

friendly to them in no way diminishes its relevance or accuracy. Simply put, *The Bill Cook Story* is a good read. Maybe someday Frank DeFord will give us the definitive work on Bill Gates or John Feinstein will trace the rise and fall of Bernie Madoff.

MORTON J. MARCUS is director emeritus of the Indiana Business Research Center, Kelley School of Business, Indiana University Bloomington and Indianapolis.



Steve McQueen *The Great Escape*

By Wes D. Gehring

(Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society Press, 2009. Pp. xxxvi, 272. Illustrations, appendix, notes, bibliography. \$19.95.)

In his absorbing new biography, *Steve McQueen: The Great Escape*, Wes D. Gehring continues his role as a keen observer, a skillful writer, and a genuine movie buff who openly admires the spirit of his subjects. This thorough and engaging book, the latest of Gehring's Hollywood biographies, recounts McQueen's humble Hoosier beginnings, his early television success as a tough-guy bounty hunter, and the numerous films that made him the biggest movie star of the early 1970s.

Gehring begins his biography with McQueen's "train wreck" of a childhood. Born in Beech Grove, Indiana, in 1934, Steve McQueen never knew his father. His mother periodically abandoned the boy, shrugged him off on relatives, or took up with abusive alcoholics who turned their fists on him. The insecure child grew into a moody womanizer with a temper and a thirst for danger.

As a teen, McQueen was an incorrigible risk-taker, a poor student

who suffered from dyslexia and took up with Indianapolis gangs to commit petty robberies "as a relief from boredom" (p. 13). In his early 20s, McQueen began a life of acting almost by accident; he was drawn to the New York stage because it allowed him to sleep late in the mornings and work only a few hours at night. McQueen realized that his life had already prepared him for a career as an actor; playing a variety of roles had been a survival tactic for years. "Acting," he once said, "beats stealing hubcaps" (p. 24).

McQueen joined peers James Dean and Marlon Brando in studying the Method technique. His naturally understated style and his physical charisma brought him to the attention of his teachers and casting directors. He rode the Western genre to success on the small screen and, soon after, became a film star in classics such as *The Thomas Crown Affair* and *The Getaway*. McQueen was a hard

worker, Gehring insists, who devoted hours to mastering his props, and the actor's inclination to hide his emotions worked well for him; audiences perceived McQueen as exuding a kind of troubled mystery.

As Gehring takes the reader through the highlights of McQueen's career and personal life, he balances discussion of the actor's harsher traits with quotes from those who loved him, and provides anecdotes that reveal his lesser-known humorous side. Gehring recounts, for example, the great passion (and volcanic arguments) of McQueen's love affair with and eventual marriage to Ali MacGraw.

Steve McQueen was candid about his flaws and the reasons behind them. At the root of his life story was the fact that, despite his ability to recognize the deprivations that shaped him, he was unable to get out from under them. Because of this, the book ends on a somewhat melancholy note. After a lifetime searching for a way to prove himself and for "a

safe place" (p. 233), McQueen was unable to make peace with the pain and chaos of his early life until his final years, before his death from cancer at the age of fifty.

Gehring quotes McQueen as saying, "I've done everything there is to do but a lot of my life was wasted" (p. 205). His biographer poignantly disagrees. Believing that the actor squeezed as much living into his short life as possible, albeit much of it self-destructive, Gehring points to McQueen's humility, talent, and devotion to his two children as the star's real legacy. An unabashed fan of McQueen's great escape from both his hardscrabble Indiana childhood and his life-long personal demons, Gehring reminds his readers that "we will always have the films" (p. 242). Thanks to this touching and highly readable new biography, readers will regret that there are so few.

ANDRA ST. IVANYI is a freelance writer and screenplay analyst. She lives in Los Angeles.



American Insurgents, American Patriots
The Revolution of the People

By T. H. Breen

(New York: Hill and Wang, 2010. Pp. 337. Notes, index. \$27.00.)

This Violent Empire
The Birth of an American National Identity

By Carroll Smith-Rosenberg

(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010. Pp. xxii, 484. Illustrations, index. \$45.00.)

The theme of violence has been surging to prominence in the writing of

early modern American history, and these two books by senior historians