



## The Ultimate Unmade War Movie

In the movie business there exists no “sure thing.” But a picture called *The Patriot* that will begin filming in September—starring Mel Gibson—may be as good a bet as exists. Due in theaters in the summer of 2000, it has some of the same markings as Gibson’s 1995 Best Picture *Braveheart*.

Even Mel Gibson’s poorer movies (like his recent *Payback*) currently sell tickets to the tune of \$80 million each. And *The Patriot* isn’t likely to be poor. It’s set during the American revolution, and tells the story of a pacific family man who recognizes his duty and goes off to war.

The film’s screenwriter Robert Rodat, who also penned *Saving Private Ryan*, told me he is excited by the historical setting. Just as Rodat placed the fictional story of Captain John Miller’s effort to rescue Private James Ryan against the factual backdrop of D-Day, *The Patriot* is an original tale of Rodat’s creation set amidst “the times that try men’s souls.” It will look at America’s first civil war: patriots against Tory loyalists.

“No one’s really done it right,” said Gibson, after he signed the deal. In fact, Hollywood has only even attempted the Revolutionary War about a dozen times, ranging from 1958’s forgettable *Johnny Tremain & the Sons of Liberty*, to the musical comedy *1776* (released in 1972), to 1985’s tedious and implausible *Revolution*. Seeing that the job gets done on an epic scale this time will be director Roland Emmerich, the man behind *Independence Day*.

Gibson once described *Braveheart*, which he directed as well as acted in, as “totally uncompromising. The story is uncompromising, and the way I filmed it is uncompromising.” Whether *The Patriot* will be cut from the same mold

won’t be known until next summer. But what is certain is that Mel Gibson is cut from a different mold than most of his Hollywood peers. His background alone is unorthodox: One of ten children, Gibson was born in Peekskill, New York, but moved to Australia when he was 12 because his father, Hutton Gibson, didn’t want any of Mel’s older brothers in Vietnam. “I heard him say at the time, ‘They’re not getting any of my kids.’”

Hutton Gibson, though, was certainly not a draft dodger. He is himself a patriot, a veteran of Guadalcanal whose war service earned him the Purple Heart. A one-time brakeman for the New York Central Railroad, Hutton Gibson is also a devout Catholic who went to seminary and is the author of books on canon law and Catholicism. He founded the Alliance for Catholic Tradition, a conservative group that Mel Gibson says his father started because, “Everything he was taught to believe was taken from him in the ’60s with this renewal Vatican Council. The whole institution became unrecognizable to him.”

Gibson the younger must himself often feel like a stranger in a strange land because of the profession he’s selected. This parochial school graduate is a devout Catholic and reportedly a devoted family man (he and his wife just had their seventh child). When once asked by an interviewer why he wasn’t “particularly broad-minded” about celibacy and abortion, Gibson answered, unflinchingly: “Those are unquestionable. You don’t even argue those points.” Gibson believes in heaven—and hell. “Absolutely,” he says. “I’m not going to the same place as Hitler. Or Pol Pot.”

From some critics, the inevitable question is: How can Mel Gibson, con-

servative Catholic, make pictures containing sex, violence, and strong language? His answer is that he is simply in the entertainment business and seeking to entertain audiences, not to proselytize. He is not, like many industry liberals, or even some conservatives, an aggressive activist for his own beliefs. One gets the sense that the *Lethal Weapons* and *Paybacks* are merely done to pay Gibson’s rent, and keep his 15-employee company, Icon Productions, in full flourish. “It’s just horsing around,” as he says.

But every few years Gibson does seem to put his heart into some special project which he personally shepherds. These refreshing and occasionally profound undertakings include his 1990 version of *Hamlet*, his 1993 directorial debut *The Man Without a Face* (where he plays a former high school teacher who tutors a young man applying to military school), and of course *Braveheart*.

“It is the tales we tell ourselves that make us who we are,” said one of the characters in *Braveheart*. Within months, Mel Gibson and his colleagues will spin the tale of America’s birth. Dare one hope that just as *Saving Private Ryan* brought audiences face-to-face with the sacrifices of the World War II generation, this picture might bring a renewed sense of the age when men pledged their lives, fortunes, and sacred honors for the cause of political freedom?

— John Meroney

# Flashback

TO KNOW NOTHING OF WHAT HAPPENED BEFORE YOU WERE BORN  
IS TO REMAIN EVER A CHILD—*Cicero*

## Of Poe and Lee and other West Points

There is a rich literary tradition at West Point. As alumnus and novelist Lucian Truscott IV says, "You just spend four years doing nothing but writing and figuring electrical engineering problems. The education at West Point is excellent for a writer—a hell of a lot better than the Iowa writers' school, where they sit around doing a lot of navel-gazing."

The academy's most famous dropout was a chronic class-cutter named Edgar Allan Poe, whose "wayward and capricious temper made him at times utterly oblivious or indifferent to the ordinary routine of roll-calls, drills, and guard duties," a classmate remembered. Poe did not accept hazing with good cheer, as any reader of "The Cask of Amontillado" might guess, and so he was expelled after half a year.

Yet Superintendent Sylvanus Thayer played a role in the cultivation of this proud eccentric's genius. He encouraged Poe to solicit subscriptions of 75 cents from his fellow cadets to pay for publication of his poems. His classmates, who had enjoyed Poe's scabrous and scandalous verse upon stern or detested professors, kicked in, and the poet dedicated the volume to the "United States Corps of Cadets." To the Corps' disgust, however, Poe's printed poetry had nothing whatever to do with them or West Point.

The classic West Point pedant was Dennis Hart Mahan, who taught engineering from 1830-1871. "Most of the men who would lead the major units in the Civil War learned the art of war from Mahan," Stephen Ambrose has written. Mahan was a great pedagogue, if an easy target for sport. He taught "Engineering and the Science of War," although he never saw a moment's com-

bat in his life. He always carried an umbrella. The story is told of the graybeard Mahan asking a cadet—a veteran of the War Between the States—how to perform a particular duty. "No, sir! That is all wrong!" thundered Mahan. The cadet explained, "But, professor, that is just as I have performed that duty practically as a soldier many times during my battle service." To which Mahan responded, "I don't care what you did or what you saw during the Civil War, you stick to the text!"

The cadet oath begins, "I \_\_\_\_\_, do solemnly swear that I will support the Constitution of the United States, and bear true allegiance to the National Government; that I will maintain and defend the sovereignty of the United States, paramount to any and all allegiance, sovereignty, or fealty I may owe to any State or Country whatsoever...."

This vow of loyalty to the nation over the states dates from August 1861, when former Superintendent Robert E. Lee and 295 fellow West Pointers had thrown in with their native South. Agonized Lee, "I have been unable to make up my mind to raise my hand against my native state, my relatives, my children & my home. I have therefore resigned my Commission in the Army & never desire again to draw my sword save in defense of my State." For choosing Virginia over the Union, Robert E. Lee would be separated from today's West Point.

The Academy has always been very much a product of its time. There were no black West Point graduates from 1889-1936; blacks were barred from

West Point's intercollegiate teams until the 1950s.

The University of Nebraska Press has recently reissued *The Colored Cadet at West Point: Autobiography of Lieutenant Henry Ossian Flipper, U.S.A.*, a strange book by a remarkable man. Flipper was the fifth black cadet at West Point but the first to graduate, in 1877. He "exhibited the manners of a Southern military aristocrat," according to historian Quintard Taylor, Jr. While Flipper endured his share of slights and maledictions of "damned nigger," in true aristocratic fashion he attributed these discourtesies to white trash: Cadets "uncouth and rough in appearance...much inferior to the average Negro." The officers and gentlemen of West Point, he said, "have never, so far as I can tell, shown any prejudice at all"—an exoneration at odds with press accounts of Flipper's cadetship. (The Republican press of the North made him a celebrity.) But then memory is a funny thing.

Army's hockey and basketball teams play in the Holleder Center, named for Don Holleder (W.P. 1956), a golden boy out of Rochester, New York, who had been pursued by almost every college football powerhouse in the nation. Holleder chose West Point; as a former high school classmate told Rochester newsman Scott Pitoniak, Holleder "was one of those naturals who was good at everything he did. But it was more than just the athletic skills that you noticed. There was a presence about him, a leadership quality. He wanted the onus to be on him."

An All-American wide receiver at West Point as a junior, Holleder was switched to quarterback as a senior by