



Flynn, Errol (1909-1959)

by Richard G. Mann

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Errol Flynn in a promotional piece for *The Sea Hawk* (1940).
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At the height of his career, Errol Flynn was the heart throb of movie fans throughout the world. Handsome, athletic, graceful, and charismatic, Flynn seemed to personify Robin Hood and the other heroic figures that he portrayed on screen. A highly publicized trial for statutory rape in 1942 tarnished his public image and revealed darker qualities than had been expressed in his previous films. In his final years, Flynn played psychologically complex characters, which expressed aspects of his personality not evident in the swashbuckling roles for which he is most famous.

Flynn exuded sexual energy. He tellingly declared in a famous interview of 1950 that he wanted his gravestone to be inscribed: "If It Moved, Flynn Fucked It." This assertion might be regarded as corroboration of persistent and widely disseminated rumors that he was eager to have sex with both men and women. In the aptly titled, posthumously published, but unreliable *My Wicked, Wicked Ways* (1959), Flynn included abundant details about his countless sexual conquests of women. While he emphasized that he enjoyed partying with his male buddies, he never indicated that their interactions had sexual overtones.

However, in his autobiography, Flynn effectively acknowledged--without confirming--the rumors about his sexual exploits with men when he noted that many of his female co-stars thought he was a "faggot" (his term) because his politeness was interpreted as emotional distance. This explanation for the rumors is utterly unconvincing since Flynn was notorious for behavior on the sets of his pictures that could hardly be considered either polite or emotionally distant.

Biographers of Flynn, as well as other observers of Hollywood, have claimed that Flynn had sexual (if not romantic) flings with Tyrone Power and numerous other, less well-known actors during his Hollywood years. The best cases for Flynn's alleged bisexuality were made by controversial biographers Charles Higham and David Bret. Although Higham's sensational charges that Flynn was a Nazi spy have been thoroughly discredited, his account of Flynn's sex life, though infuriating to many of the actor's fans, has not been. Bret, who emphatically rejected allegations that Flynn was a spy, substantiated Higham's account of the actor's supposed bisexuality by providing fuller information about his sexual escapades with other men. Moreover, Flynn's first wife, Lili Damita, insisted as late as 1994 that Flynn enjoyed sexual encounters with men, and her assertions have been corroborated by some of Flynn's associates in Hollywood, including Marlene Dietrich.

However, other close friends and family members--including actor David Niven, his roommate during his early Hollywood years; his second wife, Nora Eddington; and his third wife and widow, Patrice Wymore--have emphatically denied that Flynn was bisexual or gay. More disturbingly, many of Flynn's fans have rejected out of hand the possibility of the actor's bisexuality because they think such allegations besmirch their hero's reputation or because they somewhat naively believe that Flynn's well-documented heterosexual activities preclude any interest in homosexual dalliances.

Notwithstanding such protests, it may be telling that in recounting a visit to a brothel in Marrakech, Flynn claimed that he was initially horrified to discover that the establishment was actually a male brothel; but,

he says, he quickly came to the realization that everyone had a right to whatever pleasures suit them, and he encouraged his readers to remember the splendors of ancient Greece, which had accepted homosexuality. The anecdote, of course, indicates nothing definite about Flynn's own sexual interests, but the plea for tolerance, coupled with the familiar citation of the glories of Greece, is significant because it challenges the climate of sexual repression that was pervasive in the 1950s.

There is no doubt that Flynn was a compulsive womanizer. The likelihood is that he also had occasional sexual relations with men. While no concrete evidence has been discovered that unequivocally documents Flynn's affairs with men, that is hardly surprising. At a time when homosexual acts were illegal in the United States and Great Britain, and the mere suspicion of homosexuality could destroy careers, such documentation would almost certainly not be preserved. Given the time in which he lived, Flynn probably did not self-identify as a bisexual. However, his exuberant sexual appetites, and his willingness to transgress all kinds of sexual boundaries, increase the likelihood that the widespread rumors of his sexual affairs with men had a basis in fact.

Background and Early Career

Flynn was born on June 20, 1909 in Hobart, Tasmania in Australia. His father, Theodore Thomson Flynn, a lecturer at the University of Tasmania, already had gained international recognition for his research in marine biology. His mother, Lily Mary Flynn, was a descendent of Fletcher Christian (leader of the Bounty Mutiny), whom Errol would portray in his first movie role. From a very young age, Errol showed exceptional athletic ability, but he devoted much of his energy to sometimes cruel pranks on children and adults alike. As a result, he was--despite his father's eminence--expelled from numerous schools in Australia and England.

Dismissed in August 1926 from a prestigious grammar school in Sydney, he worked in a large import-export firm until September 1927, when he was fired for borrowing money from petty cash. Flynn attempted to support himself for a while as a semi-professional boxer, but, in September 1928, he went to New Guinea in hopes of finding a fortune by prospecting gold. Although his claim produced little gold, Flynn remained in New Guinea for nearly four years, trying his hand at all sorts of legal and illegal activities, including training as a cadet patrol officer, growing tobacco, and even engaging in the slave trade. While in New Guinea, he contracted malaria, which would plague him for the rest of his life.

On a visit to Sydney in 1929, he and some friends bought a fifty-year-old yacht, *Sirocco*. Despite their lack of experience, they decided to sail it 3,000 miles back to New Guinea; their adventures formed the basis of Flynn's novel, *Beam Ends* (1937).

In 1930, Dr. Hermann F. Erben, a medical researcher in tropical diseases and an adventurer, hired Flynn to sail up the Sepik River in order to make a documentary film about those parts of the interior of New Guinea that were still largely unexplored by Europeans. As the captain of the *Sirocco*, Flynn appeared occasionally in the film. In 1932, impressed by Flynn's dashing appearance, motion picture director Charles Chauvel offered him the role of Fletcher Christian in the first Australian sound feature film, *In the Wake of the Bounty* (1933), about the history of Pitcairn Island.

Intrigued by this experience, Flynn resolved to develop a career as a professional actor in Britain. In 1933, accompanied by Erben, he spent several months traveling to Europe through the Philippines, Asia, and North Africa. Unable to find employment in film studios in London, he accepted a position at the Northampton Repertory Company, where he worked from December 1933 to June 1934. Playing a variety of roles, he gained increased skill as an actor.

By fall 1934, Flynn was working as an extra at Warner Brothers' Teddington Studios in London. Impressed with his good looks and charm, Irving Asher, the head Warner executive in Britain, gave him a starring role in *Murder at Monte Carlo* (1935). At Thrasher's persuasion, Jack Warner viewed a copy of the film and

promptly offered Flynn a six-month contract at the American studio. On board ship to New York, Flynn met Lila Damita (1905-1994), a French-born movie star, then under an extended contract to Warner Brothers. They initiated an intense but stormy relationship and married on June 19, 1935.

Initially, Flynn had difficulty getting assignments at Warner Brothers. His first American appearance was as a corpse in the Perry Mason film, *The Case of the Curious Bride* (1935). In *Don't Bet on Blondes* (1935), he appeared for about five minutes as a society playboy.

Success in Hollywood, 1935-1942

Flynn got his big break in May 1935 when he was offered the lead role in *Captain Blood*, conceived from the start as a major production, based on a Rafael Sabatini novel (1922), which had been made into a very successful silent film in 1924.

After negotiations broke down with preferred leading actors Robert Donat, Leslie Howard, and Clark Gable, Warner Brothers conducted an extensive talent search among contract players. From their first look at a screen test made of Flynn (who was being considered for a small role), both studio boss Jack Warner and director Hal Wallis agreed that he perfectly exemplified the masculine but debonair adventurer. Originally intended for Bette Davis, the female lead ultimately was given to an equally unknown actor, Olivia de Havilland, who would costar with Flynn in seven other movies.

Opening in December 1935, *Captain Blood* established Flynn as a major star. Drawing upon his own experiences as an adventurer, he was able to breathe life into the screen image of the swashbuckler. Doing virtually all of his own stunts, he displayed his strength, skill, and grace in fencing and other athletic activities.

As Peter Blood, Flynn plays a seventeenth-century English doctor, wrongly convicted of treason. Sent to Jamaica, he is sold into slavery on a plantation owned by Olivia de Havilland's uncle. Leading a successful rebellion, Blood becomes the captain of a pirate ship manned by other former slaves. After a series of adventures, Blood provides valuable services to the British crown; he is rewarded with the governorship of Jamaica, where he takes up residence with his new bride (Olivia de Havilland, of course).

This story of an unjustly accused hero who redeems himself through selfless actions is one that would be repeated in numerous other Flynn movies, set in diverse historical and contemporary contexts, including medieval England, nineteenth-century India, the western frontier, contemporary American small towns, and various battlefields in World War II.

According to Bret and some other biographers, Flynn had an affair with supporting actor Ross Alexander (1908-1937) during the filming of *Captain Blood*. Speculation about their possible relationship seems to be supported by the tenderness and intensity of their onscreen performances. Adding to the script, Flynn constantly refers to Alexander as "dear" and "darling." Intentionally or not, some of the scenes by Flynn and Alexander have a homoerotic aura: for example, Flynn's massage of Alexander's leg, interrupted by the question "What's going on between you two?," as Lionel Atwill enters the set.

A number of Flynn's other screen performances also have homoerotic dimensions, including, for instance, his flirtatious conversations with a decidedly uncomfortable Fred MacMurray in *Dive Bomber* (1941). However, it should be kept in mind that, while these possible "queer readings" suggest the complexity and richness of his acting, they do not provide firm evidence about Flynn's own sexual orientation or experiences.

Between 1936 and 1942, Flynn was at the pinnacle of his career. He starred in nineteen major films for Warner Brothers during this period. Costing over \$2,000,000, the technicolor film *Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938) was the most expensive film made up to that point. It became one of Flynn's signature roles.

Intending to star Flynn and Warner leading lady Bette Davis in *Gone with the Wind*, David O. Selznick signed a very lucrative contract with Warner Brothers for their services. When the deal fell through because Davis refused to act with Flynn (whom she considered untalented), Jack Warner forced her to work with him in two movies: the soapy melodrama *The Sisters* (1938) and the lavish historical romance *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* (1939).

Although Flynn detested the genre, he was compelled to star in several Westerns during his time at Warner Brothers, beginning with the hugely successful *Dodge City* (1939). In *They Died with Their Boots On* (1942), Flynn expanded the limits of his usual adventurer roles by conveying the complexities and contradictions of General Custer.

Feeling increasingly constrained by his swashbuckler vehicles, Flynn pleaded with the studio to allow him to undertake other types of films. In *The Perfect Specimen* (1937; costarring Joan Blondell) and *Four's a Crowd* (1938, costarring Olivia de Havilland and Rosalind Russell), he demonstrated exceptional comic timing, as well as the sophisticated wit admired by his friends. Many film historians maintain that had Flynn been allowed to perform in more movies of this type, he would have challenged Cary Grant's status as the dominant male star of screwball comedies.

In 1937, already tired of studio efforts to control all aspects of his life and eager for an actual (as opposed to filmed) adventure, Flynn traveled with his old friend Dr. Erben to Spain, then in the midst of a devastating civil war. Although most of his friends insist that Flynn was apolitical, he professed strong support for the Republican cause. It is virtually certain that Flynn was unaware that Erben, though Jewish, was a card-carrying Nazi working as a spy. Erben photographed German dissidents in Spain and gathered other information for the German government.

Flynn placed himself in many dangerous situations, as he and Erben sought to photograph battles in and around Barcelona and Madrid during March and April. At one point, Spanish newspapers published stories of his death, and the Spanish government sent condolences to his wife. Because of his association with Erben, the FBI doubted Flynn's loyalty and placed him under constant surveillance during World War II.

Despite the fiasco of the trip to Spain, Warner Brothers' studio succeeded in creating a very positive public image for Flynn throughout the period 1936 to 1942. A continuous stream of publicity emphasized correlations between his personality and his screen roles. Flynn's youthful adventures were fully exploited for this purpose. In addition, every effort was made to create the impression that he was actually as rigorously virtuous and as conventionally upright as he appeared to be on screen.

For younger viewers, this conception was reinforced by several series of elementary and high school textbooks of such classic works as *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, which extensively referenced Flynn's screen performances. Until 1942, studio publicists managed to conceal from public view Flynn's seemingly insatiable sexual appetites and the heavy drinking that increasingly affected both his general health and his performances.

Flynn's Final Years at Warner Brothers, 1942-52

In the early 1940s, several events coalesced to shatter Flynn's carefully crafted public image. At the beginning of World War II, the actor applied for United States citizenship, but he was unable to enlist in the military because of chronic health problems, including recurring bouts of malaria and a diagnosis of tuberculosis. However, eager to preserve Flynn's status as a heroic adventurer, Warner Brothers rigorously concealed from the press all information about his medical condition. Therefore, Flynn's failure to participate in the fighting puzzled and disturbed his fans. Flynn was deeply upset by numerous editorials in newspapers of the Hearst Corporation that questioned his patriotism.

In September 1941, Lili Damita left Flynn and took their son, Sean, with her; in November, she initiated divorce proceedings, accusing him of intolerable cruelty. Because Flynn and Damita had quarreled violently for years, most of their acquaintances thought the divorce a good resolution to a bad situation. However, the general public was shocked by the breakup of what had been publicized as a perfect marriage. The settlement, finalized in May 1942, entitled Damita to substantial monthly payments for the rest of her life. In later years, this settlement would contribute to Flynn's economic woes.

On October 18, 1942, the District Attorney's office of Los Angeles filed formal charges against Flynn of statutory rape of two women, Betty Hansen (eighteen at the time of the accusation, but seventeen in September 1941 when Flynn was alleged to have had intercourse with her) and Peggy Satterlee (only sixteen at the time of the accusation). All aspects of the trial were reported by international media.

Defending Flynn, Hollywood lawyer Jerry Geisler discredited the character and credibility of both women. For instance, he established that the District Attorney's office had offered them immunity from prosecution for oral sex and abortion (both criminal offenses at the time) in exchange for bringing charges against Flynn.

Although Flynn was acquitted on February 6, 1943, the implication of his guilt remained, and most people did not view him with the same degree of respect that they had previously. Not surprisingly, many women moviegoers were disturbed by the trial, but fan mail suggests that at least some of them were also intrigued by the revelations about his sexual escapades. Further, publicity surrounding the trial gained Flynn grudging admiration among many GIs for his sexual prowess and ability to escape responsibility for his actions. Thus, enlisted men coined the phrase "In like Flynn" to describe examples of sexual boldness and success.

During the course of the trial, Flynn discreetly began an affair with Nora Eddington (1924-2001), who was working at a tobacco stand in the courthouse. When she became pregnant in August 1943, Flynn married her in order to provide their child with a "legitimate" name. Eager to pursue the lifestyle of a bachelor, Flynn publicly denied rumors about the marriage, until the birth of his daughter Deirdre on January 10, 1944 was reported by the Hollywood press. They subsequently had another daughter, Rory.

Eddington eventually moved into Flynn's home, and his children remember him as an excellent father. However, with his restless spirit, Flynn could not be contained within the limits of a conventional household. Thus, he continued to pursue sexual liaisons with countless women (and, likely, some men) and indulged in heavy drinking with his male buddies. According to family and friends, his desire for adventure caused him to experiment with drugs; his resulting addiction to morphine created many problems for him in his later years. Increasingly frustrated by Flynn's behavior, Eddington divorced him on July 7, 1949.

Initially, Warner Brothers was wary that the trial for statutory rape would destroy Flynn's box office appeal. However, *Gentleman Jim* (1942), rushed into release before the trial began, proved to be highly successful. Still, the features that Flynn made during his final decade at Warner's generally did not attract the same degree of enthusiastic fan response that his earlier films had. Furthermore, most of his pictures were given lower budgets than previously, and he was even assigned to several cheaply produced "B" movies.

An exception to this trend was *The Adventures of Don Juan* (1949), which was intended to give Flynn one last chance at a big budget epic. As he had in *Captain Blood* and other swashbuckling films, he displayed considerable prowess in sword fights and stunt work, though he looked considerably older than he had in the earlier epics. Most significantly, Flynn infused self-conscious humor into the role of Don Juan--creating the archetypal "camp" image of the insatiable lover. Although his performance in *Don Juan* remains a favorite among many gay viewers, not least because of Flynn's self-conscious satire of Romantic clichés, American audiences in general were disappointed by the film, which did, however, do exceptionally well in Europe.

In the course of filming *Don Juan*, Flynn's binge drinking and morphine addiction had begun to spin out of control. His prolonged absences from the studio delayed production and greatly inflated costs. After this point, Warner Brothers regarded him as a liability, though they retained him under contract until 1952.

Despite a significant number of inconsequential films, Flynn also gave some outstanding screen performances during the period 1942 to 1952. For instance, in *Uncertain Glory* (1944), he subtly portrayed a criminal who sacrificed his life to redeem hostages held by the Nazis. Avoiding conventional sentiment, he revealed the petty and cunning aspects of the character, as well as his idealism.

Flynn conveyed the tedium and horror of battle in *Operation Burma* (1945), now regarded as one of the few combat films produced during World War II that still seems credible. But outrage by the British media over the film's presentation of the Burmese operation as an American endeavor caused Warner's to withdraw the film from distribution in the Commonwealth countries and hurt its theatrical run even in the United States. In *That Forsyte Woman* (1949), Flynn, on loan to MGM, played against character as the scheming and possessive Soames Forsyte.

With its stilted script and "B" level production, *Rocky Mountain* is typical of many of the films to which Flynn was assigned during the final years of his contract. However, the project gave him the opportunity to meet singer and actress Patrice Wymore (b. 1926), whom he married in France on October 23, 1950 and with whom he had a daughter, Arnella Roma.

Last Years

In 1952, by mutual agreement, Flynn and Warner Brothers abrogated Flynn's contract. Resolving to demonstrate his ability to create major features on his own terms, he began a lavish European production of *William Tell* in spring 1953. If completed, this would have been the first independent feature to be made in Cinemascope. Unfortunately, his Italian partners withdrew from the production and left Flynn to deal with the legal complications resulting from the deal's collapse. Contributing to Flynn's dismay were the retaliatory legal actions taken by his long-time friend, actor Bruce Cabot, who seized his cars, clothes, and other personal possessions.

Later in 1953, Flynn's financial woes intensified when he discovered that Al Blum, his recently deceased financial manager, had been stealing from him and had left him with a debt of over \$1,000,000 to the IRS. Refusing to declare bankruptcy, he sold many of his remaining assets to pay off some of his debts.

In 1955, Damita made claims for additional alimony and won his house in partial payment; thereafter, his yacht, the *Zaca*, became his primary residence. During the mid-1950s, Flynn made guest appearances on television variety shows; in most cases, he was required to enact caricatures of his earlier heroic roles.

Wymore's appearances in films and television helped the couple to survive financially, and she also offered Flynn great emotional support. However, he separated from her in 1958 and pursued a scandalous affair with teenager Beverly Aadland (b. 1942), whom he had met the previous year.

During the mid-1950s, Flynn made a few routine pictures for British studios, including *Let's Make Up* (1955), a sentimental romance with the popular English musical star, Anna Neagle, and *The Warriors* (1955), his final historical epic.

However, in the last years of his life, Flynn experienced a resurgence of his film career, and he gave outstanding performances, which revealed dimensions that were not expressed in most of his previous roles. His portrayal of a world-weary alcoholic in *The Sun Also Rises* (1957) was widely hailed as a major comeback, and he followed this success with critically acclaimed performances as John Barrymore in *Too Much, Too Soon* (1958) and as a British deserter who devotes himself to preservation of African elephants in *The Roots of Heaven* (1958).

Still eager for adventure, Flynn went to Cuba in 1959 in order to witness the revolution occurring there. For American and Canadian newspapers, he wrote enthusiastic reports about Fidel Castro, which he later retracted. He also made a short feature, *Cuban Rebel Girls* (1959), intended both to glorify Castro and to showcase Aardvark. The favorable publicity surrounding his Cuban escapade evoked the period of his greatest successes.

Flynn died of a heart attack on October 14, 1959 in Vancouver, where he had gone to sell his boat in an effort to repay some of his debt.

Conclusion

In a tribute to Errol Flynn, Jack Warner vividly characterized his screen performances: "He was all the heroes in one magnificent, sexy, animal package. He showered the audience with sparks when he laughed, when he fought, or when he loved." The dynamism, sexual energy, and charisma evident in his early films still excite viewers of diverse backgrounds and perspectives. In his final films, he revealed a profound awareness of the tragedies and complexities of life.

Flynn deserves a place in LGBTQ history for several reasons. In *The Adventures of Don Juan*, he devised a thoroughly camp interpretation of the insatiable lover that resonated particularly with gay viewers at a time of great repression, and in other films he added a homoerotic dimension that may have gone over the heads of most of his audience, but which thrilled gay fans.

Moreover, in real life, Flynn was a sexual adventurer. He probably had sexual relations with men as well as women. Most importantly, he exemplifies the fluidity of sexual desire and the somewhat indiscriminate nature of sexual compulsion. The persistent rumors of his dalliances with men, coupled with his own self-description ("If It Moved, Flynn Fucked It"), suggest that his compulsive womanizing may have been related to sexual needs that transcend current categories of sexual orientation.

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