

# Cecil B. DeMille's Greatest Authenticity Lapse?

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## ***THE PLAINSMAN* (1937): CECIL B. DeMILLE'S GREATEST AUTHENTICITY LAPSE?**

Cecil B. DeMille was a seminal founder of Hollywood whose films were frequently denigrated by critics for lacking historical verisimilitude. For example, Pauline Kael claimed that DeMille had "falsified history more than anybody else" (Reed 1971: 367). Others argued that he never let "historical fact stand in the way of a good yarn" (Hogg 1998: 39) and that "historical authenticity usually took second place to delirious spectacle" (Andrew 1989: 74). Indeed, most "film historians regard De Mille with disdain" (Bowers 1982: 689) and tended to turn away in embarrassment because "De Mille had pretensions of being a historian" (Thomas 1975: 266).

Even Cecil's niece Agnes de Mille (1990: 185) diplomatically referred to his approach as "liberal." Dates, sequences, geography, and character bent to his needs." Likewise, James Card (1994: 215) claimed that: "DeMille was famous for using historical fact only when it suited his purposes. When history didn't make a good scene, he threw it out." This DeMillean fact-of-life was also verified by gossip columnist Louella Parsons (1961: 58) who observed that DeMille "spent thousands of dollars to research his films to give them authenticity. Then he would disregard all the research for the sake of a scene or a shot that appealed to him as better movie-making." As Charles Hopkins (1980: 357, 360) succinctly put it: "De Mille did not hesitate to turn the meandering stream of historical record into a straight channel if by doing so he made his films more exciting and comprehensive to a general audience; but if he simplified history, he was seldom guilty of conscious distortion." In fact, Diana Serra Cary suggested that DeMille's un-authenticity was itself an auteuristic trademark:

After combing all the libraries and other sources for every fact and figure bearing on his theme, De Mille just as methodically set about throwing out that data that did not match up to his own conception of good history as being good theater. This was a De Mille hallmark and one in which he took considerable pride. Not every historian had such resources at his command nor, indeed, was so high-handed in his disregard for history (Cary 1975: 222).

DeMille's absurd, inaccurate and unauthentic reputation was artistically encapsulated in the following cliché that he recorded in his own autobiography, namely:

Cecil B. De Mille,  
Much against his will,  
Was persuaded to keep Moses  
Out of the War of the Roses"  
(DeMille and Hayne 1960: 106).

Many critics were particularly scathing of his Americana showpiece *The Plainsman* (1937), a story that interwove the lives of the touchstones of western mythology: Wild Bill Hickok (Gary Cooper), Calamity Jane (Jean Arthur), Buffalo Bill Cody (James Ellison) and General George Armstrong Custer (John Miljan).

### ***The Plainsman* (1937) as Historical Bunk**

Nowadays it is considered a "memorable classic" (Marill 1975: 43) and "the splashiest epic western of the decade" (Hutton 1992b: 497). Jack Lodge (1985: 82) argued that, of all the minor westerns, it was the "only one considered to be of any real importance," while Paul Trent (1975: 102) claimed that it "ranks with the best Westerns produced during the 30s." Others considered it an unmitigated disaster: "by the time all those screenwriters got done messing with it there wasn't much history or even pseudohistory left" (Garfield 1982: 258). Even in its day *The Plainsman* garnered severe complaints. For example, Mari Sandoz wrote to Paramount's boss Adolph Zukor (dated 23 January 1937) and stated: "I was appalled. I've spent my whole life in Plains history and if the main characters hadn't been named I shouldn't have recognized a [sic] one of the three by the things they did in the picture" (quoted in Rivers 1996: 109).

Less troublesome, but still unflattering was Jon Tuska's (1985: 177) complaint that: "Some nasty Cheyennes speaking gibberish take Jane prisoner and sing *a la* a Hollywood conception of African natives as they march toward their camp. Hickok joins them, remarking to Jane: "Indians'll sell anything. They might sell you." (Friar and Friar 1972: 131, 133) though that "De Mille reduced exciting history to bad soap opera, phony heroics, and cheap sentimentality" and argued how *The Plainsman* was "an excellent example of how De Mille rewrote history." Paul Andrew Hutton (1992a: 409) also thought it "displayed a remarkable disregard for history...and brought together in one film nearly every cliché associated with the western genre." While Leonard Maltin (1998: 1066) claimed that it was: "About as authentic as *Blazing Saddles*, but who cares - it's still good fun." To be fair to the critics, DeMille *did* distort an important aspect of the truth regarding his portrayal of Calamity Jane.

### **The Calamity Jane Error: DeMillean Sin Acknowledged**

DeMille's own American-Indian consultant, Iron Eyes Cody<sup>(1)</sup> was uncomplimentary about DeMille's portrayal of this historical woman:

It should be mentioned here that if you always suspected *The Plainsman* was complete nonsense from a historical standpoint, you're right. The real Calamity Jane was a vulgar, tobacco-chewing, raw-boned kid who resembled nothing more alluring than an oversized Huckleberry Finn, minus the charm of innocence. She was a great shot and horsewoman, but Wild Bill Hickok certainly did no romancing with her. Hickok was also shown in the Battle of Arickaree, which he never set eyes on. There's no historical hint of him ever attempting to warn anyone of the impending Custer battle (Cody and Perry 1982: 198).

Rebecca Bell-Metereau similarly claimed regarding her physical appearance:

Sex had not yet become a blatant feature of the western, but the cowgirls had undergone a real before-and-after beautification process. One need only contrast Louise Dresser's fat and aging 1931 Calamity Jane with Jean Arthur's slim, neatly coiffed version in DeMille's *The Plainsman* (1937) to see the trend towards glamorizing historical figures until they were practically unrecognizable. The Calamity Jane played by Jean Arthur is thoroughly representative of the industry's standard treatment of the masculine heroine of the thirties - a mixture of tomboy features and stereotypically feminine attributes...DeMille's treatment of Calamity Jane rests precisely between the poles of defending and offending the status quo of society. Although Jane does a number of things that woman don't ordinarily do, whenever she is attacked or defended, it is on the grounds that she is a woman (Bell-Metereau 1985: 82).

Indeed, DeMille's gorgeous blonde Jean Arthur as Calamity Jane is the most severe misrepresentation of the historical facts. As Wayne Michael Sarf claimed:

...Martha Jane Canary [Calamity Jane] was a female only in the narrowest technical sense, and during her suspected service as a "painted cat" must have appealed only to the most hardened of those rough-and-ready frontiersmen who chanced to cross her path. Her manners were as unattractive to most contemporaries as her appearance, for as one acquaintance apologetically put it: "She swore, she drank, she wore men's clothing...She also chewed tobacco, a large gob of which this frail *nymph du prairie* once expectorated with commendable accuracy upon the dress of an actress whose antics on stage had displeased her (Sarf 1983: 38).

No wonder she became the "most famous female of the Old West...creating a legend of toughness" (Newark 1980: 57), or that she had been described as a "man among men" (Rivers 1996: 36). On the other hand, DeMille got it right when he had his Calamity wear men's clothes (buckskins), and he even inserted a dialogue line to this effect: "'Don't you *ever* wear a dress?' 'I might if I had one'" (Harvey 1998: 360). In Mark Rudman's eyes, Calamity Jane's "manliness" and forthrightness was also captured by DeMille:

She [Jean Arthur] never looks more appealing to me than when she plays Calamity Jane in leather pants and buckskin jacket, six-shooter tucked into her belt, cracking a whip. She never seems to hold back what she's feeling. Not many actors manage to "be themselves" so often that the film revolves around their firmness of character (Rudman 2000:157).

John Oller also noted the discrepancies between DeMille's Calamity Jane and the historical Martha Jane Canary but accepted it as a DeMilleian norm:

Her perfectly coiffed and well-scrubbed Calamity was an almost laughably inaccurate characterization of the real Martha Jane Canary, a coarse, ugly woman who cut a wide swath of drunkenness and prostitution across the Great Plains as an army scout and stagecoach driver. Nor is there any historical evidence for the love affair between Calamity and Wild Bill as portrayed by Jean Arthur and [Gary] Cooper on screen. But as with most of the historical hokum perpetrated by DeMille over the years, audiences didn't care in the least; they adored the film (Oller 1997: 93-94).

Even DeMille himself admitted: "I confess to taking some liberties with authenticity in that casting: pictures I have seen of the real Calamity Jane were far removed indeed from the piquant loveliness of Jean Arthur" (DeMille and Hayne 1960: 320). This error being symptomatic of DeMille's auteuristic desire to stamp his stylistic signature of subdued sex and beauty into his films even if it meant violating historical accuracy, or at least historical legend. But it did ensure box-office success that made DeMille-the-businessman happy.

### **The Unappreciated Historical Accuracy**

Even if one admits his physical Calamity Jane error, was DeMille so wrong in his mixing of Wild Bill Hickok, Calamity Jane, Buffalo Bill Cody and General George Armstrong Custer? Many thought so. For example, Colin Hogg (1998: 39) claimed that DeMille "threw almost every known western character into the mix - several of whom had never in real life met each other." While Paul Andrew Hutton (1992b: 497) considered the film remarkable for "its absolute disregard for the broad outlines of the historical record." Is this true? Not so according to Brian Dippie in *Custer's Last Stand: The Anatomy of an American Myth*:

The author of a recent history of the Western movie thought there was "an air of contrivance" about *The Plainsman's* "great Round Up of favorite Western characters." Surprisingly, this "Round Up" was not as preposterous as the rest of DeMille's "history" might suggest...Tradition has it that Hickok, Cody and Calamity all "scouted for Custer." In fact, the Custers did know Hickok on the Southern plains, and Mrs. Custer later wrote that Wild Bill and her husband were "fast friends." For her part, the General's wife adored the "Prince of Pistoleers," describing him as "a delight to look upon," the epitome of "physical perfection." Wild Bill reminded me of a thorough-bred horse," she went on innocently...Besides scouting for Custer, the real Wild Bill took a turn on the stage with Buffalo Bill during the 1873-74 season in *Scouts of the Plains*. In legend, he then married Martha Jane Cannary, "Calamity Jane," and sired a daughter by her before he was gunned down from behind on August 2, 1876, while playing poker in a Deadwood, Dakota Territory, saloon. Carved on one of Wild Bills' early monuments were the enigmatic words "Custer was lonely without him." (Dippie 1994: 103-104).

In the *Illustrated Encyclopedia of the Old West*, Peter Newark (1980: 57) claimed that in 1876, Calamity Jane "came in contact with Wild Bill Hickok in Deadwood, South Dakota during the gold-mining boom, a casual relationship that she and many writers have made much of, even suggesting that they were married." At least DeMille's Hickok-Jane linkage was historically true, although the idea of a sexual romance between them was less probable simply because the historical Hickok was a very fussy man. As Cameron Rogers argued:

He liked Jane much as the king likes his jester, tolerantly submitted to her familiarities, and occasionally paid for her drinks, but not for an instant did he consider her in another light than that of an asexual buffoon capable of loyalty and therefore to be protected. Mr. Hickok's taste in women was, like his taste in pistols, fastidious and incapable of latitude (quoted in Rivers 1996: 42).

DeMille also got it half-right by portraying a no-time-for-love Hickok who was not very interested romantically in Calamity Jane, even if Calamity was keen on Hickok in the classic unrequited love fashion (which was also a logical historical possibility). DeMille did not show or imply any on-screen sex between them, but he did get Hickok to stiffly admit: "Yes, Calamity, I love you" after she noticed her picture in his gold watch (just as she had his picture in her locket). However, some saw a sexual subtext between them. For example, the

captured Hickok and Jane were tied together inside a tepee awaiting death by fire, but "she's never more wildly happy than when...they hang beside each other (in what Cecil B. DeMille called the most erotic scene ever filmed)" (Rudman 3000: 157). One imagines DeMille-the-pop-culture-professional playing PR man here, and because he was being hamstrung by the censors of his day.

### **The Hamstrung DeMille: The Limits of Desire and Design**

To be fair to DeMille, the harsh judgement of Calamity Jane's characterisations must be toned down simply because DeMille would not have been *allowed* to tell the historical truth given the power of the moral police prevalent in his day. Indeed, "DeMille's decision to make Calamity a sober stage driver rather than a drunken prostitute was probably the easiest way to make her life conform to the moral values of the thirties" (Rivers 1996: 46). An inter-office memo from John Hammell to the production staff dated 28 January 1937 specifically concerned the depiction of alcohol that had a profound impact of DeMille's filmmaking freedom:

It was unanimously agreed that all scripts or pictures, which, in the judgment of the Production Code Administration, contain excessive or unnecessary drinking or drunkenness are to be rejected, until such offending scenes, actions, or dialogue are deleted (quoted in Rivers 1996: 41).

The historical Calamity Jane would have scandalised 1930s society. Indeed, DeMille-the-realist was also forced to re-edit the Hickok Indian torture scene because it was *too* graphic for its day (Trent 1975: 102). For DeMille-the-epic-filmmaker, romanticising Calamity Jane was a better practical solution to his filmic difficulties, and certainly less detrimental to recorded history than a number of other potential solutions (Rivers 1996: 41). As DeMille himself argued, one must not lose:

...sight of the fact that a successful historical film must embrace not only education and accuracy, but entertainment and good taste...For the character of Calamity Jane, we took the best attributes of the woman, and were chivalrous enough to ignore those qualities that would not have done credit to her in the light of day (quoted in Rivers 1996: 114-115).

Indeed, *The Plainsman* concludes with a patriotic message that reads in part: "It shall be as it was in the past...a nation moulded to last" (Tuska 1985: 177), "Cecil B. DeMille's 1937 celebration of Manifest Destiny" (Hutton 1992b: 497). This was another characteristic attempt by DeMille to infuse important social issues into his entertainment films, and which would not have been well served by a drunken, ugly, vulgar, unsympathetic, prostitute interpretation of Calamity Jane. DeMille was also being a social trendsetter here. As Brian Dippie argued:

*The Plainsman* is best understood in the context of depression America. With the advent of hard times, the Western's popularity had steadily slipped, and the heroes of the Golden West who had dominated the screen in the 1920's mounted their stallions and rode off into the sunset of an apparently dying genre. By 1935, the back of the Depression seemed broken; at least, the New Deal had revived hope in the future, and that optimism so fundamental to the Western myth was back in fashion. If the formula Western had lost some of its appeal, the epic Western would more than fill the void. *The Plainsman*, released on New Year's Day, 1937, was DeMille's overblown tribute to the enduring values of a pioneering race (Dippie 1994: 102-103).

Not only did DeMille reinvigorate the western genre, but he also used *The Plainsman* as a vehicle for American patriotism that required he "adjust" the historical facts ever so slightly. In a letter to N. A. Hickok dated 4 February 1937 he claimed:

While Hickok actually lost his life in a casual poker game with some friends, I found it necessary to imbue that poker game with a patriotic motive. I have always found it necessary in picturizing the life of any actual character to make the motivations of his various acts a little more noble than they sometimes were. William Cody and Wild Bill Hickok are both heroes in the minds of the American people, and I believe it of importance to build this heroism to a point beyond which it actually ran as an example for the youth of the country today (quoted in Rivers 1996: 45).

### **Portraying the Essence of Wild Bill Hickok**

While acknowledging that Gary Copper's Hickok did not physically match some well-know features of the

historical figure, DeMille got the essence of the character fairly right according to Jennifer Ann Rivers:

In order to ensure box office success and inform the audience of who was trustworthy and who was not, DeMille did not adhere to an historical Hickok look with long hair and a moustache. DeMille's decision not to change Cooper's appearance too much was done for strictly entertainment purposes. His motives did not include disloyalty to history or the desire to lead the public astray. The personality portrayed by Gary Cooper fits almost perfectly with the written record concerning Hickok. Cooper's character was well spoken, very respectful of those who had earned his respect, and possessed a quality of quiet determination (Rivers 1996:28).

Indeed, DeMille also got it right concerning Hickok's known love of children:

Hickok's appreciation of children was seen in the opening minutes of the film when he took the time to speak with a boy on the dock in St. Louis and tell him stories of Buffalo Bill Cody. He even introduced the boy to Cody and gave him his "Arkansas toothpick" (knife) as a gift. After he showed the boy his watch with the picture of he and Calamity, he took the occasion to discuss women with the youth. The boy was most impressed by their meeting even though he did not realize whose company he had enjoyed. Upon their departure the boy yelled "bye mister and thanks!" In this respect DeMille not only ably displayed Hickok's concern for children, but also his complete modesty concerning his own name and abilities. DeMille's awareness of these qualities stemmed directly from his research and the incorporation of them into the film produced a Hickok that was at least a resemblance of the one that actually existed (Rivers 1996: 30).

Overall, Rivers argued that:

DeMille excelled at the personality factor where Hickok was concerned. It was apparent that DeMille and his team had taken the time to work the spirit of Wild Bill into Copper's portrayal. In fact Harold Lamb spent one year checking over facts and working the true feelings of the time into the script. Although the outward appearance suffered through comparison it is almost certain that a better job of personality incorporation could not have been achieved. DeMille's success at character portrayal made the screen version of Hickok as close to an historical mimic as one might ever come (Rivers 1996: 31).

Even to the point of allowing Hickok to be murdered during a card game, as did happen historically, and fighting the studio to get it because they wanted him to live at films end (Donaldson 1980: 1352). No wonder William Everson (1969: 164) claimed that *The Plainsman* was "a major landmark in the movie treatment of Wild Bill Hickok." Nor did the positive historical facts supportive of DeMille's filmmaking choices end there.

### **DeMille, Custer and Co.**

During his pro-Americana idolisation, DeMille helped save the virtually ignored reputation of General Custer in the 1930s (Dippie 1974: 151), and produced "one of the best Custers on the screen" (King npd: 140). DeMille's mixing of western icons was also supported by Brian Dippie:

It is a matter of record that Cody's and Custer's paths also crossed. For one thing, both took part in the Western buffalo hunt staged for the benefit of the Grand Duke Alexis, third son of the Russian Czar, in 1872. Calamity Jane's link to Custer is another matter. Of the foursome, her reputation is the least substantial. Though her name flits in and out of history, she impinged only tangentially on the men. Yet the legends about her know no bounds, and one of the more persistent of these has the manly Calamity working as a muleskinner or scout for the Seventh Cavalry. A writer in 1922 had her carrying dispatches for General Crook...And, of course, there is always Calamity's own letter placing her on the field shortly after the battle [Little Bighorn massacre] (Dippie 1994: 104).

Indeed, after General Custer's death: ...a dissipated Calamity went on exhibition for a dime as "The Famous Woman Scout of the Wild West...The Comrade of Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill," and, before dying, was heard to mumble, "Bury me next to Bill." Today she and Hitckok lie close by in Mount Moriah Cemetery overlooking Deadwood, their legends mutually secure...Buffalo Bill toured the world with his Wild West, one year featuring "Custer's Conqueror," Sitting Bull, and in many others re-enacted the Last Stand before rapt

audiences... Whatever its other merits, then, *The Plainsman* had made an uncanny choice of celebrated Western characters (Dippie 1994: 105).

All of which belies the various claims that the film was "not with any historical accuracy in terms of events" (Whitaker 1983: 190).

### **DeMille's Unappreciated Authenticity and Realism Passions**

Frequently overlooked was DeMille's legitimate passion for production authenticity and realism. As he once argued during the making of *The Plainsman*:

It is true that a large part of the audience doesn't know, or care whether officers in the Union calvary [sic] wore boots that stopped short of the knees or extended above them. But if such things are immaterial to that audience, they are not immaterial to thousands of people including teachers and their pupils, who will see and believe this film. And they are not immaterial to us who are making the picture and want to do an honest job of it, if only for our own satisfaction (Rivers 1996: 7).

DeMille also demonstrated integrity in other areas of authenticity. For example, *The Plainsman* was "one of the first movies to use an Indian chief by name as the tribal leader, Yellow Hand in this case" (Price 1980: 80), and in its making DeMille actually employed "1200 Montana Cheyennes" (Vermilye 1982: 181). Indeed, Mari Sandoz wrote to Paramount's Adolph Zukor (dated 23 January 1937) and stated: "Generally speaking, your work with the Cheyennes in the picture is good. I should know. I've put in years of study on the Sioux and Cheyenne. I've spent some time on all their reservations, even the Northern Cheyenne in Montana" (Rivers 1996: 110). The film was also "remarkable for its fidelity to minute historical detail (the statue on Custer's desk is correct)" (Hutton 1992b: 497). DeMille even "employed Chief Thunderbird to make an original teepee. Using twenty hides and ornamental beadwork, the Chief constructed the only genuine teepee ever made in Hollywood" (Rivers 1996: 46). Cecil's American-Indian consultant Iron Eyes Cody also confirmed this DeMilleian attitude towards props:

His interest in authenticity, at least as far as Indian dress went, was revived, and he listened to me with rapt attention when I'd explain what was required. He had some of my pieces copied, and then challenged me to tell them apart. I couldn't. When he wanted, his sense of detail was uncanny (Cody and Perry 1982: 210).

At other times, DeMille had to be challenged over screen perceptions of authenticity versus historical truth. For example, Iron Eyes Cody reported an important authenticity skirmish during the making of *The Plainsman*:

When my brother and I had assembled the thirty or so Indians in full costume, and white men dressed as Indians, for the scenes to be shot in the lot, DeMille had them line up so he could make his inspection--again, military style. Everybody stood at attention while he walked up and down the ranks. "Okay, take that off," he said, stopping at one end, pointing to a beaded vest. He stopped again, "Take that off, and that, and--" "Wait, *wait* a minute, C.B. You can't take those things off. He's gonna be a chief. Cheyenne chiefs *wore* vests like that. And he's a warrior, they always wore leggings. That's a medicine pouch on him. It stays." "You've got too much clothes on them." "Not for these Indians, C.B. We either do an authentic picture or I'll walk off and the Indians will come with us. That's the way its gonna be" (Cody and Perry 1982: 194-195).

There was a momentary impasse between them, but it was quickly sidestepped:

He looked at me hard, but with a smile creeping in the corner of his mouth. "You're sincere, aren't you." "That's right," I said, setting my jaw and crossing my arms. I thought any minute he'd kick me in the ass. "Your father, did you know he worked for me?" "Yeah, I know that." "Then you know we didn't have any trouble with him." "Well, you're not talking to my father now. I know what these Indians should wear for this picture, and if you can build an authentic telegraph office for a bunch of reporters, you can keep the Indians in your picture authentic." "Ha!" he exploded, slapping my back. "You've got guts, Iron Eyes. I can see where you got your name from. Okay, they stay dressed like Eskimos. But if I hear any complaints about the

Indians being *unauthentic*, from anyone, I'll have your hide. Got it? "Right." (Cody and Perry 1982: 194).

The above reference to an authentic telegraph office was also interesting for it was indicative of DeMille's realism passion fused with a canny PR sensitivity while making *The Plainsman*:

For the dozens of journalists who always followed the doings of a DeMille picture, he built an exact replica of a nineteenth-century telegraph office just so that they could cable their stories to the world "in the right frame of mind" C.B. always had an eye for publicity (Cody and Perry 1982: 192-193).

### Conclusion

The above supportive facts are frequently unrecognised examples of how DeMille's flair for plotting inventiveness was actually rooted in some solid seed of historical, legendary and/or personalistic truth. Regrettably, contemporary scholarship is only just beginning to realise, verify, validate, and in due course, vindicate DeMille's deserved filmmaking reputation. Even if he did get things historically wrong on occasions, and even if his authentic facts were sometimes subordinated to his showmanship desires, as Carl King (n.p.d: 140) argued: "One doesn't expect historical verisimilitude of characterisation in a western, - not even an epic western." In which case DeMille was just being true and faithful to the western genre while being bundled in historical wrappings.

In the final analysis, DeMille was a filmmaker, a pop culture professional and not a historian, and so this is how he should be legitimately judged. However, as a lay film historian, there are depths to DeMille's research process and legitimate achievements that have yet to be discovered, let alone adequately plumbed. Overall, DeMille was just being DeMille, the man for all seasons who tried to harmonise the various competing elements of his day and profession. As he summed up *The Plainsman*: "The picture will be history for those that look for that and a western for those who don't" (Rivers 1996: 47). Or as Jerry Vermilye (1982: 181) put it, DeMille "chose to synthesize the romance and adventure of pioneer America, serving up the results in a stirring blend of folklore and movie-star glamour that restored his movies to popularity." A thorough, more thoughtful re-evaluation of DeMille's filmic oeuvre is certainly needed, long overdue and highly recommended.

### Notes

1. Ironically, Iron Eyes Cody was himself a fake. He was not an American Indian but a full-blooded American-Italian born Oscar DeCoti who had fooled Hollywood for decades (Aleiss 1999).

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