

COCKNEY CHEROKEES ON THE SKY-LINE

Luke McKernan

Museum of the Moving Image, 12 May 1999

The genesis of this talk came when I was invited to contribute to a film festival held in Udine, Italy, on the theme of the European Western. We are all familiar with the Italian, or 'spaghetti' Westerns of the 1960s and 70s, but the Eurowestern festival made it clear that other European national cinemas had, for whatever reasons, produced Westerns of their own, and had had a long history of doing so. Some were remarkably good, many were engagingly odd, a handful were thoroughly, embarrassingly bad. We saw Westerns from Italy, naturally, several of a violent character from Spain, and the peculiar *Der Kaiser von Kalifornien* from Hitler's Germany which is showing at the NFT this month. There were the romantic and beautiful *Winnetou* films from West Germany, severely political Westerns from East Germany, a spoof Western from Czechoslovakia, a French Western set in the Carmargue, a silent Corsican Western and a Finnish Western reputedly filmed in a sandpit just outside Helsinki. And there were British Westerns. I'm not quite sure why they thought of me to be responsible for such an unlikely theme, except that I have a taste for some of the odder corners of film history, but in any case I uncovered what I hoped was an intriguing and worthwhile history, in effect an alternative history of British cinema, the fruits of which I would like to present to you this evening. As you will see from your programme note, it is my contention that there has been a considerable number of British Westerns, and that the Western theme is an almost constant thread running through British film history. It is all a question of definition - as I hope to explain.

British cinema is what it is because of its relation to American cinema. For reasons economic, artistic and linguistic, British film makers have always had an uneasy relationship with American film making, half envious, half slavish, playing along with the game to a set of rules not quite understood. A minor, but diverting illustration of this is the British Western. As the classic genre of American cinema, the occasional British attempts in this field have much to show about the particular qualities of British films and the British view of Hollywood. Although there are frequent mentions throughout the general literature on British cinema to this or that film being an attempt at a 'British' or an 'English' Western, so far as I am aware there has not previously been an attempt to gather such titles together or to define just what a British Western might be. With only a few exceptions they can be divided up into three categories: straight attempts at Westerns,

adaptations of the Western milieu to British Empire settings, and parodies. The straight versions are an occasional occurrence among more recent British film productions (that is, from 1960 onwards), but it is not often realised they were common in the early silent period, which is where we will begin, and where most of our film examples this evening will come from.

The American West was already popular in the British imagination before the arrival of the movies in the mid-1890s. Western novels began to be published and to be popular in the mid-Victorian era, and especially the frontier novels of James Fenimore Cooper, author of *The Last of the Mohicans*, and Longfellow's widely known poem of Indian life, *Hiawatha*, and the several visits to this country of Buffalo Bill Cody and his Wild West show had created a romantic enthusiasm for the Western myths and values in many in Britain at the turn of the century. The first British film to reflect this interest was a music hall sketch starring the legendary music hall comedians Dan Leno and Herbert Campbell as 'Indian braves', entitled *Burlesque Attack on a Settler's Camp*, made in 1900. This film is lost, but not so the second British film to be made on a Western film, a somewhat grotesque trick film made by Cecil Hepworth in 1901, entitled *The Indian Chief and the Seidlitz Powder*. I don't know much about Seidlitz powder, except that clearly it was a stomach powder of some sort and it blew you up - literally so in the case of this film - nor can I begin to say why it should be an Indian chief who tries the powder, except that he is a convenient example of someone who could be expected to be ignorant of the dangers of such powders. But note the rather confused idea of what an Indian chief should look like, with reference to his improbably spiky headdress.

[THE INDIAN CHIEF AND THE SEIDLITZ POWDER]

[STILL: Hiawatha]

The first serious drama of the American West to be made in Britain came two years later in 1903. Joseph Rosenthal, the celebrated war and travel cameraman, on a trip to Canada filmed a dramatic production of Longfellow's *Hiawatha* enacted by members of the Ojibwa people. The film is lost, but the stills that survive indicate a curiosity that in its naive attempt at authenticity probably had minimal dramatic value but considerable historic interest nonetheless.

But once we are past the oddities of the earliest years of British films, we come to the key period of Western filmmaking in this country, which was 1908 to 1913, when American films were becoming an increasing economic threat and began to demonstrate an evident hold on British audiences that British films seemed to lack. Had they but known it, British film makers had played their part in the creation of the American Western, as it is a probable if not absolutely proven case that the Sheffield Photo Company's exciting chase dramas of 1903, *A Daring Daylight Burglary*

and *The Robbery of the Mail Coach* in particular, made a great impact in America and were a strong influence on *The Great Train Robbery*, the archetypal American Western. *The Robbery of the Mail Coach*, with its highwayman protagonist, indicated a possible route for British films to follow if they were to challenge the Americans on their own ground. Various producers were indeed to film stories of the medieval outlaw Robin Hood and the eighteenth century highwayman Dick Turpin, but somehow the historical trappings only resulted in a lack of conviction, and it was not until the 1950s and the television series *The Adventures of Robin Hood* that the British came up with the depiction of a native myth that could match equivalent American Western product for popularity. A halfway solution came the following year, 1904, with the Charles Urban Trading Company's *Robbery of a Mail Convoy by Bandits*, which located its thrills in Australia, the robbery being perpetrated by bushrangers. British film makers seeking to recreate Western thrills would turn again to the colonies in later years.

British Westerns thus began to appear in some numbers from 1908. Britain was not the only European country making Westerns at this time, and France in particular had a flourishing Western film industry, and in the actor Joe Hamman one of the very first genuine Western film stars. *The BFI Companion to the Western* cautiously states, "*Though very little is known about them, some Western films were made in England in the early years of the century*". It is true that beyond reviews in trade papers, very little information can be traced on these films. The chief producers were the American Charles Urban, the most cosmopolitan film maker in the British film industry, who might have been expected to show such an interest, and more surprisingly the Hepworth Manufacturing Company, a company based in rural Walton-on-Thames, and rather better known for delicate character dramas, happy comedies, and its use of the English countryside as a background. That there was some retrospective embarrassment in having made Westerns in Britain might be inferred from the absence of any mention of their production in Cecil Hepworth's otherwise very detailed autobiography, *Came the Dawn*. Some records of the production of early British Westerns do exist, however, such as this useful account in 1937 by film historian Leslie Wood, which pinpoints that sense of absurdity which no doubt silenced Cecil Hepworth (and also gave me the title for this talk):

With the introduction of the tax, British producers set about stealing a march upon their transatlantic cousins and started making a brand of cowboy and Indian films all their own - in more senses than one! Many of these 'horse operas', as the Americans call them, were made in Epping Forest and other more or less suitable locations on the outskirts of London. Old ladies enjoying a quiet picnic on Box Hill would have their idyll rudely shattered by the war-whoops of a dozen half-naked Cockney Cherokees suddenly appearing on the sky-line, waving tomahawks and lusting for blood. Countless 'Nells of the ranch' rode in chaps and Stetsons over the hills at Addington, Surrey, and scores of bad men in check shirts and sombreros plotted to steal the mortgage on 'the old mine' at Friern Barnet. Somehow they lacked an air of reality when seen on the cinema's screen of illusion. The horses, hired from livery stables, were but poor substitutes for the ponies

of the prairie, and the English lanes lacked that barrenness and dustiness which so stirred the imaginations of the followers of the American Broncho Billy. For many years the Americans were to send us films purporting to show English life against backgrounds dotted with eucalyptus trees and cactus plants and prickly pears; the Knights of King Arthur could chew gum and our courts of justice were represented as a cross between a three-ring-circus and a public auction, and we accepted it all without a murmur, apparently because we either thought the Americans knew more about our national life than we did ourselves or because, being foreigners, we couldn't expect them to know any better, but the cowboy pictures made in Surrey were quickly disclaimed by all right-thinking cinema-goers.

The tax Wood refers to he describes as a new duty of 2s 8d per pound weight of film exported from Britain to America over and above the previous 25% *ad valorem* payment, imposed in 1908. This however seems too specific an answer for what was more obviously a result of the general freezing out of foreign competition in America with the formation of the Motion Picture Patents Company trust in 1908. Whether the decision to produce Westerns was a direct response to economic rivalry, or any sort of an effective weapon, is doubtful, but there was certainly a panic feeling among British producers that they could not produce what a global market wanted. With a comparatively small home market they were heavily dependent on exports, and had to at least to try and make Westerns if that was what the public wanted. Equally a stubborn feeling that *'whatever they can do we can do just as well'* must have influenced the decision. After all, as Wood points out, *'the Western film or the Cowboy-and-Indian picture as it was known to every small boy, was a sure drawing card'*. British producers simply had to have a go. Wood also describes very clearly the sense of absurdity that the British Western brought about, a sense that has been constant throughout British Western filmmaking ever since - often a stumbling block, but just occasionally used well for its comic potential, or for an effective sense of otherness.

Very few of the British Westerns from this period, of which there were around thirty as you will see from the filmography, now survive. We have three to show you this evening, and no doubt unhappily for the spirit of Cecil Hepworth, one of them was made by his film company. It was made in 1906, two years before the main body of British silent Western production, and it must be described as the first true British Western, making its survival all the more remarkable and welcome. It is called *The Squatter's Daughter*, it was directed by Lewin Fitzhamon, the famous director of *Rescued by Rover*, and is rumoured to have been shot on Putney Common. It is less than sophisticatedly made, with a particularly unconvincing ranch house; there is continuing confusion over the correct appearance of American Indians, who are seen to carry spears, and the illusion is further shattered by the unmistakable greenery of the English countryside, but it is also great fun, and looks exactly as Leslie Wood said such films were. Dolly Lupone plays the heroine, Lewin Fitzhamon himself plays the hero, and look out for a somewhat unfortunate yacht sailing in the background during the Indian camp scene:

[THE SQUATTER'S DAUGHTER]

The next film features Britain's first, and possibly last, singing cowboy. There were even at this time short singing films being made, where silent films were synchronised to pre-existing music recordings, with sufficient accuracy to make them a popular feature of cinema programmes for a number of years. For most of the surviving British examples the film remains, but not the sound disc, which is the case with this example of the Walturdaw Cinematophone system, filmed in 1907. The song and the film are called *Fly Ann*, and not knowing what the original tune was like, our pianist will endeavour to come up with something appropriate, while we all try and lip read. Once again, exact ideas of what the West should look like are lacking, and our cowboy has quite the wrong sort of hat. We do not know the names of the performers:

[FLY ANN]

Leslie Wood referred disparagingly to '*cowboys picture[s] made in Surrey*', and indeed Surrey was a common location for British Westerns at this time, as it would later serve as the location for *Carry on Cowboy*. The Cricks and Martin firm, based in Croydon, made a number of Westerns, and the director of one of these, Dave Aylott, described how he went about producing such a film in his unpublished memoirs:

We once attempted to make a Western picture, and there were some very good paddocks and corrals on the adjoining estate that we used. We hired some real cowboy saddles, etc., and managed to get some good cowboy outfits complete with 'chapps'. There were some fine long-tailed horses in the paddock but not one to suit me. I was playing one of the parts, [A. E.] Coleby another, and Johnny Butt was supposed to be a treacherous Red Indian guide. I was supposed to have a rough-looking horse that also had to buckjump. We found the very thing in a gypsy camp and had it brought to the studio. But when we had saddled it and I mounted, the animal would not move, let alone buck. We tried all ways, even a chestnut burr under the tail, but it was no good. The gypsy who owned him said he could not understand his being so quiet, and when we told him to take the horse away as being no good, he said 'Wait a few minutes. I'll make him jump for you'. He dashed out of the gates to a little general shop a few yards away and when he came back said 'Jump on his back and hold tight'. I don't know exactly what he did, but I have an idea that he mentioned the word 'ginger'. Within a few minutes I was giving the onlookers a wonderful display of buck-jumping. I stuck to him like grim death until he reared right up and nearly toppled over on top of me as I slipped off. It was along time before he quietened down. We did manage to finish the film, but never afterwards did we attempt to make a cowboy film.

The memories of Wood and Aylott view the past with amusement, but it appears that at the time producers took their task seriously and hoped for the results to be convincing and commercial. The film Aylott is describing is *Twixt Red Man and White*, made in 1910, and that the Cricks and Martin publicity department at least had confidence in the film may be gleaned from its notice in a

trade paper, which gives a good indication of the sort of Western being made in Britain at this period:

'Twiixt Red Man and White. - An incident in the life of a backwoodsman, with realistic setting and splendid acting. A white trapper plays cards with an Indian whom he discovers cheating: a struggle ends with the apparent death of the Indian. The white man, fearing reprisal, hurries back to the settlement and tells his chums and all make haste to fortify their cabin. The inert body of the Indian is soon discovered by other members of the tribe, who swear revenge, and taking the trail, soon arrive at the settlement, which they immediately attack. A stout defence is offered, and the Indians are kept in check, but ammunition fails, and to save his comrades the hero of the story, notwithstanding the entreaty of his chums, gives himself up to the Indians, who march him off to their encampment, and hastily binding him to a tree, pile faggots round him, fire them, and enliven the proceedings by starting the weird 'Death Dance'. But the cheating Indian has in the meantime recovered his senses, returns to the white man's settlement and soon hears of his antagonist's fate. Accompanied by the rest of the erstwhile defenders, he follows the Indians to their camp and demands that the white trapper shall be released, and the quarrel settled by single combat. Each taking a knife, a terrific fight is engaged in, which ends in the Indian being disarmed. He bares his chest for the final thrust but the white man offers his hand in friendship, and what might have ended in a deadly feud is closed by a scene in which enemies intermingle and swear peace and goodwill 'twixt red man and white.

In its narrative and in its moralising, this is not unlike the sort of Western dramas being produced in America by D.W. Griffith for Biograph at this time, and shows that British film producers were taking serious note of and imitating American product. The plotting and performances were serious; it was the British backgrounds that let them down. That, and a certain lack of confidence which was making itself felt throughout British production, and could only be more pronounced when attempting to film the Wild West. But the films are now lost, and the evocative titles alone remain: *An Indian's Romance* (1908), *The Ranch Owner's Daughter* (1909), *Hidden Under Campfire* (1910), *The Sheriff's Daughter* (1910), *An Outlaw Yet a Man* (1912), *Through Death's Valley* (1912), A particular oddity must have been the Natural Color Kinematograph Company's *Fate* (1911), filmed in Kinemacolor and hence the world's first Western in colour. Also lost are the several parodic comedies made in which a comic figure, usually besotted with cowboy films, tries to become one in real life, with chaotic results made more absurd by the British setting. For instance Pimple (Fred Evans), Britain's most popular native film comic, made three such parodies: *Broncho Pimple* (1913), spoofing the schoolboy's favourite, Broncho Billy, *The Indian Massacre* (1913), which poked fun at such serious endeavours as D.W. Griffith's *The Massacre* and *The Battle of Elderbrush Gulch*, and finally *Ragtime Cowboy Pimple* (1915). You may also notice in the filmography a curiosity from 1914 with the splendid title *How Men Love*, directed by the author J.M. Barrie and the playwright Harley Granville-Barker. To find out more about this distinct oddity, which starred none other than Bernard Shaw and G.K. Chesterton, look out for my Museum talk on literary figures and film on June 30th.

The only other film to survive from this period is one of those very Westerns made in Surrey, *The Scapegrace*, directed by Edwin J. Collins for Cricks in 1913. This is a longer film than we have seen so far, and though it is poorly made, melodramatically acted and crudely racist in its depiction of the Mexican villain, it has many points of interest. The confusion over the exact nature of the American West continues, as we find Mexicans in the Yukon, and the locale seems to float between Alaska and Canada, but the headgear is getting more convincing, and we have gunfights and other thrills, including a quite impressive collapsing bridge. In its theme and structure it is most notable, because it tells of a dissolute Englishman forced to leave England in disgrace, who is then able to redeem himself in the West. The frontier land is somewhere wholly apart from the corruption of European society, where there is nothing to impede the progress to fortune of an Englishman if he has the stuff in him to make good. The film does not make nearly enough of this idea, the purity and potential of the frontier, but the germ of it is there nevertheless.

[THE SCAPEGRACE]

The small spate of silent British Westerns seemed to have come to an end in 1914 with the First World War and the gradual emergence of the feature film. The imposture of the Western could just be sustained while films were one- or two-reelers; not when the film ran for over an hour. Westerns largely, if not entirely, disappeared from British production schedules. Some continued to be made, with Cecil Hepworth still interested in the idea as can be seen from these stills for the comparatively ambitious 1916 production *Partners*, directed by Frank Wilson and starring Stewart Rome and Crissie White. The most interesting effort during the war period was a six-part series made by the Samuelson Film Company, *The Adventures of Deadwood Dick* (1915). This was co-directed by and starred Fred Paul as the Englishman Richard Harris who journeys to the Wild West for adventure, and proves himself as tough as any true Westerner. The West is seen as a testing ground of macho toughness, and Englishmen, though they would always necessarily be outsiders, could either be seen to be as surprisingly tough as their American cousins when it came to the crunch, or else were fastidiously different. This scenario was one to which British film makers would return. The incongruous Englishman out West was in any case to prove a standard figure in American films, from Charles Laughton's imperious butler in *Ruggles of Red Gap* (1935) to (by some curious irony) the real life Richard Harris, playing a masochistic lord undergoing a Sioux trial by strength in *A Man called Horse* (1970), and the self-glorifying 'English Bob' in *Unforgiven* (1992).

Somewhat surprisingly, there was a small return to Western film making in the immediate post-war silent period. The early 1920s were the absolute low point of British film production, crushed as it had been by the war and then by absolute domination by Hollywood, but they were also by

extension a period of experimentation, of 'we'll try anything once', when anyone might have a go (there were, for instance, perhaps more women able to be involved in filmmaking in Britain at this time than there would be for many years). Thus a handful of silent British Western feature films appeared. In *Jack, Sam and Pete* (1919) three cowboys rescue a kidnapped child. It was a starring vehicle for Percy Moran, the pre-war star of the stirring *Lieutenant Daring* adventure series, who clearly hoped to create a new character to excite a young audience. The film is now most notable, or would be if only it existed, because one of the trio in the title, Pete, was played by Ernest Trimmingham, Britain's first black film actor. *The Night Riders* (1920) was one of a handful of features made in Hollywood at Universal City by the adventurous producer G. B. Samuelson and concerned cattle rustlers in Alberta. Renowned war cameraman Geoffrey Malins made the humble *Settled in Full* in 1920, a conventional Western that in style looked back to the pre-war days, and for which a few production stills at least survive. *Little Brother of God* (1922) was a Western set in Canada about a man (Victor McLaglen) seeking the truth behind his brother's death. Produced by Stoll, the stolid leading British film company of the period, it was fatally compromised by being shot entirely in the studio. It does at least still exist, however, though I have not seen it, and a copy was not available for this evening's talk.

Rather more interesting, probably, were two adventures set in England starring a visiting American stuntman star of cowboy serials, Charles 'Hutch' Hutchison. British producers had just begun what was to be a long-running policy of importing minor American stars to brighten up their productions, and for the Ideal Film Company Hutchison made *Hutch Stirs 'Em Up* (1923), in which he rescues a girl from a wicked squire's torture chamber, and a sequel *Hurricane Hutch In Many Adventures* (1924) again brought cowboy thrills and spills to an unexpected English setting, with Hutch effortlessly moving from galloping on his horse to chases on motorcycles, cars and trains. Descriptions of these lost films from reviews of the time suggest that it would be rather fun if either were to turn up one day.

By the mid-1920s naive British Westerns seemed a thing of the past, and a new confidence and sophistication in the film making led to a film such as Anthony Asquith's outstanding *Shooting Stars* (1928), set in a film studio, which satirises the filming of a ridiculous cowboy romance, while all along a deadly love triangle unfolds between the three leading actors. The still here shows Brian Aherne and Annette Benson as hero and heroine on and off screen. British sound films saw a gradual increase in this confidence and quality which reached some sort of peak in the late 1940s. In the era of the studio-based feature film, serious imitations of the Western genre were not to be considered, partly because the Western itself had sunk to such a lowly status in American filmmaking in general. But the shadow of Hollywood hung over all that British film makers did, and the Western still represented the quintessence of American cinema. The 1930s

saw almost no interest from British film makers in going out West, but an honourable exception is the delightful *The Frozen Limits* (1939), in which the popular stage and film comedy team the Crazy Gang come across a news clipping that tells them there's a gold rush in Alaska. But it was an old clipping and they arrive in Red Gulch forty years too late. Undaunted, they find gold anyway with the help of a crazed miner (played by Moore Marriott) and have plenty of fun at the expense of American movie conventions, notably a troupe of sturdy but useless singing Mounties straight out of a Nelson Eddy picture. Far North rather than Wild West, but a film of continuous invention, absurdity and good humour.

There are two other feature films from the 1930s that fit the bill, at least as far as I can see, and both presage a growing interest in using British Empire settings as a substitute West, Britain's own version of frontier life. *The Great Barrier*, which was shown in NFT2 on Tuesday, was Gaumont-British's expensive attempt at an epic railroad Western along the lines of John Ford's *The Iron Horse*, only set in Canada, but a timid approach fails to do justice to the film's bold conception. The Gracie Fields comedy, *We're Going to be Rich*, an Anglo-American production, is set in the gold rush of the 1880s - the South African gold rush that is. The film was a poor vehicle for a star whose whole vitality disappeared once removed from an English setting, and was similarly anaemic as a Western, but was as enthusiastic in its defence of the Imperialist idea as had been *The Great Barrier*, which took as its theme the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway.

The Imperialist theme was to be taken up further as Britain started to respond once more to the challenge from America in the 1940s. At a time when industry chief J. Arthur Rank was dreaming of matching the international power of the Hollywood studios, the simple idea as it occurred to several producers was that Britain had access to its own stories of frontier life, in its Empire, or Empire that was: Africa, Australasia, Canada and India. It would be incorrect to view the many British films with these locations as all being Western-substitutes, and deciding where the dividing line might be is uncertain. But like the West, they are frontier lands, untainted by soft civilisation, where might be found a purer, more manly way of life.

The best known example is probably Ealing Studios' series of Australian films, which began with *The Overlanders*, directed by Harry Watt in 1946. Watt was renowned as a director of documentaries under John Grierson on the 1930s, and brought a peculiarly British realist aesthetic to this tale of an Australian cattleman driving his cattle across Queensland in 1942 away from a Japanese military threat. Much praised at the time for its documentary qualities, location photography and spectacular scenes of cattle drives, *The Overlanders* is a celebration of the uncomplicated, moral, manly Australian male, a modern cowboy with all the traditional values, on

Britain's side in the Second World War. British films have produced only two cowboy stars: one is Sid James, of course, the other is Chips Rafferty, who we see in this clip from *The Overlanders*, where Rafferty is leading his party and cattle across a crocodile-infested river:

[THE OVERLANDERS]

The style and values of *The Overlanders* seemed diametrically opposed to those of Hollywood, and it gained much patriotic acclaim. Watt and Ealing next turned to Australian history in 1947 with *Eureka Stockade*, the story of a famous nineteenth century clash between gold miners (again led by Chips Rafferty, with beard as we see in this still) and the British authorities, in which Watt's sympathies are with the rebels, championing their idealism and solidarity; and the somewhat later *The Siege of Pinchgut* (1959), another nineteenth century tale of Australian rebellion against British rule as escaped convicts are besieged on a small island. Among Ealing's other Australian ventures was *Bitter Springs* (1950), directed by Ralph Smart, featuring yet again Chips Rafferty as a trekker who finds that the land he has been promised by the government is claimed by aborigines, with whom he fights before coming to learn that the only solution is peaceable coexistence. A thin production and weak direction spoiled a potentially interesting confrontational film.

Other Australasian adventures produced in Britain in the 1950s include *Robbery Under Arms* (1957), a nineteenth century drama about bushrangers involved in cattle rustling and bank robbery; and *The Seekers* (1954), directed by Ken Annakin, unusual for being set in nineteenth century New Zealand with British settlers being besieged (and massacred) by Maoris, here serving as substitute American Indians.

After Australia, which photographically made an excellent substitute for the American West, came Africa. Especially South Africa this meant, the setting for perhaps the most blatant British attempt to reinvent the West as their own, *Diamond City* (1949), directed by David Macdonald for Gainsborough, and showing in NFT2 next Monday. Set in the diamond fields of the 1870s, the story is based around the rivalry between a tough miner (David Farrar) and a scheming rum trader (Niall MacGinnis) which results in much rough-and-tumble fighting, notably a lively saloon bar brawl between Honor Blackman and Diana Dors. Its Western borrowings are surface, a plagiarism that thinks that all you need to make a Western is to give a guy a stetson to wear, but the sheer cheek of the placing of every Western cliché you can think of into a South African setting makes *Diamond City* a lot of fun. After his Australian adventures, Harry Watt next brought his realist eye to two African adventures for Ealing, *Where No Vultures Fly* (1951) and *West of Zanzibar* (1954), but exoticism and Technicolor animal life are what count here, not the distinctive

challenges and values of frontier life. More obviously aping Westerns, but unmemorable and weak in production values is *Golden Ivory* (1954), which concerns a wagon train passing through the East African jungle in the 1890s, the predatory natives as usual substituting for American Indians.

Other corners of the British Empire were less popular among British film makers, Canada being the inspiration behind the uninspiring adventures *The Naked Heart* (1950), *Fighting Mad* (1956) and *High Hell* (1958), where all invention was exhausted in the would-be exciting titles. Rather surprisingly India has only seldom been the backdrop to British feature films, and the only title from this period that could conceivably be taken as a Western substitute is the delightful *North West Frontier* (1959), directed by J. Lee-Thompson for Rank, in which Kenneth More and Lauren Bacall guide a steam locomotive through rebel-held territory, a skilful blend of comedy and suspense that simultaneously mocks and magnifies the kind of enterprising Englishman More specialised in portraying.

Kenneth More was also the star of the one of the best-known of British westerns, *The Sheriff of Fractured Jaw* (1958), directed by the American Raoul Walsh. More plays an English gunsmith with a fear of guns (naturally) who journeys out West in the hope of selling them to the Indians. He is inadvertently declared a gun-slinging hero by the town of Fractured Jaw, and being made its sheriff, manages to resolve the town's feuds, befriend the Indians and marry Jayne Mansfield. As in virtually all parodies of the Western genre, the humour lies in the contrast between the masculine demands of the West and the timidity of the unwilling hero. The resolution of the comedy must be that the West can only be a land for heroes, and even a bowler-hatted, tea-drinking Englishman who has to take lessons in pistol shooting from a woman can win the day. Unfortunately the director of *The Big Trail* and *They Died With Their Boots On* proves very heavy-handed when it comes to parodic farce, and though More was in 1958 at the very peak of his popularity and the film contained more than enough of his typical self to keep the fans happy, the piquant teaming with Mansfield does not shine as it should.

A far less well-known and now seldom seen Western parody is the low budget *Ramsbottom Rides Again* (1956), directed by John Baxter, and starring Arthur Askey. Certainly it would be hard to imagine anyone less Cowboy-like than Askey, which is the film's chief source of humour. Haughtily reviewed in one quarter as '*a shapeless hotch-potch of weak slapstick, doubtful music-hall humour, old gags and unsuccessfully aimed satire*', from another quarter more sensitive to its target audience came a far more positive assessment:

Bow-legged, pint-sized Bill Ramsbottom - that's Askey, of course - the owner of a North Country pub, finds himself also the owner of land in remotest Canada bulging with

uranium. But from the word go, the oddest and most unexpected people keep complicating life. Jerry Desmonde, for instance, as Big Chief Eagle; Sidney James as the Bad Man of Lonesome Gulch; Frankie Vaughan trilling a Western lay or two; and Sabrina as a beautiful Redskin squaw. It's as North Country as black-puddings and trotters, and much more hilarious. Big-Hearted's myriads of admirers will revel in every minute.

As expected, the puny Ramsbottom manages by good luck and the rules of parody to thwart evil Black Jake and clean up the town of Lonesome. But as the reviewer has pointed out, you are never meant to believe that film's reality lies anywhere other than on a North of England music hall stage.

Common to *Sheriff, Ramsbottom* and to what is probably the most enduring of the British Western parodies, *Carry on Cowboy* (1965), apart from the inevitable theme of the Englishman triumphing in the playground of the West, is the presence of Sid James. South African by birth, his British career began in the mid-1940s with second feature crime melodramas, his crumpled features and rasping growl making him seemingly suited for only a very narrow range of roles. But he proved remarkably adaptable, as demonstrated over these three films, where his conventional 'heavy' persona is converted from the expected hardened cowboy baffled and bested by the eccentric Englishman who somehow bypasses the rules, into a full comic character with depth. In *Carry on Cowboy* he has graduated to star status as Johnny Finger, 'The Rumpo Kid', the cattle rustler who turns the staid Stodge City into a riotous haven for the lawless before Marshal P. Knutt (played by the knock-kneed Jim Dale) comes along to clean up the place - literally so, since he is a drainage expert, sent down to Stodge through an understandable confusion over his first name. Though it borrows motifs from many Westerns, most obviously *Destry Rides Again* and *High Noon*, the film owes the greatest debt to *The Sheriff of Fractured Jaw*, with the shared theme of a timid Englishman come to sell his wares, being made a lawman by accident, receiving shooting instructions from a woman he falls in love with, and triumphing by his own peculiar methods over the bad guys. But Sid James, a sideline cowboy drunk in *Sheriff*, now gives *Carry on Cowboy* a richer edge than maybe it deserves with his wisecracking, amoral Rumpo Kid, who can in one performance encompass someone who sees that his horse is nicely tucked up in bed at night, to a look of affecting panic at the film's climax when Knutt shoots down all of Rumpo's men around him by exploiting the town's (surprisingly sophisticated) drainage system. *Carry on Cowboy* goes part of the way to creating a good spoof of the Westerns, but as with all of the 'Carry On' series comic invention and sterling performances are held up by scriptwriter Talbot Rothwell's predilection for juvenile puns and non-visual wordplay. But Sid James (and honorary mention to Charles Hawtrey's laid-back Indian Chief) helps makes the film maybe the best British Western there is.

However, a very good candidate for the best British Western could, paradoxically, be a film not normally considered a Western at all. *The Third Man* does take place in post-war Vienna, which doesn't immediately suggest the Wild West, but watch it again some time and remember that the hero, Holly Martins (played by Joseph Cotten), is a writer of Western novels, and see how he unwittingly plays a parody of a character from one of his own books, a stranger who wanders into town, bumblingly and unwillingly hunts down the bad guy, and it all ends in a shoot-out. A shoot-out in a sewer system, which is precisely what we get at the climax of *Carry on Cowboy* as well, which might possibly suggest that Talbot Rothwell was a more subtle thinker than we give him credit for.

By the close of the 1950s the studio system in Britain was coming to an end, and the 60s were to see a considerable rise in American investment and production talent in British film production; and when this was withdrawn the late 60s and 70s saw an increasing number of international co-productions. All of this made British film far less parochial, in many cases the Britishness hard to define at all, and a number of 'straight' Westerns were now made, though they form a curious collection.

Most remarkable and rewarding among this collection is Roy Baker's *The Singer Not The Song*, made in 1960. Set in Mexico, it tells of an Irish priest Father Keough (played by John Mills), newly arrived in a village, who is subjected to a programme of intimidation by the vicious bandit Anacleto (played by Dirk Bogarde). But Anacleto finds himself strangely drawn to the priest as time passes. The relationship deepens, complicated by their both being loved by Locha (Mylene Demongeot), tomboy daughter of a local landowner, and in a street battle climax both men are shot dead, the priest believing at the last that Anacleto has repented, Anacleto saying that he fell for the priest and not his religion, '*the singer not the song*'. With its virtual admission of homosexuality, and Dirk Bogarde quite extraordinary as the *angst*-ridden bandit done up in black leather, *The Singer Not The Song* is a bold and unusual film for its time, but one with serious intent. Good cannot exist in isolation; it is dependent on evil. Love of God and human love are not the same thing. Roy Baker is an always interesting director, whose detached style consistently reveals what Raymond Durnat calls '*a kind of fair-minded pessimism ... that stoic British acquiescence in arbitrary order*'. But Durnat also pinpoints that Britishness as being the film's abiding weakness:

Artistically, the film's flaw is, perhaps the Englishness creeping into the playing of the three principles. Dirk Bogarde's feline ways are only just steely enough to enable belief in his atrocities, while Mylene Demongeot seems vainly waiting for a chance to unleash her sadness. The film's defect is not a matter of merely superficial verisimilitude, for this Mexican village is clearly 'everywhere'. Through English restraint, the metaphysical

conflict lacks, at times during this engrossing and admirable film, the continuous intensity which Baker might well have reached more easily with an American cast.

The British Western may be filmed abroad (*The Singer Not The Song* was filmed in Spain), but its heart remains at home. This has to be its defining feature; it is meaningless to speculate about Baker making the film with an American cast since that would be another film entirely. The film's uncertainties are a part of the whole. Our next clip is the final shoot-out sequence from the film, showing most clearly its Western borrowings and its attempt to use these in a symbolic way, a universal dilemma in a place that could be anywhere, at any time. It also serves, of course, as a tribute to Sir Dirk Bogarde, who died on Saturday:

[THE SINGER NOT THE SONG]

The remaining Westerns of the 60s and 70s are, not surprisingly, an odd hotpotch of locations and styles. Ken Annakin's *The Hellions* (1961) is a throwback to the Empire as pseudo-West, an attempt to restage the Gunfight at the OK Corral in 1860s South Africa, with a direct violence that presages the emerging style of the Italian Westerns. The evil Billings family take over a small town and subject it to a reign of terror until police sergeant Sam Hargis (played by Richard Todd) and a timid storekeeper rout them in a climactic and rather clichéd gun battle. *The Trap* (1966), by contrast, is set in nineteenth century British Columbia and concerns the developing relationship between an uncouth trapper (Oliver Reed) and his frightened new wife (Rita Tushingham) in the Canadian wilds. A British/Canadian co-production, it is only tangentially a Western, and only tangentially British.

A throwback to the Harry Watt African adventures of the 1950s is the transparently titled *Africa - Texas Style* (1967). An English settler in Kenya (John Mills) hires two Texas cowboys to assist in his idea of wild game ranching, and despite conventional mishaps along the way, the plan succeeds. The script is tedious, the location photography the star as it generally is with such African adventures, and the whole unambitious affair calls out for television (indeed it became in effect the pilot for the American television series *Cowboy in Africa*, made for ABC in America by the film's producer Ivan Tors, with Chuck Connors as a rodeo rider in Kenya assisting on a ranch). Much bolder in conception and budget was *Shalako* (1968), directed by Edward Dmytryk, in which a cowboy (Stephen Boyd) acts as a guide to pampered aristocratic European big game hunters in New Mexico; they blunder onto Indian territory but are saved by US cavalry officer turned cowboy Shalako (Sean Connery), who leads the survivors away from attack by Apaches and ensures their safety after defeating the chief's son Chato (Woody Strode) in single combat. An interesting and appropriate idea, placing the incongruous English with their ingrained attitudes and unshakeable habits at the mercy of the West at its most brutal, but it never quite takes off, an

example of the big budget flops (Warners in this instance) that would cause the recent flood of American production investment in British films to dry up. It is perhaps most distinctive for displaying a direct violence learnt from the Italian Westerns, which they in turn had partly learnt from *The Hellions*. But American money, an American director, Spanish locations, and a polyglot cast (including Brigitte Bardot) - little beyond a few character actors mouthing snobberies seems particularly British about *Shalako*.

The boundaries blur further into the 1970s. Is *Ned Kelly* (1970) a British Western? Filmed and set in Australia, the life of the notorious bushranger Kelly (played by Mick Jagger) was made by Tony Richardson's Woodfall Productions and hence goes down as British. The anonymous *Catlow* (1971) was filmed in Spain, made by American Sam Wanamaker, produced by MGM, and stars Yul Brynner and Leonard Nimoy. It too goes down as British. *Chato's Land* (1971) returning to the historical Apache figure seen in *Shalako*, now played by Charles Bronson, with Michael Winner orchestrating the violence, counts as British, though his *Lawman* (1970) made for the same production company, does not. And *Billy Two Hats* (1973), concerning the friendship between an ageing Scottish outlaw (Gregory Peck!) and a young half-breed (Desi Arnaz Jr.) was filmed by Ted Kotcheff in Israel (briefly a rival to Spain as a location for cheap Westerns) and again the Britishness of the exercise is negligible. British money in the co-productions *A Town Called Bastard* (1971, Anglo-Spanish) and *The Man Called Noon* (1973, Anglo-Italo-Spanish) makes these conventional violent spaghetti Westerns of the period British on paper if nothing else, and the imitation-*Westworld* sci-fi Western *Welcome to Blood City* (1977) is Anglo-Canadian. *Charley-One-Eye* (1972), produced by David Frost, is wholly British-financed, but this ponderous allegorical tale of the relationship between a black Civil War deserter (Richard Roundtree) and an Indian (Roy Thinnes) appears only British by virtue of its cheapness. As Richard Combs observed, 'imagine Stanley Kramer making an Italian Western in Spain on a lean British budget and doing his best to accommodate hints of Third World agitprop ... then the result could well be *Charley-One-Eye*'.

With little or no production base in Britain, and the idea of an actual British film industry something that existed only in the minds of campaigning newspaper columnists, British films themselves were a rarity in the 1970s. That there were a handful of Westerns made reveals more about how the spaghetti Western had revitalised the form and attracted maverick producers, as well as the cheapness and convenience of Spain as a suitable location. One British Western of interest did emerge at this time, however, *Eagle's Wing* (1979), directed by Anthony Harvey and made for the venerable Rank. Why the stolid company that built up the British film industry and then suffocated it should chose to finance an allegorical Western about an Indian (Sam Waterson) pursuing a trapper (Martin Sheen) who has taken a dead Comanche's horse, is

unclear. Beautiful to look at, sometimes thoughtful, and set not so much in the West as in some abstract wilderness, it is the last serious true British Western made to date.

It is interesting that the two most recent British Westerns have been parodies, not of the classical Hollywood Western, but instead of the Italian Westerns that revitalised the genre in the 1960s, but are now too consigned to history, having had their say. It would be more accurate to describe Alex Cox's *Straight to Hell* (1986) as a *homage* to the spaghetti Western than a parody, though it would be even more accurate to describe it as a dishevelled mess. Set in a present-day Spanish-speaking country, such a plot as there is concerns three robbers and their confrontations with the McMahon gang in the town of El Blanco, but this spoof of every spaghetti Western convention that they can think of is ruined by in-jokes, incredibly sloppy film making, and a cast of non-acting rock musicians.

A Fistful of Fingers (1995) was produced by a group of very young film makers from Wells in Somerset for just £10,000. It is a spoof of the Sergio Leone spaghetti Westerns, and concerns the battles between bounty hunter Walter Marshall (the name of the Man with No Name) and The Squint. It is rock bottom cheap, and gets many of its jokes from its evident poverty. Hence the horses that they ride are pantomime horses, and the backgrounds are very patently English countryside scenes, even a pub garden. The enthusiasm of the performers and the film makers is obvious and pleasing, though many of the jokes are so bad even *Carry on Cowboy's* indiscriminating Talbot Rothwell would have rejected them. It does pinpoint something of the spaghetti Western style, but what is perhaps most of interest about it in a historical survey of British Westerns is that it is like a throwback to the humble efforts of the early silent period. Filmed unashamedly beneath English greenery, like *The Squatter's Daughter* it raids the pantomime chest, does things as cheaply as it can get away with, doesn't convince us for a second, and everyone involved clearly had a whale of a time.

[A FISTFUL OF FINGERS]

British Westerns are obviously a contradiction in terms. We don't have the West - we lost it in 1776, and no amount of pretending Australia or South Africa can act as substitutes will change the fact. Nevertheless there has been this stubborn strain throughout British film history which resents 1776, and has been trying to get back at the Americans ever since their cinema first became dominant in the early years of this century. The British have made their own relatively conventional Westerns, at home and abroad, they have parodied the form, they have protested that the frontier lands of the Empire offer just as much of a challenge, and are just as entertaining, as the American West. They have even appropriated Western filmmakers and put them in a

British milieu - look at John Ford's only British film, the police drama *Gideon's Day*, or Sam Peckinpah making *Straw Dogs* in Cornwall. But like the overall glamour and power of Hollywood itself, the Western is something we can't have.