

Ronald Colman Biography

Nationality: British. Born: Richmond, Surrey, 9 February 1891. Education: Attended London University. Family: Married 1) the actress Thelma Victoria Maud, 1918 (divorced 1935); 2) the actress Benita Hume, 1938, daughter: Julia Benita Colman. Military Service: Served with London Scottish during World War I; wounded at Messines and decorated with Mons medal, invalided out of service. Career: 1908—office boy with British Steamship Company while performing with Bancroft Amateur Dramatic Society; 1916–20—on London stage; 1919—feature film debut in *The Toilers*; 1920—emigrated to America and appeared in various stage roles, including small part with George Arliss in *The Green Goddess*; 1923—chosen by Lillian Gish as leading man in film *The White Sister*; 1924—invited to Hollywood by Samuel Goldwyn; early 1930s—star status acknowledged when Goldwyn allows him luxury of making only one film per year; 1933—sued Goldwyn for false publicity concerning rumors of his drinking on set of *The Masquerader*; 1940s—began working on radio, including regular guest spots with wife Benita Hume on Jack Benny's program; 1950–52—starred with Benita Hume in radio series *The Halls of Ivy*, and in TV series, 1954–55. Awards: Best Actor Academy Award, for *A Double Life*, 1947. Died: In Santa Barbara, California, 19 May 1958.

Films as Actor:

- 1917 *The Live Wire* (Dewhurst—short, never released)
- 1919 *The Toilers* (Watts) (as Bob); *A Daughter of Eve* (Walter West); *Sheba* (Hepworth); *Snow in the Desert* (Walter West) (as Rupert Sylvester)
- 1920 *A Son of David* (Plumb) (as Maurice Phillips); *Anna the Adventuress* (Hepworth) (as Walter Brendan); *The Black Spider* (Humphrey) (as Vicomte de Beauvais)
- 1921 *Handcuffs or Kisses?* (Archainbaud) (as Lodyard)
- 1923 *The White Sister* (Henry King) (as Capt. Giovanni Severi); *The Eternal City* (Fitzmaurice)
- 1924 *\$20 a Week* (Weight) (as Chester Reeves); *Tarnish* (Fitzmaurice) (as Emmet Carr); *Romola* (Henry King) (as Carlo Bucellini)
- 1925 *Her Night of Romance* (Franklin) (as Paul Menford); *A Thief in Paradise* (Fitzmaurice) (as Maurice Blake); *The Sporting Venus* (Neilan) (as Donald MacAllan); *His Supreme Moment* (Fitzmaurice) (as John Douglas); *Her Sister from Paris* (Franklin) (as Joseph Weyringer); *The Dark Angel* (Fitzmaurice) (as Capt. Alan Trent); *Stella Dallas* (Henry King) (as Stephen Dallas); *Lady Windermere's Fan* (Lubitsch) (as Lord Darlington)
- 1926 *Kiki* (Clarence Brown) (as Victor Renal); *Beau Geste* (Brenon) (as Michael "Beau" Geste); *The Winning of Barbara Worth* (Henry King) (as Willard Holmes)
- 1927 *The Night of Love* (Fitzmaurice) (as Montero); *The Magic Flame* (Henry King) (as Tito the Clown/Cassati the Count)
- 1928 *Two Lovers* (Niblo) (as Mark Van Rycke)
- 1929 *The Rescue* (Brenon) (as Tom Lingard); *Bulldog Drummond* (F. Richard Jones) (title role); *Condemned!* (Ruggles) (as Michel Auban)
- 1930 *Raffles* (Fitzmaurice and d'Arrast) (as A. J. Raffles); *The Devil to Pay* (Fitzmaurice) (as Willie Hale)
- 1931 *The Unholy Garden* (Fitzmaurice) (as Barrington Hunt); *Arrowsmith* (John Ford) (as Dr. Martin Arrowsmith)
- 1932 *Cynara* (I Was Faithless) (King Vidor) (as Jim Warlock)
- 1933 *The Masquerader* (Wallace) (as Sir John Chilcote/John Loder)
- 1934 *Bulldog Drummond Strikes Back* (Del Ruth) (as Hugh Drummond) Ronald Colman with Lilyan Tashman in *Bulldog Drummond*
- Ronald Colman with Lilyan Tashman in *Bulldog Drummond*

Ronald Colman Biography

- 1935 Clive of India (Boleslawski) (as Robert Clive); The Man Who Broke the Bank at Monte Carlo (Roberts) (as Paul Gallard); A Tale of Two Cities (Conway) (as Sydney Carton)
- 1936 Under Two Flags (Lloyd) (as Sgt. Victor)
- 1937 Lost Horizon (Capra) (as Robert Conway); The Prisoner of Zenda (Cromwell) (as Rudolf Rassendyll/King Rudolph V)
- 1938 If I Were King (Lloyd) (as François Villon)
- 1939 The Light that Failed (Wellman) (as Dick Helder)
- 1940 Lucky Partners (Milestone) (as David Grant/Paul Knight Somerset)
- 1941 My Life with Caroline (Milestone) (as Anthony Mason)
- 1942 The Talk of the Town (Stevens) (as Michael Lightcap); Random Harvest (LeRoy) (as Charles Rainier/John "Smithy" Smith)
- 1944 Kismet (Oriental Dream) (Dieterle) (as Hafiz)
- 1947 The Late George Apley (Joseph L. Mankiewicz) (title role); A Double Life (Cukor) (as Anthony John)
- 1950 Champagne for Caesar (Whorf) (as Beauregard Bottomley); Shakespeare's Theater: The Globe Playhouse (W. and M. Jordan) (as narrator)
- 1956 Around the World in Eighty Days (Anderson) (as railway official)
- 1957 The Story of Mankind (Irwin Allen) (as Spirit of Man)

Publications

On COLMAN: books—

- Griffith, Richard, Samuel Goldwyn: The Producer and His Films, New York, 1956.
- Colman, Juliet Benita, Ronald Colman: A Very Private Person, New York, 1975.
- Quirk, Lawrence J., The Films of Ronald Colman, Secaucus, New Jersey, 1977.
- Smith, R. Dixon, Ronald Colman, Gentleman of the Cinema: A Biography and Filmography, Jefferson, North Carolina, 1991.
- Frank, Sam, Ronald Colman: A Bio-Bibliography, foreword by Robert E. Morsberger, Westport, Connecticut 1997.

On COLMAN: articles—

- Current Biography 1943, New York, 1943.
- Jacobs, Jack, "Ronald Colman," in Films in Review (New York), April 1958.
- Obituary in New York Times, 20 May 1958.
- Richards, Jeffrey, "Ronald Colman and the Cinema of Empire," in Focus on Film (London), September/October 1970.
- Fox, Julian, in Films and Filming (London), March and April 1972.
- Wyatt, Jane, "Ronald Colman: Elegant Englishman," in Close-Ups: The Movie Star Book, edited by Danny Peary, New York, 1978.
- Films and Filming (London), April 1983.
- The Listener (London), 15 March 1984.

* * *

Suave, debonair, a gentleman hero with dashing good looks, Ronald Colman is the quintessential Hollywood-Englishman. One of the few stars of the silent era to maintain and even increase their popularity after the transition to sound, Colman

Ronald Colman Biography

was a leading man for more than 20 years, for in addition to his handsome grace, Colman possessed a beautifully cultured and modulated voice. Colman is known for roles where he is above all polite and well-mannered, but the source of his success may lie beyond his ability to portray characters who are refined but sentimental, mysterious but thoughtful. As Sheridan Morley points out, Colman's sense of humor made him stand out from other good-looking Englishmen. Moreover, Colman was a consummate craftsman; director George Cukor explains that Colman knew more about acting for the camera than any actor he had worked with.

Colman began with small parts in the theater. His (silent) film career received its greatest impetus in the two films he made with Lillian Gish, *The White Sister* and *Romola*. Handsome, graceful, exuding good nature, he complemented Gish, and demonstrated the magnetism that captured the public in subsequent starring vehicles such as *The Dark Angel* and *Beau Geste*. Reviewers of the time noted that Colman was stepping into the shoes of Rudolph Valentino and John Gilbert.

Colman's first sound film, *Bulldog Drummond*, for which he received an Academy Award nomination, might be a surprise to viewers who know the actor primarily for his later films, because he races through this rather madcap detective story with a verve and athleticism that recall Douglas Fairbanks, and his dialogue delivery matches the humor and panache of his physical presence. That same vibrant intensity informs his portrayal of Robert Clive's rise from office boy to British officer in *Clive of India*.

By the mid-1930s, Colman's performances in such films as *Clive of India*, *Arrowsmith*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Lost Horizon*, *The Prisoner of Zenda* had made him one of the most popular male stars in Hollywood. Sought after for "important" pictures, Colman played the selfless hero and the noble Englishman in film after film. In *A Tale of Two Cities*, Colman comforts Elizabeth Allan on the way to the guillotine, richly atoning, "It is a far, far better thing I do"; in *Lost Horizon* he incarnates the idealism of author James Hilton and director Frank Capra.

There was no diminution of Colman's romantic appeal in the 1940s. Exemplary of MGM's Anglophilia, *Random Harvest* proved to be one of the most popular films of the war years, and it united Colman with a particularly congenial co-star, Greer Garson. Colman's star image, in part that of the Englishman who is reserved to the point of shyness, contributes to the film, as do his intelligent choices in representing Smithy/Rainier—Colman conveys the profound impact of finally, suddenly recognizing Paula's voice as the voice of his long-lost love in one simple move: with his back to us, he simply raises his head.

A Double Life, the film for which Colman received an Academy Award, is an intriguing commentary on acting, and, in particular, the performances of a star such as Colman, a "movie" actor par excellence, who in this film plays a "legitimate" actor who becomes so immersed in the role of Othello that he is pushed to murder. Here, Colman, the dashing romantic lead, is measured against one of the great tragic roles in the Western tradition. Our sense of Colman having a go at Shakespeare is fully tested twice in the film: on opening night, when his style is conventionally theatrical, and near the end, when he replays the same scene, prey to guilt and madness, in rhythms and tones that are decidedly cinematic. The film suggests that Colman, and others like him, depend on their charm, wit, grace, but that they labor, sometimes even to their own detriment to be "good actors." The film not only plays on Colman's star image, it also provides an occasion for us to see the actor at the height of his craft, for Colman's meticulous preparation and execution is apparent even in small scenes. Early in the film, as the character recalls how he had already come a long way with his ambition, Colman caricatures the juvenile in tennis shorts "he" used to be, then performs a remembered scene with "his father," then comes back to "himself" as he remembers having to teach himself how to talk, how to move, how to think. Like so many scenes in Colman's career, it is a passage of seamless virtuosity.

In the 1950s, Colman turned in a marvelously funny portrayal of a television quiz show sensation in *Champagne* for Caesar, co-starred in a radio series, "Halls of Ivy," the Best New Radio Show for 1950, and moved to television with the series which was named Best New Television Show for 1954.

—Charles Affron, updated by Cynthia Baron