolta and Kenneth Branagh. Watch Joe Pesci erupt in "GoodFellas" or Jack Nicholson in "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" and you're seeing the Cagney legacy.

This controlled explosiveness also made Cagney a terrific dancer, earning him the admiration of Mikhail Baryshnikov. One abiding mystery of Cagney's Hollywood career is why he didn't make more musicals. Here again his failure to connect with leading ladies may have played a part: There weren't a lot of female dancers with whom he might have teamed successfully; only Eleanor Powell comes to mind. He worked with Ruby Keeler in "Footlight Parade," but though she was charming, Keeler danced as if she were wearing Doc Martens.

What Cagney really needed, as his duet with Bob Hope in "The Seven Little Foys" shows, was a male partner. It would have been great to see Cagney in the right vehicle with Astaire. As in another Astaire partnership, Cagney might have made him look sexy, and he might have given Cagney some class.

In the end, McCabe doesn't let enough of Cagney out of the bottle. In his overprotectiveness of his subject he seems determined to reduce Cagney to simple formulas -- superlative actor, consummate professional, devoted son, loyal brother, faithful husband and affectionate father. This only serves to make him dull, which is something the scowling imp on the cover of "Cagney" surely can't have been.

Monica says

I am he and we are he and we are all together. Goodness. Cagney had it. He gave it away, and always had more to give, even 'til his last wink.

Diane Heath says

This was a very interesting look at an actor who was much more than the roles he played. A previous biography of Bogart made the comment that Cagney and Robinson made lives outside their roles. This book shows the inner Cagney and is a good book to read
