

Raves for Steve McQueen:
Portrait of an American Rebel

"Extensive interviews with those who knew and worked with the star...Through it all, McQueen emerges as a compulsive, insecure, fiercely driven man whose competitive nature was always on view...a life as colorful as many movies."

—Chicago Tribune

"Absolutely fascinating."

—The Flint Journal

"Sifting through a mountain of interviews with McQueen's friends and co-workers, Terrill charts the actor's progress, presenting a complete description of the making of such films as *The Great Escape*, *Billitt* and Sam Peckinpah's *The Gataway*...Terrill doesn't hold back."

—Washington Post Book World

"His story is fascinating—a kid who had nothing, got everything, and spent the rest of his life worrying that somebody would take it away...The account of his last days is harrowing."

—Cosmopolitan magazine

"Well-researched life of film actor Steve McQueen (1930-1980), who packed two or three lives into his 50 years."

—Kirkus Reviews

"Well-documented...balanced...Terrill [is] a welcome and serious biographer."

—Tulsa World

"Well told and documented with a dynamic feel for the paradox behind a gentle yet savage man...the reporting is so solid that accounts of McQueen's meeting with Ali MacGraw on the set of *The Gataway*, his emotional breakdown after the failure of *An Enemy of the People*, and his last pained words (revealing a renewed spirituality) ring with a potent authenticity."

—Films in Review

Paninis

Donald I. Fine, Inc.
19 West 21st Street
New York, N. Y. 10010



ISBN 1-55611-414-1

STEVE McQUEEN

STEVE McQUEEN

PORTRAIT OF AN AMERICAN REBEL



BY MARSHALL TERRILL

tomorrow or never. That's it." MacGraw later commented, "Not exactly moonlight and roses, but pretty much in character."

There was still the business of the prenuptial agreement to be taken care of. Paranoid that Ali would take him to the cleaners if they ever divorced, Steve held out the papers for Ali to sign before they took a trip to the altar. "Before we were married," says Ali, "he made me sign a prenuptial agreement that there would never be any alimony. I was scared to death of his disapproval, and his rage was gigantic. You never knew what his mood would be."

The wedding was to take place in Cheyenne, Wyoming. Steve wanted no press, so he took the pains to make it as hard as possible for the paparazzi to find the glamorous couple. Terry, Chad, and Joshua were rounded up to be a part of the ceremony. The plan was to fly halfway to Cheyenne, then rent a truck, drive into town unannounced, and be married by a justice of the peace. MacGraw described the unromantic setting of the night before the wedding: "We checked into one of those basic avocado-and-orange, shag-carpeted Holiday Inns. Steve and Chad shared one hard little bed, while Steve's daughter, Terry, and I were in another. Josh was in a rented crib under the coat rack, a rather hyper two-year-old surveying us with a baby bottle half-full of celebratory champagne."^{*}

Justice of the Peace Arthur Garfield received a phone call on July 13, 1973, while playing a round of golf. "Hi, this is Steve McQueen. I'm in town and I'd like you to marry me and Ali MacGraw today, if that's possible," said the famous movie star. Garfield was not convinced it was McQueen, but he did sound awfully convincing. "Yes, sir, it is me," said Steve. Garfield instructed McQueen to meet him at the courthouse. "Well, sir, I'd kind of like to be married under a big shade tree with lots of green grass around." Garfield complied.

Garfield instantly recognized the famous couple and married them right away, with the children as witnesses. The groom wore a short-sleeved plaid cowboy shirt with snap buttons and blue jeans. The bride and bridesmaid wore matching white shirts and plaid shorts. It would be representative of their lifestyle back in Malibu.

On July 20, 1973, actor Bruce Lee died of a severe brain hemorrhage. (Many rumors floating around Hollywood contradict the official reason for his death.) Lee and McQueen had become rivals after Lee got into the movie business. McQueen had been the highest-paid movie star in

^{*} MacGraw, Ali, *Moving Pictures* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), 105.

the world when he received \$2 million upfront to star in *Papillon*. Lee then topped that when he was paid \$3 million to star in *Enter the Dragon*. Lee bragged to James Coburn, "I did it! I made more money than McQueen!" Coburn added, "Well, then McQueen came back in *The Towering Inferno* and blew him away."

The last time the two men saw each other, Lee had conquered Hong Kong triumphantly and was now a bona fide star. With money rolling in, he was thinking of buying a brand-new Porsche. "I'm finally gonna get my dream car," Lee boasted in his broken English. McQueen told Lee, "Before you buy one, why don't I take you for a ride in mine and then you can see how it handles? It's not a toy, and you've really got to know what you're doing. Why don't I come by and give you a test drive?"

McQueen picked up Lee and proceeded to winding Mulholland Drive. He told Lee, "Hold on, I'm going to take it through its paces." Then he revved up the Porsche to nearly 150 miles an hour around the curves. Steve acted as if this were a normal speed. Lee, however, was a white-knuckled passenger, a man not in control of an out-of-control situation. All he could think about was the impending doom. "Watch how I can slide it through these tight curves," said McQueen. Lee was cringing. Steve announced, "Now, watch how this baby can do a beautiful 180." And Steve downshifted, slammed on the brakes, spun the car around, and did a 180 in the middle of the road. He then went full speed back in the other direction. "Well, Bruce, what do you think?" McQueen looked over and Lee was not in his seat. "Where the hell did he go?" said a mystified McQueen. He pulled the car over and came to a stop. Lee came up from the floor screaming, "McQueen! You crazy muddafucker! I kill you!" McQueen roared with laughter until he looked into Lee's eyes. The karate expert was livid. McQueen began to accelerate the car again. He told Lee, "Bruce, I'm going to drive as fast as I can until you calm down." Lee put his hands up and conceded, "Okay, okay. I'm calm, Steve." Surprisingly, Lee went out and bought a Porsche anyway.

Despite any jealousy between the two men, Steve was asked to be a pallbearer at the funeral, along with James Coburn and Chuck Norris. They flew to Seattle, the site of Lee's American funeral. (Lee also had a funeral in Hong Kong.) Coburn delivered a beautiful eulogy and everyone who attended was in tears. That is, everyone but Steve McQueen. "We were all saddened by his death," says Coburn. "I think that I felt more saddened than Steve. Steve didn't feel that much because he wasn't that emotional of a guy. He wasn't sentimental about anything. He would hold it all inside."

* * *

Steve was growing weary of the movie industry. His success meant he had the luxury of shooting one picture a year. Even at that pace, it was getting to be too much. He admitted, "Sometimes I wish I was Jack Warner's son and didn't have to work."

Back in the fifties, when Steve was having difficulty getting out of his contract with Four Star to do *The Magnificent Seven*, he threatened to leave Hollywood and go to Australia to become a sheep farmer. The shoot from *Papillon* had left him exhausted. He wanted to get on with his life with Ali. Freddie Fields was instructed to come up with a "sweet-heart of a deal." Steve also added, "No out-of-state locations for the next one. Gotta be right here in California. And I want some fat percentages. That's where the heavy bread is. Get me one!" One thing Steve always was a quick study. He learned early on that "they can kill you on net, but on gross you make out like a bandit!"

For his next film, *The Towering Inferno*, Steve not only made out like a bandit, but made enough money from its gross profits that he could have never worked again if he chose to do so. He would eventually earn a staggering \$12 million just from the one film.

Steve had always admired Fields's tenacity. "I need someone who isn't afraid to play dirty," he said. Fields came to Steve with the biggest movie deal of the year: \$1 million up front with 7.5 percent of the box office gross.

Producer Irwin Allen spawned a fad in the early seventies with the release of *The Poseidon Adventure*. Heavy-duty special effects and stunts were the key to its success. It was the first of many disaster movies that would follow.

Allen held a simple theory of why so many moviegoers enjoyed such movies: "Survival is the key. The brave and the weak all in it together, fighting for their lives. I believe there is a bit of Walter Mitty in everyone. People get a delight out of escaping into movies. They watch the actors face enormous obstacles and conquer them. When they come out of the theater, they tell themselves, 'I could have done that, too.'" *The Towering Inferno* would be the biggest, grandest, and best disaster movie of all.

It is not uncommon in Hollywood for different studios to be working on the same type of picture and release them at the same time to a less than enthusiastic reception. It had happened just two years earlier with *Junior Bonner*. Two other films on the subject of the modern-day rodeo were released in the same month, and all had died a quick death. The

same was about to happen with *Day of the Champion* and *Grand Prix*, until Jack Warner pulled the plug on *Day of the Champion*.

Twentieth Century-Fox was interested in the rights to a book titled *The Tower*, written by Richard Martin Stern. *The Tower* was the story of a fire in a tall skyscraper. Fox, hoping to repeat the success of *The Poseidon Adventure*, was bidding for it, with Allen contracted to produce and John Guillermin set to direct.

The other big studio in town, Warner Brothers, outbid Fox, finally shelling out \$390,000 for the rights to the book. It looked as if Fox were "outfoxed."

That is, until just three weeks later, when Allen received a proof of the novel *The Glass Inferno*, written by Frank Robinson and Tom Scortia. Fox immediately snapped up the rights to it, paying \$300,000 for the privilege. It was then that Irwin Allen came up with an idea that would make history in the motion picture industry.

Allen suggested that the two studios join forces rather than compete with one another. Both studios could see money being thrown out the window if they released two separate movies. "Actually, it was the amazing similarity of the two novels that brought about the marriage of the two studios to cosponsor the film," said Allen.

"Both were concerned with high-rise fires in unusually identical circumstances. We all felt it would have been foolhardy to compete in a race to beat each other to the box office with the same movie, so we formed an amalgamation to create a single blockbuster script from the two books and to share the costs and rewards."

In October 1973 a deal was hammered out between the two monster studios, both agreeing that Irwin Allen would produce and direct. Warner Brothers and Twentieth Century-Fox issued a statement on their temporary and historical partnership:

It's as though General Motors and Chrysler combined their respective brainpower and manpower and went Dutch treat on the bill to produce a new model automobile.

For the first time in motion picture history, two major studios have effected a union to make a single movie. The movie is Irwin Allen's production of *The Towering Inferno* and the cooperative companies are Warner Brothers and Twentieth Century-Fox.

It all came about because each studio had purchased a different literary property dealing with the identical subject: to wit, a modern-day skyscraper wrapped in flames with a lot of big and little people trapped in the sky.

With more than three-quarters of a million dollars invested in the

books, it only made sense that the two companies should join hands and pocketbooks and make a big thing out of what might have been two lesser ones.

Warners and Fox not only put a lot of money, excitement and "movie magic" into *The Towering Inferno*, but they amassed a collection of star actors as dazzling as their salaries.

Fox and Warner Brothers were to split the production costs right down the middle. The latter would release the picture abroad, and Fox would be entitled to the U.S. release, splitting all profits evenly.

A record-breaking fifty-seven sets had to be built, only to be burned down by the end of the shoot. One hundred stuntmen had to be hired and were to be paid five times the normal fee for performing some spectacular and oftentimes dangerous stunts.

Four different camera crews worked simultaneously over a spread of five different locations. Actual shooting of the film took only seventy days to complete.

Holding true to his new policy of not granting interviews to the press, McQueen told both studios he would not give the movie any type of publicity. Under no uncertain terms would he promote the movie. "I don't need the publicity and I don't want it," he told them.

The film got more promotion out of Steve's real-life heroism than any interview he could have given. On May 6, 1974, Steve and Ali had been going over some preliminary instruction with Los Angeles Battalion Chief Peter Lucarelli, who had been hired for *The Towering Inferno* as the technical adviser. While the three were talking, an alarm sounded and a call was taken by Lucarelli, informing him to report to a fire nearby at the Goldwyn Studios. Two stages were engulfed in flames. Lucarelli offered to take Steve along, saying, "I'll show you what it's really like to fight a fire. Maybe you can learn something."

Never one to back down from any danger, Steve took the battalion chief up on his offer. The blaze, it was learned, had started out as a freak accident. The entire cast and crew of a new children's show, *Sigmund and the Sea Monsters*, were assembled on the soundstage when suddenly a large spotlight burned and shattered. Sparks fell everywhere along the set. The fire started when it hit highly flammable polyfoam that was being used as a prop cave in the show. Suddenly, without notice, the soundstage had become covered in flames. The people on the set headed toward the exit doors. One door wouldn't open, which left only one door through which to exit. By the time all the members of the cast and crew were out, a list of casualties arrived at the hospital, the most serious one being a man in critical condition with 75 percent of his

body burned. Others suffered from smoke inhalation. The heat from the fire was so intense that twenty-five cars parked in the studio lot were reduced to a pile of ashes.

Next in line were the production offices. The hope was to save them from the fire.

When Lucarelli, McQueen, and MacGraw arrived at the lot, they found 200 firefighters attacking the blaze. Lucarelli immediately began gearing up in a helmet, jacket, and boots, and Steve followed suit. He gave Ali a quick kiss on the cheek and headed toward the fire. Ali warned him, "Be very careful in there."

As Lucarelli and Steve entered the building through a lower floor window, they grabbed onto a hose and began dousing the fire. A firefighter on the hose across the way glanced over at the newcomers, did a double take, and announced, "Holy shit! Steve McQueen! My wife will never believe this!" Without missing a beat, Steve said, "Neither will mine."

While Steve was inside battling the fire, outside Ali was wringing her hands. Ever the supportive wife, she said to a reporter on the scene, "He has to do his thing, I know. But, this fire! I'm really afraid for him."

An hour later, he emerged from the ruins. Red-eyed from the smoke, and a few pounds lighter from the heavy protective gear, a sweaty Steve spotted Ali. She rushed up to him and whispered, "Thank God you're all right." He grabbed her by the hand and led her to the car, where they departed the studio lot.

The estimated damage from the fire was \$80 million. The publicity Steve "didn't want or need" made headlines across the country.

Not only did Steve emerge from the fire unharmed, but he came out with a newfound respect for firefighters, as only McQueen could put it: "These guys [firefighters] really hold their mud. The difference between me and them is that I'm paid millions of dollars. This poor firefighter is doing it for a few hundred and he's putting his life on the line every day."

The Towering Inferno gave Steve the opportunity to surpass his friendly rival, Paul Newman, in terms of stardom. It had all started in 1956 on the set of *Somebody Up There Likes Me*, when McQueen looked on from the sidelines as Newman got the star treatment. It went on from there. It was Newman who was originally sought out for the lead in *Love with the Proper Stranger*. [That next year, Newman was on top of the list for *King Rat*.] McQueen was offered the part only after Newman had turned it down. Then in 1966, it was Newman who was approached