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Book Review: William S. Hart: Projecting the American West

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This first biography of the early film star William S. Hart is solidly researched and full of useful information, even if written in unexciting prose. Hart is a difficult subject, a taciturn, self-dramatizing figure about whose peripatetic childhood on the Great Plains little is known and who came to live the Western persona created through his silent movies. He was forty-nine before his first film in 1914, and his career lasted only a decade. Still, in those years he starred in forty-eight feature-length films (and an additional nineteen two-reelers), for many of which he also served as de facto writer and co-director. The output is daunting, but one missed opportunity of Ronald L. Davis’s book is any exploration of the strengths of particular films, most of which are tossed off with a sentence or two of analysis, and it becomes impossible even to guess which of them can now be seen. (In an era from which at least 80 percent of US features are lost, Hart’s have a relatively good survival rate, partly because he himself appreciated their worth and kept copies).

The biography is at its informative best in tracking Hart’s quarter-century as a touring stage actor from the late 1880s (notably in Ben-Hur, The Squaw Man, and The Virginian) and in exploring his growing resistance to corporate Hollywood of the 1920s. The book also comes alive in a chapter about Hart’s sad late-life romances, about which Davis discovered an evocative trove of letters. Often, however, the author seems not to care much for his subject, or at least holds Hart at a distance, and regards his Western films as little more than nostalgia. (Most earlier Westerns, we’re informed, “were rubbish.”) By seeing Hart merely as “an unhappy, immature man looking for a way to relive his idealized boyhood” or as “a simple, fanciful man of narrow perspective,” Davis skirts the ways in which Hart’s personal loneliness, despondent world view, and pessimism about modernity also infused his best surviving films (among them The Bargain, Hell’s Hinges, and The Whistle).

For a wider perspective on the movies, one still needs to consult Diane Kosarski’s The Complete Films of William S. Hart (1980). For a more sympathetic sense of Hart himself, one cannot do better than to visit his ranch in northern Los Angeles County (see www.hartmuseum.org). By the terms of his will, guests are welcomed free and no fees permitted; Hart was never one for newfangled commerce.

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