

Great Day in the Morning

US : 1955 : dir. Jacques Tourneur : RKO : 92 min
 prod: Edmund Grainger : scr: Lesser Samuels : dir.ph.: William Snyder
[Donald McDonald](#)
 Robert Stack; Virginia Mayo; Ruth Roman; Alex Nicol; Raymond Burr; Regis Toomey;
 Leo Gordon

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω	8	≠	M	⊗	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
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Donald McDonald, newly arrived to join his father, is told by Robert Stack how his dad was killed in a gunfight – omitting the detail that it was Stack himself who shot him. Source: NFT bulletin May 78

Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 1996 review:

“Good cast, beautiful colour scenery help this so-so story of pre-Civil War Colorado, when gold rush fever and separationist sentiments clashed. Shot in SuperScope. **1½ ”

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review - identical to above

Halliwell's Film Guide review:

“At the outbreak of the Civil War, Denver has divided loyalties. Solemn semi-western without much excitement.”

Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89 review:

“The loyalties of an assortment of townsfolk are tested when the Civil War breaks out. Slightly offbeat Western drama with good performances, some above-average touches in the direction. **1½ ”

The Time Out Film Guide review:

“A fine Western, set on the eve of the Civil War, with Stack as a Southern gambler / gunslinger who agrees, for a price, to help ferry a shipment of gold desperately needed to buy guns for the Rebel cause. Adapted from a bestseller and set in the booming Colorado Territory, it starts with the advantage of a remarkably literate script by Lesser Samuels which beats a lucid path through the tangle of conflicting interests: not only between North and South but between public need and private lust for gold, between the realities of love and the illusions of desire.

Focal point of the various subsidiary battles between self-interest and selfless commitment is Stack's anti-hero, who is finally cornered not only into offering his services to the South free of charge, but to acknowledge that he loves Roman's shop-soiled saloon girl rather than Mayo's pristine lady. But he does so – the script never quite abandons its abrasive edge of cynicism – only when it is too late for his gold (otherwise all of it would fall into Northern hands) and for his girl (although he doesn't know it, he left her behind to be murdered). Tourneur stages it all impeccably, with outstanding performances from Stack and Roman.”

TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995 review:

“This pre-Civil War Western is definitely superior of its kind. Its hero is another of those tough guys with big hearts, but in this case he’s more real than most, and the strong characterisation of this man is what allows Robert Stack to dominate the film against some fierce acting competition. There are good performances from Ruth Roman, Raymond Burr (as a villain called Jumbo Means) and Leo Gordon, but heroine Virginia Mayo, despite top billing, displays little of the fire her character needs. Thanks to cinematographer William Snyder, colour and photography are both excellent, and the story has quite a few original twists. *** ”

NFT bulletin – May ’78 – review:

“This chamber Western is unspectacular, concerned with relationships, not shoot-outs. A fine example of Tourneur’s gentle talent which, as Sarris remarks, lifts the film “to a new, unaccustomed level of subdued, pastel-coloured sensibility”. Robert Stack murders a man and “adopts” the son. In atonement he is willing to sacrifice his life, even play his part in the Civil War. However, he is allowed free, returning to his ambiguous parental role. The complicated plot matters little, the subtle use of the familiar Western/fugitive/boy theme involves us.”

[no listing in "The Critics' Film Guide", "The Good Film and Video Guide", "Rating the Movies (1990)", "The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television", "Variety Movie Guide 1993", "Video Movie Guide 1993" or "The Virgin Film Guide"]

Radio Times review:

“Western. Owen Pentecost is a gunfighter who is interested only in gambling and his own welfare. With the Civil War looming, Pentecost refuses to take sides, but his relationship with the young son of a man he has killed leads to a change of heart. *** ”

“This strikingly shot eve-of-Civil-War Western features a redoubtable performance by Robert Stack as a southern maverick forced to choose between patriotism and his pocket. Competing for his attention are wealthy Virginia Mayo and saloon entertainer Ruth Roman. The script is literate, the action is serviceably staged and the villainy of Raymond Burr and Alex Nicol is impressive. *** ”

From a novel by Robert Hardy Andrews. Donald McDonald does not put in an appearance for the first third of the film, but don't be tempted to bail out early, because an intriguing moral dilemma for anti-hero Stack does open up as the film progresses, and it has nothing to do with which side he'll be fighting on when the looming war breaks out.

When Pentecost (Stack) rides into Denver, his quick draw and experienced gambler's eye enable him to win the town saloon from under crooked Raymond Burr within the first eight hours, and along with the saloon he acquires feisty Ruth Roman and a fistful of claims from prospectors gone broke. So he offers to finance any man in town who will work one of these claims in return for 50% of any gold found there. One of the takers, a man called Lawford, soon strikes it lucky, but tries to welsh on his deal with Pentecost. They draw, and Lawford is killed. When the body is brought back to Denver the townsfolk, led by Burr, are minded to lynch Pentecost as a no-good Johnny Reb, but he's saved by milliner Virginia Mayo, who insists she was with Pentecost when they discovered the body. Not long afterwards, the man's son, Gary John Lawford (±14), arrives in town by stagecoach to join his father, and without skipping a beat Pentecost decides to raise the boy himself. He explains to Gary how his father met his end, but postpones the revelation that his own finger was on the trigger.

In a scene clearly recalling Brandon De Wilde and Alan Ladd in “**SHANE**” (which was made just two years earlier), Gary begs Pentecost to teach him how to use a gun. “You're just a boy, Gary” Pentecost demurs. “Not if I can shoot like a man!” the boy insists. After the

instruction has started, Mayo protests that the gunfighter only wants to raise the boy to be like himself. She knows well enough that the pistol giving the lessons is the very one that killed his father. "Don't be so sure you can read other people's minds, or hearts" Pentecost reproaches her. "I can read Gary's mind alright," she replies, "He loves you, worships you."

The news of Fort Sumter reaches Denver ("North and south are natural enemies, like... husband and wife"), and a mob of hotheads burst into the saloon where Pentecost is gathered with a group of other southerners, offering to sell them wagons to ship out their gold but declaring no allegiance to Dixie. Gunplay ensues, and Pentecost is wounded when the boy tries to get himself into the fight. Finally, more or less on a whim, Pentecost relents and agrees – for a fee – to help his countrymen move their gold out of town, so he has to take his leave of the boy, of Mayo, with whom he has flirted non-committally, and of loyal Ruth Roman, whom he genuinely cares for. Gary insists on going with him, of course, and to prevent this Pentecost at last discloses the truth about his father's death. It wouldn't be fair on the film to disclose how these matters resolve themselves in the final reel.

Jacques Tourneur, like his father before him, was a distinguished if under-rated director, turning in genre films of a subtler quality, with a strong eye for picture composition and tone. The latter qualities aren't especially evident here, but it's still an unusually grown-up, understated Western, with an intriguing, ambivalent central character. Pentecost is stubbornly independent and self-serving, yet always scrupulously gallant in his skirmishes with Virginia Mayo, and baffling in the spontaneity of his adoption of the boy. Like Alan Ladd, he's the gunfighter-with-a-heart-of-gold, but warring conscience and pragmatism don't explain the offhand way he agrees to relinquish everything he's won in Denver and throw in his lot with the "secessionists". He's a creature of noble impulses, largely unarticulated, which make his motivations unpredictable. At any rate, it's another boy-worships-fast-gun tale, or a loner-picks-up-waif-on-his-travels story, and that's its main interest to us. Donald McDonald, alas, is a bland figure in an under-written part, and his "worshipping" of Stack must take place off camera, because there's scant attention to it outside the dialogue between Stack and the two women. Disappointing in that regard then, but even halfway literate Westerns are as scarce as Apache presidents.

Sounding like some hideous progeny of the Disney corporation and a burger-chain mascot, Donald McDonald was one of the eponymous pupils in "**HER TWELVE MEN**" (53), and Burt Lancaster's devoted son in "**THE KENTUCKIAN**" (55). He was also seen in "**MA AND PA KETTLE AT HOME**" (54) and "**THE BRASS LEGEND**" (56), but nothing else is known of him.

See subject index under **SPECIAL FRIENDSHIPS** for other "ambiguous parental roles", and under **ORPHANS / ADOPTION, WAR** and **WESTERNS**.