



CINEMA UNBOUND: THE CREATIVE WORLDS OF POWELL + PRESSBURGER

# The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp

## The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp

*Directed by:* Michael Powell, Emeric Pressburger  
*Production Company:* Archers Film Productions  
*Produced by:* Michael Powell, Emeric Pressburger  
*Assistant Producer:* Richard Vernon  
*Floor Manager:* Arthur Lawson  
*Management:* Sydney S. Streeter, Alec Saville  
*Archers Secretary:* Joan Page  
*Assistant Directors:* Ken Horne, Tom Payne  
*Continuity:* Maggie Unsworth \*  
*Written by:* Michael Powell, Emeric Pressburger  
*Based on a cartoon character created by:* David Low  
*Photographed in Technicolor by:* Georges Périnal  
*Chief of Colour Control Department:* Natalie Kalmus  
*Technicolor Cameramen:* Geoffrey Unsworth, Jack Cardiff, Harold Haysom  
*Chief Electrician:* Bill Wall  
*Special Portraits:* Fred Daniels \*  
*Process Shots:* W. Percy Day  
*Edited by:* John Seabourne  
*Assistant Editors:* Thelma Myers, Peter Seabourne  
*Production Designed by:* Alfred Junge  
*Costumes Designed by:* Joseph Bato  
*Costumes Executed by:* Matilda Etches  
*Make-up:* George Blackler, Dorrie Hamilton  
*Music Composed and Arranged by:* Allan Gray  
*Conductor:* Charles Williams  
*Sound:* C.C. Stevens, Desmond Dew  
*Military Adviser:* Lieut-General Sir Douglas Brownrigg  
*Period Advisers:* E.F.E. Schoen, Dr C. Beard  
*Logo:* D&P Studios  
*Cast:*  
Anton Walbrook (*Theo Kretschmar-Schuldorff*)  
Deborah Kerr  
(*Edith Hunter/Barbara Wynne/Angela Cannon*)  
Roger Livesey (*General Clive Wynne-Candy*)  
Roland Culver (*Colonel Betteridge*)  
Harry Welchman (*Major Davies*)  
Arthur Wontner (*Embassy Counsellor*)  
Albert Lieven (*von Ritter*)  
John Laurie (*Murdoch*)  
Ursula Jeans (*Frau von Kalteneck*)  
James McKechnie (*Lieutenant 'Spud' Wilson*)  
Reginald Tate (*van Zijl*)  
David Hutcheson (*Hoppy Hopwell*)  
A.E. Matthews (*president of tribunal*)  
Neville Mapp (*Stuffy Graves*)  
Vincent Holman (*club porter, 1942*)  
Spencer Trevor (*period Blimp*)  
James Knight (*club porter, 1902*)  
Dennis Arundell (*café orchestra leader*)  
David Ward (*Kaunitz*)  
Jan Van Loewen (*indignant citizen*)  
Valentine Dyllal (*von Schönborn*)  
Carl Jaffe (*von Reumann*)  
Eric Maturin (*Colonel Goodhead*)  
Frith Banbury (*Baby-Face Fitzroy*)  
Robert Harris (*embassy secretary*)  
Count Zichy (*Colonel Borg*)  
Jane Millican (*Nurse Erna*)  
Phyllis Morris (*Pebble*)  
Muriel Aked (*Aunt Margaret*)  
Capt. W.H. Barrett US Army (*Texan, US Army*)  
Corp. Thomas Palmer US Army (*sergeant, US Army*)  
Yvonne Andrée (*nun*)  
Marjorie Gresley (*matron*)  
Felix Aylmer (*the bishop*)

Churchill's famous opposition to *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* has probably done most to crystallise the image of Powell and Pressburger's wartime epic as a subversive thrust at the military establishment. Interestingly enough, in the 'Blimp file' of official correspondence on the subject, opposition from all government agencies is fiercest at the production stage, when the reasons are necessarily theoretical – mainly that the film was going to resurrect 'an imaginary type of Army officer which has become an object of ridicule to the general public'. Once the film is completed, the opposition fades, to the point where even the Minister of Information decides that it is 'too boring' to do any damage except to the people who made it. Only Churchill (and there is no indication that he even saw it) continues to worry away at the film throughout 1943, seized with an *idée fixe* that in the end makes him seem an ideal Powell-Pressburger character himself, one who found in the film (or his image of it) the proper sporting ground for his bulldog temperament.

For if there is one thing that *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* resists, it is being cast in any anti-establishment role. Its restlessness, its élan, its stylistic variety and dazzle have more to do with a quest for an establishment role that is worthy of it. The film is an implicit demonstration of the conservative impulse behind much formal experimentation in art – the anger at what is outmoded, at what has lost its power to enshrine those values considered eternal.

It also goes to the heart of Powell-Pressburger's particular paradox vis-à-vis political/national allegiances and an apparently free-floating cinematic determination to attack something. Their collaboration seems to involve such an inextricable criss-cross of un-, anti- and ultra-Englishness – is Powell the Englishman's Englishman who understands more about his compatriots than they could ever accept?; is Pressburger the foreigner with the most sublime, mystical, overarching view of his adopted home? – that it is hard to decide whether they are insiders trying to cut their way out of hidebound traditions or outsiders trying to revitalise those traditions.

*The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* may come on with a great deal of animus, the sense that it is attacking some deep-rooted canker in the military establishment that is impeding the war effort, but its energies are actually profoundly integrationist, conciliatory; its movement not thrusting but circular. It is also intrinsic to the Powell-Pressburger paradox that their films should have such an un-English stylistic attack (the opening sequences here of motorcycle despatch riders racing through the countryside could be strong competition for *The Wild One* or *The Wild Angels*) when their aim is usually to re-establish some ideal or fantasy of Englishness. The oppositions set up by Colonel Blimp consequently have a kind of unreal, skewed dimension, as if the conduct of the war really did depend on the question of whether an old-fashioned, gentlemanly, playing-fields-of-Eton approach should apply, or a more ruthless realpolitik, the all-out-to-win tactics implied by the term 'total war'.

As a strategic consideration of the Second World War, or of the military history of the first half of the twentieth century, this is a fantasy akin to *The Thief of Bagdad*. And as is appropriate to a fantasy, its oppositions prove chimerical,

Helen Debroy (*Mrs Wynne*)  
Norman Pierce (*Mr Wynne*)  
Edward Cooper (*BBC official*)  
Joan Swinstead (*secretary*)  
Ian Fleming (*Major Plumley*) \*  
Patrick Macnee \*  
Norman Williams \*  
UK 1943  
163 mins

\* Uncredited

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With introduction by Kevin and Andrew Macdonald (Sun 29 Oct) & pre-recorded intro by Stephen Fry (Sun 26 Nov)

With thanks to



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Restored by the Academy Film Archive in association with the BFI, ITV Studios Global Entertainment Ltd., and The Film Foundation. Restoration funding provided by The Material World Charitable Foundation, The Louis B Mayer Foundation, Cinema per Roma Foundation, and The Film Foundation. Supported by Simon and Harley Hessel. Restoration consultants: Martin Scorsese & Thelma Schoonmaker Powell.



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illusory, easily blending or reversing in effect. If Wynne-Candy at the beginning is viewed as a hidebound, tradition-bound, class-bound old fogey, those same qualities are assumed by the rest of the film to be synonymous with moral rectitude, honour and decency ('Clean fighting, honest soldiering have won' as Wynne-Candy announces at the end of the First World War, and Powell and Pressburger seem to concur with his view of a war in which only the dirty Hun used poison gas). Similarly, the film approves the initiative and daring of 'Spud' Wilson, the boyish enthusiasm with which he pulls off a manoeuvre by cheating a little – and then worries (or pretends to) that there's something of the Nazi mentality about it. Or is it just efficient German-type soldiering? One thing that makes the film's argument so ambiguous, mystical and difficult to grasp is that it conflates too many qualities – of political ideology and national character, for instance – and assumes that military conduct can be discussed in purely spiritual terms, without reference to political or historical circumstances, or even to technology.

If *Blimp* is a very ambiguous – chimerical – figure in the two wars, in between he virtually ceases to exist. Of this the film seems to be quite ironically aware, though its irony insists more on the poignancy of a real soldier having no place in peacetime: the inter-war years are summed up in a series of montages (in one of which the death of *Blimp's* wife, Deborah Kerr's second, barely noticeable incarnation, is noted) and the accumulation of hunting trophies in his sepulchral study (where the wife's portrait eventually finds its place). The parade of women – the same but different – through *Blimp's* life may be the film's most inspired and most ambiguous move. In their interchangeable background function, they are on the one hand a reproach to the blindness, the exclusivity of this military tapestry. On the other, the interplay of their diversified characters with Wynne-Candy's bulldog role gives the film's image of a chivalric place that is forever England an emotional completeness which it would not otherwise have. (Though it is unclear whether or not the last of these roles, that of the driver Angela who prefers to be called Johnny, should be taken as a further reproach to the equalising tendencies of total war.) *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* is in a sense playing at soldiers, playing at myths of nationhood. What gives it such uncanny power as a myth in its own right is that it uses its own disrespect for narrative, visual and thematic decorum to create a national fiction that is too 'ecstatic', contradictory and shifting to be called propaganda.

Richard Combs, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, August 1985