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~~She Wore A~~ Yellow Ribbon
RKO
Directed by John Ford
1949; 103 min.

Cast		Credits	
Capt. Nathan Brittles	John Wayne	Direction	John Ford
Olivia Dandridge	Joanne Dru	Screenplay	Frank Nugent, Laurence
Lt. Flint Cohill	John Agar	Based on Saturday	Stallings
Sgt. Tyree	Ben Johnson	Evening Post story	"Massacre"
Lt. Ross Pennell	Harry Carey Jr.	Written by	James Warner Bellah
Sgt. Quincannon	Victor McLaglen	Music Score	Richard Hageman
Abby Allshard	Mildred Natwick	Photography*	Winton Hoch
Major Allshard	George O'Brien	Technical Advisors	Major Phillip Kieffer (Ret.),
Dr. O'Laughlin	Arthur Shields		Cliff Lyons
Pony-That-Walks	Chief Big Tree	Color by	Technicolor
Red Shirt	Noble Johnson	Filmed in Monument Valley, Utah	
Corp. Quayne	Tom Tyler		
Trooper Cliff	Cliff Lyons		
Narrator	Irving Pichel		

*Academy Award

It was director John Ford himself who said of John Wayne: "My version of Stagecoach made "Big Duke" a star, but it was in Howard Hawks' Red River in 1948 that he really became an actor." As if to re-enforct that claim, the following year "Big Duke" gave two of the best performances of his long career. While it was the role of tough Marine Sergeant Strikker in Allan Dwan's Sands of Iwo Jima that got him his first Oscar nomination, it was his performance as Captain Nathan Brittles in Ford's own She Wore A Yellow Ribbon that ranks among his finest, and is certainly his best of the 13 films he made for the director. His hair streaked with silver and sporting a dashing mustache, he is the absolute image of a legendary cavalryman. Rather than portraying his usual, mythical lonely plainsman, he essays instead the role of a leader of men, and is both rugged and compassionate. His unfair typecasting as an insensitive roustabout is belied in this film, particularly in the sequences at his wife's gravesite, where he places flowers and, in solemn soliloquy, fills her in on current events. These touching scenes would have been farcical in less assured hands than Wayne's and Ford's.

She Wore A Yellow Ribbon was the second film in a remarkable and deeply felt trilogy of cavalry epics directed by John /ord in the late 1940's (the others: Fort Apache and Rio Grande.) This entry is easily the best of the three. Ford built into these films his concept of historical myths which centered on the compassionate, often sentimental affirmation of the structure of the family. Strangely enough, it is in this film, which lacks a real personal family relationship, in which this affirmation is most poignant. Instead of wives and children, the family unit is the cavalry itself, with its built-in codes of loyalty, honor and chivalry that is the binding force.

The film is only the third in which Ford made use of the color process prior to the 1950's, and it is one of the most beautifully photographed of all his pictures (it received an Oscar for best color cinematography in 1949.) Ford returned to his favorite location, the majestic and mystical Monument Valley, and shot most of the outdoor scenes at dawn and dusk. The result was a striking and beautiful array of natural vistas in gold, reds and browns that are reminiscent of the great paintings of the Western artist Fredric Remington. The movie also contains the usual Ford repertory of performers, some of whom appear in two or three of the cavalry pictures, in order to further affect the family theme. Victor McLaglen plays Sergeant Quincannon in all three films, Wayne himself played Captain Kirby Yorke in the other two, and Ben Johnson would return as Trooper Tyree in Ford's Cheyenne Autumn in 1964.

While on the subject of actor Ben Johnson, let it be noted that he was, John Wayne

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and Henry Fonda and Jimmy Stewart notwithstanding, Ford's best and most likeable Western figure. He was not handsome, but his healthy and rugged appearance, Southern twang and amiable personality made him a believable cowpoke. He was a former rodeo performer and did his own stunts in films. The hard-riding sequence in which he outruns an Indian patrol is an action highlight of this movie. It was Ford who persuaded the reluctant Johnson to accept the role of Sam the Lion in Peter Borgdanovich's The Last Picture Show in 1971, and he responded with a masterful performance that won for him both the New York Film Critics and Academy Awards for Best Supporting Actor.

Though this film is a lovely and sentimental one, it does contain faults (although Ford's weaknesses and crudities seldom ruined his pictures -- he had too many cinematic strengths for that.) The physical comedy involving the brawling and boozing Victor McLaglen is heavyhanded and overdone, and the film is uneventful at times. And, like the conclusions of weekly episodes of TV's Laugh In, the movie just does not seem to know where or when to finish. The narrator and the music keep setting up the audience for the finale, but as we grab our coats and get ready to head for the nearest exits, the images lurch forward to another false conclusion, although the eventual finish is very satisfying and worth waiting for.

What is most interesting about the film is its treatment of Indians, and Ford's gradual career awareness of the need to portray them decently. He did not fully succeed here (it would be a year later when Delmar Daves' courageous Broken Arrow with James Stewart would start some movie makers in the proper direction), but it was an important step for Ford. The scene where Wayne confers with the old Indian chief is very affecting, and the picture's refusal to subject us to a bloody climax indicate a change of heart by a director who, cinematically at least, wiped out whole Indian tribes.

Notes by Christopher J. Warren