The Unfashionable Dissenter: Copperhead, the Movie
Guest: Bill Kauffman
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WOODS: Bill, you may not know this, but the response from my listeners to your last appearance was just overwhelming. The consistent response I got was: I was unfamiliar with Bill Kauffman before and shame on me, but I love this guy—I can't believe how much a love this guy.

KAUFFMAN: Well, to know, know, know him is to love, love, love him, right?

WOODS: That is right. (laughs) That's what I tried telling them: the response you are having is the perfectly human response when first encountering Bill Kauffman.

So I thought I'd have you back, Bill, especially because it's a particularly auspicious moment to do so because the *Copperhead* film that you played such an intimate role in is now available on DVD. I thought it might be nice to talk about that. This movie has Peter Fonda in it, and it has Ron Maxwell of *Gods and Generals* fame as the director. This is a big deal. How did this project get started? You just happened to know Ron Maxwell?

KAUFFMAN: Well, I did. You know the odd thing is I did, you know, you mentioned Ron is probably he foremost cinematic interpreter of the Civil War, with *Gettysburg* and *Gods and Generals*—these two big scale, epic films. I have known him for years, and we happened to be. We were at breakfast like four or five years ago, and the night before he had spoken to the New Canaan Historical Society. I was up there because we had another project we were working on that was an abortive project—someday may be revivified. But someone asked him, "Hey, when you going to make another Civil War movie?" And he replied, "You know, I'd love to. I'm always looking for a topic, maybe something offbeat." And the next morning at breakfast I said, "Hey, you ever read this novella *Copperhead*?" He said. "Oh, that's a fantastic book," and it was born there. *The Copperhead* was written by Harold Frederic, who is now a forgotten name in American letters, but at one point was considered one of the major American novelists. He was born in Utica, which I think is the literary capital of New York State, you know? Certainly—

WOODS: Well, next to Batavia [TW note: Bill's hometown].

KAUFFMAN: Well, of course, so that's an exception, but pound-for-pound Utica is far more impressive than that city down there on the Hudson at the bottom of the state.

WOODS: Right.

KAUFFMAN: Frederic had been a boy during the Civil War, living in upstate New York, which was an area that as Edmund Wilson said was marked by a peculiar mixture of patriotism and disaffection. I think it's accurate to say that per capita we sent more boys to the Union army than any other region of the country, and yet it was also a hot bed of antiwar, or maybe not so much antiwar but anti-Lincoln sentiment. We elected a Democrat governor in 1862, Horatio Seymour, largely on the civil liberties issue.

Frederic had an odd life. He was an old-fashioned Jeffersonian Democrat. He was a friend of Grover Cleveland, Uncle Jumbo over there in Buffalo. He had been the London correspondent for the *New York Times* for a number of years. He died very young, under odd circumstances. It actually turned out he was a bigamist. He had two families in London, and he was staying with the Christian Science wife when he had a stroke, which was really a piece of bad luck. He was not treated. But she was tried for manslaughter. So he died scandalously. And his works were forgotten. But then they were—one of the books *The Damnation of*

Theron Ware, F. Scott Fitzgerald called the best American novel written before 1920, so he was not totally forgotten. But in the 1960s, the literary critic Edmund Wilson, also a native of the area around Utica, revived Frederic's Civil War stories. They came out in a new edition, and these stories are unlike any other Civil War stories in that they were about the home front in rural New York state. They don't have any Southern Dixie romanticism, nor do they have any of the northern "Battle Hymn of the Republic" triumphalism righteousness. They're stories about little communities, and the way these communities are changed and altered irreparably when young men are removed from the communities. Some of them will return home intact. Some will come home in pine boxes. Some will come home changed for the worse. And some you never know what happens to them. So these little hamlets, these interdependent communities of small farms and crossroads businesses, little Protestant churches, are shattered by the war, and that's an aspect of war that our artists have tended to ignore—the domestic consequences. And that's what Frederic's stories are about, and that's what *The Copperhead* is about, and that's one thing that I think really attracted us to the story. [TW note: The book is called *The Copperhead*, and the film is called *Copperhead*.]

WOODS: When I interviewed you about this around the time the movie was coming out in theaters—I talked to you about it when I was filling in for Peter Schiff, and I noted that there's a speech in it, a small soliloquy, let's say, delivered by the protagonist, where he's speaking to the Peter Fonda character, and he's defending himself because the protagonist is not in favor of the war. He would like to see peace reestablished. And there are some people who find this hard to understand. We're fighting for the Union. Don't you value the Union? And he basically says, look, there are so many things I value more than I value the Union, and he looks at his friend and he says, you know what? I value you more than I value the Union. And it was this whole thing about preferring things that are close and tangible to things that are distant and abstract, and as we were watching it, I turned to my wife and said, "Bill wrote that speech." There's no question in my mind that's Bill Kauffman through and through. (laughs)

KAUFFMAN: (laughs) Yeah, we try to avoid—I hate message movies, you know, where they pound you over the head.

WOODS: Oh, they're the worst, right.

KAUFFMAN: Yeah, and this is not at all a message film, but yeah, I confess that I did write that little soliloquy.

WOODS: But I will say in your defense, though, it's not John Galt's 40-page speech.

KAUFFMAN: (laughs) Well, we should probably explain to the listeners that the very term Copperhead was a derisive, serpentine epithet applied to those northerners who were against the war. And the Copperhead of our film is a small farmer in upstate New York, an old-fashioned Jeffersonian Democrat who's certainly not pro-slavery. Most Copperheads weren't. Although, obviously in the southern parts of Indiana and Ohio you had a lot of people who were socially very close to the South, had family ties there. And a lot of those people were, say, indifferent to the suffering of black bondsmen and bondswomen. That was not the case in upstate New York. There the opposition tended to be centered in old-fashioned constitutional Democrats. Whether they were right or wrong, or misguided, or prescient is for the viewer to decide. But anyway, the war comes, and even though the war is far away, the war comes home as it always does. This formerly substantial man of the community is ostracized, made a pariah, his son ends up running off to join the Union army. So his family is riven, much as the community is riven, and thereupon unfolds a tale of recovery and redemption and violence and vengeance and the salvific properties of love.

WOODS: There is a moment in the film I won't give away in which something happens that is entirely shocking. You can see maybe the film is building to it. You know there's tension in the town. You know that people don't much care for this guy's political views. But then something happens that is just so jarring that you just sit right up and pay attention.

But you know, Bill, let me change my line of discussion here because I want to tell you that what impresses me about this is that it's not difficult to put together a Civil War movie in the sense that you have a ready audience for it. People eat it up. People love that era. People can't get enough Civil War movies. But they expect them to follow a certain line. They expect it either to be a military film, which this is not, or they expect it to repeat the standard pieties about the war that we've all imbibed, and yours throws them a curve ball.

KAUFFMAN: It does, and in that sense it is subversive, I would say, but also is there any kind of political message to the film? I mean, other than love thy neighbor, which is as radical a message now as it was a couple thousand years ago, but it would be about tolerating dissent. Now, movies or plays, pieces of art about dissent, they always, I think, flatter the author and they flatter the audience.

WOODS: Yeah.

KAUFFMAN: Because, of course, all right-thinking people are on the side of the dissenter.

WOODS: Right.

KAUFFMAN: You know, who is being persecuted by the narrow-minded peasants or the clerics who deny that the Earth is round, or that it orbits the sun, or that there's such a thing as evolution, and it's just such a cheap and easy pose to stand at this distance of time with Galileo, or—

WOODS: I know, right!

KAUFFMAN: Or Scopes, or the witches of Salem—oh, you're against witch burning!

WOODS: I know, boy, what moral courage you've shown today in 2014 to be against witch burning! (laughs)

KAUFFMAN: (laughs) Exactly. In our film, the protagonist in a sense, who is in many respects a flawed man, is standing up, speaking against the war, which is now hallowed. He is critical of Lincoln, who I think by most twenty-first century lights is the greatest American hero. So it makes it more difficult. Okay, Mr. Free Speech, Mr. Oh, I'm for the First Amendment, oh, I may disagree with what you say, but I defend to the death your right to say it: are you going to stand with this man? You know, who's taking on probably the most hallowed cause in American history the Civil War? It makes it much more difficult, and I think it introduces a lot of complexities into it, you know?

His chief antagonist, Jee Hagadorn, who is brilliantly played by Agnes Macfadyen—I should say, Abner [the protagonist] is played by Billy Campbell in a really powerful, understated performance—Hagadorn is an abolitionist, and so he is, I think, unquestionably right on the central moral question of the age, the immorality of slavery. The great, big failing of this country was the failure to have liberated the slaves, not only many decades earlier but also peacefully. And yet Hagadorn, the abolitionist, is also a fanatic, and like any fanatic, political fanatics, religious fanatics, he subordinates personal relationships and [inaudible] to a cause, and that cause eventually becomes an abstraction. So he becomes the kind of guy—he only can see a forest. He can't see the individual trees. Now, again, in a conventional film Hagadorn should have been impeccable and Abner Beech, the antiwar guy, should have had a Snidely Whiplash mustache, and he should have kicked the dog, and he should have been smoking cigarettes and whatever other signifiers you have now of a villain. But that's not the case in this film or in the story upon which it's based. That's one of the things that I think makes it something that people when they see it most are affected by it and they talk about it.

And certainly Abner Beech is not flawless because he suffers also in a sense from Hagadornism in that he, too, comes to subordinate his family to the personal cause, the antiwar cause. So it's kind of a complex film, I think, and we're proud of it. It didn't exactly set the box office on fire, but it played in about 100 cities, and now it's on DVD and Blu-Ray, and should be in your friendly neighborhood video store, or even better, you can buy it.

WOODS: Yeah, you can buy it, and you can make both of us happy: if they buy it from Amazon through the widget on my show site, you help me stay on the air to promote Bill Kauffman, so—

KAUFFMAN: Oh, that would be—I can't imagine a better act that a person could commit.

WOODS: There it is. Although the idea of Bill Kauffman ordering something from Amazon is a bit mind-spinning here. (laughs)

KAUFFMAN: Well, you know, I always do that. Even I have a little website, and I always say, please, if you can, order from the local guy, but if Amazon is the only source, well, hey.

WOODS: Well, the affiliate program helps me pay for some work that I sometimes need done on the show and all that. Now, let me ask you: what was your exact role in the film? Did you adapt the screenplay from

the original work?

KAUFFMAN: Yes, I did. I wrote the screenplay, so it was an adapted screenplay, and Ron Maxwell the director was tremendous mentor. We followed the novella somewhat closely. Although, actually, about halfway through we branch off. The book ends very badly. I don't know what happened. Maybe Frederic was tired. I have no idea. It's inspired by the book, largely based on the book, but if you read the novella, which I encourage folks to do, there are a fair number of differences.

WOODS: Where did you guys film it?

KAUFFMAN: It was filmed actually up in where of course you would expect an American Civil War movie to be filmed, in Canada.

WOODS: Oh, that's funny! I didn't realize that. Why?

KAUFFMAN: Yeah, I was hoping it would be filmed, actually, in a historical site in upstate New York, but for tax reasons it was filmed in the province of New Brunswick—actually, for more than tax reasons. They filmed it at a place called King's Landing, which is a treasure of Canada, I would say—it's a living history museum, where the architecture and layout is mid-nineteenth century North American. So it was the perfect spot to film, and it was a fantastic set—they tell me it would have cost $30 million to build a set like this, but it was there for us to use.

WOODS: Wow! Beautiful! Well, you can't argue with that.

KAUFFMAN: Although the funny thing is, at the last minute, maybe two and a half months or so before the film was released, the producers, who were fantastic people, said, "You know what? We need a brief scene at the beginning of the film." So that's actually the one scene that I did not write. Ron wrote it. And it's the very first scene in the movie, and it was filmed, since you can't really film anything in the provinces in early March, it was actually filmed in southern California, doubling for upstate New York.

WOODS: How about that!

KAUFFMAN: But you can't see any palm trees or anything like that in the background.

WOODS: Oh, that's funny. YouTube has this channel where when they have huge movies that come out, this channel puts out everything wrong with such-and-such movie. It finds all the anachronisms, and you know, the guy's wearing three pens in his pocket in one shot, and then the very next shot he's got only two. So mercifully, you will not be subjected to that. I think they would have spotted the palm tree. That's for sure.

KAUFFMAN: They would have, yeah, yeah, and I hope they won't find too many anachronisms. The biggest anachronism, usually, in a historical movie is again, the author doesn't want to be thought to in any way share the social conventions or whatever of the time, so there's always this auctorial, alter ego. So you have a movie set in the 1830s where you'll have a female character who has the attitudes of a twenty-first-century screenwriter, you know? And that to me is a [inaudible 0:20:07.2] anachronism.

WOODS: Oh, yeah, and you know what? When I think about, for example, *Amistad*—there are courtroom scenes, and they're in Connecticut, and there are black people sitting there in the courtroom observing the trial, which goes to show they are more interested in political correctness than they are in really showing what conditions were like. You think black people would be allowed in a courtroom in Connecticut? There's no way, right? But, of course, we have to make it seem like these were the good guys—and there were some good guys, yes, but you can't pretend that society was a way that it wasn't unless you just want to use "the North" as against the traditional foil, "the South," thinking of them as these gigantic blobs, these gigantic aggregates that have no actual people in them.

KAUFFMAN: Right! Right! And so again, all the complexity and contradiction gets washed out—the Unionists in the South, the antiwar folks in the North. I actually live about 20 miles north of what was really the cradle of political abolitionism in America—Warsaw, New York, where the Liberty Party was formed. And these were, to me, some of the great heroes of American history. I mean, they took a very unfashionable position, and they were motivate by, I think, Christian concerns, and they had a two-pronged approach: moral suasion and the enactment of personal liberty laws—which I know you've written about, Tom—which were essentially defying the Fugitive Slave Act. This was one of the strategies to end slavery peacefully.

WOODS: As a party, they got about two percent of the vote. This is why, Bill, it particularly sticks in my craw when today, especially among libertarians who are dying to let the establishment know that, yeah, we favor free trade and low taxes, but please, please don't call me an extremist, oh, good *New York Times* reporter, sir. I want you to know that I hold all the fashionable opinions on everything, and I am deeply opposed to slavery, nd these other libertarians, I think secretly they support it because they've said unkind words about Lincoln, but I am really against slavery.

So what I have sometimes said, Bill, is that I consider it exceedingly unlikely, given that two percent of the vote went to the Liberty Party 150 years ago, that people today who devote themselves to assuring everybody that they hold all the officially approved opinions would have been among that two percent. In that day, they would have been assuring everybody they hold the officially approved opinion that they were, of course, opposed to the Liberty Party and the extremists who belonged to it!

KAUFFMAN: Right! Anathematizing of Gerrit Smith and all these I think really heroic figures.

WOODS: Now, Bill, were you actually on set when they were filming?

KAUFFMAN: Yes, I was. They filmed for about seven weeks. I was there off and on for about four weeks. On the set of a well-planned movie there's not a whole lot for a writer to do, but once in a while, they'd say, hey, we need a little transition scene here for tomorrow, and I had a little cubby hole, and it was fun because it was from like a 1930s movie—"Get me a rewrite!" So I get in there and pound out the scene. I was really impressed by the competence and the dedication of—these crews are phenomenal. It's a really complicated undertaking with many hundreds of parts to put one film together, but this worked very well, and I think it shows on the screen. I like the film a lot.

WOODS: You know, Bill, I was asking not so much—it hadn't occurred to me that there would be a need, let's say, for an impromptu drafting of a short scene, but just that this was in some ways your baby, having done the screenplay, and it just might be fun to go and observe it, whether or not they really needed you there.

KAUFFMAN: Oh, yeah, absolutely it was. You hear a lot of stories—writers tend to be whiners, as you know, Tom.

WOODS: I refuse to believe that.

KAUFFMAN: I think people who write films sometimes, I've heard a number of horror stories about how all these vulgar philistines ruined my vision, etc. But in this case, Ron Maxwell and the cast and crew—I can't imagine it having turned out better. There might be one or two little things where I wish this scene stayed, and this scene didn't, but I can't complain. It was a great experience.