

The Newton Boys:

A tribute to human resiliency

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Film review: The Newton Boys, directed by Richard Linklater, written by Richard Linklater, Claude Stanush and Clarke Lee Walker, based on the book by Claude Stanush

Richard Linklater's new film, *The Newton Boys*, is an immensely sympathetic and honest account of the lives and times of a real-life quartet of brothers from Texas—Willis, Jess, Dock and Joe Newton—who, between 1919 and 1924, robbed over 80 banks throughout the US and in Canada.

The Newtons never became notorious or celebrated criminals, in the manner of John Dillinger or Bonnie and Clyde, because they were largely successful in evading the law—until they staged a \$3 million train robbery—and because they never killed anyone. They adopted a professional, craftsmanlike attitude toward their activities. “We wasn’t gunfighters and we wasn’t thugs like Bonnie and Clyde,” explained Willis Newton to the brothers’ biographer Claude Stanush. “All we wanted was the money. We was just like businessmen, like doctors and lawyers and storekeepers. Robbin’ banks and trains was our business.”

Former *Life* magazine reporter and screenwriter Stanush came across the Newtons’ story in 1973 while collecting material about people and events in Texas for a book of short stories. He befriended Willis and Joe Newton and recorded their life story on audio tape, eventually turning it into a book published in 1994. Stanush also made a half-hour documentary film about the remarkable brothers.

Richard Linklater’s film begins at the moment Willis (Matthew McConaughey) returns home from prison after serving more than three years for a crime he did not commit. Angry, disaffected and poor, Willis turns to robbing banks, reasoning that he is not stealing from the depositors, farmers and townsfolk, because the banks are

now insured. Drawing his brothers into the operation, he argues that the banks and insurance companies are the biggest criminals of all. “The banks have been dealing dirt to our people since before we were born. It’s time we dealt some back,” he explains.

The film emphasizes the peculiarities of the historical period. On the first heist in which Willis participates, a thoroughly botched affair, the hold-up men ride in to a town on horseback and attempt to rob a bank in broad daylight, à la the Jesse James gang in the 1870s. Willis learns his lesson. Obtaining a list of all the banks in the country still using safes vulnerable to a small explosive charge, he and his brothers set out to rob every one of them. Nighttime operations and speedy getaway cars become the order of the day.

The brothers soon have plenty of cash. They dress in fine clothes and stay in the best hotels. Willis invests in the oil industry, hoping to strike it rich. He becomes involved with a woman, Louise (Julianna Margulies), who has no idea of his occupation. A crisis erupts when she learns the truth. An attempt to rob bank messengers in Toronto goes awry, Willis loses all his money in a dry oil well, and the brothers decide upon one last operation—the heist of a mail train outside Chicago. They carry off the train robbery, the largest in US history, but one of the gang mistakenly shoots Dock (Vincent D’Onofrio), seriously wounding him. One after the other, the Newtons are rounded up by the authorities. The brothers hold out in the face of police beatings until they are offered a deal—the return of the loot in exchange for relatively light prison sentences.

The film notes that all four Newtons lived to be old men. They largely shunned criminal activity after their release from prison, although Dock, by then in his seventies, was arrested in 1968 for a bank robbery; Willis, who was not apprehended, apparently drove the getaway car. The film concludes with quite moving clips from television appearances the brothers made and from

Stanush's documentary. Willis retained his hatred of banks and bankers until the end and remained unrepentant about his crimes.

The Newton Boys is beautifully made. Meticulous care obviously went into the film, shot in 81 Texas locations in 56 days. Every effort has been made to capture the feeling of the period and the locales. McConaughey gives a very strong performance, although singer Dwight Yoakam—as the nitroglycerin expert and only nonfamily member of the gang—continues to surprise, giving perhaps the strongest performance of all. Director Richard Linklater has made the transition from low-budget films, primarily made in Austin, Texas and environs, to this large-scale work with remarkable ease and aplomb.

Of course, Linklater [*Slacker* (1991), *Dazed and Confused* (1993), *Before Sunrise* (1994) and *SubUrbia* (1997)] has an advantage over nearly other American film director in making such a period piece. These are not dead issues for him. (See accompanying interview.) More important than his grasp of the physical feel of the period is the fact that he shares the brothers' attitudes. It is this sympathy for their poverty, their ambitions, their wildness that brings the film to life.

The Newton Boys is unusual in many ways. While advocating distrust of official society and all authority, it avoids easy cynicism. What the film communicates perhaps above all is Linklater's deep belief in the resiliency and ingenuity of human beings, his confidence in their ability to resist, by whatever means at their disposal, unfair and unjust conditions. At a time when worship of wealth is the official national ideology, Linklater advocates sympathy for the marginalized, the underdog, the exploited, the outsider. While Willis and his brothers value money and the worldly pleasures it gains them, they place an even greater premium on loyalty and trust. This is a film that expresses a belief ultimately in love and compassion and humanity.

Are there any problems? Of course.

One is an objective problem. As we discussed in our interview, Linklater apparently felt obliged to go back in history to discover characters who "fought back." Both his choice of subjects and period reflect something about our day. What sort of social struggles would an American filmmaker born in 1961 have witnessed in his adult life? The early 1980s saw a series of bitter strike struggles in which workers resisted government-backed wage-cutting and union-busting. Each of these was systematically isolated and betrayed by the trade union bureaucracy. Since that time the working class, thanks to the

worthlessness of the unions and, more generally, decades of political stagnation and official anticommunism, has been unable to organize any serious resistance to the attacks on its conditions.

The mainstream of political life in the US must strike any sensitive and thinking person as vile and corrupt; official discourse is dominated by sterile debates between "liberals" and "conservatives," whose differences are microscopic. Under these conditions it is entirely understandable why anyone searching for real life would look for it in the margins of society.

The other problem is perhaps more complex. In his first four films Linklater examined, more or less in "real time" (24 hours or less), the attitudes, relations and behavior of members of his own generation. Three of the films took place on the streets of Austin. The fourth, *Before Sunrise*, could very well be considered the study of one of that city's youthful inhabitants vacationing in Europe (alternative title, *A Slacker Abroad*). Inevitably, every serious artist must stretch his limbs intellectually and expand the scope of his investigations. Linklater has begun to do this in an important fashion with *The Newton Boys*. New projects bring with them new contradictions.

If one has any complaint about this new film it is the relative lack of emotional complication and spontaneity in contrast to the earlier works. The glimpse we are given of one of the more interesting pairs, Glasscock (Yoakam) and his wife Avis (Chloe Webb), for example, is tantalizingly brief. No doubt the director and screen writers wanted to be true to the historical record as they perceived it and did not want to invent difficulties where none existed. With new resources and personnel at his disposal Linklater has created an accurate and moving historical piece. The challenge inevitably confronted by every artist—and perhaps filmmakers in particular—is to come into one's own technically while retaining the intensity, originality and fascinating disorder of one's initial efforts. Linklater belongs to the select group of American film directors one has confidence will meet that challenge.



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