

JAMES COBURN

1928~2002

Laconic, iconic and
never knowingly
underdressed

WORDS Sean Macaulay



Laidback in London: James Coburn exemplifies the era's style, complete with trademark Ferrari and sharp suit, in Mayfair in 1970

James Coburn was the first Hollywood movie star I ever saw in the flesh. It was the late Seventies in north London and I was doing my morning paper round when, shimmering out of the early-morning haze of Highgate's Swains Lane, came the star of *Our Man Flint*, striding along past the row of suburban London villas with his trademark languid self-assurance. (He was dating pint-sized British songbird and local resident Lynsey de Paul at the time.)

The effect was incandescent. Coburn didn't just look like a movie star off screen, he looked like an adolescent boy's Platonic ideal of a movie star. He was rugged and tall (6ft 2in) with silvery-white hair that cried out for some gorgeous Nabokovian adjective: 'argent' or 'nacreous'. He was wearing a corduroy jacket with rather epic lapels, I remember, and some kind of natty neck scarf. I couldn't help but stare; he just looked so... deluxe. But he gave me a friendly little salute as he passed, which for a pimply youth still in Orange Tag flares was about as cool as it gets. I never forgot it.

Twenty years later, I moved to Los Angeles and crossed paths with an Englishwoman called Victoria who was cat-sitting for Coburn while he was travelling with his second wife. I got to tag along with her, visiting Coburn's house in Beverly Hills and duly admiring his collection of Chinese gongs, played intently on many a chat show. ('It's kind of like the sonic mirror of your soul,' he told a bemused Michael Parkinson.) There was also an array of eye-popping Japanese erotica in the toilet and four of the fattest cats I'd ever seen. The house was more chintzy than I had expected, but it didn't dent the mystique.

For my generation, raised on Sunday afternoon repeats of *The Magnificent Seven* and *The Great Escape*, Coburn was one of the great Sixties Tough Guys – part of that breed of hip macho actors like Steve McQueen and James Garner who bridged the gap between the square-jawed heroes of the Fifties (Charlton Heston, Burt Lancaster) and the neurotic anti-heroes of the Seventies, such as Al Pacino and Robert De Niro.

These Sixties Tough Guys were old-school without being square. They'd all served in the army or navy, but were shaped by the social liberation of the Fifties, so they smoked dope and broke the rules, whilst being grown-ups and not angst-ridden adolescents. The result was a style of acting that was intense and modern without the woe-is-me excesses of the Method. In a word, cool. As Coburn liked to say, 'I'm a jazz kind of actor, not rock'n'roll.'

If Steve McQueen was the era's King of Cool, then Coburn was the laid-back older brother, watching it all go by with a sardonic grin – often enough in real life, too. Robert Vaughn recalled emerging from a restaurant with Coburn while making *The Magnificent Seven* in Mexico only to watch Coburn's shiny new Jaguar go crashing into a wall. As the dust settled, a drunken valet tumbled out headfirst to the ground. 'I tell you what, Roberto,' said Coburn, slapping a hand on Vaughn's shoulder, 'we're never gonna get a taxi at this time of night.' 'Even then he had class,' said Vaughn. It was a quality that came up a lot when I spoke with various friends and relatives of Coburn: 'Classy... A class act... A classy guy.'

Katy Haber, who spent a decade as director Sam Peckinpah's Girl Friday, working with Coburn on three of Peckinpah's films including *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*, went further: 'He was a prince.'

Among her mementoes is a photo of her and Coburn on the set of *Pat Garrett* in 1973. Amid the heat and dust of Durango, Coburn reclines on a director's chair in his sheriff costume, sporting distinctly non-Method mirror shades and a Gauloises in a cigarette holder. 'Jimmy loved what being an actor gave him, where it took him,' she said.

Many of his acquaintances described him as both a seeker and a man's man, an avidly curious soul who read widely on Eastern philosophy without forsaking the finer things in life. He did kung-fu and Chinese wand exercises, but savoured the finest cigars and clarets, and always kept a bottle of Stolli in the freezer.

He was simultaneously new age and old-school. He liked patchouli oil, but burned through stop signs in a string of Ferraris. (Broadcaster Chris Evans bought Coburn's old Spyder 250 GT in 2008 for £5.5 million, setting a new world record for the highest price paid for a vintage car at auction.) As he explained once: 'I meditate, I take good care of myself, sure. I don't get too involved in the details.' He wore 'elegant wolf' attire – blazers and silk polka dot handkerchiefs – but never stopped using the Beatnik slang of his New York bachelor days. 'It's a groove and gas,' he would say, or, 'That's the jazz of it, man.' He was groovy, macho and debonair as the decade required, appearing with everyone from Cary Grant to Kermit the Frog. Even Tom Hanks gushed like a love-struck fan when he met Coburn at a party. He was, in short, Hollywood royalty.

Born James Harrison Coburn III in 1928, he grew up in Compton, Los Angeles, where his father was a garage mechanic. 'I came from dustbowl folk,' he said, 'ordinary people who were stultified by the American Dream.' The family had relocated from Nebraska after the Great Depression wiped out their Ford dealership, and Coburn always felt his father never got over the loss. 'To watch your father go down like that is a hard one.'

The result was a harsh streak which affected Coburn profoundly. 'His last words were "Goddammit", which was typical,' said Coburn. 'I don't think he ever really hugged me once.' But, in general, he enjoyed a sunlit, carefree upbringing. He had his own car at 17, a coveted Winfield roadster, and ran around with a cool crew ('Good kids, no assholes').

Coburn drifted into the army after school, where he played the conga drums in a service club band before deciding on a career in acting after his formidable baritone (brought on by a childhood bout of bronchitis) found him doing voiceovers for army training films. His unlikely role model was Mickey Rooney, whom he'd watched repeatedly while working as an usher at the local cinema. His biggest influence, though, was grande dame Stella Adler, under whom he studied in New York at the Stella Adler Studio of Acting. He blossomed under her flamboyant approach and quoted her maxims for the rest of his life ('Never be boring, darling!').

Thanks to his rangy physique and deep voice, he was soon working steadily on television Westerns such as *Wagon Train* and *Bonanza*. He nearly always played the heavy or the murderer – everything from eyepatch-wearing hicks to waistcoated smoothies – and tended to fare best when he could add a little panache or sarcastic topspin to his lines.

The apotheosis of all this fine-tuned physicality was Coburn's big break as the knife-throwing gunman in *The Magnificent Seven* in 1960. The set in Mexico was a testosterone-fest of hotshot actors fidgeting with their Stetsons to upstage the star, Yul Brynner. But Coburn went the other way, making a virtue of his minimal dialogue (just 14 terse lines), and embodying a Zen-like stillness instead. He must be the first Western hero to wait for the bad guys by sitting down cross-legged and inspecting a flower.

Coburn's breakthrough into movies was testament to the influence of another powerful and magnetic woman in his life – his first wife, Beverly Kelly. Raised in California, she was an exotic dark-haired beauty with an edgy, potent charm. Her idea of relaxation was heading off to Tibet to collect Buddhist artefacts. She wore dark robes and a perfume from Cairo called Dragon's Blood. 'She had the authority of a high priestess,' says Frank Messa, an artist and long-time friend of the Coburns.

Beverly's influence was crucial to Coburn's success. When he was fretting about how to play his part in *The Magnificent Seven*, it was Beverly who told him simply to emulate the Zen-like poise of the swordsman in the original *Seven Samurai*. ▶



Above, clockwise from left: James Coburn, James Garner, director John Sturges and Steve McQueen on a WWII motorbike during the filming of 'The Great Escape', 1963
Below: Coburn with Lynsey de Paul (his girlfriend at the time), her ex-boyfriend Ringo Starr, Shelley Duvall and Jack Nicholson looking on, at Claridge's London, 1978



'Stella Adler taught us that without style, without personality,
you're just a stick out there'

► The couple married in 1959 – down in Mexico by most people’s recollection – and Coburn adopted Beverly’s young daughter, Lisa, from her first marriage, as his own. ‘I was always her daddy,’ he said. A son, James H Coburn IV, known as Jimmy, followed in 1961. By 1964, with Coburn progressing to bigger movie roles, the couple decided to buy a house to match. It was a sprawling Moroccan mansion in Beverly Hills, where the neighbours included Bill Cosby and Jack Lemmon. Beverly brought in designer Tony Duquette and turned the house into a Swinging Sixties fevered dream of turquoise walls, scarlet bannisters and zebra-skin rugs.

‘The house was like an epicentre of the times,’ remembers Lisa Coburn. ‘When the guy who wrote *Pyramid Power* came to visit, they erected a pyramid in the Moroccan Room. I didn’t take it too seriously. My mother would host these wild parties with a whole range of guests – artists, musicians, thinkers. Dad was more laid-back. He loved to play his drums in the stair hallway [for the acoustics] with his friends, the Gamelan Bang Gang.’

Finally, Coburn ascended to leading man stardom with *Our Man Flint* in 1966 and the sequel, *In Like Flint*, a year later. Conceived as the American answer to James Bond films, the movies were unabashed campfests, but not without wit. Master spy Derek Flint boasts a black belt in judo, cohabits with four playmates and can speak in 47 languages, including dolphin. His cigarette lighter has 82 different functions – ‘83 if you want to light a cigar.’

These were the good years for Coburn – a giddy, decade-long whirl of jet-set travel, fast driving, tailored suits, glamorous projects and epochal socialising. When Dennis Hopper threw a wrap party at their house without actually bothering to tell them first, the Coburns simply opened the doors and pressed the kids into service. When the Karmapa of Tibet and his retinue of Buddhist monks came to town, they all stayed at his house. Coburn even took His Holiness for a spin in his red Ferrari along Mulholland Drive, saffron robes trailing.

Coburn experimented with LSD, worked out on his back patio with Bruce Lee, and coughed up a Rolls-Royce, as you do, after losing a game of gin rummy to his wife on a plane. Beverly repaid the courtesy by acquiring a couple of pet monkeys for the household.

The monkeys, called Moonbeam and Coco, had their own rope-filled enclosure, but often ran free to add to the house’s chaotic anything-goes vibe, even peeing on guests’ heads. Moonbeam, the male, liked to jump onto Coburn’s back when he and Beverly were having sex.

‘I was not a fan of the monkeys,’ says Coburn’s son, James IV. ‘They got all the attention I wanted. My father just wasn’t into being Superdad. He was an actor and an artist and had his own agenda to deal with.’ But Jimmy did get to go to Mexico for the making of *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*, and appears in the film’s river raft sequence.

‘Look, it was a great life, no question,’ he says of his father’s career. ‘All the actors he worked with, all the films he did – nothing to complain about. Location was fun. My dad was good company when his health was good. We’d go on drives. We had good times, there just weren’t that many.’

Lisa Coburn’s memories are more affectionate. She loved running errands with her dad in his Ferrari and to this day runs a specific stop sign in Beverly Hills in his honour. For years, they enjoyed a running joke of her launching surprise Cato-style karate attacks on him. ‘I thought he was a great dad,’ she says. ‘I adored him.’ Still, fatherhood remained one area that Coburn felt remiss about in later years. ‘If I’d had the monkeys before I had kids,’ he once confessed, ‘I would have been a better parent.’

By contrast, as a professional colleague, Coburn was a paragon of attentive generosity. Katy Haber still keeps a ‘Jimmy section’ of

photos among her career mementoes. ‘Jimmy was one of the few people that Sam deeply respected and couldn’t be rude to. They often caroused together even when they weren’t making movies.’

Peckinpah, in turn, remained Coburn’s favourite director despite his addictive extremes. ‘I got him off alcohol and immediately he started snorting cocaine!’ protested Coburn. Yet it was precisely that unhinged quality – at least when aligned with sufficient sobriety – that produced such vibrant cinema. ‘Sam was a mad genius,’ said Coburn. ‘He would shove you right over into the abyss and sometime he would jump right in after you.’

Certainly, Peckinpah inspired what is arguably Coburn’s best performance as the world-weary outlaw-turned-sheriff in *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*. The film remains a woozy mangled masterpiece – even the restored director’s cut – but Coburn’s performance is a hard, clear and beautiful study in disenchantment and self-disgust. In the film’s most poignant scene, a wounded old sheriff (played by Slim Pickens) staggers down to the riverside to die, watched helplessly by his wife. It could so easily be maudlin (the soundtrack is Bob Dylan’s ‘Knocking on Heaven’s Door’), but the effect is heartbreaking, and properly tragic. Not least because the scene closes on Coburn’s haunted expression as he looks on, sensing that his own soul is similarly doomed. Forced to hunt down his old partner, he winds up, in effect, killing himself. From here on, his actions get increasingly sour, and his view of the world hardens into contempt. As Mark Cousins observed, when he interviewed Coburn on an episode of *Scene by Scene* in 2000, ‘There’s nothing sentimental in your work as an actor.’

Steve Saragossi is the author of the first biography of the actor, the upcoming *In Like Coburn*. He feels that while Coburn never achieved the superstardom of, say, Paul Newman or Clint Eastwood, he did make the transition from classic Hollywood to the post-studio system era more successfully than most. ‘A lot of Sixties stars couldn’t hack it,’ says Saragossi. ‘Your George Peppards, your Rod Taylors, your Tony Curtises. But actors like McQueen and Coburn were just as good in the postmodern anti-heroic mode as they were in the classic strait-laced heroic mould.’

‘If you line up Coburn’s roles post-Flint,’ says Saragossi, ‘he played more anti-heroes than anyone you can think of: conman, blackmailer, huckster, outlaw, pickpocket, criminal mastermind, IRA terrorist... He ploughed that trough with abandon, more than Clint Eastwood even.’

Watching the Coburn canon again, it’s easy to see why. His expansive lust-for-life charm, seasoned with a little mocking disdain, was perfectly suited to the rogues and scoundrels that flourished in the Nixon era. That vast equine grin was equal to any criminal setback, it seemed. Sergio Leone’s 1971 movie, *Duck, You Sucker*, is probably the pick of Coburn’s non-Peckinpah films, a billowy meditation on revolution and friendship drenched in dreamy torrents of Ennio Morricone. It contains another favourite Coburn moment – when he watches a firing squad from the shadows, rain dripping off his fedora, and the echoed gunshots send him back into his own tragic past. It’s sublime screen acting – no dialogue, all close-up – the great-souled hero letting us in.

The Seventies proved to be equally dramatic for Coburn personally. In 1976, Beverly flew out to Greece where Coburn was making *Sky Riders* only to be confronted by a marital indiscretion that was too close to home. After 17 years together, the strains were beginning to show, and the couple divorced. As with most things in Hollywood in the Seventies, cocaine was also a factor.

‘When it came down to the second half of the Seventies, there were a lot more drugs,’ says James IV frankly. ‘I don’t think my dad wanted to sit around and do drugs. I think my mother did.’ ►

James Coburn



‘I came from dustbowl folk... ordinary people who were stultified by the American Dream’

Relaxing in the Moroccan Room at his sumptuously decorated Beverly Hills home, 1966

► Turning 50, he settled in a bungalow in Sherman Oaks with a home bar and a couple of snooker tables and embarked on his rebound years. 'He never had a problem getting chicks,' says James IV. 'He had a house in the Valley, he was a movie star, he drove around in a Ferrari. It was a Good. Steady. Flow. "You never have to worry about chicks, kiddo," he'd say. "There's always another one."'

'He did fine,' confirms Lisa. 'His choices weren't always so good, but he did fine.'

This was the start of a dark time for Coburn. In 1980 he lost his great pal Steve McQueen to cancer and noticed a strange stinging in his wrists which turned out to be rheumatoid arthritis. Within a year the pain was so great, he could barely get out of bed. His father had also suffered from the disease, but

Coburn preferred to blame it on the negative emotions stirred up by his divorce. 'I was raging inside,' he said, 'and it turned me to stone.'

'I remember those days because they were sad in a way,' says Messa, who was the closest of Coburn's male friends. 'He was hurting and nobody was around. This town, people see someone in his shape and whoosh.'

'People thought he was dead,' says James IV.

Instead, Coburn found comfort in his spiritual interests. When playing drums proved too painful, Messa customised a bamboo flute with a rubber tube so he could still play. It was a particularly cruel irony that this most graceful and physically expressive of actors – *Sight and Sound* magazine devoted a whole article to his gestures alone – should wind up with his hands so gnarled.

He finally alleviated the disease with an experimental electromagnetic treatment, but when he resumed full-time movie work in 1988, he was mostly confined to B-movies or pallid comedies playing one-note villains. He had a name for such parts: 'Guy in a suit... Guy with the briefcase... Guy with the money.' Understandably, he succumbed to depression.

What rejuvenated him was meeting Paula Murad, a vivacious broadcaster from Cleveland who was 27 years his junior. They locked eyes at a lambada carnival in 1991, and married two years later in Versailles. En route to the altar, Coburn wooed Paula by taking her to St Tropez where he appeared in an episode of *My Riviera* enthusing about modern art. The series' director Michael Feeney Callan found Coburn an expansive raconteur, but detected a hint of curmudgeonly regret beneath the Steve McQueen and Bruce Lee anecdotes. 'He was very aware he had come in at the tail end of the golden era. He saw his career in chapters. Hollywood chapters. And with the rise of the counter culture, he'd fallen off the train, as he put it.'

Even if he didn't admit it, Coburn had missed Beverly's shrewd creative guidance. It would be another two years before salvation arrived in the form of writer-director Paul Schrader offering him the role of the abusive patriarch in his adaptation of *Affliction*. It was the kind of meaty role Coburn had been seeking for years, but he had to overcome some deep resistance to the part, his friend Sandi Love remembers. 'Paul Schrader said to him: "You're not going to intimidate with your big deep voice. You're going to speak in a falsetto through rehearsals." It was tremendous psychology because it forced him to be more fragile. He had to work out the demons that were hiding inside him about his own father – to face the stuff he was scared of.'

Affliction was the darkest film he ever made – a schematically bleak family drama about a smalltown sheriff (Nick Nolte) goaded into patricidal fury by his father's unrelenting spite. Coburn had played villains before. In *The Last Hard Men* (1975) he let his outlaw gang rape a woman, but that was still high-style stuff – all black leather gloves and buckaroo scarf knots. Here he was bluntly appalling – a taunting overbearing drunk shorn of any charm and flair. Also, he got to be abjectly helpless – unprecedented for him on screen. For the first time, those crooked hands were an asset.

Affliction was released in December 1997 to rave reviews, but Coburn had to be pushed to go out and promote his chances of a Best Supporting Actor Oscar. 'He didn't think he had a shot in hell,' says Sandi Love. 'The closer it got to the Academy Awards, the more cranky he became.' But he'd underestimated how well-loved he was among Hollywood folk, and his name was duly announced. 'I finally got one right, I guess,' he said as he clutched the statue in his gnarled grip. He celebrated in style, getting royally smashed at the after-parties.

'He was the only star I knew who didn't have Actor's Disease – that inflated sense of entitlement,' said his daughter Lisa. 'I was always really proud of him for that.'

The Oscar set him up for a gratifying career twilight of interesting roles, dark and light. He got to be in a Pixar movie, voicing the jolly booming villain in *Monsters Inc.*, and even found time to star in a short film by a first-time director simply because he liked the subject. Called *The Good Doctor*, it was a fictional spin on euthanasia pioneer Dr Kevorkian. Filming took place at director Ken Orkin's house in the Hollywood Hills, literally in the backyard, but the no-budget lack of glamour didn't bother Coburn. 'He loved the whole process – just acting and being on a set,' says Orkin. 'My abiding memory of him is filming on the back deck as the sun went down, when he paused and looked out over the hills and said, "It doesn't get better than this."'

Coburn died at home on 18 November 2002 of a heart attack, aged 74. In his final years, he suffered from an enlarged heart and congestive heart failure, and despite doctor's orders, remained something of a rogue bon viveur – grappa, Champagne, dinners at The Palm. But he always seized any opportunity to keep working. 'I pushed him around in a wheelchair for half a year,' remembers Messa. 'I had to watch this man I love deteriorate. But even in his sickest state, he had this huge energy for acting.'

Coburn's penultimate film, *The Man from Elysian Fields* (2001), was playing in cinemas when his death was announced and I took the afternoon off to see it. Mercifully, it was a fitting swan song – a low-budget, heartfelt drama in which he plays a worldly novelist struggling to write his final book before death closes in. The film is quirky – Mick Jagger pops up as a gigolo – but it is that most agreeable of Hollywood farewell turns – the majestic old lion strutting his stuff.

My own father suffered terribly from arthritis, so I understood what Coburn faced. That day I loved him all the more for not letting the disease diminish his swagger or inhibit his performances. In his later years he always seemed to make an extra effort to wield his prop cigars and tumblers of Scotch with the full Adler-mandated élan. 'Stella taught us that without style, without personality, you're just a stick out there,' he said.

The Man from Elysian Fields has a couple of love scenes and there is a unexpected grace in the way he runs his weathered fingers over his younger wife's smooth skin, a poignant – and alas prescient – farewell to precious things. Coburn's beloved wife, Paula, would die of cancer just two years after his death.

His first wife, Beverly, lived until 2012 with no diminution of her distinct charisma. 'Dahhhling,' she would begin every phone call, reclining on her 500-year-old hand-carved Chinese bed, surrounded by Tibetan thangkas.

After the screening of *The Man from Elysian Fields*, I went and bought a *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* lobby card and wandered down Hollywood Boulevard to see Coburn's star on the Walk of Fame. There was a cluster of fans, quiet but appreciative, but it didn't mute the sting. Then, just as Coburn had once stepped, radiant, out of the north London mist, I walked away quietly into the California sunshine, the glare closing behind me. **GG**

James Coburn



'I meditate, I take good care of myself, sure. I try not to get too involved in the details'

The unmistakable cool of Coburn in all his shimmering argent glory, 1968