

Jeremiah Johnson

US : 1972 : dir. Sydney Pollack : Columbia / Warner : 116 min
prod: Joe Wizan : scr: John Milius & Edward Anhalt : dir.ph.: Andrew Callaghan
[Josh Albee](#)
Robert Redford; Will Geer; Stefan Gierasch; Delle Bolton; Charles Tyner; Allyn Ann McLerie;
Joaquin Martinez; Paul Benedict; Matt Clark; Richard Angarola; Jack Colvin

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω 8 € M ⚡	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
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**“ Some say he’s dead...
Some say he never will be! ”**



*Jeremiah with his mountain mentor Bear-Claw Lapp (Will Geer) who insists on addressing him as “Pilgrim”
Source: Movies of the Seventies*



Johnson and Caleb chance on a trapper and scalp-hunter who has fallen foul of the locals. "You alright?" Johnson asks warily. "Sure am" the bald man replies, "and I got a fine horse under me!" Source: Sight & Sound

Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide
1996 review:

"Atmospheric chronicle of the life of a mountain man, surviving wintry wilderness, indians, rival trappers. Unfortunately, the film doesn't know where to quit, rambling on to an inconclusive ending. Geer is delightful as a feisty mountain hermit. Script by John Milius and Edward Anhalt. Shot in Panavision. *** "

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review – identical to above

Halliwell's Film Guide review:

"In the 1850s an ex-soldier becomes a mountain trapper. Splendidly made if rather desultorily plotted adventure story with the feel of raw reality. Scr: John Milius & Edward Anhalt; dir.ph: Andrew Callaghan ** "

The Good Film and Video Guide review:

" "No-one knew where he came from, but it didn't matter much," says the theme song, "he wanted to be a mountain man." Robert Redford plays, colourlessly, this legend in the making, fighting or loving indians and guiding cavalry through the mountains. Intended as an examination of the pioneer spirit, this film emerges as a commercial balance of high adventure and comedy. * "

Movies on TV (1987) review:

"Off-beat, visually beautiful Western about a loner in the mountains of Utah shortly after the Mexican-American War. Redford hunts, lives off the land, and acquires an indian wife during the course of his picturesque adventures. *** "

The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television review:

"Robert Redford, in private a keen conservationist, shows how man can live idyllicly in the wild. He marries an indian

but offends the tribe and they kill her¹. He spends the next years exacting a terrible revenge. Narratively the film is flat; Sydney Pollack's direction is irritatingly tricky. 3"

The Time Out Film Guide review:

"A flawed but immensely appealing film adapted in part from Vardis Fisher's "Mountain Man", a superb historical novel which explores the myth and the reality of the tough trappers who roamed the unconquered West in the 1850s. Shot on location in fantastically beautiful, desolate snowscapes in Utah, the first part of the film is terrific: tenderfoot Redford's first, baffled steps in the battle for survival; the weird encounter with a corpse frozen upright in the snow which provides him with his first real gun; the old man of the mountains who takes time out from hunting grizzlies to teach him how to fish, trap beaver, tell one indian from another, and stay alive.

After this things switch from documentary to picaresque adventure, and John Milius' script begins to stumble uncertainly. But it does come back on course towards the end as the indians, half-worshipping and half-contemptuous, begin their hunt for the strange white man who has broken their taboos and disappeared into the snows – the legend of the West in the making."

TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995 review:

"The actor-director team of Robert Redford and Sydney Pollack (responsible for **"THREE DAYS OF THE CONDOR"**, **"THIS PROPERTY IS CONDEMNED"**, **"THE WAY WE WERE"**, **"THE ELECTRIC HORSEMAN"** and **"OUT OF AFRICA"**) scores again with this spectacularly shot yarn of a mountain trapper and his adventures near the American-Canada border in the 1850s.

Episodic in structure, the film is kept constantly interesting by its director who fills the screen with colourful little anecdotes – like the discovery of Hatchet Jack, frozen dead in the mountains, his last will and testament around his neck ("I

Hatchet Jack, being of sound mind and broke legs.."); or an eerie journey through an indian burial ground.

Supporting characters are minor, but richly delineated by the likes of Will Geer, Matt Clark, Charles Tyner and especially former musical star Allyn Ann McLerie as a "crazy woman" who exists to tend the graves of her massacred family. Stunning snowscapes lend the action a primitive grandeur. *** "

Variety Movie Guide 1993 review:

" **"JEREMIAH JOHNSON"**, based on Vardis Fisher's novel, "Mountain Man" and a story, "Crow Killer", by Raymond W Thorp and Robert Bunter, is a sort of man of whom legends or sagas are made. Pic leans toward the latter as it meticulously, *sans* grandiloquence, lays out the life of a male dropout, circa 1825, who decides to live in the Rocky Mountains as a trapper.

Director Sydney Pollack has given a skilled, observant mounting as he carefully allows the man to grow in experience and knowhow. Robert Redford, as Johnson, has a solid stamina, a fine feel for the speech of the time, giving an auto-didactic flair as he sometimes comments the actions.

He begins to trade with the indians and wins the esteem of a Crow nation chief to whom he gives a present, to find he must accept the chief's daughter in return. The film has its own force and beauty and the only carp might lie in its not always clear exegesis of the humanistic spirit and freedom most of its characters are striving for. "

Video Movie Guide 1993 review:

"Robert Redford plays Johnson, a simple man who has no taste for cities. We see him as he grows from his first feeble attempts at survival to a hunter who has quickened his senses with wild meat and vegetation – a man who is a part of the wildlife of the mountains. **"JEREMIAH JOHNSON"** gives a sense of humanness to a genre that had, up until its release, spent time reworking the same myths. Rated "PG". **** "

¹ Inaccurate, his wife was Flatfoot, the offended tribe were Crow



Avenging his wife and boy, Johnson becomes an exterminating angel to the Crow tribe. The Indians believed that a tribe's greatness was measured in the greatness of its enemies, so he found himself locked into an escalating spiral of attacks and challenges from Crow braves. He had not come into the mountains to wage a one-man war, and as time passes he begins to think of pastures new.

Source: Film Review 1973-74

The Virgin Film Guide review:

"Slow as molasses. Redford stars as a lone wolf who dislikes civilisation. He moves into the Rocky Mountains in the 1830s but is barely managing to stay alive when trapper Geer meets him and takes him under his wing. For a year Redford learns all the basic skills of survival in the wilderness, and then he's off on his own. When he comes upon a settlement that has been wiped out by marauding Indians² who have left only a woman, now deranged, and her son alive, he buries the dead, transports the woman to a ferry³, and adopts the boy.

Later, he finds another rugged trapper, bald Gierasch (who shaves his head so that the Indians will not attempt to scalp him), left buried up to his neck. Redford rescues him and later, when they raid an

Indian camp, Gierasch scalps several of his victims. When they are again on the trail, Gierasch spots advancing Indians and puts the scalps into Redford's pack. The Indians are not hostile, however, and when they discover the scalps of their enemy in Redford's possession, he is hailed as a great warrior.

These Flathead Indians insist that the chief's daughter, Swan (Delle Bolton)⁴, be given as a wife to Redford. Rather than risk insulting the tribe and losing his own scalp, the young trapper takes the Indian woman with him. They all form a bond of deep affection as they carve out a cabin and clearing in the wilderness. All is tranquil until a U.S. cavalry unit arrives and asks Redford to guide the troopers through the mountains to a stranded wagon train of settlers. He does,

² a single homestead, in fact

³ no he doesn't

⁴ Hang on, did you tell us who plays the boy? No? Thought not.

reluctantly leading the soldiers through the sacred Crow Indian burial grounds.

Beautifully photographed in the wilds of Utah, this film unfortunately doesn't know when to stop; it feels consumed by a self-conscious desire to be arty, and offers a treatment too cool for its subject matter. The dialogue, by John Milius and Edward Anhalt, is full of homespun homilies that undercut the attempted seriousness. Of the small cast, Will Geer steals the film. The story is purportedly based on the experiences of a real trapper known as "Liver-eatin' Johnson", so called because of how he disposed of his victims.

Not until the very end of the shooting did Pollack decide how Redford would meet his fate. "Pollack wanted me to freeze to death," Redford was later quoted, "but I preferred to leave Johnson's fate up to the audience's imagination by having him disappear into the mountains." That ambiguous fate is exactly what happened to the real Johnson, and it's one that befalls Redford in the film. ***1/2 "

Film Review 1973-74 review:

"Extremely well told tale of a young man who at the turn of the century or thereabouts decides to opt out of life and becomes a lonely, self-sufficient Mountain Man on the slopes of the Rockies. But ironically it is only through the help of his fellow men that he survives to fight through to self-sufficiency. Superb scenic backgrounds, fine acting and an air of cold conviction. Screenplay: John Milius & Edward Anhalt, based on the novel "Mountain Man" by Vardis Fisher and "Crow Killer" by R.W. Thorp & R. Bunker. Released January 14th. Certificate "A" "

"There was a pleasant, snowy air of conviction in Columbia-Warner's **"JEREMIAH JOHNSON"**, an extremely ably told tale of the young man of the title who decides to opt out of civilisation (as it was at the turn of the century) and becomes self-sufficient along the slopes of the Rockies, a tough pilgrimage which teaches him a great deal about himself in particular and life in general. In the title role Robert Redford turned in a sterling performance."

The Warner Bros Story review:

"JEREMIAH JOHNSON" was a grass-roots story of an ex-soldier in the middle of the last century who has opted for a life of solitude and contemplation in the mountains. Not as easy a thing to do as he had anticipated, he finds himself having to wage constant battle against the elements as well as hostile Indians. His tribulations are nothing, however, compared with the battles director Sydney Pollack waged with the studio in an attempt to have the film shot on location rather than on the back-lot.

Pollack won a Pyrrhic victory, and was allowed to take his crew to Utah with the proviso that he was not to spend a cent more than the movie would have cost had it been shot in Burbank, California. Despite the physical difficulties encountered during the production, the film was well received, and grossed over \$22,000,000. Glorious to look at, and ruggedly acted by its star Robert Redford, it was written by John Milius and Edward Anhalt, produced by Joe Wizan, and featured Will Geer, Stefan Gierasch, Allyn Ann McLerie, Charles Tyne, Delle Bolton and Josh Albee. "

Sight & Sound – Winter 72/73 – review:

"Stepping off a barge on the last stage of his journey out of civilisation into the Rocky Mountains, Jeremiah Johnson is introduced as a man of "proper wit and adventurous spirit... suited to the mountains," as though this dour greenhorn were already plainly on his way into legend. Before the credits have appeared, in fact, Sydney Pollack seems to have set about the kind of mock-epic storytelling by which he has made room within his films for romantic adventure, deep seams of comedy, settings as handsome as nature can provide, and a gallery of characters who have elected to become heroes in their own epic simply by being foolishly human to a delirious degree.

In this determinedly spectacular display of human features, Pollack bears some similarity to Franklin Schaffner, the contemporary who also moved from television into films surprisingly generous in their sense of staging and skilful drawing of plot into poetic drama. But the

grand manner in Schaffner looks like wholehearted romanticism, while Pollack often seems to be over-calculating and undercutting his own broad romantic flourishes. He works not so much by sacrificing plot for character as by subjecting both to an intellectualised view of human contradictions. In connection with "**CASTLE KEEP**", Pollack has spoken of the warmonger Falconer and the art-lover Beckman as being facets of the same personality; and when he moves away from comedy such a deliberate devising of human qualities results in the portentous allegory of "**THEY SHOOT HORSES, DON'T THEY?**".

"**JEREMIAH JOHNSON**" (Columbia-Warner) conceivably tells of another battle in man's struggle with his own nature. But the conflict is so obliquely introduced that for a while what is most striking about the film is its apparent disconnectedness – a rambling series of incidents and encounters in which Johnson, the tyro mountain man, makes the acquaintance of his bizarre and more experienced brethren and by accident acquires his own incongruous family, when he takes the young survivor of an indian massacre away from a mother keeping an insane vigil over the graves of her other children, and is later bamboozled by the intricacies of indian courtesy into taking a squaw for a bride.

Johnson's painful education in the ways of the wild is something like the processes of re-education in "**THE SCALPHUNTERS**", though with its conflicts of lore and learning and quality of serio-comic debate, the latter film had a lively tension which "**JEREMIAH JOHNSON**" replaces with a loosely strung account of how a fumbling greenhorn is transformed into an awe-inspiring myth. The humour of such episodes of cultural shock as the arrival at the camp of missionary-trained indians who now have their own crucifix-totem and offer their hospitality in French, makes up an amiably picaresque tale. But it is only belatedly that a fruitful antagonism develops, not this time between opposing halves of a multi-faceted personality but between Johnson and the mountain-scapes where he struggles to survive.

The concept of "**JEREMIAH JOHNSON**", in fact, could not be further from the mountain man of Vardis Fisher's novel.

The triumphant giant whose sense of communion with the wilderness is peculiarly expressed in spontaneous expressions of joy (and a formal education in classical music) disappears in Robert Redford's disgruntled refugee from civilisation. And what the mountains offer is not so much a sanctuary from the man-made world (far from exulting in nature, the mountain men appear preoccupied with the trials of their condition), as simply another arena in which they struggle to adapt their own natures.

The opening, incongruous, description of Johnson as "suited to the mountains" becomes ironically true by the end when, after declaring war on the entire Crow nation for the murder of his wife and adopted child, Johnson becomes, for redmen and whitemen alike, a mysterious manifestation of the towering but remotely forboding landscape. His assimilation is anticipated in a scene near the beginning when, as a hapless novice, Johnson comes upon the corpse of an old mountain man, frozen into a bizarre outcropping amidst the rocks and with a tattered parchment stuck to his chest bequeathing his good buffalo gun to his lucky finder. The details have a certain reverberation through the film; but their development is frustrated by the casually episodic quality of the whole, and some unnecessarily wide-open expanses within the story. "

– Richard Combs

"Ex-soldier flees from 19th century civilisation and graduates in the Rocky Mountains wilderness from greenhorn trapper to semi-legendary hero. Sydney Pollack's characteristic humour and mock-epic grandeur barely compensate for a sad lack of detail and a rambling storyline."

Movies of the Seventies notes:

" "**JEREMIAH JOHNSON**", a legendary story of a lone trapper who braves the elements to live his own life in the mountains, is another film that challenges Hollywood's heroic notions. Redford's Johnson is neither braver nor wiser than others: he is simply more determined to live free from interference..."

"...In the two Westerns he has made for the director Sydney Pollack, "**JEREMIAH**

JOHNSON" (72) and "THE ELECTRIC HORSEMAN" (79), Robert Redford has used the form to proclaim his particular ecological interests, both films employing the majesty of the landscape and the later one, set in the modern day, showing how a resourceful Westerner can outsmart and humiliate big business."

NFT bulletin – July 79 – review:

"Script-writer John Milius develops his favourite theme of the growth of a legend, and celebrates the pioneer spirit. Redford plays a former seaman fleeing from civilisation to live as a trapper. Against striking panoramas of the snow-covered Rocky Mountains, this greenhorn undergoes a painful apprenticeship in the way of the wilds. His vengeful pursuit of the Crow tribe generates his legendary status. This epic of nineteenth century individualism is directed by Sydney Pollack with characteristic humour and economy."

[no listing in "The Critics' Film Guide", "The Good Film and Video Guide", "Rating the Movies (1990)"]

TV Times note:

"Mountain adventure starring Robert Redford. Tired of civilisation, former Civil War soldier Jeremiah Johnson decides to become a mountain trapper. But he struggles to survive until he learns the ways of the wild from a wise old Indian trapper.⁵ **** "

What's On TV review:

"Robert Redford is heavily disguised in furry buckskins and an unusually bushy beard for most of this stoically eco-friendly tale about a young mountain man coming to terms with the wilderness and the local indians. Not one of Redford's most accessible films, it is still beautifully shot and coldly atmospheric. Will Geer provides some welcome human warmth as a hermit. ** "

"Western adventure. An ex-soldier and mountain trapper becomes a legend after taking revenge on indians who murdered his family."

"Robert Redford stars in this eco-tale about a mountain man coming to terms with the wilderness. ** "

⁵ "Bear Claw" Lapp is no indian

So to recap, the story is set circa 1825, in the 1830s, the 1850s, and at the turn of the century. That sort of narrows it down very helpfully. In fact, the only indication the film itself gives of a date is when Johnson asks the first white men he's encountered in a long while how "the war" is going. "Which war?" one man incredulously replies. "The war against the Emperor of Mexico" says Johnson.

By the terms of this archive, "**JEREMIAH JOHNSON**" is actually of only slight interest, since the character of "Caleb" (Josh Albee) rescued by Johnson from an indian massacre, is slight and undelineated. The boy, deeply traumatised, does not utter a word in the film, and Johnson has to invent a name to call him by. After initially tagging along as so much excess baggage, boy and man do finally begin to warm to one another, and with Johnson's Flatfoot wife "Swan", seem set fair to become a comfortable ménage à trois ("Little House in the Rockies"), but when Johnson leads a cavalry troop over the mountain passes to rescue a party of stranded settlers, Caleb and Swan are both butchered by outraged Crows for Johnson's defilement of their burial ground. Up to this point Johnson has been at pains to stay on live-and-let-live terms with the various indian peoples he encounters, and was fully aware of the gravity of leading white men through their burial ground, but his rage at the tribe's reprisal drives out all rational thought, and he spends the latter part of the film in a state of perpetual war with the Crow. Only at the very end, as he sets out for territories new, and has a chance encounter with an indian (Paints-His-Shirt-Red) he met very early in the film, does he seem to have purged his taste for vengeance. The final shot is an ecstatic parting gesture between Johnson and the indian.

The beauty of the photography has been well reported in the above reviews, but one of the film's other strengths is in its quiet insistence there were no "indians". There were Crow, Blackfoot, Apache, Flatfoot, etc, each with their particular customs and stance toward the encroaching white hordes. Learning to distinguish between them was as crucial to Johnson's survival as knowing how and where to set a fire, or how to "skin a grizz". The period dialogue, as *Variety* noted, is well caught by John Milius' intelligent script – he also wrote "**THE LIFE AND TIMES OF JUDGE ROY BEAN**" (72) and '**THE WIND AND THE LION**' (75) – and the characters Johnson encounters are flavourful and uniformly well played. In the central role, Redford is suitably rugged and taciturn, in striking contrast to his other roles of the seventies, and he does not make Johnson a heroic figure, merely a stoical, determined loner around whom legends and tall tales seem to coalesce, do what he will. Director Pollack chose wisely when insisting on shooting his film on location, and I would hardly describe that as a "pyrrhic victory" on his part. Even reviewers who grew impatient with the anecdotal structure of the film praised its visual splendour.

Revisionist Westerns of this kind have often been blamed for almost annihilating the Western genre, until its renaissance in the nineties. I prefer to think they were a much-needed corrective to the John Ford/John Wayne romantic myths of the old West, just as Clint Eastwood's "**UNFORGIVEN**" is a better film by far than any of his "**DOLLARS**" horse operas, "**THE OUTLAW JOSEY WALES**" and others. Even the likes of "**JEREMIAH JOHNSON**" inevitably prettify the grim, squalid subsistence of the life such people led, but it is perhaps as honest an account as can be expected of commercial American cinema. Contrast this with "**THE LIFE AND TIMES OF GRIZZLY ADAMS**" (76).

Josh Albee went on to make "**SLAUGHTERHOUSE FIVE**" the same year, and "**TOM SAWYER**" for TV in 1973 (in the title role, with Jeff Tyler as Huck). In 1975 he played Johnny Miles in "**THE RUNAWAYS**", and was also seen in the series "**Gunsmoke**". His age is not known, but Caleb would be 10-12.

See subject index under **DISABLED / HANDICAPPED, HUNTING / SHOOTING, ORPHANS / ADOPTION, VENGEANCE** and **WESTERNS**.