Charles Laughton
in

Alfred Hitchcock's

-JAMAICA INN-

A
Pommer-Laughton
Production

Adapted from the novel by
Daphne du Maurier

with
Leslie Banks · Emlyn Williams
Robert Newton
Marie Ney · Wylie Watson
and
introducing
Maureen O'Hara

Screen Play by
Sidney Gilliat & Joan Harrison

Dialogue
Sidney Gilliat

Additional Dialogue
J.B. Priestley

Photography
Harry Stradling

in collaboration with
Bernard Knowles

Settings
Tom Morahan

Costumes
Molly McArthur

Music
Eric Fenby

Film Editor
Robert Hamer

Special Effects
Harry Watt

Directed by
Alfred Hitchcock

Produced by
Erich Pommer

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plenty to relish

by Nathalie Morris

Sandwiched between the critical and commercial success of *The Lady Vanishes* (1938) and the Oscar-winning *Rebecca* (1940), *Jamaica Inn* (1939) often languishes on the margins of the Hitchcock canon, noted primarily for its status as the director's final British film. It has widely – and unfairly – been considered as something of a failure, a project Alfred Hitchcock completed with reluctance while impatiently awaiting the start of his contract with American producer David O. Selznick, the contract that would be his passport to Hollywood.

Jamaica Inn came Hitchcock's way when he was looking for an interim project to tide him over until his move to America. He had been interested in buying the film rights to Daphne du Maurier's novel *Rebecca,* published in 1938, but had been put off by the high price tag. *Rebecca* was now one of two potential projects Selznick had lined up for Hitchcock's American debut (the other was a film about the *Titanic*). It perhaps therefore seemed auspicious when Hitchcock's old acquaintance Charles Laughton approached him to direct a film version of du Maurier's previous hit, *Jamaica Inn.*

Laughton and Hitchcock moved in similar circles and had known each other for many years. Occasionally they'd talked about making a film together but the right project had never come along at the right time. With the German Jewish *émigré* Erich Pommer (who Hitchcock knew from his time working in German studios in the 1920s), Laughton had formed Mayfair Pictures, and the two producers were thrilled when they secured Hitchcock's agreement to direct their third film, *Jamaica Inn*.

On the surface it appeared to be the perfect partnership; a fitting swansong for Hitchcock's British career and a huge coup for Mayfair. Unfortunately, soon after accepting the assignment Hitchcock changed his mind. He later claimed he'd signed his contract before reading the script, and as soon as he had, realised he'd made a terrible mistake. He then did everything in his power, including offering to sell his house, to get out of it. Laughton, determined not to lose his star director, employed some coaxing, wheedling and emotional blackmail to convince him otherwise and Hitchcock reluctantly stayed, on the condition that the script could be re-written by his own people, his long-term collaborator Joan Harrison and *The Lady Vanishes*' co-writer Sidney Gilliat.

By all accounts, *Jamaica Inn* was not an easy film to make. The script presented numerous challenges for director, writers and actors which played out across the course of production. Hitchcock himself tried to disavow the film upon completion and it's certainly true that period films were not his metier. *Waltzes from Vienna* (1934), *Jamaica Inn* and *Under Capricorn* (1949) are all traditionally regarded as anomalies in his career, un-Hitchcockian Hitchcock films which struggle to assert their place in standard auteurist accounts of his work. Critics of the time, eager to see what Hitchcock would do next, felt pangs of disappointment upon realising that *Jamaica Inn* didn't deliver what they had now come to expect from the director's films.

But while *Jamaica Inn* did not provide the overt suspense and elaborate camera tricks that critics had come to expect, it's important to remember that the film was hugely popular with audiences and it's easy to see why. There was a vast audience for du Maurier's brand of Gothic romance, and Laughton was an established character actor in both Britain and the US. He had won an Oscar for his portrayal of the bawdy, lusty and emotionally complex monarch in *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (1933) and in 1935 played one of his most iconic roles, Captain Bligh in *Mutiny on the Bounty*. Like Hitchcock, he would go on to have an American hit immediately after *Jamaica Inn* with his star turn as Quasimodo in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1939). Even as *Jamaica Inn* was described as "third rate Hitchcock", it was simultaneously rated "first rate Laughton" (*Time*, 30 October 1939).

The film is also top notch melodrama. Hitchcock's biographer, John Russell Taylor, hits upon a key point when he observes (albeit in rather pejorative terms) that *Jamaica Inn* was a "forerunner of the taste which ran rampant in Britain in the 1940s for costume tushery and Regency romances of all sorts". Viewed within the context of escapist romances such as *The Man in Grey* (1943) and *The Wicked Lady* (1945), *Jamaica Inn* sits far more comfortably than within the trajectory of the Hitchcockian thriller which had been established through the director's 1930s collaborations, first with writer Charles Bennett and then Frank Launder and Sidney Gilliat, the so-called 'thriller sextet' of *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934), *The 39 Steps* (1935), *Sabotage*, *Secret Agent* (both 1936), *Young and Innocent* (1937) and *The Lady Vanishes*. And unlike the slick and fine-tuned *Rebecca*, *Jamaica Inn* has an unpolished freshness which, for me, is part of its appeal and links it to its vibrant and unruly British successors.

Set in the early 19th century, *Jamaica Inn* tells the story of strong-willed heroine, Mary Yellan, who comes to live with her aunt and uncle at Jamaica Inn on the Cornish moors. To accommodate actress Maureen O'Hara, the film's Mary is not Cornish but Irish, having travelled to England after her mother's death. Du Maurier's Mary soon becomes pitched into a battle of wills with her darkly brooding, destructive (and self-destructive) uncle, Joss

Merlyn, the leader of a gang of local wreckers. Attracted to and repelled by her uncle in equal measure, the literary Mary is also drawn to two other men. The first is her uncle's brother Jem, a horse thief and good-natured scoundrel who combines the dangerous allure of her uncle with a sounder moral foundation. The second is the local vicar, an albino who is portrayed as an implacable and almost other worldly being in whom Mary seeks moral guidance and salvation. It is only towards the end of the novel that he's revealed as the mastermind behind Merlyn's wrecking operation, not only a man without moral compunction, but also a fanatic who has abandoned the Christian God in favour of a mysterious paganism which flourishes amid the timeless setting of the moors.

The film reconfigures du Maurier's timeline and characters somewhat. In typical Hitchcock style, the narrative is condensed and played out across two days rather than several weeks. The romance with Jem is retained, although he becomes an undercover lawman rather than Joss's brother. The hint of a dark and sexually complex central relationship between Mary and her uncle is established early on but not fully developed. It is instead displaced onto the relationship between Mary and Laughton's Squire Pengallan. Laughton was originally to play Merlyn but switched roles after the filmmakers realised that there was no way Americans would accept a vicar as the villain of the piece (many years later, in 1955, Laughton got to redress this by using a bogus preacher as his charismatic baddie in *The Night of the Hunter*). The script was duly re-written to accommodate this change, utilising and developing a secondary character from the novel, creating a much bigger, starring role. Laughton's squire becomes larger-than-life personality – jovial, sinister and, we discover, suffering from hereditary insanity. But he is also, at least at first, a substitute father figure to whom Mary is drawn.

Their relationship takes on a troubling sexual undercurrent as the film progresses but in its early stages resembles Laughton's paternalistic friendship with ingénue O'Hara. As Maureen FitzSimons, O'Hara had begun her career on stage at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, and had been considered by Laughton and Pommer for their previous Mayflower venture, *The Beachcomber* (1938). They'd felt her too inexperienced at the time, but Laughton was convinced that she would be perfect as Mary in *Jamaica Inn*. He became quite taken with her, choosing her stage name (*Gone with the Wind* was on everybody's mind at the time and O'Hara attributed Laughton's choice of surname to this) and seeing her as the daughter he'd never had. Unlike Pengallan, who is thwarted in his attempts to sail away with Mary, Laughton did leave for America with O'Hara in 1939 after having her cast alongside him in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, thereby launching her American career.

It is notable that O'Hara was Laughton's choice, Laughton's discovery, and not Hitchcock's. While this was not a source of any tension between actress and director (O'Hara in fact got

on very well with Hitchcock), it contributes to the notion of *Jamaica Inn* being Laughton's rather than Hitchcock's film. In the same way that the book's controlling, compelling Merlyn takes on a secondary role to Laughton's Pengallan in the film, Hitchcock too forsook his usual close control during production. The director knew that asserting authorial authority over *Jamaica Inn* would be a pointless struggle. With one eye on America and the next stage of his career, it was a battle he didn't think worth fighting. Instead, he channelled aspects of himself through his lead actor.

The extent to which Laughton can be seen as an on-screen surrogate for Hitchcock (both in *Jamaica Inn* and in their later collaboration, 1947's *The Paradine Case*) has been debated. For some, like Peter Conrad in his book *The Hitchcock Murders* (2000), these are Hitchcock's "completest and most candid self-portraits". For others the comparison is purely superficial. I am in the former camp. There are, of course, many obvious parallels between the two men. They were of a similar age (born only a month apart, in 1899) and both were overweight and felt themselves to be physically unattractive. Both were Catholics and the product of Jesuit school and, as Laughton's biographer Simon Callow has observed, both were "not quite gentlemen, sexually complex, and closely involved with their work, with the darker impulses of humanity".

When Pengallan first sees Mary, the scene brings to mind a vision of the similarly portly Hitchcock first catching sight of one of his desirable and unattainable leading ladies. Later, Pengallan employs the language of the film director when he prides himself on his "good, clean [gun] shot". Soon after this, as he fantasises about taking Mary to France and choosing new clothes for her, he is like the Hitchcock who, twenty years later, channels his hopeless longings through the controlling impulses of *Vertigo*'s Scottie. In her memoirs, O'Hara recalls Hitchcock's "giddy" excitement at directing the wrecking scenes, claiming that while shooting these dramatic and beautifully executed set pieces she could "see the devilish boy hiding within his giant frame". In this respect, the director's boyish pleasure mirrors that of Pengallan, who delights in the transgressive fun of causing shipwrecks. Elements of biography linking fictional character with director also creep in. At the dinner which introduces us to Pengallan and his guests at table, Pengallan has his horse Nancy led into the grand dining room. This post-prandial prank is both surreal and decidedly Hitchcockian, recalling the occasion Hitchcock had a horse delivered to the dressing room of actor Gerald du Maurier (incidentally, the father of *Jamaica Inn* author Daphne).

But if there was something of Hitchcock in Laughton's Pengallan, like many doppelgängers, his alter ego had a will of his own, which escaped from and confounded the original. The changes to his character had unsettled Laughton and he struggled to work out how to play the part. This caused numerous problems as Hitchcock was forced to shoot all of Laughton's

scenes from the chest upwards until the actor could determine how his character would walk (the answer eventually came after hearing the rhythm of a waltz). Laughton also frequently had trouble in understanding his character's motivation or deciding on the best way to play a scene. After one particularly tense session, inspiration finally struck when he hit upon the conceit of playing the scene as a small boy who had wet himself. Hitchcock despaired. Laughton was essentially his first Method actor, and he didn't like it.

However, for all the headaches *Jamaica Inn* caused its creators (including du Maurier herself, who insisted that Hitchcock and Selznick treated *Rebecca* with more reverence), the film nonetheless has plenty to relish. While there are plenty of small Hitchcockian touches and motifs for those who care to look for them, *Jamaica Inn* can and should be appreciated on its own terms, for what it is, rather than what it is not. From its atmospheric art direction and exciting action scenes, to its rich and nuanced performances, the film is a thoroughly well-made and enjoyable romp, its elements of light and shade interwoven with threads of comedy, cruelty and complexity.

Nathalie Morris is a film historian and a senior archive curator at the British Film Institute. She has published on many aspects of cinema history, particularly around British and silent film, and curates a regular programme of exhibitions at BFI Southbank, London. She cooked Alfred Hitchcock's Quiche Lorraine on camera as part of the BFI's Genius of Hitchcock project and is currently writing a book about food and drink on film.

about the transfer

The restoration of *Jamaica Inn* was carried out by Cohen Film Collection at RR Media and supervised by Finishing Post Productions. The 4K restoration utilized a nitrate 35mm original negative held at the BFI National Film Archive.

production credits

Discs and Booklet Produced by Anthony Nield
Executive Producer Francesco Simeoni
Production Assistant Liane Cunje
Technical Producer James White
QC Manager Nora Mehenni
Authoring & Subtitling Digital Cinema United
Artist Dan Mumford
Design Jack Pemberton

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