Victor McLaglen, the British Empire, and the Hollywood Raj: Myth, Film, and Reality

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When this article was initially presented at the Western Conference on British Studies, the commentator concluded his remarks by observing “I believe this Victor McLaglen and Hollywood Raj business can have wide popular appeal.” He meant, of course, that today the biography and the as-told-to celebrity autobiography have become the most popular sources of non-fiction reading in the United States, far surpassing any staid scholarly monographs, a situation that frequently leads to jealously among academic historians about the monetary rewards of such enterprises. Interest in biographies extends beyond the book business however, with magazines such as Vanity Fair and others publishing profiles or excerpts from longer works almost every month. There exists an almost insatiable demand for books and articles of this type. A&E Television has a very popular Biography series that runs the gamut from Napoleon to Sid Caesar. The internet has opened up easy access to biographies of virtually anyone, written by virtually anyone, with varying degrees of reliability. Any author who writes an interesting account of the life of an individual, living or dead, that appeals to the casual
reader and the enthusiast will most likely find financial success. There is a whole genre of “celebrity” biography that focuses on the rich and famous, the influential, or the notorious, and within this category an entire sub-genre devoted to movie-stars and other Hollywood types. They can range from the sleazy and sensational to the more complex, hefty literary film studies, or historical biography—the latter varieties seeking to situate the biographical subjects in the social, cultural, or literary context of the times in which they lived, without sparing the gossip. This is what makes the literary and film biography of the British actor Victor McLaglen (1886-1959) so fascinating and appealing to students and historians of the British Empire.

Victor McLaglen’s life was greatly influenced by, and mirrored, his experiences of the British Empire, an empire he travelled widely and knew well. He had been a Boer War volunteer, potential Canadian homesteader, gold and silver miner in Canada and Australia, farm worker, boxer, wrestler, pearl diver, big game hunter, macho carnival tough guy, music hall performer, World War I soldier, Assistant Provost Marshal of Baghdad, and an actor in the early British film industry. Some of his brothers would settle in Kenya and South Africa. He knew the British Army and its imperial mission. David Thomson was indeed correct when he said that McLaglen’s screen persona of imperial tough guy had actual “authentic grounding in personal experience.” But when McLaglen arrived in California in 1924, he would find that his cinematic career would now become conflated with the Hollywood mythology of the British Empire, just as he himself became more immersed in the conflation of California and British culture in the so-called “Hollywood Raj” of the 1920s and 1930s, that collection of English actors living in luxurious, if self-imposed, isolation among the palm trees and Spanish Mission architecture of Hollywood. So taken was McLaglen with his military legend and movie roles that he actually established a cavalry troop, the California Light Horse, that some thought had fascist tendencies. A still ongoing but more benign legacy would be the world-famous precision motorcycle-riding Victor McLaglen Motor Corps.
Large numbers of Britons started arriving in Hollywood in the 1920s, wasting no time in establishing polo and cricket clubs and Sunday afternoon tea parties, employing nannies and butlers, and displaying a highly developed sense of superiority toward the manners and customs of their American cousins. The centre of this British émigré network was the Hollywood Cricket Club founded and captained by that staple of British Empire films, C. Aubrey Smith. Its matches on the UCLA campus, and the annual dance at the Roosevelt Hotel, became the defining social events for this community of British “settlers.”

The late Sheridan Morley, the *ne plus ultra* of Hollywood biographers, whose grandmother was Gladys Cooper and father was Robert Morley, wrote that “the British were to go to California much as they had once travelled to the farther outposts of their own empire…. Like Africa and India at the end of the nineteenth century, California at the start of the twentieth century was a place where to be English, or at the very least British, was nearly enough.”

Actors such as Cary Grant, Ronald Colman, Basil Rathbone, Errol Flynn—Australian, but publicly perceived as British because of his film roles—Charles Laughton, Herbert Marshall, Ray Milland, and Nigel Bruce all combined a sense of melancholy and wistfulness with a suave English accent that translated into box office success.

The British in Hollywood were not just out of their place, but also out of their time:

The curious thing about the British in Hollywood was their ability to survive and prosper in what was then the newest of media simply by clinging to a world that had already vanished. The bits of old England that were brought to Hollywood by men like Aubrey Smith and George Arliss were seldom reflections of their own time, of the 1920s or 1930s. Instead, they were bringing to America an England of about 1870: the England of Kipling and Queen Victoria, never that of Jarrow or George V. Post-1914 Britain was of remarkably little interest to Hollywood in its heyday; you can go almost from *Journey’s End* to *Mrs. Miniver*, from mid-First World War to mid-Second World War, without finding a major Hollywood film about contemporary Britain.
Hollywood loved heritage Britain. Between 1930 and 1945, over one hundred and fifty “British” films were made in Hollywood. In the years from 1939 to 1945, many films portrayed the British war effort in the most sentimental and heroic terms. Mark Glancy argues that “Hollywood’s love for Britain stemmed primarily from box-office considerations rather than ardent Anglophilia.”6 All this culminated in the 1943 RKO production *Forever & a Day*, which assembled an all-star British cast—from Brian Aherne to Arthur Treacher—in a romantic, sentimental, patriotic story of a London house and the generations that lived in it from 1804 to the Blitz of World War II. Viewing the film today, one comes away amazed at how many actors then were British. The film raised funds for British War Relief. Victor McLaglen has a cameo role as a hotel doorman with a chest conspicuously full of World War I medals.

British transplant, now American citizen, Christopher Hitchens suggests that America’s fondness for things British, such as Empire films, red telephone boxes, or the London Bridge in the Arizona desert, lies in the actual disappearance of these things from Britain. Hitchens argues that Americans seem nostalgic for nostalgia. Thus the props and furniture of imperial Britain enter American culture as style objects, rather than as lost historical realities.7 In fact, the cycle of British and American films made in the 1980s, such as *Heat and Dust, A Passage to India, Out of Africa, Mountains of the Moon*, as well as the *Indiana Jones* series, and even the Banana Republic Travel and Safari Company with its line of “adventure” clothing, all portray empire and imperialism with a misty-eyed nostalgia.8 So the “British Films” of the 1920s and 1930s, particularly the Empire films which featured Victor McLaglen, presented an image of the British Empire at its most powerful, virtuous and racist, just as it was in reality starting to decline.9 As the real empire faded, this lost cinematic image of empire could now be viewed with nostalgia, even including the seventh remake of the A.E.W. Mason’s *The Four Feathers* (2002), directed by Skekhar Kapur, which promised, but failed to deliver a revisionist British Empire.10
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Victor McLaglen, the rambunctious leading man and later character actor in American films, especially those of the legendary director John Ford, played so many swaggering drunks and sentimental Irish sergeants that film critics dubbed him the British-born Wallace Beery. The film critic David Thomson, who was less than generous in his overall summation of Victor McLaglen’s later film career, wrote: “Self-pity and barroom Irish bravado were the keys to his work.”

Victor Andrew de Bier McLaglen was born in Tunbridge Wells, England in 1886, the son of the imposing 6’ 7” Right Reverend Andrew McLaglen, a Church of England clergyman of Scottish descent, who later become the Bishop of Clermont in South Africa, where he moved his family. Mrs. Marian McLaglen, who was of Irish descent, gave birth to nine children, with Victor being the third. The eight boys were all at least 6’ 4”; the one daughter, Lily, was only 6’ 3”.

When his two older brothers, Fred and Leopold, enlisted in the army during the Boer War (1899-1902), the thrill-packed letters home were too much to resist, and one night fourteen-year-old Victor ran away from home and joined the Life Guards. He never fought, however, as his father promptly secured his release from military service. While in the Guards, Victor first learned to use his fists to protect himself, developing an interest in boxing, and becoming the regimental champion. Fatherly care may have kept Victor out of the Boer War, but returning to school was simply too dull for the adventuresome young man.

Four years later, Victor persuaded his father to let him go to Canada. Although his father had initially secured him a job there in a solicitor’s office, Victor contemplated claiming a homestead; instead, he ended up doing farm work and mining silver in Cobalt, Ontario. He also worked as a policeman and fitness trainer. When a professional prize-fighter, Fred Snyder, came to town, challenging anyone to a bout for money in a local pool hall, the brawny McLaglen answered the challenge, and won the fight, thus launching a successful Canadian career as a prize-fighter. With a ring victory in Aberdeen,
Washington, he became the Heavyweight Champion of the Pacific Coast. The highlight of McLaglen’s fight career occurred on 10 March 1909, when he fought the great Jack Johnson in Vancouver, British Columbia. In his 1953 television autobiography, This is Your Life, McLaglen recalled the episode: “Well, not only did I meet Jack Johnson, but I met a terrible defeat and an awful licking, but I stood the limit of ten rounds.” McLaglen also remembered “how I tried my very best to rattle him during the last two rounds, conscious of the fistic immortality that would be mine were I lucky enough to slip a ‘sleeper.’” He received nine hundred dollars as his share of the purse. In his autobiography, McLaglen wrote: “I have often seen Johnson in the States since our fight. He has more recently been far more interested in dance bands than in boxing, but he remains the same smiling, good-hearted, simple sort of soul of old. He was certainly the greatest boxer I ever saw in action.”

In between prize fights, McLaglen toured in circuses, and vaudeville and Wild West shows, often as a fighter challenging all comers, with anyone able to go three rounds with him getting twenty-five dollars or sometimes a box of cigars. He would take on as many as eight challengers a night. He tried a similar format with wrestling, but he felt it “could never work on my imagination like boxing. I always loved the flicker of the gloves, the tap of feet on the canvas, the snort of breath as the punches beat home. There is merely a clash of forces in the wrestling ring.” First with Hume Duvel, then with his brother Arthur, McLaglen teamed up to form a vaudeville act called “The Romano Brothers: The World’s Great Exponents of Physical Culture Grecian Art.” They coated themselves with silver cream, and posed as Greek statues, or recreated famous fight scenes. His tours took him all over the world, including the United States, China, India, and Australia, where he also joined in the Kalgoorlie gold rush. His wanderlust drove him to hunt lions in Africa—he relished the sensation of “A gun in your hand and a pair of heavy boots swinging your feet along”—and he did some pearl diving in the South Seas. He visited Tahiti, Fiji, and Ceylon, and was a physical fitness coach to the Raja of Akola in India. He later explained: “A man had one life
to live and one world to live it in. The most he could hope to do with it was to sample that world and its sensations to the full knowing that every new country and thrill he struck was another tweak to the beard of time.”

While in Cape Town, South Africa, on his vaudeville tour, he learned that World War I had broken out in Europe: “As the war tension thrilled me with excitement my thoughts of the pugilistic ladder vanished in the blare of a bugle.” Along with his brother, he returned to England and enlisted in the Middlesex regiment. All eight of the McLaglen boys enlisted, and even sister Lily served by entertaining the troops with her singing. A propaganda poster circulated all over England featuring the “Fighting Macks,” with pictures of all the brothers in uniform—including Fred, the brother who was killed—and also including Lily and their mother. One of the brothers enlisted at the age of thirteen, and another at fourteen. George V was given a personal copy of the poster. Honing his skills for his later acting career, McLaglen also became a recruiting officer: “Standing on egg-boxes in Covent Garden we would guarantee to attract the largest crowd in the district….With some rough and ready sense of showmanship we used to indulge in a little mild horseplay, and frequently staged a fight… for the edification of the onlookers.” He would then settle down “to the serious business of roping them into the Army.”

Victor McLaglen soldiered in Mesopotamia, where he served as a captain, and from 1916 to 1919 served as the Assistant Provost Marshal for the city of Baghdad, although he was actually based at Sheikh Sa’ad, 125 miles south-east of Baghdad along the Tigris. A Provost Marshal is an officer on the staff of a commander, charged with the maintenance of order and other police functions within a command. McLaglen’s most serious task during the war “was to attempt to check the enemy espionage behind our own lines.” After the Armistice, as the Assistant Provost Marshal of Baghdad, he “had to work like a fury helping to convert chaos into some sort of order.” He also recalls the sweltering heat: “Among other things the heat of Baghdad, which had been something we hardly noticed during the movement and drama of the war, became intolerable during those af-
ter-war months, and it seemed to our biased minds that the thermometer jerked upwards deliberately every day....We were all desperately anxious to get back to England." 22 His brother Clifford later came to the United States from Kenya to take part in the This Is Your Life television show devoted to McLaglen, and he reflected on how “Vic” symbolized the British Empire: “Yes, he was quite a man for that great city of Baghdad. And up and down the river boats used to run, and the carts too, with Victor’s permission.... With that great big frame he was a bulwark and symbol of the Empire for all the people of Baghdad.”23 While in Baghdad, McLaglen received a commendation from Winston S. Churchill, the Colonial Secretary.

A controversy has raged in the internet “blogosphere” over the claim made by some McLaglen websites, and for a time by the entry in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, that he had initially joined the Irish Fusiliers. But no record can be found of him enlisting in that regiment. Bloggers have suggested that he may have invented this to bolster his later acting career. One participant in the online discussion wrote that he had been “trying to find out about my grandfather’s time in the war” and had been alerted to the online discussion by his aunt, who told him that she remembered him “mentioning a film star Victor McLaglen as someone who I think was in his regiment and ‘was a complete swine of a chap’—he said that every time his name came up.”24 McLaglen also continued to box while in the army, and was named Heavyweight Champion of the British Army in 1918.25

In spring 1919 he sailed home to England, discharged from the army as a captain. His sister Lily, who also appeared on the This Is Your Life segment devoted to McLaglen, recalled: “When I first saw Vic upon his return my heart jumped: there was a small Arabian boy at his side. I thought, ‘what will the Bishop say, Victor has married a native girl and brought home an Arabian McLaglen.’” Exactly who was this Arab boy? Lily simply said that he was a little Arab boy that Victor brought from Baghdad. McLaglen somewhat cryptically told the host of This Is Your Life, Ralph Edwards, that the boy was his “dog.” McLaglen mumbled this, and it is difficult to interpret
the word, but this is the best guess. “Brother,” he elaborated, “I used to send him out to some cheating things when necessary. He came—[a hesitant pause]—I took him to England.” And that was where the whole mystery was left hanging on the This is Your Life segment.

Although he had previously vowed never to marry, Victor McLaglen wed Enid Lamont, who had been introduced to him by his sister Lily, on 29 October 1919, and his only son Andrew McLaglen was born in 1920. Andrew McLaglen would go on to have a very successful Hollywood career as a director of action movies, directing John Wayne in five feature films, McLintock! (1963), Hellfighters (1968), The Undefeated (1969), Chisum (1970), and Cahill—United States Marshal (1973). The couple also had a daughter, Sheila. Enid Lamont died in 1942, and in 1943 McLaglen married Suzanne M. Brueggeman. He divorced her in 1948, the same year that he married Margaret Pumphrey, his spouse until his death in 1959. He had no other children.

After his war service, McLaglen tried to resume his boxing career in England, but a producer friend, I.B. Davidson, who saw him box in a sporting club, suggested that he take a stab at acting. McLaglen appeared less than enthusiastic about a career as an actor, but with few immediate prospects other than boxing, and with two children to feed, he decided to try it. His first appearance was in a 1920 film The Call of the Road, directed by A.E. Colby. His acting performance was well received, and he quickly became a popular leading man in British silent films such as Carnival (1921, Harley Knoles, director); Corinthian Jack (1921, Walter Rowden, director); The Sport of Kings (1922, Arthur Rooke, director); The Glorious Adventure (1922, J. Stuart Blackton, director); A Romance of Old Baghdad (1922, Kenelm Foss, director); The Romany (1923, F. Martin Thornton, director); M’Lord of the White Road (1923, Arthur Rooke, director); and The Gay Corinthian (1924, Arthur Rooke, director). The camera liked him, his vaudeville and carnival experience helped him in his acting, and a steady contract put money in his pockets, but his early impression of the film business and the people in it was that it was all pretty silly: “Acting never appealed to me, and I was dab-
bling in it solely as a means of making money. I rather felt that the grease paint business was somewhat beneath a man who had once been a reasonably useful boxer.”28 With the British film industry in a slump, he answered the call of director J. Stuart Blackton to come to Hollywood in 1924 for the very appropriately titled film *The Beloved Brute* (1924).

In fact, when he got to the Golden State he found it initially difficult to get steady work, and he suffered from culture shock:

I knew the Pacific coast of old (he wrote in his 1934 autobiography), having toured it as a boxer, but I had never previously been as far down as Los Angeles. My first impression on stepping out of the train was one of acute disappointment. Actors back on Shaftesbury Avenue spoke of Hollywood with bated breath, mentioning it as an El Dorado where the streets were paved with gold and the tables covered with long-term contracts. To my travel-tired eyes, as I viewed it for the first time, it seemed remarkably like any other suburb of any other Pacific city. I presented a curious spectacle as I stood on that platform. I had, I admit, been anxious to create a good impression. In consequence I was well dressed, in the English style, which must have looked museum-like to the natives. My kid gloves, my spats and my walking cane divulged the fact that I was English; the natives stopped and stared at me as though I were a freak show. There was about twenty dollars in my pocket, representing about four pounds in English money, and that jaunty feeling in the heart that comes when a man finds himself on the threshold of a new life.29

While he did have the promise of a studio contract in his pocket, McLaglen’s initial meeting with the head of publicity at Vitagraph was not exactly encouraging: “It may be nothing much,” said the pressman, “but very few of you English fellows do well out here; reticence and absurd self-consciousness tell against them in a land where everyone has a pat on the back for the next man.”30 The Vitagraph man, who just happened to be Irish, continued, “making it quite plain that any race as foolish, as dimwitted, as utterly lacking in honesty, initiative, and decency as the English would naturally stand
little chance of getting on in God’s Own Country.” “The English,” he said, “…were a curious race, intolerable enough in their own native strongholds, but utterly unthinkable under a decent sun.” The English Hollywood community would have to adapt to the perpetual California sunshine. Therefore McLaglen decided that he would be completely cheerful and friendly to all, avoiding any persona of a morose, stuffy Englishman. He managed to keep this posture despite the postponement of his promised first film, and even when he found himself living with several rats in a small flat overlooking a sewage farm.

In McLaglen’s early Hollywood career, he made some good silent films, some that were undistinguished, and some that were inconsistent. In his first film with director John Ford, The Fighting Heart (1925), a film now lost, he played, not surprisingly, a heavyweight boxing champion. Yet McLaglen, in Sheridan Morley’s opinion, was “one of the first to grab the character opportunities that the talkies provided, and by 1930 was on $1,000 a week starring opposite Marlene Dietrich in Dishonored.” Josef von Sternberg directed this World War I drama, with Dietrich playing X-27, an Austrian spy modelled on Mata Hari, who was trying to outwit a Russian agent by the name of Colonel Kranau, played by McLaglen. Surprisingly at ease in his new Hollywood career, Victor McLaglen would soon be a top star at Fox and his future as an actor looked bright.

His initial Hollywood success had come with the silent film What Price Glory (1926), directed by Raoul Walsh, where he played the role of Captain Flagg. Edmund Lowe, who played his sidekick, Sergeant Quirt, related how McLaglen got the part:

Vic wanted to play the part of Captain Flagg very badly but he could not get in touch with Raoul Walsh, the director. Word went out that Walsh wanted a real, authentic tough guy to play the part. So what did Vic do? He crashed the studio gates, brushed away a couple of studio policemen like flies, strode into Walsh’s office. Well, he got the part didn’t he?”
What Price Glory?, a World War I tragicomedy, made Captain Flagg and Sergeant Quirt so popular that McLaglen and Lowe went on to play the characters in a series of film adventures, including the patriotic slapstick musical comedy Call Out The Marines (1942). Beau Geste, the classic French Foreign Legion tale, since remade two more times, came out the same year as What Price Glory?. McLaglen would again serve in the Legion in Under Two Flags (1937) with Ronald Coleman.

In Professional Soldier (1936) the gruff but big-hearted McLaglen plays a tough soldier of fortune, Colonel Mike Donovan, who gets charmed by the innocence of the young Freddie Bartholomew, a role that anticipates his later pairing with Shirley Temple. In this Tay Garnett-directed film, McLaglen not only protects the eleven-year-old king of an imaginary European kingdom, but also kills half the rebel army in order to restore him to his usurped throne. Reviewer Frank Nugent wrote in the New York Times that “Professional Soldier’ is incongruous, it is loud, and intermittently, it is funny.”

Victor McLaglen will always be linked with John Ford, who used him to advantage in so many of his films. It should be noted that they were also linked by their reputations, well deserved in both cases, for heavy drinking. McLaglen’s films with Ford included Mother Machree (1928), Hangman’s House (1928), and Strong Boy (1929). In Hangman’s House McLaglen plays a fugitive Irish Republican Army member returning to Ireland from the Foreign Legion to hunt down and kill a villain responsible for his sister’s death. Joseph McBride wrote that “McLaglen’s Citizen Hogan is a hopeless outcast in a society torn by the evils of colonialism, the tragedy of civil war, and pervasive treachery of informing.” In the end, Citizen Hogan returns to the Foreign Legion: “I’m going back to the brown desert…but I’m taking the green place with me in my heart.” The Black Watch (1929), starring McLaglen and Myrna Loy, was the first full-length talkie directed by Ford, who was not yet well known, despite having credits on thirty-eight films as a director, producer, screenwriter, or actor. British film historian Jeffrey Richards writes that
“the film…contains what have emerged as the major themes of the cinema of Empire: fear of native uprising, dedication to duty, even at the expense of reputation, and a narrow escape from miscegenation.”³⁶ Loy played an Afghan princess who falls in love with McLaglen’s character, a captured British officer, and thus spares him the usual fate of prisoners: castration. The dialogue was poorly written—Myrna Loy’s character at one point says to McLaglen’s: “They will torture thee; they will put out your eyes.” An unknown by the name of John Wayne appeared as an extra in the film, which was remade in 1953 as *King of the Khyber Rifles*, directed by Henry King and starring Tyrone Power.³⁷ Even when Fox dropped McLaglen, forcing him to go back to England to make *Dick Turpin* (1933, directed by W. Victor Hanbury), it was Ford who restored him to American stardom with *The Lost Patrol* (1934).

A British silent version of *The Lost Patrol* had been made in 1929, starring Victor’s brother Cyril. Enduring the hardships of filming in the Yuma Desert, Victor McLaglen played a sergeant of a British patrol in Mesopotamia that is being picked off one by one by an unseen Arab enemy. In the opinion of Jeffrey Richards “it emerges as a respectful and expertly handled tribute to The British Soldier.”³⁸ The heat allowed Ford to have McLaglen go shirtless to reveal his burly chest. Joe Harris, an actor Ford used frequently, liked to spread rumours about Ford’s sexuality: “Ford was a frustrated athlete and wanted to be the Irish brawler, a big rough and tumble guy. He wanted to be like Victor McLaglen, but he wasn’t, so he created it on screen.”³⁹

The highlight of Victor McLaglen’s acting career came in 1935 when he won an Academy Award for best actor playing the title role of Gypo Nolan in Ford’s *The Informer*. Ford had to fight RKO to get the role for McLaglen: “The studio spent weeks trying to foist better-known heavies on me, said Ford, but I knew Vic could do the job, and I knew I could handle him exactly as I wanted to. I won in the end—and you saw the performance he gave.”⁴⁰ In this film set in 1922 Dublin, Gypo informs on a buddy and then agonizes about it. It is beyond the scope of this essay to offer a thorough analysis of this
film, but David Thomson’s comment is trenchant: “It is a hard film to endure, and symptomatic of Ford’s Irish willingness to see brutality inflated into religion and patriotism by drink. This performance was so far outside American traditions of economy, the Academy persuaded themselves that it was noble acting.”

Ford’s *Wee Willie Winkie* (1937), featuring both McLaglen and Shirley Temple in kilts, presents the story of how a little American girl stops a war in 1890s British India. The film was based loosely on a Rudyard Kipling short story, although the executives at 20th Century Fox ordered the screenwriters to perform a sex change on the central character in order to allow the widely-popular Shirley Temple to assure the film’s financial success. It works as a passable Temple vehicle, but many aspects of the film, such as her relationship with the genial, tough, blustering, Sergeant Macduff (McLaglen) are hard to swallow today. But the intrusion of Temple into the child- and woman-phobic military societies of the British Army, and the opposing forces of Korda Khan, do pose some interesting gender dynamics.

In many ways, *Gunga Din* (George Stevens, 1939), in which McLaglen played Sergeant McChesney, was both the culmination of McLaglen’s well-established British imperial NCO character and the beginning of its end. As Kevin Hagopian has written, “The cast was straight from the playing fields of Beverly Hills, with British and Commonwealth expatriates (and their American auxiliaries) playing most of the leading roles. Victor McLaglen, Cary Grant, and Douglas Fairbanks Jr. play the rowdy and sentimental trio of… Ballantine, Cutter, and McChesney.” In this RKO version of British India the “sadness, alcoholism, self-doubt and suicide that haunt the characters” in Rudyard Kipling’s short stories do not exist, writes Zohreh Sullivan. McLaglen’s McChesney has none of the “inextinguishable sorrow” that marked Kipling’s Private Mulvaney, the original name and rank for this character. Filled with masculine humour, physical comedy, racism, adventure, dash, pluck, over-the-top escapism, and boyish comradeship, *Gunga Din* epitomized the ultimate adolescent fantasy set in a mythological British India. “The Hollywood Raj was
never more faithfully served by its handsome, brave, fun-loving men-at-arms,” writes Kevin Hagopian. “Just a year after the release of *Gunga Din*, the Raj would begin to break up, as several of its members, including David Niven, went home to fight for England. But *Gunga Din* remains evergreen, a memento of a decade when England ruled not just the waves, but the hearts of moviegoers as well.”

After 1939 and Sergeant McChesney, McLaglen’s acting career also started to spiral down, with cookie-cutter roles that were mere parodies of his earlier tough-guy persona. John Ford again rescued him with the Sergeants Mulcahy and Quincannon roles in his cavalry trilogy/male soap operas—*Fort Apache* (1948), *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949), and *Rio Grande* (1950)—which he played as clownish, bloated, stooge, Irish caricatures. Ford’s imperial trilogy of *Black Watch* (1929), *Wee Willie Winkie* (1937), and the lesser known *Four Men and a Prayer* (1938), the only one of these in which McLaglen did not play, preceded his cavalry epics. The transition of the NCO character from British India to the American west was an easy one. Ford again deployed McLaglen in *The Quiet Man* (1952), a story set in a timeless Ireland of donnybrooks. In this film, Ford showcased McLaglen’s vaunted boxing and fighting skills in cartoonish slapstick form.

But there would be one role that Vic McLaglen did not get from John Ford. After seeing the film *La grande illusion*, Jean Renoir’s classic antiwar film set in World War I, Ford decided in March 1938 that he wanted to do a Hollywood remake of the film, changing the French prisoners to English. His casting ideas included Victor McLaglen in the Jean Gabin role, George Sanders in the Erich von Stroheim role, David Niven or Cesar Romero in the Pierre Fresnay role, and J. Edward Bromberg in the Marcel Dalio role. Darryl F. Zanuck vetoed the project, telling Ford that, “I think it would be a criminal injustice to attempt to remake the picture in English. The most wonderful thing about this picture is the fine background, the authentic atmosphere, and the foreign characters, who actually speak in the language of their nationality. Once you take this away, I believe you have lost 50% of the value of the picture.” What
McLaglen would have done with the Jean Gabin role remains an intriguing question.

The less said the better about two of McLaglen’s later films: in *Prince Valiant* (1954), he plays a bearded Viking named Boltar, who has a set of horns that looks like a prop from a bad Wagnerian opera, and *Many Rivers to Cross* (1955) is an American western reprise of his role in *The Quiet Man*. His last film, *Sea Fury* (1958), features two up-and-coming tough guys, Robert Shaw and Stanley Baker, along with Luciana Paluzzi. McLaglen plays an aging salvage tugboat captain operating in the Bay of Biscay, who is in an incongruous competition with Baker for the amorous affections of Paluzzi, at least thirty years younger than himself. He spends most of the movie bellowing, breaking obvious prop “paste” Johnny Walker whiskey bottles, and limping around with the aid of a cane. The spirit may still have been willing, but the flesh had given out. He deserved better in his last performance. But the equally lacklustre 1955 film *Bengazi*, directed by John Brahm, really puts the final coda on his imperial career. Set in post 1945 Libya, the film is so bad that it frequently does not even appear in his filmography. Richard Carlson plays a British intelligence officer with the worst Hollywood Scottish accent imaginable, while McLaglen is a sleazy bar owner with a daughter (Mala Powers)—just arrived in Bengazi from Scotland—whom he hardly knows. Richard Conte’s character is a wise-guy, American expatriate soldier who knows where the Arabs buried their gold. In a sad replay of *The Lost Patrol*, this trio of men, along with Powers, end up trapped in a desert religious shrine surrounded by marauding Arabs. But the world had changed; what had been compelling in the heyday of Empire now just seems ridiculous, even laughable.

The circle had finally closed. From the British Raj to the Hollywood Raj, from *The Lost Patrol* and *Gunga Din* to *Bengazi*, Victor McLaglen and the British Empire, myth, film, and reality, had started to decline. In his later years, McLaglen spent more and more time at his ranch near Clovis, California where he raised horses and tended his fruit trees and grapevines. Increasingly ill, he would stagger on
for four more years, having growing difficulty remembering his lines, until felled by a heart attack in 1959 in Newport Beach, California. He was interred in Forest Lawn Memorial Park in Glendale.

Victor McLaglen was in many ways the real deal—a patriot-soldier, military officer, adventurer, and athlete. Given his background and film persona, it is perhaps unsurprising that McLaglen would be accused of having fascist tendencies, a charge that would persist long after his death, and that is still widely believed by many film historians. It all started with an article by Carey McWilliams in 1935, “Hollywood Plays with Fascism,” in which he expressed concern over the number of uniformed military “saber-rattling gangs…conducting intensive recruiting campaigns.” Among those who fell under suspicion were the members of McLaglen’s Light Horse cavalry troop. “Originally restricted to Canadian and British ex-service men, the troop has suddenly developed an amazing concern over American politics,” McWilliams wrote. “Mr. McLaglen was recently quoted in the Los Angeles Post-Record to the effect that the new unit has offered its services to city, state, and federal authorities at any time it might be needed. In their public meetings the Light Horsemen listen to speakers who specialize in the fanciest variety of red-baiting.” The forming of the Light Horse brigade, a semimilitaristic riding and polo club, and a similarly attired and arrayed precision motorcycle team, the Victor McLaglen Motor Corps, which still exists today, and rides its Harley-Davidsons in the annual Pasadena Rose Parade, led McWilliams and others to fear that McLaglen had fascist leanings and was forming his own private army. Victor McLaglen also helped found the British United Services Club of Los Angeles for actors who had British military service. The club still exists and is open to all officers who have served in the British military. The degree to which McLaglen’s screen life merged with his political and personal life was noted by a reviewer assessing the 1936 film Professional Soldier in the New York Times:

Victor McLaglen struts through “Professional Soldier” with such obvious delight in his role that it would be downright cruel not to
pretend to enjoy it as much as he does. On the screen and off, he loves a uniform. Out in Hollywood he rides at the head of his private cavalry—the California Light Horse Troop—which he has equipped and holds ready for any civic or national emergency. His new film at the Center Theatre provides no cavalry, but it permits him to be a swashbuckling ex-colonel of the marines with a full dress uniform and a few pounds of medals to wear on state occasions. Mr. McLaglen’s cup of happiness flows over….There is something communicable in watching the simple pleasures of a forthright soul. Before “Professional Soldier’ has progressed very far, you find yourself relishing the picture less for the entertainment it is giving you than for the joy it is affording its chief player. This is a silly state of affairs, we must admit, but that’s the way it is.”

Although Victor McLaglen clearly enjoyed his activities as leader of the Light Horse, Garry Wills does point out that “it was a time when other British actors were forming polo clubs and [John] Ford himself created a yachting uniform for those who sailed with him in the *Araner*... . Actors George Brent and Gary Cooper also had riding clubs that wore uniforms.” Wills cites a survey he did of all references to McLaglen in the *Los Angeles Times*, noting that the search turned up nothing but mentions of social and charitable events attended by his troop. In spite of McLaglen’s claim that the Brigade could be used as a “government unit” in the time of war or national emergency, he really used the Light Horse only as a personal escort for selected exhibitions and personal appearances, and to lead parades. The members of his Brigade, like so many in Hollywood, only played at being a credible paramilitary group. And even headlines about the Brigade’s activities that suggest possible political motivations turn out to be misleading: “When McLaglen, attended by his Light Horse brigade, put his hand prints in the cement at Grauman’s Chinese Theatre, two eggs were lobbed at him by a heckler—who turned out to be a movie extra who claimed McLaglen broke his nose in a filmed fight scene.” McLaglen would have nothing to do with the right-wing activities of other prominent Hollywood stars such as Ward Bond or John Wayne. Wills evidently rejects charges made by McWilliams and others that McLaglen had fascist sympathies. It
seems that military uniforms were in fashion during the 1930s, and these riding clubs were just good opportunities to socialize and get drunk. There is certainly fodder for some closer scrutiny of the intriguing issue of semi-militaristic riding clubs, polo clubs, and motorcycle clubs in pre-World War II Hollywood.

Victor McLaglen actively promoted pro-British causes on and off the screen. He helped to create a set of meanings relating to the cinema of empire in the films in which he appeared. For example, John Ford used him to create a mythopoetic vision of Ireland, and for George Stevens in *Gunga Din* he became the epitome of the burly, brawling, working class “Cockney” NCO. While there is no specific evidence that McLaglen was actively involved in the scripting or production of films, his son Andrew certainly was involved as a significant Hollywood director of action and adventure films set in the British Empire as well as the American west. As Victor McLaglen’s film career shows, viewers do not just respond to the images, reviews, advertisements, merchandise, or the recommendations of friends, but also to the specific “stars” of films. The lead actors, plus the cultural dynamics of film production itself, along with the individual agency of directors, art directors, composers, costume designers, editors, producers, cinematographers, scriptwriters, all help to shape understanding of a film and its social context by both audiences at the time and later historical observers. The biography of Victor McLaglen, therefore, offers more than just a colourful account of the adventurous life of a popular character actor who just happened to win an Academy Award. It also reveals much about the history of film in Britain and America, and about the “Hollywood Raj.” It provides a unique opportunity to understand the wide influence of a particular idea of the British Empire, and twentieth-century Hollywood’s depiction of that influence, and shows how fact and fiction can confl ate to create pervasive historical images that shape popular historical consciousness. The number of recent Hollywood films dealing with the new Anglo-American imperial adventures in Iraq and Afghanistan, including the Best Picture winner for 2010, *The Hurt Locker*, indicates that the genre of imperial cinema, far from be-
ing dead, awaits new cinematic historical interpretations.
Notes


5 Ibid., 12.


11 Thomson, 586.


13 *This Is your Life Victor McLaglen* 1953.


15 Ibid., 171.

16 Sharp, 1; McLaglen, *Express to Hollywood*, 196.
18 Ibid., 205-208.
19 Ibid., 210.
20 Sharp, 1.
22 Ibid., 221-222.
23 *This Is Your Life Victor McLaglen*, 1953.
26 *This Is Your Life Victor McLaglen*, 1953.
29 Morley, 72. Five of McLaglen’s brothers—Clifford, Kenneth, Arthur, Cyril, and Leopold—were also Hollywood actors, and many participated in Victor’s many charities.
30 Ibid.
32 Ibid., 72-73.
33 *This Is Your Life Victor McLaglen*, 1953.
39 McBride, 121.
40 Ibid., 223.
41 Thomson, 587.
42 Bagott, 31.
43 Kevin Hagopian, “*Gunga Din,*” New York State Writers Institute Film Notes, http://www.albany.edu/writers-inst/webpages4/filwomen/fnf99n7.html (accessed
10 May 2011).

44 Zohreh T. Sullivan, as quoted by Chapman and Cull, 38.

45 Hagopian, 2.


47 McBride, 254.


50 Ibid.


52 Sharp, 3; Burrows, 361; For the British United Services Club see the website for the Club at www.buscinfo.com/ (accessed 5 August 2010).

53 Nugent, 1.

54 Wills, 247.

55 Ibid., 346, 247.