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Author, Conversations With Scorsese

Gary Cooper

A Life In Film



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GARY COOPER, A LIFE IN FILM

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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. . . but the traces of national origin are a matter of expression even more than of feature, and it was in this respect that our friend's countenance was supremely eloquent. . . . It had that typical vagueness which is not vacuity, that blankness which is not simplicity, that look of being committed to nothing in particular, of standing in an attitude of general hospitality to the chances of life, of being very much at one's own disposal, so characteristic of many American faces. It was our friend's eye that chiefly told his story; an eye in which innocence and experience were singularly blended. It was full of contradictory suggestions . . . you could find in it almost anything you looked for. Frigid and yet friendly, frank yet cautious, shrewd yet credulous, positive yet skeptical, confident yet shy, extremely intelligent and extremely good-humoured, there was something vaguely defiant in its concessions, and something profoundly reassuring in its reserve.

The description is of Christopher Newman, protagonist of one of **Henry James**' most approachable and entrancing novels, *The American*, his most conscious attempt to give particular form to the

general characteristics he found most admirable in his countrymen. It occurs within the first few pages of the book, and from that point onward Newman moves through its pages - in one reader's imagination, anyway - in the lineaments of **Gary Cooper** despite the fact that James carelessly endowed his hero with a mustache, an adornment with which the actor only rarely trifled.

It was in 1960, a year before Cooper's death, that I read *The American*, and so powerful was the connection I made between the two fictions - the formal one and the informal one that any star's career eventually becomes - that I have never been able to separate them since. That linkage would have seemed eccentric at the time if I had let it stray from my thoughts to print, and indeed, it may seem even more so now, a half century later. To moviegoers either older or younger than I am, Cooper seems to be a much more limited, regional sort of icon. He is to them, to borrow the title of one of his best-known films, *The Westerner*, nothing more resonant than that. It's understandable. Everyone knows he was born in Montana, a fact that colored his accent and manner, no matter whom he was playing, and that he broke into the movies as a rider in the herd thundering after Tom Mix and his ilk in inexpensive cowboy pictures. The older generation first noticed him in a small part in a western, *The Winning of Barbara Worth*, in 1926 and took him to heart seriously after his talking-picture debut in a version of that most classic of western tales *The Virginian* in 1929. Conservative of temperament and closely attuned to his own limits, Cooper was careful not to stray too far or too long from the good first impression he had made. Especially in his later years he tried to make every third or fourth picture a western. It reminded him and his lifelong fans of his roots and, as he once said, "gives me a chance to shoot off guns."

As for the younger crowd, who came to his career late, their sense of him was even more limited.