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## Mark Glancy: When Hollywood loved Britain. The Hollywood 'British' film

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**Mark Glancy: When Hollywood loved Britain. The Hollywood 'British' Film**  
Manchester: Manchester University Press 1999, 208 p.,  
ISBN 0-7190-4853-2, £ 12.99

Mark Glancy has written a less than riveting account of the films produced about Britain and the British by Hollywood during the 1930's and '40's. By trawling through government archives and old studio documents, he is able to show that the production of these pro-British films was motivated as much by the profit margin as by allegiance to the old country in its time of struggle against fascist domination. Approximately two-thirds of total gross was domestic and the remaining third, foreign. Therefore the cost of film production could be recouped in the domestic American market and anything earned abroad was considered profit (p.32, table 6). Clearly, the importance of generating a product which is popular globally and inoffensive to no-one is not a new marketing phenomenon, but part of a strategy that has been successfully employed by Hollywood since its inception.

As the Axis conquered more territory, the markets available to American product became increasingly restrictive, to the point where Britain accounted for more than 54 per cent, and the countries of the commonwealth 14 per cent, of the foreign gross for Hollywood films in 1943 (p.33, table 7). It became important to make films which the British public would like and the British government would approve of. And if these films were also propaganda countering the isolationist lobby and encouraging American involvement in the Second World War, then that was an added bonus to the industry: foreign markets could be rescued and made accessible to American product once more. Cynicism apart, many of the studio heads were of East European and/or Jewish origin and actively wanted American intervention. There was also a large British community in Hollywood in the '30's, consisting of the likes of Alfred Hitchcock, Charles Laughton and Cary Grant, who also wanted to do their share for the war effort, although not all of them were prepared, like David Niven, to go back to Britain to enlist.

Hollywood's foreign policy was shaped and administered by the film industry's trade organisation, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) also known as the Hays Office (named after its first head Will Hays, the most respectable Protestant politician industry leaders could buy). The Hays Office was established to protect its members' interests, head off statutory regulation by improving Hollywood's image, and to negotiate with foreign governments on behalf of the industry. Hollywood's foreign policy, as expressed through the Hays Office, was one of 'pure entertainment', that is, to produce politically neutral films which offended neither the isolationists in America nor the delicate sensibilities of Europe's fascist dictators. However, once those markets were lost to Hollywood and Pearl Harbour was bombed, there was no financial advantage to the studios in not offending Hitler, quite the opposite, and the obstacles that had been placed in the way of films like Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (1940) disappeared.

In any case, studios such as MGM had been making highly popular adaptations of British literature, using a mixture of American and British talent in front of and behind the camera, since the mid-30's (*David Copperfield* [1934], *Goodbye Mr Chips* [1939]). This was partly due to Hollywood's strategy of buying up local talent (Alfred Hitchcock, Robert Donat) in order to reduce competition and win over foreign markets, but also to meet the requirements of the British quota system. The success of these films indicate that pre-war America was extremely interested in Britain, but Glancy avoids any in-depth analysis of why. Was it a vicarious enjoyment of the upper-class lifestyle of the films' protagonists, a love of high culture or a sentimental attachment to the old country? He seems uninterested.

Warners' expensive but highly profitable „Merrie England“ films (*The Adventurers of Robin Hood* [1938], *The Sea Hawk* [1940]), costume dramas starring Errol Flynn, an 'Englishman' from Tasmania, had plots centred around the defence of the English monarchy from foreign machinations, a theme which was easily given a contemporary spin by the British writers and Anglophile producers involved in these productions. This led to accusations from America's isolationists that these films were biased, which of course they were. A very successful formula was created in *A Yank in Oxford* (1938) where Mickey Rooney's brash and boastful Yank, lacking in team spirit, eventually recognises the superiority of (certain) British values – self-centred isolationist becomes committed ally. When the existence of a RAF Squadron, Eagle Squadron, manned by American pilots was discovered, Anglophile American directors Darryl Zanuck and Walter Wanger were falling over themselves to make a film about them. After the war, however, Hollywood's Britain no longer captured American's imagination. With the return of a larger foreign market, the importance of Britain's foreign earnings declined as did MGM's „conspicuous Anglophilia.“ (p.97)

My favourite chapter is about the British community that had been living in Hollywood since the '20's. They were stung by criticism from the homeland that they weren't doing enough for the war effort, but at the end of the day the likes of Hitchcock and Grant didn't let the war interfere with their careers. It would have been nice to have seen a comparison between American filmmakers' direct involvement in the war, such as William Wyler (*Memphis Belle*, 1944) and Frank Capra (*Why We Fight*, 1943-45) and the contributions of ex-pat Brits, charity cricket matches notwithstanding.

The Hays office's 'pure entertainment' policy and the American government's Office of War Information's (O.W.I.) desire to show Britain – regardless of its colonial history and rigid class system – in a more favourable light (and therefore worth saving), often came into conflict with Hollywood's tendency to buy the rights of successful contemporary plays and books, or to set films within topical situations i.e. the war in Europe. *Mrs Miniver* (1942), based on a series of newspaper articles chronicling the life of an 'ordinary' upper-middle class family at war, was a huge critical and commercial triumph, but did it show the 'real' Britain?

What Glancy makes clear, in his slightly pedantic way, is that although there were certain American and British film makers in Hollywood with a specific pro-British agenda, financial considerations were upmost in the industry's collective mind; the O.W.I. was virtually ignored until it started restricting the flow of films into newly liberated markets. However, what is missing is an analysis of how 'Britain' and the 'British' are constructed within these texts, and what was it about them which so appealed to the American audience. An appeal which disappeared quickly after the war but was partially revived in the 'red bus' movies of the '60's and the heritage movies of the '80's.

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