

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 413

“Frankly, My Dear”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

“All we’ve got is cotton and slaves and arrogance.”

Rhett Butler, in *Gone with the Wind*.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 413. Frankly, My Dear.

This episode will be the sixth and last of our series on Hollywood in the Thirties and Forties, and I’ve saved the biggest studio in town for the finale: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, known to one and all as MGM.

As you can no doubt deduce from its name, MGM was the product of a merger of three studios, and this story begins with a man born Lazar Meir to a Jewish family in what was then the Russian Empire in 1884. When he was three years old, his family emigrated to Long Island in the United States and then later to St. John, New Brunswick, in Canada.

His parents did not speak much English and the family was poor. Young Lazar, now known as Louis B. Mayer, quit school at the age of 12 to help his father, who collected scrap metal for a living. At the age of 20, he moved to Boston, Massachusetts in the United States, where he started his own scrap metal business and did a little of this and a little of that. In 1907, he renovated a rundown burlesque hall and reopened it as a movie theater.

This proved to be a shrewd move. Over the next several years, Mayer and his partners put together the biggest movie theater chain in New England, which by 1914 was big enough that the owners started a film distribution business for the New England region. One of their early successes was 1915’s *Birth of a Nation*. Mayer had secured from D.W. Griffith distribution rights to the film in New England and made a huge profit from it. With this money, Mayer went into partnership with Richard Rowland in 1916 to create a film studio, Metro Pictures.

Mayer only stayed with Metro Pictures for two years before leaving to form his own production company, Louis B. Mayer Pictures.

Meanwhile, you may recall I told you about Jesse Lasky's film studio, which he founded in 1913, with financing provided in part by his brother-in-law, Samuel Goldfish. After Lasky's studio merged with Famous Players to create what would ultimately become Paramount Pictures, Goldfish left the company, though he still owned a chunk of its stock. Reportedly, he did not get along very well with Adolf Zukor.

In 1916, Goldfish formed a new filmmaking business in partnership with two brothers who were producers of Broadway stage shows. Their names were Edgar and Archibald Selwyn, and the partners created a name for their business by combining their surnames, so it became Goldwyn Pictures. Samuel Goldfish liked the name so much that he had his own name legally changed to Samuel Goldwyn in 1918.

The now-Samuel Goldwyn once again had trouble getting along with his partners and left the company in 1922 to establish his own production company, Samuel Goldwyn Productions.

In 1920, Marcus Loew, head of the Loew's theater chain, purchased Metro Pictures so that he'd have his own studio to supply films for his theaters. It wasn't enough, so in 1924 he bought Goldwyn Pictures and Louis B. Mayer Productions and merged the three companies together to form Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

Samuel Goldwyn was gone from Goldwyn Pictures by that time and never had anything to do with MGM. The Goldwyn in Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer refers to Goldwyn Pictures the company not Samuel Goldwyn the person, because strange though it seems, remember that Samuel Goldwyn named himself after his company, not his company after himself, as is more usual.

And by the way, when Goldwyn Pictures was formed in 1916, the company publicist selected a lion as the company logo, and its films opened with a shot of a real live lion, framed inside a circle of motion picture film, on which was written the company motto, *Ars Gratia Artis*, a Latin translation of the 19th-century French slogan, *l'art pour l'art*, which means "art for art's sake."

The lion did not originally make any sounds, because these were silent films, but when talking pictures were introduced, the Goldwyn lion was updated to one that roars. MGM inherited the lion after the merger and continued to open its films with it, as indeed the company still does in our time.

I told you that all of the major Hollywood studios of this time had a prominent head of production and a reputation for making a certain kind of film. MGM's reputation was for polished, high-quality productions starring big name actors cast in glamorous roles, since MGM was the largest studio in Hollywood and it had the deepest pockets.

Louis B. Mayer was the head of the studio, but the production chief was a young man named Irving Thalberg. He was born in Brooklyn in 1899 to parents who were Jewish immigrants from the...German Empire.

Alas, baby Irving was born with blue baby syndrome. This happens when a baby is born with a congenital heart defect that results in the heart pumping out blood that is not fully oxygenated, and it's called blue baby syndrome because the first sign of the syndrome appears when the baby is born with blue discoloration of the skin, which is known as cyanosis.

There wasn't much they could do about it in 1899, and Irving's parents were told their baby son would be unlikely to reach his 30th birthday. His heart condition affected his ability to study in school, and to make matters worse, at the age of 17 he contracted rheumatic fever, a disease that can damage heart tissue.

He read widely in his youth, as he was not strong enough for games or sports. Despite being a good student, he declined to go to college, as he believed he was not strong enough to do college work, so he looked for a job as a secretary.

He found work in the New York offices of Universal Pictures and worked his way up to the position of personal secretary to Universal's president, Carl Laemmle. Laemmle was impressed with Thalberg, and when he went to Hollywood in 1919 to spend a month overseeing the studio, he brought his secretary along. When Laemmle was ready to return to New York, he told Thalberg to stay in California and keep an eye on the studio for him.

When Laemmle later returned to Hollywood and was reunited with his secretary, Thalberg gave him a number of recommendations on how to improve studio operations, one of which was to create the position of studio manager to oversee operations on Laemmle's behalf. Laemmle told Thalberg, "All right, you're it."

A puzzled Thalberg replied, "I'm what?"

And that is how, at the age of 20, Irving Thalberg became the general manager of a Hollywood studio. When gossip columnist Louella Parsons was first introduced to him, she said, "What's the joke? Where's the new general manager?" But Thalberg impressed her so much that she dubbed him "Universal's Boy Wonder" in her column.

Despite his youth and his slender, frail appearance, he impressed everyone he worked with. The famed veteran playwright and screenwriter George S. Kaufman expressed amazement that this young man, who was ten years younger than Kaufman and had never published a story or sold a script in his life, was able to read one of Kaufman's scripts and give him useful suggestions on how to improve it.

In 1923, Thalberg convinced Laemmle to produce a silent film based on one of Thalberg's favorite books, Victor Hugo's 1831 novel *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and cast character

actor Lon Chaney in the title role. This was in line with Universal's developing reputation for horror films, although Thalberg envisioned a grand production and pitched the film to Laemmle as a love story.

The film earned the biggest box office returns of any silent film Universal ever made and it would be the performance of Lon Chaney's career.

Thalberg worked at Universal for three years, but yearned for a job at a bigger studio. Cecil B. DeMille tried to get Jesse Lasky to hire Thalberg for Paramount. He told Lasky, "The boy is a genius." An unimpressed Lasky retorted, "Geniuses we have all we need." Reminds me of a Jim Croce song.

Louis B. Mayer had a very different impression when he met Thalberg. He hired Thalberg to be vice-president in charge of production at his studio, promising, "I'll look after him as though he were my son."

Less than two years later, Mayer's production company was folded into MGM, and the now 24-year-old Thalberg was given his same position in the new studio, vice-president in charge of production, and with an ownership stake in the new company.

When Thalberg took this new job, he inherited the mess that was the Goldwyn Pictures' ongoing production of *Ben-Hur*, a film adaptation of the 1880 novel by Lew Wallace. The project, shot on location in Rome, was over schedule and over budget; it had changed directors in midstream, and there were those in management in the new studio that advised Thalberg to can the production and write off the costs as a loss.

But Thalberg believed *Ben-Hur* had that special blend of artistic merit and crowd-pleasing scenes he was always looking for, and that the film had the potential to create a splash for the new studio. Thalberg had the production moved back to California, where he could keep an eye on everything, and finished the filming on newly-constructed sets. The lead role was recast and all the character's scenes had to be reshot. In the end, the film cost nearly four million dollars, making it the most expensive silent film ever made, with a budget about 25 times that of a typical silent picture.

On release, it was a big success, MGM's highest-grossing film of the silent era, although given the huge production costs, the studio took a modest loss on the project. Even so, it succeeded in boosting the reputation and prestige of the new studio, just as Thalberg had intended.

Louis B. Mayer was an astute business leader, but Thalberg had the creative vision Mayer lacked. The young man had a knack for putting together film productions that were both commercially successful and artistically satisfying. In a few years, Thalberg brought MGM to the top of the industry and kept the studio in the black even during the depths of the Great Depression, when other film studios were filing for bankruptcy.

He was a hands-on producer, going so far as to supervise set construction and choose the lenses and filters that would be used to film a scene. But he was in no way overbearing; the creative people who worked for him loved him. He refused to take a producer credit on any of the films he worked on, saying that “credit you give yourself is not worth having.”

This is not to say Thalberg’s judgment was infallible. He was slow to lead MGM into the era of talking pictures, at first dismissing them as a fad. Likewise, he was slow to embrace color films and was dubious of the value animated shorts could bring to a studio; thus, MGM lagged behind its rivals in developing its own signature cartoons.

In 1929, director King Vidor pitched an idea to Thalberg: a big movie musical with an all African-American cast, though even the director himself expressed doubt as to whether a project like that could turn a profit. Thalberg approved the idea anyway, and MGM released *Hallelujah* later that year. It was not the first Hollywood film with an all-African-American cast, or even the first musical, but it was perhaps the first major studio production that made an effort to depict African Americans as they were, rather than relying on the same old stereotypes. The film was progressive for its time, though it feels dated in ours, and it didn’t do too badly at the box office, despite having been banned in every state of the former Confederacy.

Thalberg had specific ideas about how an MGM film should look, and he had specific ideas about what kind of actors should appear in them and recruited his actors accordingly. He hired men like Clark Gable, Wallace Beery, and the two Barrymore brothers, John and Lionel, and women like Joan Crawford, Helen Hayes, Jean Harlow, and Greta Garbo, who came from Sweden at Thalberg’s request, not speaking any English, based on still photographs he had seen of her, and he made her into a star in America.

In 1932, at the age of 33, three years past the maximum life expectancy the doctors had given him at birth, Thalberg stepped down from his role as production chief at MGM. The long hours and hard work had gotten to him, but he continued to produce films for MGM, most notably 1935’s *Mutiny on the Bounty*, starring Charles Laughton and Clark Gable. The film was a big success and received eight Academy Award nominations, including an unprecedented three in the category of Best Actor. That’s why they created a separate award for Best Supporting Actor.

It was Thalberg who signed the Marx Brothers after Paramount let them go and produced their two most successful films, *A Night at the Opera* in 1935 and *A Day at the Races* in 1937.

In 1936, while Thalberg was working on an adaptation of the novel *The Good Earth* by Pearl S. Buck, one of MGM’s screenwriters pitched him an idea: a screen adaptation of a forthcoming novel, *Gone with the Wind*, by Margaret Mitchell. Thalberg passed on it, saying Civil War pictures never made any money.

Later that year, as he was supervising the filming of *A Day at the Races*, Thalberg came down with pneumonia, and it was too much for his weakened heart. He died on September 14, 1936. He was 37 years old.

News of his death was received with shock and sadness across the film industry. His contributions to Hollywood filmmaking were praised by everyone from Samuel Goldwyn to Franklin Roosevelt to Groucho Marx. It is rare thing indeed in Hollywood for any studio executive to be praised so highly as an industry leader and as a human being, in the way Irving Thalberg was.

When *The Good Earth* was released in 1937, it bore an on-screen posthumous producer credit for Irving Thalberg, his first and his only. The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences created the Irving G. Thalberg Memorial Award in his honor. It is an occasional award given to producers “whose bodies of work reflect a consistently high quality of motion picture production.” It has been awarded 39 times, as of the date I release this episode.

[music: Lehrer, “I Wanna Go Back to Dixie.”]

About that film adaptation Irving Thalberg turned down, just months before his death? Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind* was published June 30, 1936. It was 1,037 pages long and copies sold for the hefty price of three dollars, but that didn’t prevent a million Americans buying it in the first six months. It drew generally good reviews, although the *New York Times* critic declared it would have been much better if it had been half as long. It won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction and the National Book Award.

Gone with the Wind is a historical romance of the Holy Roman Empire variety, by which I mean it is not technically a romance and it certainly isn’t historical, though it does rank as one of the most popular English-language novels of the twentieth century, and not just in the United States. Whatever else you might say about it, and there’s a lot else to say about it, its cultural legacy casts a shadow over any other literary work about the American South.

It also perpetuates the myth of the Southern enslavers as genteel and noble, men who fought for their own rights and dignity, foregrounding them and their struggle, while sidelining the matter of the millions of human beings they reduced to items of property. When enslaved people do appear in the story, they are household servants, historically the best treated. Field hands are barely mentioned.

The household servants are depicted as well dressed, well fed, and selflessly loyal to their enslavers, even after Emancipation, particularly the character of Mammy, Scarlett O’Hara’s former nurse, who remains as devoted to Scarlett as if she were her daughter. I suppose this kind of thing helps to soothe guilty consciences.

The Ku Klux Klan is in the story, depicted as heroes, not very different from their depiction in *Birth of a Nation*. In fact, the only villains in the story are the soldiers of the United States Army. (Whatever happened to “Thank you for your service?”) I feel confident in saying that if I published a novel about any of America’s other wars, in which I depicted American soldiers as looting, pillaging, raping, and murdering their way across the devastated lands of their defeated enemy, that would be good for at least five hundred one-star reviews on Amazon calling me a Communist and a traitor, while Margaret Mitchell gets to be rich and famous. Go figure.

Margaret Mitchell was born on November 8, 1900 in Atlanta, Georgia. Mitchell was her birth name. By her own account, she was ten years old before she learned the South had lost the Civil War, and on hearing the news, found it hard to believe. She was educated in a private school in Georgia, which would have skewed her ideas of American history. She was an avid reader, a big fan in particular of Thomas Dixon’s novel *The Clansman* and its film adaptation, *Birth of a Nation*.

After graduation, she attended Smith College, but left after a year because of the death of her mother. She had tomboy-ish tendencies, but was also an “unscrupulous flirt,” as she herself put it.

At the age of 21, she married Berrien Upshaw, a man who made his living bootlegging moonshine and as a husband proved to be an abusive drunkard. Mitchell did some freelance writing for the *Atlanta Journal Sunday Magazine* during this time, to help support herself. She divorced Upshaw in 1924, and a year later married John Marsh, a friend of Upshaw’s who had been the best man at their wedding.

After marrying Marsh, Mitchell gave up her freelance work to become a homemaker. She continued to read avidly, and took a special interest in what we would call erotica, but in her time would have been called pornography. Her husband found tiring the task of collecting from and returning to the library the heavy stacks of books it took to keep her mind occupied, so he bought her a typewriter and suggested she write her own book. She spent the next three years writing a novel set in the Civil War era, about the experiences of a young woman named Pansy O’Hara. Her name was changed to Scarlett O’Hara shortly before publication of the novel, titled *Gone with the Wind*.

I will say this in defense of Margaret Mitchell. She didn’t have a whole lot of education or life experience at the time she wrote the book. If her depiction of the Civil War era is a revisionist fantasy, she is guilty of nothing worse than the same sins most professional historians of her time also committed. If *they* couldn’t get the facts straight, we shouldn’t be surprised if Margaret Mitchell, who studied their work, made the same errors. We can’t expect a young homemaker/author publishing her first novel to write something more authentic than the academic works of the most celebrated historians of her day.

As I said, Irving Thalberg at MGM turned down the opportunity to secure the rights to a film adaptation of *Gone with the Wind*. So did RKO. Darryl Zanuck at Twentieth Century-Fox made an offer, but it was turned down. Jack Warner considered producing it at Warner Brothers, but he hoped to cast Bette Davis as Scarlett O'Hara, and she wasn't keen on the role.

It was producer David O. Selznick who finally secured the rights, for \$50,000, for his independent production company, Selznick International Pictures. Next came the question of whom to cast in the main roles. Selznick very much wanted Clark Gable to play the roguish Rhett Butler, the man in a complex love/hate relationship with Scarlett, but Gable was under contract to MGM. Louis B. Mayer had loaned him out once before, to Columbia for *It Happened One Night*, and that had proved a big mistake, so Mayer was not keen on trying that again, not even for his son-in-law.

Jack Warner dangled the prospect of Bette Davis as Scarlett O'Hara, Errol Flynn as Rhett Butler, and Olivia de Havilland as Scarlett's friend Melanie Hamilton, but Selznick held out for Gable for two years, until at last he and his father-in-law came to terms. MGM would loan Gable and pay half the cost of the production, in exchange for half the profits and the distribution rights.

Selznick agreed, but had to wait until 1939 for his distribution contract with United Artists to expire before he could sign the deal with MGM. By this time, *Gone with the Wind*, the novel, was old news. In order to keep the public engaged with the forthcoming film, Selznick staged an elaborate publicity campaign. With the most important role, Scarlett O'Hara, not yet cast, he announced a huge, nationwide casting call, which auditioned over a thousand actresses and would-be actresses for the part.

It was a big success in terms of the publicity it generated for the film although the truth is that Selznick never seriously considered hiring anyone from that casting call. His first choice was prominent stage actress Tallulah Bankhead, but at 36 years old, she was a little too old for Scarlett O'Hara. After the MGM deal, Selznick considered MGM stars Joan Crawford and Norma Shearer, the latter of whom was Irving Thalberg's widow, by the way. Paulette Goddard almost got the role, but Selznick decided against her, owing to the scandal surrounding her relationship with Charles Chaplin. George Cukor, whom Selznick had hired to direct the picture, suggested his friend and colleague Katherine Hepburn for the role, but Selznick didn't think that would work. Speaking for myself, I find the thought tantalizing that somewhere out there in the multiverse is a version of *Gone with the Wind* starring Katherine Hepburn.

In the end, the role went to a dark horse candidate: a young English actress named Vivien Leigh, who was not well known in America at the time, though Selznick had seen some of her film performances and was impressed. It didn't hurt any that Vivien Leigh's agent was Myron Selznick, David's older brother. Myron brought Vivien Leigh to Hollywood to meet his brother David and introduced her to him by saying, "Hey genius, meet your Scarlett O'Hara."

Olivia de Havilland won the role of Melanie Hamilton, and rounding out the main cast was English actor Leslie Howard, best known in Britain for playing the lead role in the 1934 British film *The Scarlet Pimpernel*. In the United States he was best known for 1936's *The Petrified Forest*, which I already talked about, when I told you the story of how he insisted on the then-little-known Humphrey Bogart to play the villain. And I told you the story of how he died, when the BOAC passenger plane in which he was riding was shot down by the Luftwaffe over the Bay of Biscay in 1943.

George Cukor was first choice to direct the picture, but after three weeks of filming, Clark Gable expressed displeasure at working with a gay director, and so Cukor was taken off the project over the vocal objections of Vivien Leigh and Olivia de Havilland.

His replacement was Victor Fleming, who was taken off another MGM film he had almost finished. That one was called *The Wizard of Oz*. Perhaps you've heard of it.

The film adaptation of *Gone with the Wind* is faithful to the novel. Perhaps too faithful, as some critics have remarked. It was four hours long, for one thing. And it bought into the book's revisionist history. The opening card reads:

There was a land of Cavaliers and Cotton Fields called the Old South. Here in this pretty world Gallantry took its last bow. Here was the last ever to be seen of Knights and their Ladies Fair, of Master and Slave. Look for it in books, for it is no more, a dream remembered. A Civilization gone with the wind ...

Gone with the Wind premiered in Atlanta on December 15, 1939. The governor of Georgia declared a state holiday for the occasion. Leslie Howard did not attend, as he had returned to his native England when the war began. Hattie McDaniel, the African-American actress who played Mammy, did not attend either, because Georgia's segregation law didn't permit her to sit in a theater next to white people. Clark Gable planned to skip the premiere in protest of McDaniel's exclusion, but she urged him to appear at the event.

The film was a huge success, despite steep ticket prices of one dollar or more. It was the most expensive film ever made to that point, with the exception of 1925's *Ben-Hur*, and it became the highest grossing film of its time. If you adjust for inflation, it is still the highest grossing film of all time.

The New York Times film critic wrote that *Gone with the Wind* was the most ambitious film ever made, though he doubted it was the greatest film ever made, and I think that sums the thing up nicely. The performances drew much praise, particularly those of Vivien Leigh, Clark Gable, Olivia de Havilland, and Hattie McDaniel.

And I have to comment on Rhett Butler's final line in the film. After Scarlett O'Hara says to him, "Where shall I go? What shall I do?" Butler replies, "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn," as he walks out of her life, indicating that after ten years of pursuing her, he has given up.

This is not the first time the word *damn* was used in an American picture. A number of films used it prior to the introduction of the Hays Code, but the code did indeed ban the use of that word. However, shortly before the release of *Gone with the Wind*, the Code Administration amended the rule to permit the use of the words *damn* or *hell* in certain circumstances.

Butler's line isn't even the only use of the word *damn* in *Gone with the Wind*. Earlier in the film, someone refers to the "damn Yankees." It was not merely the use of a taboo word, but the dramatic way it was used that made the scene so shocking. My mother claimed that when she saw the film, the audience gasped at the line. The American Film Institute put that line at the top of its list of the one hundred greatest lines in American films, and placed the film itself at number four on its list of greatest American films.

Gone with the Wind was nominated for a record 13 Academy Awards, and won eight, including Best Picture, Best Director for Victor Fleming, Best Screenplay Adaptation, Best Actress for Vivien Leigh, and Best Supporting Actress for Hattie McDaniel, who beat out, among other nominees, her co-star Olivia de Havilland.

This made McDaniel the first African American to win an Academy Award, which has to count as a milestone, even if they did make her sit at a separate table at the back of the room at the award banquet, and even if her character in the film made many real-life African Americans uncomfortable.

The film is quite the spectacle. Its faithfulness to the novel is perhaps its greatest weakness. Like the novel, it's a colorful story about a determined young woman, hardly more than a girl at the beginning, and her coming of age in harsh circumstances. Also like the novel, it is overlong and a distortion of history. Neither African Americans nor the conditions of slavery are depicted honestly, and the rape scene doesn't age well. You could say all these same things about *Birth of a Nation*, though at least *Gone with the Wind* hired real African American actors instead of putting white actors in blackface.

It's something of an ordeal to sit through, and I don't know many people who've watched it over and over, but it is beloved even so, and one of the most colorful films, figuratively and literally, Hollywood ever made.

We'll have to stop there for today. And I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, "Isn't he going to talk about *The Wizard of Oz*?" The answer is, yes I am, but not today. I thank you for listening and I'd like to thank Justin for his kind donation, and thank you to Ville for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Justin and Ville help cover the costs of making

this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone always, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, you are most welcome; just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

As always, the podcast website also contains notes about the music used on the podcast. If you hear a piece of music on the podcast and you would like to know more about it, including the composer, the performers, and a link to where you can download it, that would be the place to go. While you're there, you can leave a comment and let me know what you thought about today's show.

Next week is a bye week for the podcast, but I hope you'll join me in two weeks' time, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we take up the story of the first face-to-face meeting of the Big Three—the Teheran Conference. That's in two weeks' time, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. Walter White, head of the NAACP at the time, called Hattie McDaniel an “Uncle Tom” for her role in *Gone with the Wind*. McDaniel retorted that she would rather make \$700 a week playing a maid than \$7 a week being one. Come to think of it, that salary is probably a milestone too.

[music: Closing War Theme]