March 16, 2010 (XX:9)

Peter Yates, **The Friends of Eddie Coyle** (1973, 102 min)

Directed by Peter Yates
Based on the novel by George V. Higgins
Screenplay by Paul Monash
Original Music by Dave Grusin
Cinematography by Victor J. Kemper

Robert Mitchum...Eddie 'Fingers' Coyle
Peter Boyle...Dillon
Richard Jordan...Dave Foley
Steven Keats...Jackie Brown
Alex Rocco...Jimmy Scalise
Joe Santos...Artie Van


**Comrades (1943), Leather Burners (1943), Action in the North Atlantic (1943), Hoppin Serves a Writ (1943), and Saboteur (1942).**


**Peter Yates from World Film Directors V. II. Ed. John Wakeman. H.W. Wilson Co, NY 1988**

British director and producer born at Aldershot, Surrey, He was educated at Charterhouse, a famous British “public school” [what in the US is a private school], where his involvement in school plays as an actor and director aroused his interest in theatre. He went on to the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art and afterwards
worked for about two years as an actor, stage manager, and director with a succession of repertory companies in England and Scotland.

However, the theatre was not Yates’ first love: he told one interviewer that he had spent his childhood “tinkering about with engines or going to the cinema.” When the reviewers convinced him that his talent as an actor was limited, he returned to these earlier interests, initially as a car salesman. The company he joined, Yates explains, “was also interested in motor racing, so I was able to try my hand at that as well.” He drove in club races and for some years was involved in the sport as an administrator and manager, working with such champions as Stirling Moss and Peter Collins. At the same time, his interest in the movies was stimulated by the coincidence that the company he worked for adjoined the Walton film studios. Filmmakers sometimes hired him as a stunt driver and, according to John Preston (London Times, October 8, 1981), Yates found himself becoming more involved with what was happening on the other side of the fence.”

He began his third career in a language studio, dubbing foreign-language films into English, and progressed to the editing of documentaries, in due course becoming a third, second, and first assistant director. By 1960 he was working with such luminaries as Tony Richardson (The Entertainer, A Taste of Honey), Jack Cardiff (Sons and Lovers), and José Quintero (The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone). Yates received the Directors Guild of America award as best assistant director for his work on Sons and Lovers (1960). The same year, as assistant to J. Lee Thompson on The Guns of Navarone, he met and married Virginia Pope, a New Zealander then working as a film publicist.

In 1961, on the recommendation of Tony Richardson, Yates directed two short plays by Edward Albee at the Royal Court Theatre, The Death of Bessie Smith and An American Dream. By then, he says, he had the directing “bug,” and his first movie followed in 1962, the musical Summer Holiday. It stars the pop singer Cliff Richard as a London Transport mechanic who, with three friends, converts a double-decker bus into a mobile hotel and sets off across Europe to Athens. Along the way a number of girls are collected, including an American singer (Lauri Peters) on the run from her agent and her and her avaricious mother. Summer Holiday was soon to be upstaged by the Beatles and Richard Lester, but in 1962 it seemed to Penelope Gilliatt “the most cheerful and skillful British musical of our generation” and “a real breakthrough,” thanks to the pace of Yates’ direction and the inventive production numbers devised by Herbert Ross.

After a stint in television, working on The Saint and Danger Man, Yates directed his second feature, One Way Pendulum (1964), produced by Michael Deeley for Tony Richardson’s Woodfall Productions. … Patrick Gibbs called it a “robust contribution to minority cinema,” [absurdist] but most critics thought that Yates had failed to turn the play into a movie.

Yates had Michael Deeley as his producer again when he made Robbery (1967), scripted by Edward Boyd, George Markstein, and Yates himself (the only writing credit he has claimed). A fictionalized reconstruction of Britain’s Great Train Robbery of 1963, it has an excellent cast (Stanley Baker, Frank Finlay, James Booth, Barry Foster) to whom the script gives little scope for detailed characterization. The action scenes were generally admired, however—especially a car chase that, as Peter Cowrie writes “was shot with a verve and brutality quite foreign to the British cinema of the sixties.”

The car chase impressed another racing driver, Steve McQueen, who invited Yates to Hollywood to direct his next picture, Bullitt (1968). Adapted from Robert L. Pike’s novel Mute Witness and splendidly photographed on location in San Francisco by William A. Fraker, it was the first of many Yates films edited by Frank P. Keller. McQueen plays Frank Bullitt, a maverick police lieutenant who is entrusted with the safekeeping of a vital state’s witness. The witness is murdered, other deaths follow, and Bullitt finds himself fighting the good fight alone, obstructed by his time-serving superiors, while the ruthlessly ambitious district attorney (Robert Vaughn) demands his professional castration, and his girl (Jacqueline Bisset) opposes his devotion to so squalid a career.

David Robinson said that the eleven-minute hair-raising car chase through roller-coaster San Francisco streets revived “a kind of physical excitement one had forgotten the cinema could achieve,” and John Russell Taylor thought it “just about the best car-chase ever filmed,” an achievement the director attributes to the fact that he and McQueen (who did his own driving) “care about cars and drivers.” It launched a decade or more of car-chase movies, ranging from Smokey and the Bandit to The French Connection.

Richard Roud described Bullitt as “the best thriller since [John Boorman’s] Point Blank”—another American film by a British director—adding that it gave “a picture of San Francisco that no American eye has managed since [Delmer Daves’] Dark Passage….Yates seems to have pressed into service the whole city….The early morning scenes have just the right feel, and when McQueen slouches into a grocery to pick up six TV dinners, it tells us more about a policeman’s life than all the dialogue in [Don Siegel’s] Madigan.” Tom Milne praised the candid-camera realism of the crowd scenes and an “extraordinary feeling of immediacy, which is more responsible for the almost tangible sense of violence than any lingering on gory details.” (Yates has said that he dislikes putting violence on the screen: “One suggests violence rather than showing it. That’s where the art lies.”)

The public liked the movie as much as the critics did, and more American assignments followed for Yates, beginning with John and Mary (1969), a film far removed from the mayhem of Bullitt. …

Resuming his partnership with the producer Michael Deeley, Yates went off to Venezuela to shoot Murphy’s War (1971), starring Peter O’Toole as an Irish mechanic out to revenge himself on the German submarine that had sunk his ship. There are strong echoes of The African Queen.

An expensive array of talent was assembled for Yates’ next movie, The Hot Rock, released by 20th Century-Fox in 1972.
jokey “caper” movie, it has Robert Redford and Georges Segal leading a virtuoso quartet of thieves in stealing from the Brooklyn Museum a diamond wanted back by its country of origin. Moses Gunn plays the black diplomat who commissions the heist, and Zero Mostel, a consummately crooked lawyer. There is a witty script by William Goldman, adapted from a novel by Donald E. Westlake, and some glossy New York photography by Ed Brown.

Another much more somber thriller followed, The Friends of Eddie Coyle (1973), described by one critic as a variation on the theme of “disenchantment with the old romantic myths of cops and robbers.” Eddie Coyle (Robert Mitchum) is a small-time Boston crook and two-time loser. He is pressured by the police into supplying a little information, then set up for the mob by the real Judas of the piece.

Adapted by its producer, Paul Monash, from the novel by George V. Higgins, the movie was shot by Victor J. Kemper on location in an autumnal Boston. Yates says that Robert Mitchum “taught me more about directing actors than anyone else,” but it was Mitchum’s casting that was most criticized in this often “compulsive” film—as David Robinson says, there is an “inevitable imbalance when a star player of Mitchum’s weight and authority is cast in the unlikely role of a small-time victim.”

Stanley Shapiro and Maurice Richlin, who wrote Pillow Talk, were responsible for “the same sort of antique situation comedy” in Yates’ next script, For Pete’s Sake (1974). Barbra Streisand stars as a hard-up Brooklyn housewife who falls into the clutches of a loan shark and as a result finds herself involved successively with the call-girl racket, the Mafia, and urban cattle rustling. …

Having filmed in San Francisco, Boston, and two of the boroughs of New York, Yates next added Los Angeles to his gallery of urban portraits. Mother, Jugs and Speed (1976) was written by Tom Mankiewicz, who also coproduced with Yates himself. A frenetic farce about two rival ambulance services and starring Bill Cosby, Raquel Welch, and Harvey Keitel, it was widely and unfavorably compared with Robert Altman’s M*A*S*H.

Peter Benchley, the son and grandson of writers, made more money with his first book, Jaws, than his distinguished forebears saw in their combined careers. It was his second bloodcurdler, The Deep—a laborious potboiler set in Barbados—which Yates tackled as his next assignment. Jacqueline Bisset and Nick Nolte are vacationing skin divers who discover not only Spanish treasure but a hoard of morphine, thus attracting the attention of the island’s historian (Robert Shaw) and a gang of voodoo-working villains, not to mention sharks and a giant moray eel. “It may have jaws,” John Coleman said of the movie, “but it lacks teeth.” This was the commonest critical view, though the film (about 40 percent of which takes place under water) was recognized as a technical tour de force and had its champions. One of the latter called it “a glorious piece of hokum,” and the public obviously shared that opinion, making it Yates’ greatest commercial success to date: it grossed $31 million.

By that time Yates had been working in the United States for more than a decade and, as John Preston says, had established a reputation as “a big-budget director who could handle temperamental stars and was especially good at action sequences.” But he was anxious not to be typed. “I decided I wanted to make a comedy about class distinctions in America....I also wanted to present an entertaining view of American life without being sentimental or cynical.” …Breaking Away went into production for 20th Century-Fox, with Yates as both producer and director.

By following a string of big-budget movies with a cheaper project without a single star name, John Preston wrote, Yates broke “one of the great unwritten laws of Hollywood.” But Breaking Away justified the gamble. It was a great critical success and the box-office sleeper of the year, grossing over $20 million. According to Preston, it revitalized “a career that was in danger of bogging down in a surfeit of grandiose productions and second-rate scripts….Steve Tesich won an Oscar for his script and went on to write Yates’ next film, Eyewitness (1981). Eyewitness was followed by Krull, a negligible, if expensively budgeted ($27 million), sci-fi film capitalizing on the success of Star Wars.

Yates had been looking for years for a story that would take him back to Britain, and finally found one in Ronald Harwood’s play The Dresser, which deals with the repertory theatre world of Yates’ youth….David Denby called it “the most exciting filmed play in years.” …Stanley Kauffmann found Yates’ direction “a pleasant surprise.” “Most of what I’ve seen of his, he commented, “from Bullitt to Eyewitness, has been consecrated to the ideal of flash, of dazzle. Here he simply places his film...at the service of actors. There’s no trickery, no egotistical director’s attention-grabbing….If a director hasn’t developed a style through which a film can move to its truth, and Yates hasn’t, his best course is to be invisible, which is what Yates does effectively here.”

Eleni (1985), adapted by Steve Tesich from Nicholas Gage’s 1983 internationally bestselling memoir, deals with a New York Times reporter’s search for the man who sentenced his mother to death during Greece’s bloody civil war of 1946-1949. The film was thought by many reviewers to have a compelling documentary power, and the performance of Kate Nelligan as the martyred mother was praised. But for some, Yates’ decision to doubletrack the story, crosscutting between the present-day detective work of Gage and the war-time ordeal of his mother created a jerky, stop-and-go movement, aborting dramatic scenes before they were fully underway. Lawrence O’Toole complained that the two time frames are “never dynamically integrated. Indeed, they almost seem to be two separate movies.” To David Denby, “Yates, and enjoyable and talented craftsman wen working on the right kind of subject….doesn’t have the gravity of style for this kind of epic, political subject.”...
In 1981 Yates said that as he gets older, “I find it very important to have a hero that one can identify with and not be ashamed of doing so. I tend now to look for stories that have hope.”

“They Were Expendable” Kent Jones from The Friends of Eddie Coyle dvd

I think that work like his is necessary for people to understand something about the humors of the criminal mentality,” said Robert Mitchum of the novel The Friends of Eddie Coyle and its author, George V. Higgins. Yet he could have been describing the film itself, a melancholy succession of clandestine encounters conducted in the least picturesque parts of the Greater Boston area during late fall, going into winter. A middleman bargains with a gunrunner, the gunrunner bargains with a pair of wannabe bank robbers, a cop bargains with his stoolie, and the stoolie bargains with the man who works for the Man. The chips on the table may be machine guns or information or money, but the “humor” looming over every encounter is survival. Politeness and bonhomie are strictly provisional, and everybody knows it, which is what gives this film its terrible sadness. In the miserable economy of power in Boston’s rumpled gray underworld. Eddie and his “friends” are all expendable, and the ones left standing play every side against the middle, their white-knuckle terror carefully concealed under several layers of nonchalance and resignation. There’s not a punch thrown, and only two fatal shots are fired, but this seemingly artless film leaves a deeper impression of dog-eat-dog brutality than many of the blood-soaked extravaganzas that preceded it and came in its wake.

The Friends of Eddie Coyle is, in many ways, an inside job. Meaning that there’s not a minute spent orienting the viewer. The tale of a low-level mobster who gives up one of his contacts in a failed effort to bargain his way out of a New Hampshire prison stint is imparted to us a little bit at a time, through a series of seemingly affable but quietly desperate sit-downs between criminals and cops, or other criminals. In crummy coffee shops, underpopulated bars, and public spaces that give new meaning to the word ordinary. The filmmakers never do anything in the way of rhetorical underlining.

Director Peter Yates, born and trained in England and mostly known at this relatively early point in his career for his 1968 film Bullitt [and, to those fortunate enough to have seen it in the States, for the excellent Robbery] was an interesting choice for this material. Like that Steve McQueen classic, The Friends of Eddie Coyle is an all-action experience. But two crisply executed bank heists and a logistically complex parking-lot arrest aside, the kinetic excitement here is sparked by the verbal and gestural rhythms between the actors as they plead for their lives across dingy Beantown tabletops. Yates’s camera eye stays so casually observant and his cinematic syntax so spare throughout that when he finally retreats to a plaintive distance in the aftermath of the film’s one inevitable tragedy, it packs a considerable punch. At which point, Dave Grusin’s score, the busiest thing in the movie apart from the gunrunner’s patterned shirts and canary yellow muscle car, finally settles into a plangent farewell.

Offhanded fatalism is embedded in every word of every exchange, each of which alternates between hide-and-seek games and verbal tug-of-war. The Friends of Eddie Coyle is an extremely faithful adaptation [in structure, spirit, and flavor] of the first published novel by the Brockton, Massachusetts-born-Higgins, whose career as a United States prosecutor and then big-time criminal defense lawyer [his clients included Eldridge Cleaver and G. Gordon Liddy] coincided with his ascendancy as a novelist, and whose dialogue is one of the glories of American literature. “I’m not doing dialogue because I like doing dialogue,” Higgins once said. “The characters are telling you the story. I’m not telling you the story, they’re going to do it. If I do it right, you will get the whole story.” What is remarkable about the film is the extreme degree to which Yates and the producer and writer Paul Monash, adhere to Higgin’s aesthetic, banking on the contention that if you render the action among the characters as faithfully as possible, their entire moral universe will be revealed.

And so it is. “Look, one of the first things I learned is never to ask a man why he’s in a hurry,” says Robert Mitchum’s Eddie to Steven Keat’s inappropriately relaxed arms salesman, Jackie Brown [guess who’s a fan of this movie], in what might be the film’s most emblematic bit of table talk. “All you got to know is that I told the man he could depend on me because you told me I could depend on you. Now one of us is gonna have a big fat problem. Another thing I learned: if anybody’s gonna have a problem, you’re gonna be the one.” As in every good dialogue-driven film, talk in The Friends of Eddie Coyle equals action. In this case, maneuvering for leverage and self-preservation.

Nothing could be further from Higgins’s full-immersion approach to fiction than a collection of prima donna thespians vying for attention, thankfully. The Friends of Eddie Coyle is a true ensemble piece if there ever was one. It’s amazing that a star of Robert Mitchum’s caliber even considered this movie (he was originally offered the role of the bartender); that he integrated himself so fully into the ensemble and the working-class Boston atmosphere is some kind of miracle. Mitchum is on-screen for roughly half of the movie, and never for a moment does he or the filmmakers play the movie star card—no special isolated “moments,” no hammy overplaying or sneaky underplaying. Golden-age Hollywood’s most notorious bad boy arrived in Boston ready for action on every front, as amply chronicled by Grover Lewis in his Rolling Stone profile “The Last Celluloid Desperado.” Apart from the usual shenanigans (think blondes and booze), Mitchum went right to work, getting an “Eddie Coyle haircut” (which might have been executed with a lawn trimmer) and allegedly hanging out with the notorious Whitey Bulger, the prototype for Jack Nicholson’s character in The Departed, and his Winter Hill Gang. Higgins was worried, Mitchum was unfazed. “It’s a two-way street,” he told Lewis, “because the guys Higgins means are associating with a known criminal in talking to me.” Apart from a few slippages here and there, Mitchum mastered the exceptionally difficult Boston accent. More importantly, he found the right loping rhythm, the right level of spiritual exhaustion, the right amount of cloaked malevolence. If Mitchum betrays anything
of himself as Eddie, it’s his sense of poetry, which for roughly three-fourths of his career as an actor, seems to have manifested itself off- and not on-screen. But when he rose to the occasion, he was one of the best actors in movies. Thinks like a poet, acts like a jazz musician, hitting on the perfect melancholy chord progression from his initial appearance and playing quietly dolorous variations right to the end.

Of course, he’s surrounded by a beautiful array of character actors, many of whom have faded from memory over the years. Richard Jordan as Agent Dave Foley, decked out in leather and a hip haircut, with his usual pungent combination of sweet and sour. Peter Boyle’s bartender, a swaybacked, bald-headed giant in jacket, V-neck sweater and open-collared shirt. cultivating an air of relaxed barroom stoicism as he mentally angles his way through every difficulty. The unhealthy looking Steven Keats as Jackie and the unhealthier looking Jack Kehoe as his connection, decorating the film with their peculiar brands of hopped-up intensity (well-oiled and dry as dust, respectively). The smooth-skinned and bullet-headed James Tolan, a Lumen favorite, as the messenger boy for

Friends of Eddie Coyle anymore. The truth is that they never did. There’s only this one.

[Kent Jones is the author of Physical Evidence: Selected Film Criticism, a volume of his writings, and the director of the 2007 documentary Val Lewton: The Man in the Shadows. A film he directed and wrote with Martin Scorsese about Elia Kazan is forthcoming.]

“...The Last Celluloid Desperado” Grover Lewis (excerpted, first appeared in Rolling Stone, March 1973)

“...Perching on a tiny edge of the couch, the writer relays the Great Writer Tom Wolfe’s admiration and curiosity about Thunder Road, filmed and released in 1958 but still a perennial favorite with the hot-rodding drive-in audiences of the South.

Mitchum nods gravely.

“Yeah, it was received for true, for real. Still is. That was my original design, and I figured it that way. I wrote the story — the original story — and the title song. The screenplay I felt neither ambitious enough nor qualified to do, because those dissolve cuts and all that kind of shit are largely technical. Beyond me, and boring too.

“How come I haven’t done more of that sort of thing? How come I’m not out diggin’ a ditch between takes, you know? I choose not to work. I’ve got a gig goin’ that’s probably not the most satisfactory expression in the world — nor is anyone’s — but it’s the course of least resistance. It does me well, and everyone else well, so why should I labor myself? I mean, I do my good works quietly and elsewhere, and I can’t make a profession of it. Its denied me. I can’t make a profession out of doing better because I learned early on that if you do better, you do well, you don’t get to do better — you just get to do more. You know — ‘While you’re resting would you mind carryin’ this anvil upstairs?’ Like that shot. So, for me, it’s no strain — just the course of least resistance. Do it until it poops out, you know, and then maybe wheel in once a year like Lionel Barrymore and play Scrooge — wrap it up and go back to the Bahamas or whatever happens. Cure my arthritis and spike myself out — whatever.

“Yeah, it’s true, I work a lot of pictures. I guess I do because we’ve gone through a period of some flux and change in our industry, and the effect has become somewhat boring. The effect per se — just that, you know. The innovative or innovative effect has become boring because it’s so obviously designed as effect. Those anl shots ups through somebody’s wisdom teeth and all that whirling-light jazz, you know, is not too much fun. The main thing we lack now is writers. We’ve developed some really serious current speakers as actors, mainly because of the import of British slum morality into this country and the reawakening of the
Mitchum laughs, this time with genuine amusement, and rises to fetch two more cans of beer. Sprawling back on the couch, he rumples a hand through his already tousled hair and lights one Pall Mall from the butt of another.

“I don’t know, I’ve known a lot of cops. When I was in Vietnam, I met a lot of cops—fighting cops. They were humanists—actually humanists. And they died for it, didn’t they? A lot of them died for it. They felt that people really deserved a chance, that everyone deserves to live, and they were going to fight for that. But then they died, a lot of them.

“I went to Nam in ’67, I guess it was. To find out what was happening. Some people in the Defense Department kept nudgin’ me—‘Why don’t you go find out?’ Next thing I knew I was fallin’ off an airplane at Tan Don Nhut—February 3, and it’s 117 degrees. I went, ‘Waughhh,’ and they said, ‘Wait’ll summertime, man, it gets hot.’ It was hot all the time, and I was very impressed. I was very encouraged, enormously encouraged by what I saw. You get semi-sophisticated or cynical, you know, and it’s quite humbling to find that there are still people of high purpose and straight direction.

“I dealt mostly with Special Forces—the Green Beanie. I saw people teaching people—trying to teach them, of the legend about the chicken and the egg, and not to drink out of toilets, all kinds of very basic things. They were truly concerned, totally concerned. They’d come back from long search or battle stretches and immediately check into the village to see how the school was progressing. No, sir, definitely wasn’t set up for my benefit. No way. No way for my benefit. I came in hot. They didn’t know who was comin’ in. I ended up thinking, Well, they still make good people. Good, honest people who give of themselves for other people. Like somebody’s grandmother, like that.

“Sure, they were over there to fight a war, which is wrong in principle maybe, but that wasn’t their doing, was it? Not their doing at all. There are always the opportunists, the opportunist who make a lot of money out of other people’s misery. Then, of course, there’s that French combine which controls the rights to the rice supply which feeds five-eighths of the whole world, which is the main reason for the whole caper anyway, why everybody’s hassling. And there are all the individual people who wake up in the morning and say, ‘Hey, a war’s on—let’s go get a piece of the action.’ Same way on both sides. Little slant-eyed people wake up and say, ‘Let’s grab something. Why not, as long as it’s happening.’ Get a bicycle or something. And ultimately, of course, there’re all the manufacturers who build battleships and airplanes and stuff like that. All of which is not wasteful, because it employs people—it’s just a different form of commerce. It’s a form that I don’t endorse, but there it is.

“The single thing that I’m grateful for that’s come out of the whole war mess has been some recognition of the need for communication. I’ve gone sometimes on dangerous waters in the interests of communication because I believe in it. I believe that everyone in the world should at least have the privilege of knowing what’s happening all at the same time. One thing that I’ve learned is that the greatest fuckin’ slavery is ignorance, and the biggest commodity is ignorance—the dissemination of ignorance, the sale and burgeoning market of ignorance.

“Nah, I didn’t bother to vote yesterday. I’m an anarchist, anyway. I haven’t really been interested in voting since they took Norman Thomas off the ticket. I don’t think it makes any difference who has his duke in the till, really. I mean, you can bring Liberace or somebody simpering about the idealism of the hardworking miners, and ‘My brother George who plays the violin is a Jew,’ and so forth and so on. Well, the idea is marvelous—really marvelous. And as I sat, people go out and fight and die for it. But life is life, you know, so the new leader of Bangladesh goes to London to have his gallbladder removed, and takes over a whole floor at Claridge’s, and has a private entourage of two hundred people—two private jets he flies on. His attitude is, fuck those starvers. Fuck those starvers. Wise up, cranapple—right? Take your best shot. Well, what you do about it is do something about it. You put one brick on top of another—to make it better. If you come to get it, get it. Like the Incas did to the conquistadores. When the Spaniards came for the Incas’ gold, the Incas pried open the Spaniards’ mouths and poked...
“It was about Harry Bridges bein’ deported. He’s shipped out of the country because of his union activities, and he organizes the ship in transit. When there’s a fire in the hold, Bridges is suspected of sabotage, so they put him ashore on a cannibal island in the south Pacific. There’s nobody there but a little toothless Barry Fitzgerald Englishman who’s married to a giant Negress native. Umm...then the next visitor is a sort of Peter Ustinov bearded member of the OGPO. Finally, there’s a wedding ceremony, and Bridges is given the biggest—always the biggest—the biggest, fattest broad on the island. And he’s also awarded a trophy—the shrunken head of the OGPO guy. The play winds up with a minstrel song. It was nothin’, really. It was written before the war, and it did prognosticate the forthcoming Japanese situation. Those honchos at the Theater Guild thought it was somethin’ remarkable, though. I really don’t remember how O’Neill got involved. Somebody sent the manuscript to him, I guess. And I got summoned into the sacrosanct inner sanctum of the esoteric Theater Guild, and I thought, Oh, shit. The whole time I was there, I was tryin’ to suppress an erection. ‘The play was a piece of shit. Looked like it was written by a left-handed retarded child in crayon. Maybe there were one or two good sections in it. What I should do, really, is sit down and write it right, just for the hell of it. Or burn it up. What’s what I should do—burn it up. I don’t know—it all tied together. I suppose I could’ve pursued it. The choice came down to workin’ with little theater groups in Ontario or bein’ a movie queen here in Boston. Which was the best way to go? “Writing—I don’t know. When I first got to Hollywood, I wrote nightclub routines and song lyrics, which paid very well. The only thing is, I got married, and workin’ at home you have to spend all your time around this one broad, and I said fuck it, no way. I was a fuckin’ yet-faced twenty-one-year-old, fuckin’ broken nose—"...

“I ran into Dylan Thomas one time, and I told him, ‘You lost me with this and that.’ And Dylan said”—Mitchum mimics Thomas’s rich Welsh basso—“‘Christ, I lost me fuckin’ self. I’ll have to get Caitlin to explain to me what I was talkin’ about.’ And that happens, you know. You become so fuckin’ secret and abstract that you can’t interpret your own stuff. “I haven’t done anything, really. I wasn’t doin’ anything, really. It was all very private and personal, and I really wasn’t doin’ anything. Fuckin’ horrible junk. But I guess it was the only way I could speak. And I found myself either desperately inarticulate, seeking scan and rhythm, or hopelessly, esoterically overarticulate—and either way, it was hopeless. I guess I thought I would become the darling of the ladies’ literary society and they’d put me on the ass and endow me with profound meanings that I never really had and knew nothing about.

“I used to spend some time with William Faulkner, and Bill told me about his total bewilderment and frustration on that score. They always credit you for the wrong thing, for the wrong reasons. I remember when Bill got the Pulitzer Prize or whatever the hell it was. And he said, no, he couldn’t make it, he was gonna be drunk for another four weeks. I first met him when he came to California to write movies. He said he as there to write a treatment of something. We went all through it. I was a movie expert, see, a starlet. What, Bill finally asked me, was a treatment?

Jack Adrian: Obituary: George V. Higgins (The Independent, 10 November 1999)

It is unquestionably unfair to dub any writer a one-book man, especially when he’s published well over 20. Nevertheless in the case of George V. Higgins the fact has to be faced. He wrote superbly dialogued, complexly plotted, richly characterised novels - yet all just a slight variation on the same basic riff. And, as the years went by and the books stacked up, the similarities began to stand out, hardly helped by their author’s reliance, more and more, on pure dialogue, to the point where narrative - scene descriptions, back-story, the intricate social hinterland against which the novels’ events were played out - virtually disappeared. Until, in essence, all that remained was “two guys gabbing at each other” - or even one guy soliloquising for paragraph after paragraph, page after interminable page.

That of course is somewhat of an exaggeration; but it is not a travesty. Higgins, in his later books, was perfectly capable of having a character monopolise conversations, events, the plot, everything. He was not a difficult writer to parody.

His "one book" was - in a sense sadly - his very first, The Friends of Eddie Coyle (1972), a thriller of surpassing brilliance in which Higgins dug deep into the political, social and criminal midden that was Boston, Massachusetts. Coyle is a provider of hardware for a bunch of bank heisters, who, to protect himself against being sent up for a second stretch, talks to the cops. His friends are his fellow hoods - gunmen, bagmen, bank-rollers - who trust him about as much as he trusts them ("not a whole hell of a lot"). All are more or less in thrall to the "wise guys", the syndicate wheels who call the shots, take the profits, order (though never ever mete out: that's for the footsoldiers) the punishments, the death-warrants for stupidity and treachery.

The Friends of Eddie Coyle is compulsively readable, driven as it is by the Higgins trademark of low-life dialogue that is as hard and glittery as a velvet-plush trayful of diamonds - dialogue that almost takes the breath away, it is so rock-solid real. The book garnered extraordinary tributes not only from the usual suspects - "the most powerful and frightening crime novel...I have read this year", raved the crime-writer Ross Macdonald - but from literary New York too. Norman Mailer homed straight in on the dialogue and made a telling, and critically very sharp, comparison: "Higgins may be the American writer who is closest to Henry Green" (the British experimentalist who's novels were virtually all colloquy) - before descending into excitable blurbrwiter-speak: "What I can't get over is that so good a first novel was written by the fuzz."

Yet perhaps only the fuzz - or at any rate a working US District Attorney who never minded getting his hands dirty on a case, and
who for nearly half a decade was a federal prosecutor in the Organised Crime Section and the Criminal Division of the Massachusetts Attorney General's office - could have written a first novel that so perfectly mirrored his own hard experience hewing out a kind of justice at the legal coal-face.

Apart from a useful couple of years in newspapers at the start of his career, George Vincent Higgins lived and had his being in the world of the law. He rarely even strayed from his home state of Massachusetts.

He was born in 1939 in Brockton, Massachusetts, educated at Rockland High and Boston College, then Stanford University in California, where he gained an MA in English. He obtained a law degree from the Boston College Law School, and was admitted to the Massachusetts Bar in 1967. Thereafter he rose steadily through the establishment ranks - Deputy Assistant Attorney General (1967-69) and Assistant Attorney General (1969-70) in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts; Assistant US Attorney for the District of Massachusetts (1970-73); Special Assistant US Attorney (1973-74) - before branching out into the private sector. George V. Higgins Inc lasted from 1973 through to 1978; a partnership, Griffin and Higgins, from 1978 through to 1982.

He didn't desperately need the work. His books, even at the end, could still command high initial print-runs (over 30,000 copies in hardback, which most writers would murder for, even in the United States). But in a sense he was addicted to the law, certainly relishing that period during which he was a prosecuting attorney in the Organised Crime Section of the Massachusetts Attorney General's office, and gleefully describing the pursuit of criminals (at a time when the Boston Irish and the Mafia "wise guys" were killing each other in all-out war) as "the last officially sponsored blood sport". His books faithfully depicted the violence, the betrayals, the loquacious invective (after a page or so, in a Higgins novel, as in a David Mamet play, the word "fuck" ceases to have any sensible meaning), the gallows-humour situations of this milieu.

Oddly, despite the rich dialogue, Higgins's books did not effortlessly translate into the cinematic medium. The Friends of Eddie Coyle made an excellent movie, thanks partly to a riveting, and almost poetic, performance by Robert Mitchum as Coyle, but its success was really one for its director Peter Yates.

Higgins always acknowledged John O'Hara as a primary influence, especially O'Hara's short stories. Even so there were a good many superior pulp writers of the 1950s and 1960s whose methods and attitudes clearly rubbed off on him. Elmore Leonard, for instance (certainly not the other way round), and particularly Donald Westlake wearing his "Richard Stark" persona. Their fictional worlds, where the bad guys can be the good guys, the cops come from the outermost circle of hell, and betrayal is the norm, Higgins combined with his own reality. And like them Higgins gave his no-account low-lives an inner landscape, a certain sensibility, so that while discussing how to kill someone they could also grumble about girlfriends, the weather, what kind of oil to use in your car, and enthuse about mayonnaise in a cheese sandwich.

Alas for Higgins - and all those busy churners-out of hardboiled paperback originals a generation ago - most critics think Quentin Tarantino dreamed that angle up.

COMING UP IN THE SPRING 2010 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS XX:

Mar 23  John Cassavetes, A Woman Under the Influence 1974
Mar 30  Stanley Kubrick, The Shining 1980
Apr  6  Wolfgang Petersen, Das Boot 1981
Apr 13  Federico Fellini, Ginger & Fred, 1985
Apr 20 Michael Mann, Collateral 2004

CONTACTS:
...email Diane Christian: engdc@buffalo.edu
...email Bruce Jackson bjackson@buffalo.edu
...for the series schedule, annotations, links and updates: http://buffalofilmseminars.com
...to subscribe to the weekly email informational notes, send an email to addtolist@buffalofilmseminars.com
....for cast and crew info on any film: http://imdb.com/

The Buffalo Film Seminars are presented by the Market Arcade Film & Arts Center and State University of New York at Buffalo with support from the Robert and Patricia Colby Foundation and the Buffalo News.