

Gone With the Wind

"Gone, but not forgotten"

By Molly Haskell

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Celebrating its 70th birthday this year, the iconic status of "Gone with the Wind" is more secure than ever. It stands as a monolith over a diffuse and fragmented media landscape: producer David O Selznick's almost-four-hour extravaganza was the jewel in the crown of a kind of studio-making we shall never see again. Equally important, gone is the mass audience on which its appeal depended.

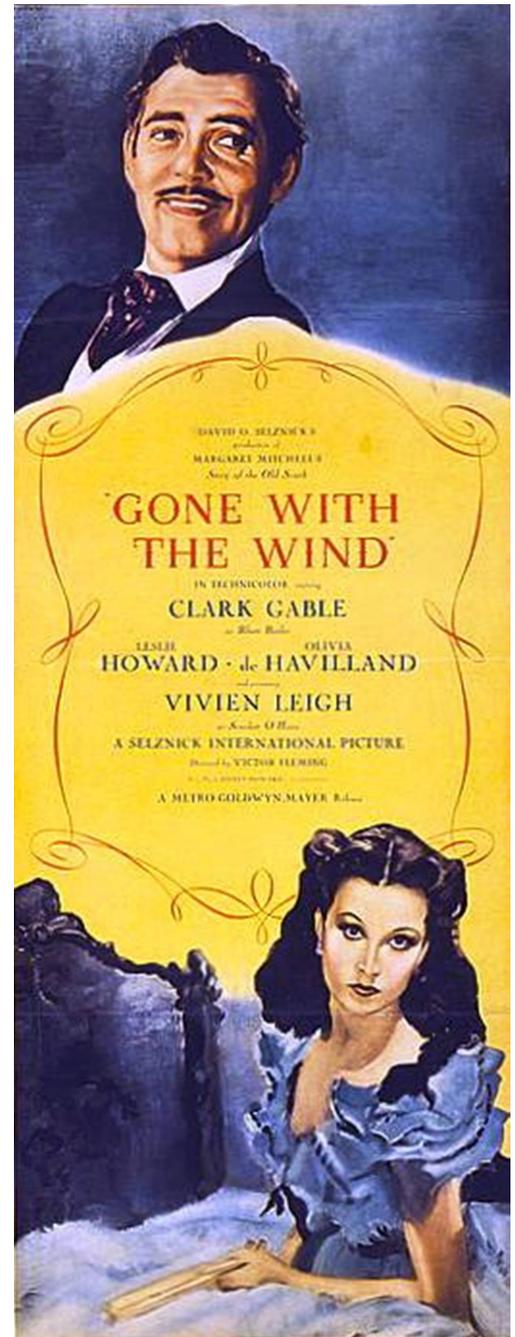
Graham Greene, who like the best early film critics were trying to understand this new medium on its own terms, might have been describing "Gone with the Wind" when he wrote that certain movies were like sports events – "made by [their] spectators and not merely shown to them." Politically incorrect and racially retrograde, the film has managed at one time or another to offend almost everyone. Its allure, though, is deeper and wider. It's a movie we loved before we learned not to like or approve of it. Max Steiner's sweeping score is nothing if not relentless, yet you need to be made of stern stuff to hear the first few chords of Tara's theme without getting a slight chill.

But how could a film beset by so many no-nos of moviemaking (five directors, 15-plus screenwriters, firings, rewrites, a length and budget that were all but prohibitive) have worked at all? Selznick's \$4.25m blockbuster, winner of 10 Academy Awards, was full of contradictions: a celebration of caste and class from the New World's most democratic medium; the portrait of a never-never land whose harmony and grace depended on the smoothing out of much that was ugly and uncomfortable. This was filmmaking on a vast and supercharged scale, yet it has an immediacy that few period films can match and, for all its large-canvas amplitude, the movie never loses its focus on the central characters.

Both the film and earlier novel by Margaret Mitchell (an instant best-seller in 1936 and in print ever since) have always had the uncanny capacity to appeal to

different people at different times; to be converted through the power of identification into "their" struggle. At the first test screenings in 1939, sneak-preview audiences invariably saw it as a Depression fable. But when the film opened in postwar France (the novel and movie having previously been banned by Joseph Goebbels as insurrectionary), viewers rapturously embraced it as the story of occupation and survival.

There was also an emerging sub-group, defined chronologically rather than geographically, with its own language and longings and struggle for independence: the country of female teenagers. For myself and members of that tribe (Southern strain), "Gone with the Wind" was a kind of anti-deb coming-out party: the



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book, not on our approved reading lists, was devoured, by aid of flashlight, under the covers at night. By day, we argued the virtues of Rhett versus Ashley as romantic fantasy figures, sensing a whiff of forbidden sexuality, while identifying with Scarlett precisely because she thumbed her nose at all the rules of Christian and womanly behavior, and was “no lady”. The movie, ideally cast, didn’t so much obliterate as subsume and streamline the book, gather and intensify its themes in the ravishing tones of the newly-developed Technicolor—which seemed almost to have been invented for Vivien Leigh’s green eyes. Credit for the movie’s propulsive force lies mainly in the fire and desperation, the strangely interlocking eccentricities, of three people: Selznick, Mitchell, and Leigh.

Selznick, the gambler, stayed up all night on bennies and peanuts; hired, fired, rewrote, and gave everyone but himself a nervous breakdown. (Victor Fleming, the director who’d been hired to replace George Cukor, finally succumbed to one such “indisposition”, holed up in Santa Monica for a couple of weeks to recuperate and was replaced by journeyman Sam Wood—who then stayed on to direct less consequential scenes.) Leigh’s pent-up frustration at not being given enough time off with her adored Laurence Olivier (plus the beginnings of her own soon-to-be-diagnosed mental illness and tuberculosis) gave her performance a feverish quality that, in perfect consonance with the drama, becomes more and more pronounced as the film progresses. A Hollywood unknown, she showed her Scarlett side when she set out to get the part. Having read the book, and with hardly a backward glance, the actress left husband, child and agent in England, paid her own way to California where she persuaded Olivier’s agent—Myron Selznick, David’s brother—to introduce her to the producer.

In December 1938, on a Culver City backlot, shooting had begun without a leading lady (1400 American actresses had been interviewed for the role, 400 given readings). Old movie sets (“King Kong” among them) were to be set on fire to represent the burning of Atlanta. All seven Technicolor cameras were in place, the fire department was at the ready, the doubles for Scarlett and Rhett positioned to flee in the horse-driven cart. An invited guest list of *le tout* Hollywood was gathered for the spectacle, with the Napoleonic Selznick on a platform; shooting had already begun when, according to most versions of the story, Myron arrived with the royal couple, Laurence Olivier and

Vivien Leigh. The agent approached his brother and announced, “Here is your Scarlett.” Bewitched by the sight of Leigh’s eyes flashing in the firelight, Selznick could only agree.

She worked 121 days to Gable’s 73. Selznick, unsatisfied with the opening scene in which Scarlett enchants the Tarleton twins on the veranda of Tara, waited until the end to reshoot it. But by then, Leigh looked too old and haggard, so he released her into the arms of her Larry. After a marathon weekend of carnal rejuvenation (her sexual appetite was reportedly immense), she came back for retakes, looking as dewy and virginal as a newly-blossomed 17-year-old.

Hattie McDaniel (Mammy) and Butterfly McQueen (Prissy) also brilliantly transcend conventionality. Their performances have outlasted and risen above accusations of cringe-inducing stereotypes that plagued the movie from the beginning, and were particularly fierce in the 60s and 70s. The conversation about race and gender has widened into a more nuanced discussion, and we can appreciate how McDaniel (the first black actor to win an Academy Award) gives so much sass and stature to Mammy – she’s the abiding presence who holds Tara together, understanding (and standing up to) Scarlett as no one else does.

The switch of directors early on, and all the subsequent controversy, turned into an ingenious balancing act. After his firing Cukor, the “woman’s director”, continued to coach de Havilland and Leigh in secret, while Victor Fleming, the “man’s man” trusted by Gable, allowed the actor to relax, even cry, and turn in his most complex screen performance. In what is essentially a passive role, Gable’s virility makes the battle seem more than equal.

Scarlett’s continuing passion for Leslie Howard’s Ashley may be the most baffling element for today’s audiences, most of whom have never seen “Pygmalion” or “The Scarlet Pimpernel.” Howard wasn’t at his best in Technicolor – he was too old for Ashley, and he hated playing the role. Still, I’m waiting for a new generation of chick-flick viewers to rediscover Howard’s cultivated aloofness, his I’m-not-that-into-you irresistibility.

For her part, Scarlett has left a mixed legacy: shrewd, manipulative and narcissistic, her legateees are celebrity survivors and “Sex and the City” shopaholics. But her chafing against the restraints on her sex still resonates with women who have refused to go docilely

into marriage and motherhood. What a waste, Scarlett expostulated, that she should spend her little girlhood learning the arts of flirtation and then only use the knowledge for two years, before going into early retirement and drab clothes.

Margaret Mitchell did put away her dancing shoes and turn matron, but Scarlett, through widowhood and wiles, managed to prolong her independence and 17in waist past the customary expiration date—and become the shrewdest of businesswomen to boot. As a heroine, she remains in a class by herself, escaping the patented Hollywood penalties for female misbehavior.

It is Leigh's willingness to play the "bitch" (or Fleming's struggle to make her do so) that gives the movie its anti-romantic toughness. True, there's something claustrophobic about being locked inside that hard, willful head, but the bravery and self-absorption go

together, never quite resolved. Is there a more fitting national epic than the story of a heroine who never quite grows up?

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Molly Haskell has written for many publications, including The New York Times, The Guardian UK, Esquire, The Nation, Town and Country, Village Voice, New York Magazine, Vogue, The New York Observer and The New York Review of Books. She has served as associate Professor of Film at Barnard and as Adjunct Professor of Film at Columbia University. She won a Guggenheim Fellowship for 2010. Her books include From Reverence to Rape: the Treatment of Women in the Movies (1973; revised and reissued in 1989); a memoir, Love and Other Infectious Diseases; and, in 1997, a collection of essays and interviews, Holding My Own in No Man's Land: Women and Men and Films and Feminists; and Frankly My Dear: Gone with the Wind Revisited, which was part of Yale University Press's American Icon series.