



1937 Errol with Olivia deHavilland and Margaret Lindsay at a Hollywood party.

No film actor better personified the forces of good against evil than Errol Flynn. Australian by birth, an adventurer by instinct, an actor by sheer force of personality, Flynn also had a strange, quiet side. When he died in Vancouver, Canada in October 1959, it was the end of an era. Sir Robin of Locksley was dead. General Custor, Don Juan, Peter Blood and the Earl of Essex was dead. There was an outpouring of encomiums.

Olivia DeHavilland recalled him as "unmatchable, full of warmth and charm." His former boss, Jack Warner, remembers him as "one of the most charming and tragic men he ever met."

Director Barry Mahon wrote "Errol Flynn was probably the greatest symbol of masculinity developed in the modern age" a consensus that is still generally conceded to this day.

BAD REPUTATION

If anything, his reputation has grown until the public's perception of Flynn's screen on-screen image has, over the years, obscured the reality that was the man. Scandal and sensationalism have knocked many a star from his pedestal into oblivion, but not Flynn. Whatever it is that feeds the fantasies of men and women is what continues to respond to the man who not only looked and acted, but even spoke like

a hero. Was it Flynn the man or Flynn the actor the public loved? Those who knew him found it very hard to distinguish between the two. His daughter Jeidre said "so much of his screen image was the man, that if you weren't close to him it would be almost impossible to tell the difference. He was fun loving and spirited, and it just blended."

On screen he was the living image of a hero, a superstar before the word was misappro-

FLYNN: HE'S STILL IN!

By Thomas A. Scalzo

priate. So powerful was his presence and magnetism, that he always seemed to be playing himself even when enacting historical roles. Off-screen Flynn was an enigma, an ingenious man who had an ingenious flair for living, but was exceedingly more complex than the eternal playboy he portrayed to the world. He often quipped, "if I have any genius at all, it is a genius for living."

Perhaps his greatest asset was also his Achilles heel, as a writer pointed out, "his physical beauty." The man who looked so perfect, "the most beautiful man God ever created," as Ann Sheridan succinctly put it, found his biggest distraction to the more serious aspects of his life to be the women he had to beat off with a club or in a court of law.

The truly sad part of Flynn's life is that with his charm and intelligence he could have excelled at anything he set his mind to. The ease with which he attracted friends and lovers



1938 on the set of "The Adventures of Robin Hood."

crossed over into his professional career, making him disdainful of success fulfilled only by hard work. A lot of this could also be attributed to what Flynn referred to as "that devil named boredom lurking around every corner." He would get involved with projects with great enthusiasm, and along the way lose interest or get distracted, most often by a pretty girl in a tight sweater.

This seeming lack of self-discipline was based primarily on the fact that Flynn, having wealth beyond his wildest expectations, and women beyond the dreams of satyriasis, lived a fantasy life that other men could only envy, and in the end it finally consumed him. He did it "his" way long before the Sinatra song, and the world's acceptance of free living. In his finest roles he inspired moviegoers like no other actor in screen history: the weak became strong, cowards became heroes, and lonely women found love and romance.

EARLY LIFE

He was born Errol Leslie Thompson Flynn on the 20th of June, 1909 at the Queen Alexandria Hospital in Battery Point, Hobart, Tasmania. His father was a distinguished marine biologist, and his mother the daughter of a sea captain who was a direct descendant of Fletcher Christian. Before he was seventeen he was expelled



1938 with friend Patric Knowles at extreme right.

from three schools in Australia and England, and after that he simply bummed around working briefly for the government in New Guinea.

A decision to spend the day at the beach led to Flynn's first acting assignment in an amateur production entitled "In the Wake of the Bounty." The soldier of many fortunes was now bitten by the acting bug and decided to try his luck on the English stage. After an eighteen month stint at the Northampton Repertory Company, Flynn was spotted by Warner's London representative, Irving Asher, who immediately cabled Jack Warner to sign the unknown Flynn, referring to him as "the best picture bet we've ever seen." Within a year of arriving in Hollywood he became a star and was well on his way to creating a legend that read like an Indiana Jones movie script, but in reality was closer to truth than fiction.

The turning point of Flynn's life and career was the rape trial in 1943. Accused of three counts of statutory rape by two underage girls, he was yanked out of his playboy lifestyle and faced with a lengthy and embarrassing trial. Although acquitted, the rape trial shook Flynn to his core. Previously able to thumb his nose at conventional lifestyles, the trial caused him great chagrin in his Hollywood social circle. A new word was added to the English vernacular,

"In like Flynn," translated meaning to achieve sexually. The trial had increased Flynn's sex symbol image if that was possible, and for the rest of his life he was considered a living phallic symbol, a label which he resented entirely.

A second blow to his ego at this time was the fact that he was ineligible for service during World War II. Classified 4F, he was turned down by every branch of the armed forces when attempting to enlist. This great athlete and hero-type had all the things wrong with him that would keep him out of the service. The man who was considered a real-life Sir Galahad now had to take a back seat, as fellow actors David Niven and Bruce Cabot returned home spinning tales of real life heroism that magnified Flynn's feelings of betrayal to his youthful ideals. Inwardly hurting, he would just don his most enthusiastic smile and go on in traditional Flynn fashion.

He married well three times, but couldn't make the commitment to make them work. His first wife, the tempestuous French actress Lili Damita, was as volatile as she was beautiful. Augmenting his film fighting with his marital battles, Errol and Lili had some of the most vicious domestic battles this side of Jiggs and Maggie. Although not known for wielding a rolling pin, Lili showed no compunction in breaking a champagne bottle over Errol's head when she felt he had strayed too far. So busy did the wires become with his domestic problems and cafe brawls, that Time Magazine simply ran a standing sub-head, "Errol Flynn News of the Week." After seven years of bitter fighting, Errol and Lili divorced in 1941, she retaining custody of their newborn son Sean, and a hefty chunk of Flynn's money.



1940 with his friend Ronald Reagan in "Santa Fe Trail."

TOO MANY WOMEN

Wife number two, Nora Eddington, was like a breath of fresh air for him. Young and innocent, he seemed to have found himself the perfect wife and soulmate. Unfortunately, he was now on the downside of the mountain, trying desperately to regain the respect he had before the rape trial and re-establish himself in the Hollywood community. The critical response to his second novel, "Showdown," plunged him further into despair, and it was about this time his drinking increased and his narcotic use began. Trying to help him regain his self esteem, Nora entered into a nightmarish situation as Flynn tried to quit his drug habit.

Unable to cope, she filed for divorce in 1949, retaining custody of their two daughters, Deidre and Rory, who remained a source of pride to Flynn till the end of his life. He had now lost the woman who, above all others, had stuck by him in his darkest hours, as he stated in his autobiography "I was now lost, never far from despondency."

Flynn married wife number three, Patrice Wymore, in Monte Carlo in October 1950. The union, which lasted until his death, produced a daughter, Amella, and provided him with several happy years before his restlessness again got the better of him. Wymore spoke for all Flynn's women when she said,

HOLLYWOOD: THEN & NOW 21



1943 with lawyer Jerry Geisler at his rape trial.

"I wish I could hate him, but I can't," she continued "he could charm the birds out of the trees."

His literary aspirations fared no better than his marital experiences. Flynn had done quite a bit of writing in his early adult life. A book published in 1937, "Beams End," detailed a seven-month voyage he and three friends made from Sydney to New Guinea in 1930. It was generally well received and appeared to be a portent of good things to come. A second novel, "Showdown," in 1946 fared much worse and Flynn, disappointed, put his book writing aside and continued the facade of the fun-loving playboy. Twelve years later, with the help of writer Earl Conrad, Flynn wrote his autobiography, "My Wicked, Wicked Ways," which has stood the test of time and remains in print today. His daughter Diedre believed "he wanted to be a writer and would have preferred that to being an actor, and I think that was his first interest and great love."

CARD-BOARD CHARACTERS

His acting potential, likewise, was never fully realized. Highly effective in Westerns, adventure films and historical roles, he came to regard these cardboard characters with contempt, often complaining the scripts he received had little substance. This appraisal was not entirely true, based on the fact that the



1937 Errol with his dog Arno.

roles always seemed smaller than Flynn himself in real life.

Director Vincent Sherman felt "criticism of his acting upset him. Everybody used to think he didn't give a damn about being an actor, or he kidded the whole thing. I think the contrary was true. I think he was highly sensitive about it, and was deeply hurt with unfavorable reviews." It wasn't until the end of Flynn's career that he was able to prove himself a highly competent actor in films such as "The Roots of Heaven" and "Too Much Too Soon," but for Errol it was too little far too late.

In the last several years, biographies have come out portraying Flynn as evil, cruel, a Nazi spy and accusing him of criminal behavior. As friends and co-stars came to his defense, the allegations were proved to be utter nonsense. But as it should be with movie stars—to paraphrase Shakespeare—the good lives after them in their films, and the rest is interred with their bones. After their son's death, Professor and Mrs. Flynn were particularly disturbed by the title of his autobiography, "My Wicked Wicked Ways." They described him as a "perfectly mannered, soft-hearted gentleman, a considerate and dutiful son, and



1946 Errol with wife Nora, Rita Hayworth and Orson Welles on his yacht "Zaca."

humorous company. He may have had weaknesses—but he was never wicked."

His frequent co-star, Olivia DeHavilland, remembers him as "the most handsome, charming and magnetic man I ever knew." Seldom revealing his feelings, Flynn admitted in his memoirs that he was in love with Olivia, and tried desperately to woo her. The happy endings they shared in so many films found no such rewarding finale in real life, and it was Olivia whom many believed to be the great love of Flynn's life. Bette Davis claims DeHavilland was "the only woman he ever really loved, and who evaded him successfully till the end."

Perhaps the true tragedy of Flynn's life was the fact that he was tormented by his acquisition of the wrong image. A man of talent obviously. But a man whose notoriety superseded his fame, and whose fame and notoriety diminished that talent. Like his idol John Barrymore, Flynn's worst enemy was always himself.

Although misunderstood and oftentimes reckless off-screen, he believed in the ideals and concepts that he represented on the screen—no man could enact them so convincingly if he hadn't. He was often accused of merely playing himself in his films. If so, then Errol Flynn wasn't as wicked as he or his detractors would have us think.