

## BOOKS

'A good plan, violently executed now, is better than a perfect plan next week.' —George S. Patton

## Film Is Hell

## Making 'Patton'

By Nicholas Evan Sarantakes  
Kansas, 258 pages, \$34.95

BY FRANK GANNON

BISMARCK FAMOUSLY said, of laws and sausages, that they are best not seen being made. Surely the same could be said of movies. Happily, Nicholas Evan Sarantakes feels no such qualms. "Making 'Patton'" supplies the tortuous—and fascinating—back story of the hugely successful 1970 biopic. Like the movie, the book has a large cast of characters, including swashbuckling moguls and ornery actors. Offstage, but ever present, is Gen. George S. Patton, "Old Guts and Glory," the very real figure behind the semi-fictional Hollywood concoction. The most interesting player in the book's whole company, though, is not a fabled name but the largely unknown producer Frank McCarthy, for whom getting a movie made about Patton was a magnificent obsession.

McCarthy (1912-86) wanted to go to the University of Virginia, Mr. Sarantakes tells us, but ended up at the Virginia Military Institute, a detail that would play a key role in his career. Upon graduation he was undecided among four occupations—the Army, theater, newspapers and teaching—and so decided to try his hand at each, starting with the first. Some memos he wrote caught the eye of Army Chief of Staff (and VMI alumnus) George Marshall, who brought him on staff. In short order the young officer was spending weekends at Hyde Park with FDR and meeting Stalin, de Gaulle and Churchill, whose daughter Sarah he dated. At one point, when Churchill's preferred smoke wasn't available, McCarthy found himself changing the labels of cheap cigars until a new supply arrived. McCarthy also met George S. Patton, another VMI alum.

Everyone hated the opening Francis Ford Coppola wrote, with George C. Scott declaiming in front of a screen-filling American flag. Producer Daryl Zanuck insisted it stay.

In 1948, McCarthy found himself in Hollywood working as a producer for Darryl Zanuck at 20th Century-Fox. McCarthy believed that military storylines were inherently dramatic, "because the minute you use the word 'war' suspense is built in." And he believed that Patton himself was intensely cinematic: "He was theatrical in his speech, theatrical in his manner, theatrical in his manner of dress. He was flamboyant." Zanuck shared—and, more to the point, backed—McCarthy's vision of putting Patton's story on film. Thus Patton became a movie idea called "Patton," and the clock on the project began ticking in 1951.



BLOOD AND GUTS AND SAND George C. Scott in costume as Patton during the filming of Franklin J. Schaffner's 1970 film.

It took another decade before 20th Century-Fox announced its intention to make the film. Then the fiasco of "Cleopatra" (1963) nearly bankrupted the studio. A few years later, "Patton" was back on track, and various directors, writers and actors came and went. John Huston, a director candidate, was offered his name in the title: "John Huston's The Life of Patton." John Wayne and Burt Lancaster were the frontrunners for the title role, along with Gregory Peck, Lee Marvin, William Holden and Rod Steiger. Robert Mitchum was dismissed as too fat; Ronald Reagan was deemed not sufficiently heavy.

Franklin Schaffner, was opposed to opening the film as Mr. Coppola had written it, with Patton addressing the audience while standing in front of a screen-filling American flag. It was thought that such a striking, and strikingly photographed, monologue would make the rest of the picture seem anticlimactic. But Zanuck was for it, and that scene is now part of film history.

By the time shooting began in February 1969—17 years after McCarthy first proposed the project—the world was a very different place. There was trepidation at the studio about how an America mired in Vietnam would welcome an almost three-hour war epic. Indeed, Vincent Canby's review in the New York Times said that "Patton" was "likely to strike terror into any rational person who refuses—perhaps absurdly—to believe that war is man's most noble endeavor."

In those more decorous days, the studio was also worried about the screenplay's salty language. It was the merest shadow of what Patton called his "eloquent profanity," but it was more than the mass-movie audience was used to. Reagan, now governor of California, wrote to McCarthy expressing his admiration for the film. Of the language, he wrote: "I've never believed that I was a total square and have never been opposed to the use of anything absolutely essential to the telling of the story. It did not offend me in the slightest that you had Patton talking as Patton talked."

The man delivering Patton's words was, of course, George C. Scott, a great actor and a real piece of work. His

drinking during the filming of "Patton" resulted in the loss of entire days, Mr. Sarantakes tells us, and his petulance was Oscar-worthy. When his script rewrite suggestions were rejected, he told a reporter that he was disgusted by the whole project and ashamed of being a part of it. Although he went to lengths to look like Patton—wearing a receding hairpiece, using putty to make his nose more aquiline—he decided to keep his own distinctive gravelly voice. Today, thanks to YouTube, anyone who is interested can hear the real Patton's higher-pitched voice and Southern-inflected locution.

The canard was spread—by Henry Kissinger, among others, Mr. Sarantakes suggests—that President Nixon pumped himself up by repeated viewings before he invaded Cambodia in April 1970, shortly after "Patton's" premiere. In fact, Nixon's interest in Patton's life and leadership was longstanding, and the film was screened only three times at the White House and Camp David.

"Patton," now considered one of the important films of the 20th century, has achieved the rarefied cinematic status that comes from being parodied by both "The Muppets" and "The Simpsons." Mr. Sarantakes concludes his superb story by saying: "If you have not yet seen 'Patton,' do so. It is a good film." If you have seen it, then read "Making 'Patton'" and see the film again with fresh appreciation for its mastery and a new amazement that it ever got made.

Mr. Gannon, a former aide in the Nixon White House, works with the Richard Nixon Foundation.

## E-READING: BARTON SWAIM

## Fast &amp; Foolish



ON FEB. 15, 2011, a gang of armed thugs gathered around an SUV on a remote highway in San Luis Potosí, Mexico. The two

Americans inside, both federal agents, prepared for the worst yet reckoned that they would be safe in a fully armored car. But when one of the thugs tried the door, it opened. The car doors had automatically unlocked when shifted into park—an idiotic feature of some GM vehicles. In the ensuing firefight, one of the Americans, Jaime Zapata, was killed.

Within eight days the Mexican government had arrested the killers, but what was it all about? As Mary Cuddehe notes in "Agent Zapata" (The Atavist, \$1.99), the prevailing rule had long been that, whatever else Mexican gangs and cartels did, they didn't harm agents of the American government. The killers themselves—members of a crime syndicate called Los Zetas—claimed that they thought the agents belonged to a rival group. Yet the SUV had diplomatic tags.

The whole affair is riddled with such oddities, the weirdest of which is this: The gun that killed Jaime Zapata had been bought on American soil; its seller was well known to federal authorities.

This last detail leads Ms. Cuddehe to examine the Zapata affair in light of the allegations of "gun walking" leveled against the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, most notoriously in the case of Operation Fast and Furious. Having whetted our appetite for scandal, however, she quickly backs down: "The larger failures of the governments on both sides of the border—of the U.S. to curtail the easy access to high-powered weapons, of Mexico to stamp out the corruption that had allowed the cartels to rule much of the country with impunity—were the culprits that no one wanted to blame." Actually many people blame those culprits. But that hardly absolves the federal bureaucrats who dreamed up "gun walking"—the convoluted scheme that allowed weapons to slip into the hands of Mexican cartels—so as a legitimate way to deal with cross-border crime. Despite its too-hedged conclusion, "Agent Zapata" is a solid work of journalism with the narrative drive of a true-crime story.

"The Convert" (Amazon, \$1.99) by Oliver Broudy has narrative drive, too, but that drive is constantly impeded by the author's moral pontifications. It is the story of Erin Mounsey, an average, likable guy who, in 1999, got caught in a house fire and sustained severe burns to his limbs and face. From there Mr. Mounsey's life began a long descent that led him, eventually, to embrace evangelical Christianity.

His longtime girlfriend, unable to cope with Mr. Mounsey's altered appearance, left him, took legal possession of most of his belongings and would later sue him for a considerable sum. His behavior became erratic and intermittently violent. Ignored by strangers who found his appearance shocking, Mr. Mounsey suddenly felt invisible and so in some way beyond morality. Without paying, he walked out of a grocery store with a champagne bottle, just to see what would happen. From there things only got worse, and Mr. Mounsey would spend more than three years in prison for robbery. Yet it wasn't at this point that he converted to Christianity; it was afterward, when his circumstances had at last turned around—he found a wife, also a burn victim, and took a good job with the American Red Cross—and he found himself unable to understand why any of it had happened at all.

Mr. Broudy is capable of writing with clarity and wit, but "The Convert" is a cumbersome tale. Again and again Mr. Broudy feels it necessary to interrupt the story's flow with disquisitions about how an atheist would interpret the dire events of Mr. Mounsey's life. In moderation and with a little charity this might have enhanced the story. But these repeated sermonettes seethe with hostility toward theism generally and Christianity especially. He is fond of zingers like this one: "All that's necessary to believe in Him is that your desire to be a better person is greater than your regard for common sense." Mr. Broudy's characterizations of "atheism," by contrast—he thinks of it as a doctrine with tenets—are laughably self-congratulatory. "One of atheism's core convictions," he writes, is "that all people are equal, and should be treated as such." Was that one of Chairman Mao's core convictions?

If you happen to think belief in God is evidence of either stupidity or excruciating life circumstances, you may find much to enjoy in "The Convert." I don't, and didn't.

## The Folk Songs All Around Us

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contraption made of two washboards mounted on a sawhorse outfitted with bells and rattles and tin plates. On the band's reworking of a fiddle instrumental and staple of Opry performers, "Soldier's Joy," he taps out a flawless, syncopated beat on his custom rig, his fingers capped by sewing thimbles.

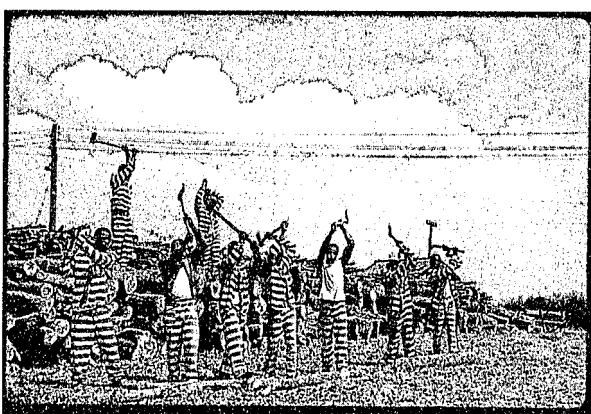
Some songs were strictly private, held close and dearly guarded. At first, Alabama housekeeper Vera Hall didn't want to share her rendition of "Another Man Done Gone," a chain-gang blues song she had learned from her convict husband. She hesitated, explaining, "I never sing it except to myself." Hall's haunting a cappella version from 1940 has inspired covers by artists from Johnny Cash to Odetta. At record's end is the voice of the recording field worker telling Hall, "That's perfect."

Luther Strong of Kentucky made the most of his big moment. Jailed for public drunkenness in 1937, he was bailed out by the Library's indefatigable Alan Lomax, who had caught wind that the 45-year-old father of nine was the best fiddler around. Fortified by a pint of whiskey provided by Lomax, Strong recorded 29 songs in a Hazard, Ky., hotel room in a marathon session, what Mr. Wade calls "a virtuoso survey of Southern fiddle repertory."

After ripping through a favorite called "Glory in the Meetinghouse," Strong blurts out, "I've won \$500 on that tune," the amount it had earned him at local fiddling contests. Mr. Wade details how this self-taught musician was able "to call upon the prized dissonance of the high lonesome sound" and transform an old-time mountain dance tune into a "piece of art to be listened to and appreciated."

The book's most colorful character, cowboy fiddler and singer Jess Morris, never tired of explaining to the world how he put his thumbprint on a stan-

dard of the Old West, "Goodbye, Old Paint." His files at the archive bulge with a paper trail that builds a solid case for Morris as the song's principal innovator, giving it the form it took as it reached the mainstream. Jess was 7 when he learned the song in 1885 from a horse breaker on his father's Texas ranch, a former slave who played it on a Jew's harp. A cowhand by trade, Mor-



WORK SONGS Inmates of the Mississippi State Penitentiary, nicknamed "Parchman Farm," photographed by Alan Lomax in 1939. He and his father, John, first recorded musicians there in 1933, and he kept returning for three decades.

ris arranged "Goodbye, Old Paint" for fiddle and recorded several versions over the years, including a 1942 session in Dallas for the Library of Congress. Backing himself on fiddle in a halting waltz time, he bellows out the words at top volume, evoking the open range and the age before amplification. He had to wait for his rough-and-ready rendition to reach the public while matinee cowboy stars like Tex Ritter enjoyed success with slick covers of what Morris considered his song.

Mr. Wade is a banjoist and interpreter of this music, and he knows his Baptist shouts from his hollers and arhoolies. He follows every twist and turn of the "Rock Island Line," from its origins as a booster-club song for a railroad company to its 1934 Library recording by an Arkansas prison-farm quartet to its rock-era incarnation by U.K. skiffle singer Lonnie Donegan, whose hit record in

1956 stoked the musical ambition of a teenage George Harrison and helped kick-start the British Invasion. With nearly 100 pages of endnotes, "The Beautiful Music All Around Us" has an encyclopedic scope. At times, though, there is a tendency to oversell these artists as exemplars of weighty academic themes. Mr. Wade chases ostensibly carefree lyrics into thickets of variant texts, parsing lines of playful nonsense as if they were verses from the "Aeneid." In his case study of

"Shortenin' Bread," Mr. Wade traces the song back to 1892 and notes that Ora Dell Graham's reworking "expresses a symbolic reversal, turning poverty into plenty. . . . Ora Dell takes a plain but desired food, rooted in subsistence, and converts it into strength." Sometimes a jump-rope rhyme is just a jump-rope rhyme, however artfully rendered.

For folk-song enthusiasts, "The Beautiful Music All Around Us" is a treasure trove of scrupulous research and on-the-road reportage, bolstered by interviews with more than 200 people. Rare family photos add to the superb documentation and give faces to the voices, as in the case of Ora Dell, memorialized in the only snapshot that can be found. Like the Library's albums that inspired it, the book offers readers a chance to hear the music described in its pages, thanks to a supplementary CD featuring the artists and songs profiled. There isn't a dud in the bunch.

Besides the field recordings themselves, the best tributes to these long-departed folk come from surviving family and friends. They remember the performers with fondness, whether a dutiful mother like Texas Gladden, who sang while doing chores, or a wayward father like Luther Strong, prone to drunken sprees, only to later sober up and make amends the best way he knew how, by pulling out his fiddle.

"He'd get up early in the morning and play them old, sad tunes," recalls Strong's daughter Faye, who once had to fetch him from the back of the mail truck after the postman, finding him passed out by the side of the road, brought her father home special delivery. "He'd have such a faraway look when he'd play them. We just thought his music was all there was."

Mr. Dean is co-author of Dr. Ralph Stanley's "Man of Constant Sorrow: My Life and Times" (Gotham).