



Written by [Steve Byas](#) on May 30, 2013

Interview With Ron Maxwell on His New Civil War Movie “Copperhead”

Copperhead, scheduled for release June 28, is based on the 19th-century novel of the same name by Harold Frederic. The movie, like the novel, is representative of actual events in upstate New York in 1862 and 1863. Dairy farmer Abner Beech opposes the war waged by President Abraham Lincoln in the name of preservation of the Union. Like other peace Democrats in the North, he is disparagingly called a “Copperhead” — a venomous snake — by ardent supporters of the war who view his stand as unpatriotic and even treasonous.



This is the third film by director Ron Maxwell set during the Civil War. The first two are the widely acclaimed *Gettysburg* and its prequel *Gods and Generals*. The new movie stars Billy Campbell (most recently in *Killing Lincoln*), Angus MacFayden (*Braveheart*), and Peter Fonda. (In the photo, Maxwell, right, is shown with Fonda.)

The New American: *This is your third movie on the Civil War. What has captured your interest in the War Between the States?*

Ron Maxwell: It started in my youth, when my dad used to take my younger brother and me to historical sites. We’d go up in northern New Jersey. Historical sites we visited that were colonial, American Revolution, French and Indian War sites. We’d go up to Lake Champlain, Lake George, and we would visit Fort Ticonderoga. My earliest memories were being read to, James Fenimore Cooper. Then when I could read myself, in first or second grade, I just continued with great curiosity and great adventure. I was just steeped in American history and American biography and American literature from my earliest memories.

Somewhere along the way, certainly by junior high school years, I started reading about the Civil War, such as [the books of] Bruce Catton. But I didn’t get focused on the Civil War as material for film-making until I read *The Killer Angels* in 1978, and I optioned the novel. Then I met Michael Shaara, who wrote it. Growing up in New Jersey, I was far from any Civil War battlefields. My first visit ever to a Civil War battlefield was Gettysburg. I got a personal tour over three days with Michael Shaara. We did the battle of Gettysburg as *he* saw it, through his novel. We spent three days going over the battlefield as he revealed it through his fictional account, so my active engagement with the Civil War as a filmmaker didn’t start until then. Now, as everyone knows, from the time that I read the book in ’78, until the time the film came out in theaters, was 15 years. I didn’t think it was going to be 15 when I started, but I guess I was lucky it wasn’t 20, or never.

Shortly after that, I thought I was done with it, quite frankly, but a year or so after that, I realized a couple of things had gone on. There was an incredibly warm response to the film, from critics, and moreover, from the public. I got a lot of mail. People were deeply moved by the film, so I realized there



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was a demand in the marketplace for this type of film. Michael Shaara's son, Jeff, and I talked about it, about creating a trilogy of novels with the same characters before and after Gettysburg. Michael Shaara had died in 1988. So, that's what we did.

The first film was *Gettysburg* in 1993, and it took 10 years, trying to get it "the prequel" financed, until *Gods and Generals* was on the screen. Now, it has been another 10 years, to where we are releasing *Copperhead*. So, it wasn't like I started out saying I want to make Civil War movies. It has evolved; my interests have evolved, changed.

In retrospect, looking back on it, I think the first two films, taken together, are a cinematic meditation on why good men — honorable, ethical men — choose to go to war. We examine that in the men who wore blue, and in the men who wore gray. As you know, I took a lot of criticism from the mainstream media for treating the men in blue and gray equally. I looked into their hearts and tried to understand what motivated them. I got a lot of flak because some in the mainstream media don't want to look upon any man who wore a Confederate uniform as a full human being. But be that as it may, I make my movies as I am called to make them. So the first two movies are a cinematic presentation of why good men choose to fight, or choose to go to war.

The film *Copperhead*, which takes place during the same time, and with the same conflict, the American Civil War, explores cinematically why good and honorable, ethical, moral men choose *not* to go to war. I found the novel *The Copperhead*, and I wasn't necessarily looking to explore that notion, but when I came across the novel, I was receptive to it. It fell on fertile ground with me. It was a worthy novel to bring to the screen, it was a story that needs telling. It is a story that has not been told in the popular culture, the story of the anti-war peace Democrats, during the Civil War.

TNA: *Bill Kauffman wrote the screenplay for Copperhead. What was it in his background that you thought prepared him to take on this project?*

Maxwell: I met Bill sometime in the mid-nineties. I met him at D.C. at a conference, and I was really impressed with what he had to say, and subsequently read his non-fiction. He is just a brilliant writer; he writes with such precision and insight. I was impressed with his honesty. He is devoid of cant and propaganda. He is a free spirit, a highly educated man, who is trying to understand the world that he lives in. He is widely and deeply read, and he is just a clear-thinking man. I appreciate that when I see it, when I see people speaking, when I see it written. I appreciate clear-thinking people who won't just regurgitate somebody's party line, regardless of what that party line is. I was impressed with him as a man, I knew he wasn't on somebody's payroll, wasn't anybody's shill, and so many people are just on somebody's payroll: They are just selling something, and he isn't. The more I read his work, the more I appreciated it. He also has a great sense of humor.

As years went by, Bill came to me with a project that he thought would make a great story, about a United States senator who became vice president of the United States, under Martin Van Buren. His name was Richard Mentor Johnson. He was a senator from Kentucky, which as we know was a slave state. He wound up falling in love with an African-American woman, a slave, that he inherited when his father died. What was unique about this story was that they fell in love and they got married, which was against the law at the time. Despite violating the conventions of the time, he was a senator and ran for vice president and won and served as vice president, with an African-American wife. It was a story most people don't know, and we wanted to explore that. We thought it was a great subject for a film. We developed it into a screenplay, and it was a learning curve for Bill, because he had never written a screenplay before, so I acted as his mentor, and not surprisingly, he was a quick learner, and he wrote a



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really beautiful screenplay based on that. It was not a novel, but rather an original screenplay. [The screenplay has not yet been turned into a motion picture. — editor's note]

So, I knew he could write a screenplay. We had dinner one time, and I don't remember whether he brought up or I brought up *The Copperhead* and what a great movie it would make. We had both read it. It is in print now, but it was out of print. It was a forgotten novel. Most of the novels of Harold Frederic, who wrote in the second half of the 19th-century, are mostly forgotten, but he was a wonderful writer. I call him the Charles Dickens of upstate New York. If you want to know about rural America in upstate New York in the 19th century, he's the guy. Just like you can learn about Victorian England from Charles Dickens. So, we decided to adapt that novel to a screenplay, and that is how it started.

TNA: *People like me love the study of history, and I know I am not alone in loving these movies that are history-based. There are so many great stories from history that could be put onto the big screen, why do you think so few are actually made?*

Maxwell: I've certainly run up against this wall of resistance over a lifetime. When I look back at the historical films that I have made, it is almost miraculous. Had I not met up with kindred spirits who love American history as much as I do, not one of these Civil War movies would have been made. In the case of the earlier two [*Gettysburg* and *Gods and Generals*], Ted Turner had this great passion. He grew up in the South, he went to the Citadel, and he loved American history. He loved Civil War history, and had he and I not met, I am convinced that those movies would have never been made. And if they had been made, they would not have been made with the artistic freedom with which they were made. Once we decided to make these movies, Ted Turner gave this filmmaker complete creative freedom. As we know, he has a lot to say, he has his opinions, and he is not shy about expressing them, but every time he would express an opinion, he would say, "You are the filmmaker, Ron, and I want to protect the artistic integrity, so it is your choice."

So, love them or hate them, they are the work of a filmmaker. Nobody told me how to make them. Nobody forced me, nobody edited them, nobody abridged them. They are *my* personal interpretation of those stories. Yes, it is a business, it is entertainment, but it is also a work of art. Let's face it. Movies are a work of art, good, bad, or ugly, or whatever you want to call them, and works of art have to be made most of the time by one person, who is the synthesizer. Five people don't paint a picture. In the case of most pictures, it takes hundreds of people to execute it, all of whom have to bring their skills and their art, and their brilliance, and their experience to make it happen, but the synthesizer is the one intellect.

So, I have been very fortunate that I have been able to do anything. Without meeting such people, if you had to rely on the studio system we have in Hollywood, it would be next to impossible. As the saying goes, necessity is the mother of invention, and we have a different way to finance this type of movie. Without the financing, the movie would not be made. From the time I started in the business 40 years ago, it has been increasingly difficult to make movies about history that are *serious* American history, or any kind of history. Now, you see a lot of costume dramas, just turn on cable television, but that is not the same thing. That is putting people in costumes and such — the French Revolution, the Renaissance — and creating stories about who's sleeping with who, who's cheating on who, who is stabbing the other guy in the back. They're soap operas set in a different time period. They are not really historical films. It is tougher now than it has ever been to make serious historical films, but look, if it were easy, then everybody would be doing it.



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TNA: *In the movie Copperhead, Abner Beech commented that Abraham Lincoln did not have the authority to issue the Emancipation Proclamation. Was there any consideration or discussion that even if the proclamation were constitutional, it didn't actually free any slaves anywhere, since it applied only to slaves outside of Union jurisdiction?*

Maxwell: Of course, you are citing a fact that anyone who has studied the Civil War must concede as true. But I think the other side of that coin that people would say with equal moral force is that it had a galvanizing effect on the abolitionists in the North, and it had a galvanizing effect on the slaves themselves who happened to be in the border states or in the Confederacy. We don't get into any of that in the film because all that Abner Beech is talking about in that scene was the constitutional issue. This was kind of a theme with him, and again this is from the novel in the 19th century by Harold Frederic. He is a Jeffersonian Democrat, and he believed that you just have to take the Constitution seriously — that it was put together in a certain way, to protect the individual; that the Founders knew what they were talking about; that they had lived through tyranny from George III and that they knew human nature being the way it is; that this Constitution would protect the liberty of mankind for generations forward. He took it very seriously. It was not just a violation of the Constitution, but the usurpation of power. Beech was commenting that if this is something the American people want to do, it should be done legislatively, by making a law through the Congress. One man can't do this.

It is interesting that in the film that came out last year [*Lincoln*], the whole film is about the 13th Amendment. You can see in that film that Lincoln understood that that proclamation would not hold unless you had a constitutional amendment. He understood that it could be challenged later. In essence, Abraham Lincoln is agreeing with Abner Beech that it is unconstitutional even though Lincoln believed it morally correct that he should have done it, but [Beech believed] that you have to do it by law. So, it is interesting that both of these movies comment on the same issue.

TNA: *After you made Gods and Generals, the prequel to Gettysburg, your intent was to do a movie about the post-Gettysburg Civil War that would continue the story through to Lee's surrender at Appomattox. Is that still a possibility?*

Maxwell: Yes, as I mentioned earlier, Jeff Shaara and I decided to make two novels, one a prequel and one a sequel, to Gettysburg. *Gods and Generals* is the prequel, and *The Last Full Measure* is the sequel. It was a best-seller, just like *Gods and Generals*. We certainly hope to someday do it. *Copperhead* has lot of scale and a lot of scope, but it has no battle scenes. Once you have battle scenes, such as the Wilderness campaign, you are talking about a lot of money. Perhaps, if we get lucky with *Copperhead*, and it is a viable, commercial success at the box office, then the odds of making *The Last Full Measure* are greatly enhanced.

Photo: Ron Maxwell (right) with Peter Fonda

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