

THE LAST ACTION HERO

Saluting the late, great documentarian Robert Gardner, whose adventurous life behind the lens redefined the archetype of the gentleman explorer

The documentary filmmaker Robert Gardner, who died last summer at age eighty-eight, cut a striking figure in the remote and rarefied worlds through which he traveled. Fluent in film theory but also capable of piloting a plane over the Andes or repairing a Jeep with improvised parts in the African desert, he was among the last of a special breed of academic adventurers who inspired a generation and defy easy categorization. Beneath his movie-star looks and commanding public persona was a frustrated auteur whose elegant films attempted to bridge the divide between art and scholarship.

A pair of dominant interests shaped his career: indigenous cultures—the less diluted by modern society, the better—and the art of movies. Gardner brought both passions with him to far-off places and became a leading practitioner of what is often referred to as “ethnographic film.” The term hardly does justice to the patient, understated poetry of Gardner’s work, qualities that are nowhere more apparent than in the film that launched his career. *Dead Birds* (1963) is, to this day, quite unlike anything else captured on celluloid. Shot in the wilds of New Guinea, it is a nonfiction meditation on one of the world’s last Stone Age tribes, the Dani, and the system of violent retribution that keeps one village in a constant, low-simmer state of warfare with its neighbors.

written by DARRELL HARTMAN photograph by STUART CODY





Gardner leads a donkey and camel caravan through the Dallol Depression, Ethiopia, 1967.

Arranging to film this barely known society was no small feat. Gardner went big, organizing a multidisciplinary expedition through Harvard's Peabody Museum. The all-star roster included his friend Peter Matthiessen, who would go on to become one of America's great novelists and nature writers, and the swashbuckling *Life* photographer Eliot Elisofon. In charge of sound recording was a young heir named Michael Rockefeller, who would disappear off the coast of New Guinea shortly after Gardner's expedition ended, never to be found again. Rumors that he was killed and eaten by tribesmen persist to this day.

Filming the Dani was not for the faint of heart. Villagers were ambushed and killed. Rockefeller was grazed by an arrow while recording a battle. (Gardner kept the incident quiet, fearing the colonial Dutch authorities would shut the production down.) The team endured flies, soaking rain, and dysentery. Gardner hauled close to fifty pounds of gear through swampy terrain, and the extreme humidity eroded his camera cables and compromised his film stock. Worst of all, he shot for months without being able to view the footage, relying instead on spotty notes sent via telegram from colleagues back in the States. It's amusing to think that at the time, advances in technology had made documentaries considerably *easier* to shoot than ever.

In the end, Gardner's footage proved to be a treasure trove. No one had documented Stone Age tribes quite like this before, and it was doubtful that anyone would again; no sooner had he returned to Cambridge for the long editing process than the Dutch government, employing police and missionaries, put an end to the Danis' warring ways. For Gardner, then, the task was to convey the vividly primeval world he and his team had been fortunate enough to witness.

"If this film can make the audience feel one twentieth of our excitement, our *astonishment*, it will be a classic," Matthiessen wrote in a letter to Gardner.

The consensus seems to have been that it did. "I almost seemed to stagger within myself," the poet Robert Lowell wrote after viewing *Dead Birds*. Through observation and artful editing, the film revealed something profound about man, the ripeness of his origins and the history of his violence. Gardner's own narration sounded the final, fatalistic note. "Men, having foreknowledge of their doom, bring a special passion to their life. They will not simply wait for death, nor will they bear it lightly when it comes."

Gardner's films didn't set out to be rigorously analytical or objective, and their classroom popularity and artistic bent made him the enemy (if not envy) of many an establishment anthropologist. Just who was this Harvard hotshot, flying himself into the Colombian highlands to film Mayan priests? But he mostly shrugged off the criticism. (He also founded and ran the Harvard Film Study Center, which produced a steady stream of collaborators and acolytes.) Gardner was a willful personality, going to extremes to get what he wanted. While filming Ethiopia's Hamar herdsmen in the early seventies, he competed with baboons for bathing spots and removed up to a dozen blood-thirsty ticks from his body each day. The journey to locate his subjects, undertaken during the rainy season, had him endlessly hauling jeeps out of the mud. Yet such adventures never wound up on the screen. "What will never be seen," he wrote of one grueling hike, "is the hardship it entailed in lost sleep, lack of nourishment, and exhausting work." While he mused that his trials in Ethiopia might make for "the ultimate road film," he decided against it in the end, no doubt because the idea struck him as self-indulgent.

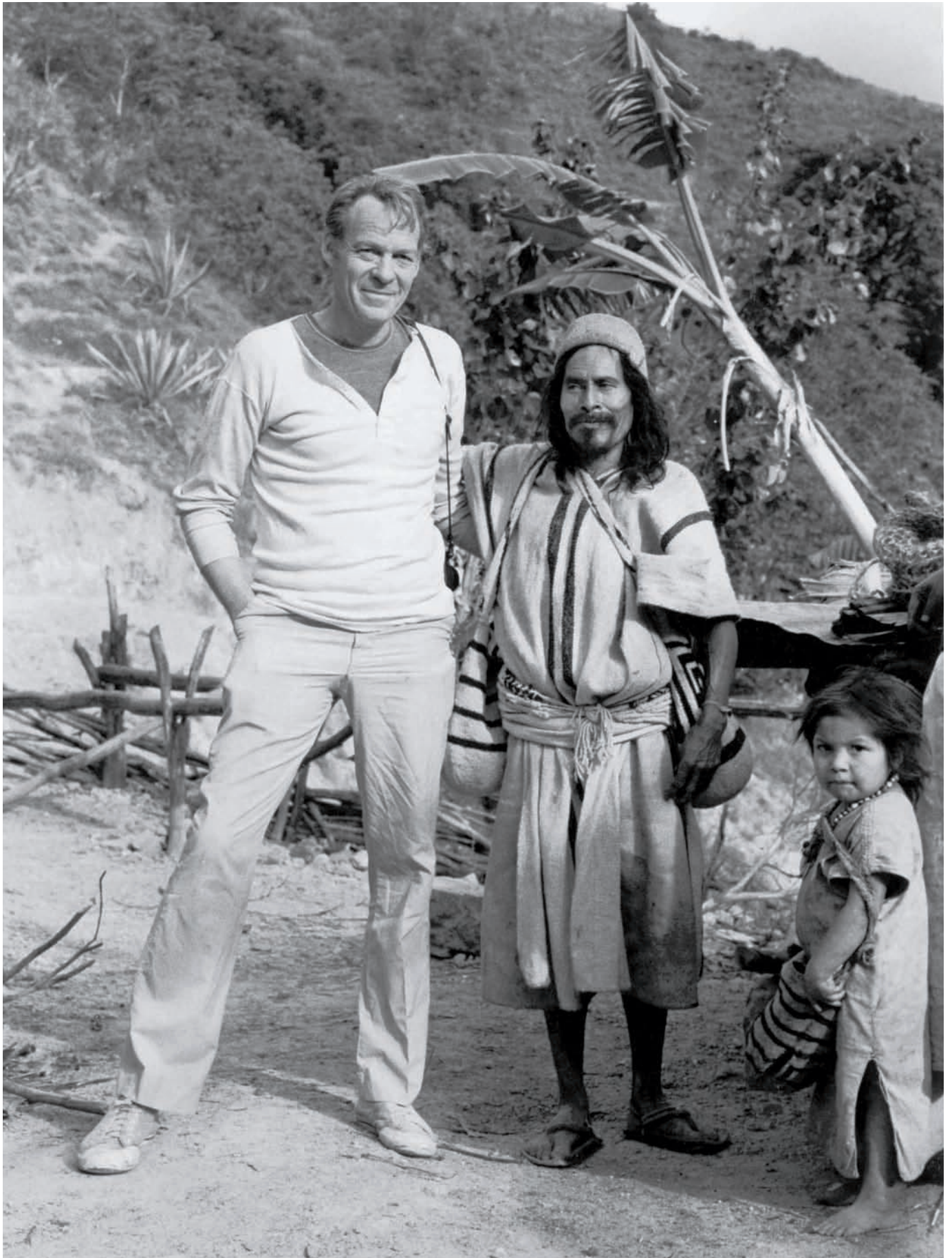
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Gardner carried with him the values of his own waning tribe: Boston's old elite, with their own curious fixations on tradition, self-reliance, and achievement—not necessarily of the artistic variety. He was the great-nephew of Isabella Stewart Gardner, whose art collection anchors one of America's great museums, and like his eccentric forebear, he chafed against the constraints of his culture. It was all but expected that Gardner would attend the original Ivy League school, but not that he would become a filmmaker. "His attachment to Harvard meant an enormous amount," recalls his widow, Adele Pressman. "That was the one thing he did that his father respected."

Gardner's background brought enormous advantages as well, of course, including Harvard's institutional support and relatively easy access to the East Coast art and literary scene. While in his twenties Gardner was introduced to Robert Frost, "the most egotistical man I had ever met," and tried unsuccessfully to make a film about him. William Styron hosted an early, encouraging screening of *Dead Birds* at his house in Roxbury, Connecticut, where the audience included such luminaries as Robert Penn Warren, Lillian Hellman, and Mike Nichols. Lowell, the poet who praised the film so heartily, was Gardner's cousin.

He was, in other words, not used to being excluded. When India's rigid caste system foiled his attempts to film Hindu rituals for *Altar of Fire* in 1975, it was a rude awakening. "He was just *shocked* to be told that he couldn't go into the sacred area," Pressman recalls. "Here's Bob the Boston Brahmin, not allowed to go into the place where they performed their ceremony because he was 'unclean.' He didn't enjoy the shooting of that at all." Gardner was brilliant at teasing out the nobility of his subjects. But rarely had a culture he was filming taken as brazenly superior a stance against his own.

Still, Gardner always maintained that the subject he learned most about while making a film was himself. As his self-critical journals make clear, he could never learn or accomplish enough. But until the end, he kept pushing forward. "Nothing happens without moving," he once wrote, "without sallying forth somewhere, anywhere."



Gardner poses with a local while filming Ika Hands in Columbia, 1981. Photograph by Robert Fulton