



Goulding, Edmund (1891-1959)

by Matthew Kennedy

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A drawing of Edmund Goulding published in 1939.

Edmund Goulding was one of the most talented and eccentric characters of Golden Age Hollywood. He was a singer, actor, composer, screenwriter, and novelist, but he primarily excelled as a director. His romantic nature and sexual attraction to men endeared him to actresses, and for a time he was considered a great "woman's director," the equal of George Cukor.

Goulding was born in London on March 20, 1891, during the twilight of the Victorian age. The son of a butcher, Goulding began acting in amateur theatricals and by 1909 began appearing on the West End in productions such as *Gentlemen*, *The King* (1909), *Alice in Wonderland* (1909), and a notorious presentation of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1913), adapted for the stage by G. Constant Lounsbery.

Goulding served in World War I, then immigrated to the United States to become a singer. He was a fine idea man, and could crank out a silent screen scenario very quickly. His writing talents were in demand by producers at Paramount and Famous Players Lasky, and so his singing aspirations were shelved. He wrote for several early film stars, and met his greatest success as co-author of Henry King's *Tol'able David*, a 1921 silent masterpiece.

Goulding directed Joan Crawford in her first substantial role, in *Sally, Irene and Mary* (1925), and Greta Garbo and John Gilbert in the smash hit *Love* (1927), before writing the script for *Broadway Melody* (1929), the first film musical.

Goulding directed Gloria Swanson in her first talkie, *The Trespasser* (1929), and Nancy Carroll in *The Devil's Holiday* (1929). However, his greatest triumph came as director of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's *Grand Hotel*, winner of the 1932 Academy Award as Best Picture and granddaddy of the all-star ensemble story format.

Subsequent assignments at MGM included *Blondie of the Follies* (1932), with Marion Davies and Robert Montgomery, and *Riptide* (1934), with Norma Shearer, the latter from a Goulding script.

Goulding moved to Warner Brothers in 1937, where he directed some of his best movies: *Dawn Patrol* (1938), *White Banners* (1938), and four outstanding melodramas with Bette Davis: *That Certain Woman* (1937), *Dark Victory* (1939), *The Old Maid* (1939), and *The Great Lie* (1941).

The Constant Nymph (1943) with Joan Fontaine, *Claudia* (1943) with Dorothy McGuire, and *Of Human Bondage* (1946) with Eleanor Parker were further testimonies to Goulding's adept direction of actresses.

After World War II, Goulding was hired at Twentieth Century Fox and made two excellent movies of starkly contrasting themes: *The Razor's Edge* (1946), based on a novel by Somerset Maugham, and the noir thriller *Nightmare Alley* (1947), both featuring Tyrone Power at his best.

Goulding's output after that was uneven. He made the comedies *Everybody Does It* (1949); *Mr. 880* (1950), with Burt Lancaster; and *We're Not Married* (1952), with Marilyn Monroe and Ginger Rogers. His last movie

was *Mardi Gras* (1958), a dismissable musical starring Pat Boone.

By then, the man who directed the great stars of early moviedom was old, tired, and alcoholic. He died of a heart attack in 1959.

Goulding's style as a director is distinguished by brisk pacing and an ability to elicit honest emotion from his players. He mastered a number of genres--comedy, romance, musicals, noir, and the war picture--and he adapted well to the personnel and conditions of each studio for which he worked.

There is a paradox to Goulding. His sensitivity to women's emotions brought him enduring success, as witnessed by his swooning melodramas, but his private life reflects a lack of sensitivity. Goulding was bisexual, with a decided taste for promiscuity and voyeurism. His sex parties and casting couch were notorious.

But he cannot be dismissed simply as a sex addict or sexual exploiter. For every excoriation of his morals, there are accounts of his loyalty to friends, generosity to family, gentlemanly manner on the set, and preternatural ability to bring out the best in his actors.

He never had a long lasting romance. A marriage to dancer Marjorie Moss ended quickly with her premature death from tuberculosis. He maintained brief love affairs with younger men and women throughout his life, but either did not want or proved unable to sustain a long term relationship.

The real romance in Edmund Goulding's life is found in his movies.

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Matthew Kennedy teaches anthropology at City College of San Francisco and film history at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. A film critic for *Bay Area Reporter*, he has also written for such publications as *Performing Arts*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, and *Bright Lights Film Journal*. He is author of *Marie Dressler* and a biography of film director Edmund Goulding.