


REMEMBERING RONALD COLMAN



 Bill Curtis

Lovers of classic black-and-white cinema will immediately recognize the names Bogart, Gable, Cooper, Stewart, Grant, Tracy, Cagney and Wayne but may hesitate when it comes to the English actor, Ronald Colman, one of the era's most popular actors and also one of its finest. In Benita Colman's biography of her father, she quotes John Ford, the celebrated American director: "Though he was a leading star of the business then, nobody ever acknowledged what a superb actor he was...he did everything so easily... he was the greatest actor I have ever known."



With his wife, Benita Hume



Bulldog Drummond (1929)

Ronald Colman's film career spanned three decades starting with *The Dauntless Three* in 1920. His final film, *The Story of Mankind*, was made in 1950. Colman was born in 1891 in Richmond, Surrey, England to a well-bred English family in comfortable circumstances. He had hoped to study at Cambridge but the death of his father when he was only sixteen and the onset of the Great War intervened. A severe shrapnel injury at the Battle of Messines left him with a slight limp which he gradually overcame. His war experiences made a lasting impact.

Colman's first taste of acting came in amateur



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theatricals at boarding school. An early success in the play *Damaged Goods* caught the attention of George Dewhurst, a pioneer of British cinema, who later offered Colman his first movie roles. His breakthrough film was *The White Sister* in 1923 opposite Lillian Gish. Colman made a successful transition to sound in 1929 with *Bulldog Drummond* which earned him a Best Actor Academy Award nomination. Fans of the silent matinee idol must have been taken aback to hear for the first time the musical voice that accompanied the handsome face. Colman eventually won the Academy Award in 1947 for *A Double Life*, portraying an actor in the role of Othello whose personal life is destroyed by his identification with the character he impersonates.



As Francois Villon in *If I Were King* (1938)



The Light That Failed, with Ida Lupino (1939)

Colman's screen performances display an innate understanding of the camera, where the tiniest gesture is magnified. His acting is natural; the viewer is never conscious of the fact that he is *performing*. From all accounts, this was his objective and he achieved this quality through considerable practice. Paradoxically, this may be the very quality that leads him to be under appreciated. He was as accomplished in light comedy as he was in more serious parts.

Those seeking an introduction to Ronald Colman's movies might start with *Lost Horizon*, *The Prisoner of Zenda* or *The Light That Failed* (available in its entirety on YouTube). *If I Were King*, boasting a literate screenplay by the brilliant Preston Sturges, may be Colman's best. Lovers of light comedy should try the charming *Lucky Partners* with Ginger Rogers or *The Talk of the Town*

with Cary Grant and Jean Arthur. And for the incurable romantic, there is *Random Harvest* where Colman is a shell-shocked amnesiac desperately seeking to recall something vital from his past. The movie's touching conclusion is a perfect illustration of how Colman, as Frank Capra (the director of *Lost Horizon*) notes "could convey his innermost feelings just with silent reactions." The vast majority of films mentioned in this appreciation are available on DVD.



Random Harvest, with Greer Garson (1942)

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