



# Meek's Cutoff

**Director:** Kelly Reichardt  
**Country:** USA  
**Date:** 2011

A review by Phillip French for *The Observer*:

Roughly defined, the western is violent entertainment about the American frontier experience set west of the Mississippi, south of the 49th Parallel and north of the Rio Grande between 1840 and the beginning of the first world war. Some films happening outside this particular area and time scale or not involving gunfights and physical conflict might be called pre-westerns, post-westerns, modern-westerns or, more vaguely, "sort of westerns". The term "anti-western" was also used for a while to describe movies that seemed to reject or even despise the conventions of the genre, though for much of the western's history many film-makers have been doing precisely that in the name of historical and psychological realism.



Kelly Reichardt's impressive Meek's Cutoff is set in 1845 on the recently created Oregon Trail that took wagon trains through dangerous terrain to the remote Pacific Northwest. It resembles a number of recent westerns centring on women in the west in its realism, its rejection of traditional heroism and its avoidance of violent set pieces. Like such pictures (I'm thinking of Heartland, an account of a Wyoming farmwife's hard-scrabble life around 1900; Painted Angels, an unromantic portrait of frontier brothel life in the 1870s; and The Ballad of Little Jo, the story of a New

England woman living as a man out west in the 1870s), it isn't the kind of movie hardcore western fans would wish to see every month. But it enlivens and illuminates a genre that once dominated the American cinema and still holds a considerable grip on our imagination.

A noted minimalist, Reichardt has made two previous low-budget films set in Oregon. In the first, Old Joy, two old friends, one a drifting hippie singer-composer, the other a settled father-to-be, reunite for a rather unsatisfactory weekend hiking in Oregon's Cascade Mountains. In the slightly less minimalist Wendy and Lucy, a young woman (Michelle Williams), driving through Oregon on her way to a summer job in Alaska, is arrested for shoplifting and briefly loses her beloved dog. Both are subtly observed, memorable and appear on the face of it to go nowhere in particular.

Meek's Cutoff is, by her standards, far more eventful and covers a more hazardous journey that begins and ends in medias res. Like the feminist westerns I mentioned earlier, it is closely based on contemporary records and diaries. There are nine characters: three pioneering couples, one with a 12-year-old son, a grizzled mountain man acting as their guide, and an unnamed Cayuse Indian they meet on the way.

The movie begins with three women in bonnets crossing a fast-flowing river, each carrying treasured possessions, one of them a caged canary. Meanwhile, their husbands are preparing their three ox-drawn wagons to cross the rivers. Gradually we learn they're a breakaway party from a larger wagon train. They've agreed to be guided to their destination via a shortcut by the eponymous guide, Stephen Meek (Bruce Greenwood). Meek, with his thick beard, buckskin jacket and trousers, a knife and a flintlock pistol in his belt, looks just the man for the job. But he's a teller of tall tales, a bluff, a self-deceiving con man without a map or a plan, and it emerges that the men are considering killing him.

From the start, the film moves as slowly as the wagons themselves as they roll across the stony, arid land. There's an extraordinary long fade between two shots of the wagons, one in the foreground around noon, the other set some hours later as they drive along the horizon at dusk. During the day the women walk beside the oxen. Whenever they stop, they knit, wash, cook and search the land for firewood.

At times, when crucial decisions have to be made, the men withdraw from the women to discuss matters with Meek. In the past are the settled places they've come from; ahead lie the pastures of heaven they're seeking; in the terrible present they await the imminent threat of Indian attacks or death by hunger. The couple with the son find solace in religion. The edgy, callow youngest couple are expecting a child. The couple in between – the widower Solomon (Will Patton) and his young bride Emily (Michelle Williams) – are more focused and determined.

When the Indian is captured it is Solomon and Emily who intervene to protect him, while their frightened and suspicious companions, especially the xenophobic Meek, unite against this stranger. The pioneers collaborate on common tasks, they share things with each other. But eventually it becomes apparent that it is the mysterious Indian, not Meek, who holds out some hope of deliverance.

The actors inhabit their roles with total conviction, and the picture creates its own sense of time and space. There are unforgettable moments: for instance, the youngest of the men slowly scratching the word "LOST" on a bleached piece of wood, or Emily suddenly looking up from her search for kindling to discover the Indian standing before her, her vision having been constricted by her bonnet. Meek's Cutoff is both realistic and allegorical, a tale of the real pain endured by the pioneers but also a fable about American history. There are echoes of John Ford here, but the westerns it most brings to my mind are



The Shooting and Ride in the Whirlwind, Monte Hellman's minimalist diptych starring Jack Nicholson, made back to back in 1966 on similarly desolate terrain. In 1957, Hellman had directed the first West Coast version of Waiting for Godot, staging it as a western with Pozzo as a Texas rancher and Lucky as an Indian, and the spirit of Beckett hangs over his two westerns and Reichardt's film.

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