



Wild Bill Wellman: Hollywood Rebel

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The extraordinary life—the first—of the legendary, undercelebrated Hollywood director known in his day as “Wild Bill” (and he was!) Wellman, whose eighty-two movies (six of them uncredited), many of them iconic; many of them sharp, cold, brutal; others poetic, moving; all of them a lesson in close-up art, ranged from adventure and gangster pictures to comedies, aviation, romances, westerns, and searing social dramas.

Among his iconic pictures: the pioneering World War I epic *Wings* (winner of the first Academy Award for best picture), *Public Enemy* (the toughest gangster picture of them all), *Nothing Sacred*, the original *A Star Is Born*, *Beggars of Life*, *The Call of the Wild*, *The Ox-Bow Incident*, *Battleground*, *The High and the Mighty*...

David O. Selznick called him “one of the motion pictures’ greatest craftsmen.”

Robert Redford described him as “feisty, independent, self-taught, and self-made. He stood his ground and fought his battles for artistic integrity, never wavering, always clear in his film sense.”

Wellman directed Hollywood’s biggest stars for three decades, including Clark Gable, Gary Cooper, Barbara Stanwyck, John Wayne, Lauren Bacall, and Clint Eastwood. It was said he directed “like a general trying to break out of a beachhead.” He made pictures with such noted producers as Darryl F. Zanuck, Nunnally Johnson, Jesse Lasky, and David O. Selznick.

Here is a revealing, boisterous portrait of the handsome, tough-talking, hard-drinking, uncompromising maverick (he called himself a “crazy bastard”)—juvenile delinquent; professional ice-hockey player as a kid; World War I flying ace at twenty-one in the Lafayette Flying Corps (the Lafayette Escadrille), crashing more than six planes (“We only had four instruments, none of which worked. And no parachutes . . . Greatest goddamn acrobatics you ever saw in your life”)—whose own life story was more adventurous and more unpredictable than anything in the movies. Wellman was a wing-walking stunt pilot in barnstorming air shows, recipient of the Croix de Guerre with two Gold Palm Leaves and five United States citations; a bad actor but good studio messenger at Goldwyn Pictures who worked his way up from assistant cutter; married to five women, among them Marjorie Crawford, aviatrix and polo player; silent picture star Helene Chadwick; and Dorothy Coonan, Busby Berkeley dancer, actress, and mother of his seven children.

Irene Mayer Selznick, daughter of Louis B. Mayer, called Wellman “a terror, a shoot-up-the-town fellow, trying to be a great big masculine I-don’t-know-what. David had a real weakness for him. I didn’t share it.” Yet she believed enough in Wellman’s vision and cowritten script about Hollywood to persuade her husband to produce *A Star Is Born*, which Wellman directed.

After he took over directing *Tarzan Escapes* at MGM, Wellman went to Louis B. Mayer and asked to make another Tarzan picture on his own.

“What are you talking about? It’s beneath your dignity,” said Mayer.

“To hell with that,” said Wellman, “I haven’t got any dignity.”

Now William Wellman, Jr., drawing on his father’s unpublished letters, diaries, and unfinished memoir,

gives us the first full portrait of the man—boy, flyer, husband, father, director, artist. Here is a portrait of a profoundly American spirit and visionary, a man's man who was able to put into cinematic storytelling the most subtle and fulsome of feeling, a man feared, respected, and loved.

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