JOHN WAYNE: a love song: Joan Didion has for three decades addressed her reporter's eye and novelist's pen to the psyche of America, high and low: from the hippies of Haight Ashbury to Miami immigrants to the powers of Hollywood and Washington. This month, three books of her articles are published. Here, from 1965, is some classic old-style machismo

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IN THE summer of 1943 I was eight, and my father and mother and small brother and I were at Peterson Field in Colorado Springs. A hot wind blew through that summer, blew until it seemed that before August broke, all the dust in Kansas would be in Colorado, would have drifted over the tar-paper barracks and the temporary strip and stopped only when it hit Pikes Peak. There was not much to do, a summer like that: there was the day they brought in the first B-29, an event to remember but scarcely a vacation programme. There was an officers' club, but no swimming pool; all the officers' club had of interest was artificial blue rain behind the bar. The rain interested me a good deal, but I could not spend the summer watching it, and so we went, my brother and I, to the movies.

We went three and four afternoons a week, sat on folding chairs in the darkened hut which served as a theatre, and it was there, that summer of 1943 while the hot wind blew outside, that I first saw John Wayne. Saw the walk, heard the voice. Heard him tell the girl in a picture called War of the Wildcats that he would build her a house, 'at the bend in the river where the cottonwoods grow'.

As it happened I did not grow up to be the kind of woman who is the heroine in a Western, and although the men I have known have had many virtues and have taken me to live in many places I have come to love, they have never been John Wayne, and they have never taken me to that bend in the river where the cottonwoods grow. Deep in that part of my heart where the artificial rain forever falls, that is still the line I wait to hear.

I tell you this neither in a spirit of self-revelation nor as an exercise in total recall, but simply to demonstrate that when John Wayne rode through my childhood, and perhaps through yours, he determined for ever the shape of certain of our dreams. It did not seem possible that such a man could fall ill, could carry within him that most inexplicable and ungovernable of diseases. The rumour struck some obscure anxiety, threw our very childhoods into question. In John Wayne's world, John Wayne was supposed to give the orders. 'Let's ride,' he said, and, 'Saddle up.' 'Forward ho,' and, 'A man's gotta do what he's got to do.'

'Hello, there,' he said when he first saw the girl, in a construction camp or on a train or just standing around on the front porch waiting for somebody to ride up through the tall grass. When John Wayne spoke, there was no mistaking his intentions; he had a sexual authority so strong that even a child could perceive it. And in a world we understood early to be characterised by venality and doubt and paralysing ambiguities, he suggested another world, one which may or may not have existed ever but in any case existed no more; a place where a man could move free, could make his own code and live by it; a world in which, if a man did what he had to do, he could one day take the girl and go riding through the draw and find himself home free, not in a hospital with something going wrong inside, not in a high bed with the flowers and the drugs and the forced smiles, but there at the bend in the bright river, the cottonwoods shimmering in the early morning sun.

'Hello, there.' Where did he come from, before the tall grass? Even his history seemed right, for it was no history at all, nothing to intrude upon the dream. Born Marion Morrison in Winterset, Iowa, the son of a druggist. Moved as a child to Lancaster, California, part of the migration to that promised land sometimes called 'the west coast of Iowa'. Not that Lancaster was the promise fulfilled; Lancaster was a town on the Mojave where the dust blew through. But Lancaster was still California, and it was only a year from there to Glendale, where desolation had a different flavour: antimacassars among the orange groves, a middle-class prelude to Forest Lawn.

Imagine Marion Morrison in Glendale. A Boy Scout, then a student at Glendale High. A tackle for USC, a Sigma Chi. Summer vacations, a job moving props on the old Fox lot. There, a meeting with John Ford, one of the several directors who were to sense that into this perfect mould might be poured the inarticulate longings of a nation wondering at just what pass the trail had been lost. 'Dammit,' said Raoul Walsh later, 'the son of a bitch looked like a man.'

And so after a while the boy from Glendale became a star. He did not become an actor, as he has always been careful to point out to interviewers ('How many times do I gotta tell you, I don't act at all, I re-act'), but a star, and the star called John Wayne would spend most of the rest of his life with one or another of those directors, out on some forsaken location, in search of the dream.

Out where the skies are a trifle bluer

Out where friendship's a little truer

That's where the West begins.

Nothing very bad could happen in the dream, nothing a man could not face down. But something did. There it was, the rumour, and after a while the headlines. 'I licked the Big C,' John Wayne announced, as John Wayne would, reducing those outlaw cells to the level of any other outlaws, but even so we all sensed that this would be the one unpredictable confrontation, the one shoot-out Wayne could lose. I have as much trouble as the next person with illusion and reality, and I did not much want to see John Wayne when he must be (or so I thought) having some trouble with it himself, but I did, and it was down in Mexico when he was making the picture his illness had so long delayed, down in the very country of the dream.

It was John Wayne's 165th picture. It was Henry Hathaway's 84th. It was number 34 for Dean Martin, who was working off an old contract to Hal Wallis, for whom it was independent production number 65. It was called The Sons of Katie Elder, and it was a Western, and after the three-month delay they had finally shot the exteriors up in Durango,

and now they were in the waning days of interior shooting at Estudio Churubusco outside Mexico City, and the sun was hot and the air was clear and it was lunchtime.

Out under the pepper trees the boys from the Mexican crew sat around sucking caramels, and down the road some of the technical men sat around a place which served a stuffed lobster and a glass of tequila for one dollar American, but it was inside the cavernous empty commissary where the talent sat around, the reasons for the exercise, all sitting around the big table picking at huevos con queso and Carta Blanca beer. Dean Martin, unshaven. Mack Gray, who goes where Martin goes. Bob Goodfried, who was in charge of Paramount publicity and who had flown down to arrange for a trailer and who had a delicate stomach. 'Tea and toast,' he warned repeatedly. 'That's the ticket. You can't trust the lettuce.' And Henry Hathaway, the director, who did not seem to be listening to Goodfried. And John Wayne, who did not seem to be listening to anyone.

'This week's gone slow,' Dean Martin said, for the third time.

'How can you say that?' Mack Gray demanded.

' This . . . week's . . . gone . . . slow, that's how I can say it.'

'You don't mean you want it to end.'

'I'll say it right out, Mack, I want it to end. Tomorrow night I shave this beard, I head for the airport, I say adios amigos] Bye-bye muchachos]'

Henry Hathaway lit a cigar and patted Martin's arm fondly. 'Not tomorrow, Dino.'

'Henry, what are you planning to add? A world war?'

Hathaway patted Martin's arm again and gazed into the middle distance. At the end of the table someone mentioned a man who, some years before, had tried unsuccessfully to blow up an airplane.

'He's still in jail,' Hathaway said suddenly.

'In jail?' Martin was momentarily distracted from the question of whether to send his golf clubs back with Bob Goodfried or consign them to Mack Gray. 'What's he in jail for if nobody got killed?'

'Attempted murder, Dino,' Hathaway said gently. 'A felony.'

'You mean some guy just tried to kill me he'd end up in jail?'

Hathaway removed the cigar from his mouth and looked across the table. 'Some guy just tried to kill me he wouldn't end up in jail. How about you, Duke?'

Very slowly, the object of Hathaway's query wiped his mouth, pushed back his chair, and stood up. It was the real thing, the authentic article, the move which had climaxed a thousand scenes on 165 flickering frontiers and phantasmagoric battlefields before, and it was about to climax this one, in the commissary at Estudio Churubusco outside Mexico City. 'Right,' John Wayne drawled. 'I'd kill him.'

Almost all the cast of Katie Elder had gone home, that last week; only the principals were left, Martin, and Earl Holliman, and Michael Anderson Jnr, and Martha Hyer. Martha Hyer was not around much, but every now and then someone referred to her, usually as 'the girl'. They had all been together nine weeks, six of them in Durango.

Durango. The very name hallucinates. Man's country. Out where the West begins. There had been ahuehuete trees in Durango, a waterfall, rattlesnakes. There had been weather, nights so cold that they had postponed one or two exteriors until they could shoot inside. 'It was the girl,' they explained. 'You couldn't keep the girl out in cold like that.'

And there was Wayne himself, fighting through number 165. There was Wayne, in his 33-

year-old spurs, his dusty neckerchief, his blue shirt. 'You don't have too many worries about what to wear in these things,' he said. 'You can wear a blue shirt, or, if you're down in Monument Valley, you can wear a yellow shirt.'

There was Wayne, in a relatively new hat, a hat which made him look curiously like William S Hart. 'I had this old cavalry hat I loved, but I lent it to Sammy Davis. I got it back, it was unwearable. I think they all pushed it down on his head and said OK, John Wayne - you know, a joke.'

There was Wayne, working too soon, finishing the picture with a bad cold and a racking cough, so tired by late afternoon that he kept an oxygen inhalator on the set. And still nothing mattered but the Code. 'That guy,' he muttered of a reporter who had incurred his displeasure. 'I admit I'm balding. I admit I got a tyre around my middle. What man 57 doesn't? Big news. Anyway, that guy.'

He paused, about to expose the heart of the matter, the root of the distaste, the fracture of the rules that bothered him more than the alleged misquotations, more than the intimation that he was no longer the Ringo Kid. 'He comes down, uninvited, but I ask him over anyway. So we're sitting around drinking mescal out of a water jug.'

He paused again and looked meaningfully at Hathaway, readying him for the unthinkable denouement. 'He had to be assisted to his room.'

They argued about the virtues of various prizefighters, they argued about the price of J & B in pesos. They argued about dialogue.

'As rough a guy as he is, Henry, I still don't think he'd raffle off his mother's Bible.'

'I like a shocker, Duke.'

They exchanged endless training-table jokes. 'You know why they call this memory sauce?' Martin asked, holding up a bowl of chilli.

'Why?'

'Because you remember it in the morning.'

'Hear that, Duke? Hear why they call this memory sauce?'

They delighted one another by blocking out minute variations in the free-for-all fight which is a set piece in Wayne pictures; motivated or totally gratuitous, the fight sequence has to be in the picture, because they so enjoy making it. 'Listen - this'll really be funny. Duke picks up the kid, see, and then it takes both Dino and Earl to throw him out the door - how's that?'

On the morning of the day they were to finish Katie Elder, Web Overlander showed up not in his windbreaker but in a blue blazer. 'Home, Mama,' he said, passing out the last of his Juicy Fruit. 'I got on my getaway clothes.' But he was subdued.

At noon, Henry Hathaway's wife dropped by the commissary to tell him that she might fly over to Acapulco. 'Go ahead,' he told her. 'I get through here, all I'm gonna do is take Seconal to a point just this side of suicide.' They were all subdued.

After Mrs Hathaway left, there were desultory attempts at reminiscing, but man's country was receding fast; they were already halfway home, and all they could call up was the 1961 Bel Air fire, during which Henry Hathaway had ordered the Los Angeles Fire Department off his property and saved the place himself by, among other measures, throwing everything flammable into the swimming pool. 'Those fire guys might've just given it up,' Wayne said. 'Just let it burn.' In fact this was a good story, and one incorporating several of their favourite themes, but a Bel Air story was still not a Durango story.

In the early afternoon they began the last scene, and although they spent as much time as possible setting it up, the moment finally came when there was nothing to do but shoot it.

'Second team out, first team in, doors closed,' the assistant director shouted one last time. The stand-ins walked off the set, John Wayne and Martha Hyer walked on. 'All right, boys, silencio, this is a picture.'

They took it twice. Twice the girl offered John Wayne the tattered Bible. Twice John Wayne told her that 'there's a lot of places I go where that wouldn't fit in'. Everyone was very still. And at 2.30 that Friday afternoon Henry Hathaway turned away from the camera, and in the hush that followed he ground out his cigar in a sand bucket. 'OK,' he said. 'That's it.'

Since that summer of 1943 I had thought of John Wayne in a number of ways. I had thought of him driving cattle up from Texas, and bringing airplanes in on a single engine, thought of him telling the girl at the Alamo that 'Republic is a beautiful word'. I had never thought of him having dinner with his family and with me and my husband in an expensive restaurant in Chapultepec Park, but time brings odd mutations, and there we were, one night that last week in Mexico. For a while it was only a nice evening, an evening anywhere. We had a lot of drinks and I lost the sense that the face across the table was in certain ways more familiar than my husband's.

And then something happened. Suddenly the room seemed suffused with the dream, and I could not think why. Three men appeared out of nowhere, playing guitars. Pilar Wayne leant slightly forward, and John Wayne lifted his glass almost imperceptibly toward her. 'We'll need some Pouilly Fuisse for the rest of the table,' he said, 'and some red Bordeaux for the Duke.'

We all smiled, and drank the Pouilly Fuisse for the rest of the table and the red Bordeaux for the Duke, and all the while the men with the guitars kept playing, until finally I realised what they were playing, what they had been playing all along: 'The Red River Valley' and the theme from The High and the Mighty. They did not quite get the beat right, but even now I can hear them, in another country and a long time later, even as I tell you this.

This piece comes from 'Slouching Towards Bethlehem', a collection of Didion's pieces from the Sixties. The book is republished on 25 January as a Flamingo paperback, as is 'The White Album', a collection of her pieces from the Seventies, each at pounds 6.99. A new book, 'Sentimental Journeys', a collection of her Eighties journalism, is published next week by HarperCollins at pounds 15.

(Photograph omitted)