The Real Pimpernel Smith: Leslie Howard and his Contribution to the British War Effort, 1939-1943

by

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Abstract

Determined to serve his country in any way possible, English actor/director/producer Leslie Howard left Hollywood to return to his country as Britain entered the Second World War. He soon created a series of propaganda films that he wrote, directed, produced and/or starred in, and featured on many BBC radio programs hoping to inspire the Commonwealth and Americans to action in the war. This thesis examines the variety of ways in which Howard tried to improve morale and influence the war effort. Utilizing the Mass Observation archive, evidence is gathered to look beyond box office numbers to focus on the reactions of the people he reached with his films and radio speeches before and after his tragic death in 1943. A holistic analysis of Howard's war work demonstrates that Howard worked as a cultural broker between England and America in defending liberal democracy against totalitarian regimes.

Keywords: Leslie Howard; Second World War; British Film; Propaganda; Mass Observation; War Effort

Dedication

For my boys, my Bumpa (who never had the opportunity to get an education), and in memory of the late Leslie Howard.

Acknowledgements

I am, proudly, part of Simon Fraser University's first cohort of secondary school history teachers completing their Masters in History while simultaneously teaching full time. Teaching over 200 students while pregnant and working to complete your masters is daunting enough, but add to that a pandemic and it gets extremely challenging. My thesis topic is based in the United Kingdom and I had a research trip planned for March 2020, but the British Columbian and Canadian governments shut down all foreign travel thanks to COVID-19 the day before I was to fly out of Vancouver. In the United Kingdom, thanks to the quick spread of the pandemic, many of the archives I had planned to visit and explore more research, closed or laid off many employees. What this means is that conducting research based solely on the limited material archives provided online and the slow email assistance of overwhelmed and short-handed employees of archives in the UK has been frustrating and has constrained what I had hoped to do. Despite these constraints I have vigorously conducted as much research as possible and hope that, given my limitations, I have done Mr. Howard's legacy and accomplishments justice.

I would not be achieving my dream of a Masters in History if it was not for the support and kindness of several people. Firstly, thank you to my Mom and Dad for always believing in me and supporting my education. Thank you to my grandmother who first introduced me to classic films and musicals when I was a little girl. It was my grandmother who first showed me *Gone with the Wind* and forever changed my life.

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A tremendous thanks is owed to artist Serena Nichol, who graciously accepted the challenge of bringing my favourite picture of Leslie Howard to life in a charcoal drawing. Serena is a former student of mine and her artistic contribution and collaboration on this project has been nothing short of inspiring. Thank you Serena, your creative talents are only equal to your kind and giving spirit.

Thank you to my dearest friends and teaching colleagues for the constant check-ins and words of support, it meant more than you know. A big thank you to Terry Miller, my fairy godmother, who provided the Fortnum & Mason tea that got me through the long nights of writing after the boys were asleep.

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Thank you to my husband Travis, who has supported me through these last two years and for sharing me with the ghost of Leslie Howard who has haunted our dinner table on numerous occasions. Tiger Lily, you are a wonderful late night thesis writing companion! Last but not least, thank you to my two baby boys, Arlo and Beau, for your patience…Mommy promises not to try to pass off her thesis as your bedtime story.

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List of Acronyms

ATS	Auxiliary Territorial Service
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BBC WAC	British Broadcasting Corporation Written Archives Centre
CBS	Columbia Broadcasting System
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
D	Diarist
FR	File Report
MOA	Mass Observation Archive
MOI	Ministry of Information
NBC	National Broadcasting Corporation
NHS	National Health Service
RAF	Royal Air Force
RAMC	Royal Army Medical Corps
RCAF	Royal Canadian Air Force
REME	Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers
SFU	Simon Fraser University
TC	Topic Collection

Image

“Leslie Howard in Charcoal.” Artwork by Serena Nichol.

Chapter 1. Introduction

In the darkest periods of our human history, we as a society often turn to the arts and entertainment industry for some measured moments of escape. One just has to observe the sharp incline in subscriptions and viewing hours to streaming services such as Netflix during the COVID-19 pandemic, to understand the importance of the escape arts and entertainment create to benefit the morale and overall mental and emotional well-being of the viewer. Turning to film to escape one's reality is nothing new, but the sheer magnitude of British viewers flocking to the cinema during the Second World War is a prime example of where it really all began.

In the years before and during the war, a typical cinema experience started with a newsreel with images of world events, then a glamorous first feature film followed by a second newsreel and a second feature film of lesser quality. The glamorous first features were almost always an American Hollywood product, with the second feature being a poorly made British film in part to the British Quota Act of 1927 requiring 20% of films shown in cinemas to be of British origin.[1] However, by the late 1930s thanks to the efforts of British filmmakers such as Alexander Korda, British films had entered a renaissance and were notably improving in aspects of story and production quality. In fact, after 1939, many British cinemagoers felt "British movies were better than American ones,"[2] and for the first time British films started to compete on par or better than their Hollywood counterparts because for both industries, as film critic David Thomson noted, "World War Two…was the glory moment for the movies."[3] For the first year of the war, the documentary film movement was successful under the Ministry of Information's Crown Film Unit, showing the British people at war. At the time, British and mostly American feature films with more escapist fare featuring romantic or thriller storylines like *Gaslight* (1940) and *Gone With the Wind* (1939) were successful at the box

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[1] Angus Calder, *The People's War: Britain 1939-1945* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2008), 367.

[2] Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England: 1918-1951* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 442.

[3] *Churchill and the Movie Mogul*, directed by John Fleet (2019; London, UK: January Pictures, 2019), DVD.

office. Popular opinion in the first few years of the war was: "we don't want to see war films; we've had it," and cinemagoers chose to see more lighthearted fare.[4] It was not until 1941-1942 when the tide had turned in the war that British feature films focusing on wartime events would become commonplace and accepted by cinema audiences.

Between 1938 and 1944, in one of the darkest periods of British history, the money spent on entertainment increased by 120% with the cinema being the favourite pastime.[5] Every week 25 to 30 million seats were sold at the movie theatres with three quarters of the adult population in Britain attending the cinema and one third of those adults going once or more every week.[6] Cinemagoers from cities were attending films more often than those living in the country mostly due to geography; women were attending more often than men, children were the most common cinema goers and the under 40s were going more often than the over 40s.[7] Most of those people under forty were seeing "at least fifty first features every year" but no more than seven of those films were British at the time.[8] Nevertheless, British people were flocking to the cinema and returning often. In 1945, a twenty-one-year-old miner noted in a Mass Observation questionnaire that in 1942 he "saw 306 films, in 1943…[he]…saw 382, and in 1944…reached the grand total of 430" with hopes of beating that total the following year.[9]

Throughout the war, cinemagoers took their pastime at the movie theatres very seriously. Newspaper reviews by well-respected film critics, in particular C.A. Lejeune for *The Observer* and Dilys Powell for *The Sunday Times,* were read with great interest and played a "large part in influencing people of all classes in an appreciation of the films shown."[10] Cinema houses and luxurious movie odeons became great social centres which more middle class people started to attend more regularly, managing to "stimulate

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[4] Calder, *The People's War*, 370.

[5] Ibid., 367.

[6] Ibid., 367.

[7] Ibid., 367.

[8] Ibid., 367.

[9] Ibid., 367.

[10] Anthony Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards, *Britain Can Take It: British Cinema in the Second World War* (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2007), 51.

cultural interest in cinema generally."[11] It is not surprising that by mid-1942, cinema attendance in Britain was at an all-time high as ticket sales for those hours of escape coincided with a dreary reality including more rationing in Britain, the military campaign in North Africa, air raids by the Luftwaffe, the failure at Dieppe and ever growing casualty numbers. Film critic C.A. Lejeune said it best:

> For the men and women of this island…the pictures have been a sort of Alice in Wonderland. They have kept our spirits up. They have taken the worst strains off mind and body. No other form of relaxation has been quite so successful in helping people to bear the burdens they had-burdens of fear and loneliness, discomfort and exhaustion; anxiety for husbands and sweethearts, and sons and little children.[12]

With so many British people flocking to the cinema, the importance of films became apparent to the Ministry of Information (MOI) which quickly created the Films Division; the quality of British films and filmmaking started to rise steadily throughout the war. The "tool of film" became a weapon of national importance and the "power of cinema later became a vital weapon in wartime" to assist in boosting the morale of the British people while utilized as propaganda on the home front and abroad.[13] To better understand the power and effect of films on the British people during the war, the Ministry of Information and Home Intelligence Office employed the resources of a new social experiment known as Mass Observation to collect and produce data on the subject.

In 1936, when the British monarch King Edward VIII decided to abdicate his throne and position for the woman he loved, Edward's younger brother, the future King George VI, would take his place in a public coronation featuring the usual pomp and circumstance associated with British royalty. British newspapers were at odds describing the public mood and feelings about an overly grand coronation, the shake-up of the monarchy and line of succession, especially since images of Hitler in the midst of his own overly grand military parades were commonplace. What was the public mood? Were

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[11] Estel Eforgan, *Leslie Howard: The Lost Actor* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2013), 206.

[12] Jeffrey Richards and Dorothy Sheridan, *Mass-Observation at the Movies* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1987), 16.

[13] *Churchill and the Movie Mogul,* dir. John Fleet, 2019.

people angry about the abdication? Were they happy that Edward had stepped down? Were they looking forward to the coronation? Were they nervous about George taking over? Or did they think it a frivolous waste of money during a time of financial constraint? These were they type of questions that two thoughtful and creative men hoped to answer with a sociological and anthropological project later known as Mass Observation.

Through a series of letters sent to a local newspaper and then followed by personal correspondence and meetings, anthropologist Tom Harrisson and poet Charles Madge found common ground in wanting to create a written record of contemporary life[14] and access the "collective unconscious."[15] The goal of their Mass Observation project would be to "enable the masses to speak for themselves, to make their voices heard above the din created by press and politicians speaking in their name….bridging the gulf between elite and popular culture and placing democracy on a firm and sustainable footing."[16]

It was the abdication of King Edward VIII and the coincidental burning of the Crystal Palace in London that would spark inspiration for Madge. As a reporter for the *Daily Mirror* posted outside Mrs. Simpson's house, he saw first-hand the power of the press as newspaper editors published rival claims of public feeling, both for and against the abdication, that were not based on fact.[17] Madge realized that "this 'massive piece of falsification' provided an object lesson in how the masses were being misrepresented and excluded,"[18] and that the abdication of the current King and coronation of the future one would be the perfect opportunity to examine the collective "'ultra-repressed condition' of the British people."[19] They decided to make King George VI's coronation day [May 12 1937] their first undertaking in this social experiment and sent out word through newspapers that they were looking for volunteers to write their thoughts, feelings,

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[14] Richards and Sheridan, *Mass Observation at the Movies*, 2.

[15] James Hinton, *The Mass Observers: A History, 1937-1949* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1.

[16] Ibid., 3.

[17] Ibid., 6.

[18] Ibid., 6.

[19] Ibid., 7.

actions, and also what they saw, overheard, etc, on that day. They were then to submit their personal accounts to the men so that the data could be organized and published for public record. Over 200 people responded to the advertisement and then later contributed their experiences to the project which was published as the book, *May the Twelfth: Mass-Observation Day-Surveys 1937 by over two hundred observers*.[20]

Realizing the success of their first solid experiment, Madge and Harrisson decided to continue the exercise on a larger scale by inviting more people to write for the Mass Observation project, no guidelines or instructions were provided, leaving it up to the 'observers' as to what they wrote about, when, and the length of their diaries. The criteria for writing topics were not specified, and what was submitted varied enormously from the behaviour of people at war memorials, anti-Semitism, the cinema, love affairs, bathroom behaviour, popular literature, venereal diseases, gardening, private lives of midwives, health issues, Communism, beards and more. Nothing was taboo or considered off topic and personal thoughts as well as public observations were encouraged. By January 1938, Mass Observation had 1700 thirty-day surveys and the number of contributors was only growing, causing the British government to take pause, and better yet, take notice. The government realized that the Mass Observation findings could be very beneficial in reading public moods and potentially dictating changes to government policy. In 1939 the Mass Observation team was hired to find out if recent propaganda posters were improving civilian morale. Not only were the posters not improving morale they were harshly criticized by observers for the selfish phrasing on the poster and therefore, swiftly removed by the government. In one Mass Observation report observers commented on their feelings about the imminent war, the current propaganda posters for the war as well as the difficulties in saving money. The reports allowed the government to gauge civilian morale, it reinforced their decision to withdraw the posters and it caused a shift in government tax policy, taking taxes off pay checks immediately which not only helped the British people save efficiently but allowed the government to more easily finance the war.[21]

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[20] James Hinton, *The Mass Observers,* 7.

[21] Ibid., 7.

Film choices and cinema habits were a popular choice of topic for the diarists, questionnaires and directives in Mass Observation, with "fifty reports on habits and preferences of British cinema going public being produced between 1939 and 1945" alone.[22] The archival material on films in the Mass Observation database is massive; it is one of the "largest collections on a single theme produced by the Mass Observation" project.[23] Most of the collected information went to the MOI or people in the film industry who could use the information as critical feedback. It was Harrisson who "set about persuading various government personnel that Mass Observation was ideally suited to the job of monitoring civilian morale."[24] What better way than by gathering personal commentary on the propaganda and commercial films the public were watching at the cinema? The government recognized that leisure was an important part of maintaining British morale and knew that the commercial feature films citizens were watching en masse were a significant way to gauge that morale. This meant that by 1941 the Home Intelligence Office was relying heavily upon reports supplied by Mass Observation.[25] As noted by film historian, Sarah Street, commercial cinema did "boost home-front morale, and the work of Mass Observation…[went]…a long way towards documenting the importance and intensity of the cinema-going habit in the 1930s and 1940s."[26]

As a qualitative research tool rather than a quantitative one, Mass Observation gave a richer perspective on what every day British people were feeling and thinking than a simple poll or survey would be able to accomplish. Madge and Harrisson were familiar with the standard interviewing and opinion sampling methods available to them, but they wanted a more qualitative and intimate level of research; a simple checked box or 'yes or no' response would not suffice. [27] They knew that by asking for written responses without criteria, observers would be free to share their thoughts without fear of judgement, whereas an interview with a stranger would cause a subject to be more

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[22] Richards and Sheridan, *Mass-Observation at the Movies*, Introduction.

[23] Ibid., Introduction.

[24] Ibid., 5.

[25] Ibid., 12.

[26] Sarah Street, *British Cinema in Documents* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 134.

[27] H.D. Willcock, "Mass Observation," *American Journal of Sociology* 48 (1943): 456.

guarded in their responses. What resulted was an archive of diary entries, newspaper articles, questionnaires and directives that historians believe is "a source for which there is no parallel or substitute in understanding wartime Britain."[28] It is "probably the richest source of material available to the social historian of the period."[29] Digitized in 2006, the Mass Observation archive is currently housed at the University of Sussex, and houses vast material on film within the database. Utilizing the database I sought to determine the success beyond quantitative evaluations of the numerous radio presentations and ten British wartime films that became the legacy of British and international film star, Leslie Howard. A movie actor, screenwriter, director and producer whom most still recognize as mainly a supporting character from the highest grossing film of all time.

Since the moment I first saw *Gone with the Wind* as a young girl, I have been fascinated with the movie stars of Hollywood's golden age and in particular two British actors: Vivien Leigh and Leslie Howard. Howard's decision to leave his successful Hollywood career and return to his homeland to assist with the war effort has long garnered my respect, curiosity and admiration.

Leslie Howard Steiner was born in London in 1893 and grew up attending theatrical performances with his British born mother. He had a gift for writing and as a child often wrote one-act plays. Howard noted himself that as a child he knew that when he grew up he "wanted to do something vaguely artistic" but that he "never thought it would be acting."[30] Just before the outbreak of the First World War, he was bitten by the "acting bug" and was featured in the film *The Heroine of Mons* (1914), directed by his uncle. Soon after, he enlisted in the 20th Hussars, serving on horseback at the Western Front before being medically discharged with shell shock after fighting at the Battle of the Somme in 1916.[31] That same year he married, began his acting career and chose to

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[28] Aldgate and Richards, *Britain Can Take It*, 50.

[29] Calder, *The People's War*, 14.

[30] *Leslie Howard: The Man Who Gave a Damn, An Intimate Documentary of His Life,* directed by Thomas Hamilton (2016; London, UK: Repo Films Ltd, 2016), DVD.

[31] Michael Brooke, "BFI: Screenonline: Howard, Leslie," *British Film Institute* (2019).

start his own production company, Minerva Films, which folded after producing four comedies. [32]

Wanting to separate himself from his memories at the front in World War One and perhaps his initial failures as a producer, Howard decided to go to the United States and try his hand at theatre on Broadway in New York City. After finding success on the stage, Hollywood casting agents came calling and soon Howard was on the silver screen in his first Hollywood roles. He quickly becoming a favourite of American movie audiences, particularly female movie goers for his dashing good looks, and was frequently requested as a co-star by some of the most popular leading ladies of the time including Greta Garbo, Norma Shearer and Mary Pickford.[33] In particular, his Hollywood films *Berkeley Square* (1933) and *Of Human Bondage* (1934) made him a household name in America. When Howard started getting relegated to secondary leading roles and realized he didn't fit the Hollywood mould, he made the decision to return to England, hoping to translate his Hollywood success back home. Back on English soil, Howard was quickly recruited by film producer Alexander Korda for the lead role in what would be a hugely popular film, *The Scarlett Pimpernel (1935),* that would finally secure the success he sought at home.

By 1936, Leslie Howard had hit his peak with success on both sides of the Atlantic for his matinee idol good looks and rich speaking voice that became newly important with the addition of audio technology to films.[34] He now had his pick of scripts, co-stars and even directors, but ultimately wanted more creative control over the work he was doing.[35] In hopes of achieving that creative control he was inspired to co-direct his 1938 Oscar nominated film *Pygmalion* and agreed to star in Hollywood producer David O. Selznick's mammoth upcoming film *Gone with the Wind*, on the condition that Howard would co-produce Selznick's next film, *Intermezzo* (1939), a vehicle for the newly discovered Ingrid Bergman. *Intermezzo* would be the last film Howard would work on in Hollywood.

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[32] *Leslie Howard: The Man Who Gave a Damn,* dir. Thomas Hamilton, 2016.

[33] *Leslie Howard: The Man Who Gave a Damn,* dir. Thomas Hamilton, 2016.

[34] Michael Brooke, "*BFI: Screenonline: Howard, Leslie (1893-1943)*," 2019.

[35] *Leslie Howard: The Man Who Gave a Damn,* dir. Thomas Hamilton, 2016.

To most modern audiences, Howard is best known for his role as sensitive southern-gentleman Ashley Wilkes from the 1939 international sensation, *Gone with the Wind.* The film made its international debut in the winter of 1939 at the same time war was declared in Europe. Not surprisingly, Howard was noticeably absent from the December 1939 film premiere in Atlanta, Georgia, and sent his regards. Even though the film guaranteed him a successful career in Hollywood, Howard felt that going home to assist in the British war effort was "a matter of principle" and he was equally eager to use his celebrity in the challenge of gaining American support.[36] He left the United States immediately after his scenes for the film were completed, and received praise from British citizens for returning to do his duty as there were many British film personalities, such as famed director Alfred Hitchcock, who were seen as shirking their duty by remaining in Hollywood. [37] Once home, Howard started writing several scripts that he thought would be beneficial to the war effort, but he failed to find financial support for them. At the same time, the British government though particularly the Ministry of Information, were trying to determine how to convince the Americans to get involved with the war. British intelligence noted that American women, having lost their sons, brothers, husbands and fathers in the last World War were particularly hostile to the idea of America going to war once again.[38] Therefore, the British government needed a celebrity well known to American women to broadcast on the BBC and work alongside the MOI's Crown Film Unit to showcase the British war effort. With his famous rich speaking voice and dashing good looks, Leslie Howard was the perfect candidate.

What followed were numerous radio presentations and a series of ten remarkable propaganda films that Howard starred in, directed, narrated and/or produced with the intention of invoking discussion and inspiring action by his countrymen, the Commonwealth and the Americas: *Common Heritage* (1941) / *War in the Mediterranean (1943), Pimpernel Smith (1941), 49th Parallel/The Invaders (1941), From the Four Corners* (1941), *Yellow Caesar* (1941), *The White Eagle* (1942), *In Which We Serve*

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[36] *Leslie Howard: The Man Who Gave a Damn,* dir. Thomas Hamilton, 2016.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Ibid.

(1942), *The First of the Few / Spitfire* (1942), *The Gentle Sex* (1943), and *The Lamp Still Burns* (1943).

In the second chapter I evaluate the power of Howard's voice with his numerous BBC radio contributions and the four wartime films he was asked to narrate. Howard's time spent performing on Broadway and in Hollywood had made him popular in the United States and as such, he was utilized as a cultural broker between the United States and Britain with his many wartime broadcasts. The radio broadcasts were his first opportunity to serve his country, and his ability to connect to audiences at home and abroad became invaluable to the MOI and his country.

In chapter three I look at three of his most well-known films, wartime or otherwise, and a short film produced by the Ministry of Information as all of these films seek to show the audience how and why Britain was at war. They are truly powerful propaganda films and their impact on audiences is striking when reading the responses of the Mass Observation diarists. With his most memorable films, he was able to translate his success on radio to the screen by creating moving and powerful images that English audiences connected to at a time during the Blitz was ever present and when losses in North Africa were high.

In chapter four I analyze the two feature films Howard made at the end of his career. These were specifically made to shine a unique light on the female contribution to the war effort and intended to influence both male and female audience members. Howard chose the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS) and nursing profession as the subjects for his final two films, which were two female professions that had previously only been featured in comedy films, unrealistically portrayed, and presented as supporting characters or love interests to male protagonists. Howard's portrayal of the two professions brought the women and their relationships with each other to the forefront of the story, made romantic relationships secondary narratives. They demonstrated how duty, hard-work and patriotism could be a female endeavor which allowed male and female audiences to see not only how much women were contributing to the war effort but how women could still maintain their femininity while in uniform.

Chapter five seeks to place Howard's cultural creations and contributions in historical context. I argue that his contributions have often been ignored or misunderstood by academic historians and I tackle directly the assertion made by historian Wendy Webster that Howard's work supported Britain's imperial goals.

I have selected the radio broadcasts from this specific time frame and these ten particular films because they are the only ones Leslie Howard completed during the war before he was killed when his plane was shot down by the Nazis over the Bay of Biscay on June 1, 1943. It is unclear whether Howard's lecture tour in Portugal was actually a covert intelligence mission or if the Nazis thought Prime Minister Churchill was onboard, but, in any case, Howard's death made headlines around the globe and was considered a national tragedy. The death of such a famous English actor who had served his country in both wars, had played such iconic Englishmen on the screen and was beloved by many was deemed an incredible loss to the film industry and to Britain. For further context, parallels with other wartime entertainers such as Glen Miller (1904-1944) and Carole Lombard (1908-1942) and how the public and entertainment industry reacted to their untimely deaths will be addressed. In the twenty first century when a prominent cultural icon dies tragically, their body of work is usually reissued to the public to honour that individual, but also for financial gain. Howard's sudden and tragic death led to the reissue of his films to theatres in late 1943, and the impact of his films returning to theatres again will also be evaluated.

There is considerable historical scholarship on British propaganda films from the Second World War by many prominent film and socio-cultural historians. Anthony Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards are two of these leading film historians and both together and separately, have written numerous books on British cinema history, its transformation over the years, its watershed moment during the Second World War and its contribution to the socio-cultural history of Britain. Their analysis of modern British history through feature films is enlightening as they hope to encourage historians now and in the future to consider the validity and power of feature film evidence.[39] Many of the leading socio-cultural film historians including Aldgate, Richards, James Chapman of

[39] Anthony Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards, *Best of British: Cinema and Society from 1930 to the Present* (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1999), 14.

the University of Leicester and Robert Murphy, the editor of the British Film Institute's series of books on British Cinema, address the power and importance of British film propaganda during the Second World War.

The common approach in their work is to choose specific films to both analyze and highlight what they believe constitutes the epitome of the British propaganda film, and then evaluate its creation, production and final product. In order to define its success, box office data is mentioned or a film critic from a local paper is quoted, from which they infer the success of the film. To evaluate the success of films then and now, box office scores are the usual quantitative method used. to Leslie Howard, however, box office scores would not have been nearly as important as the audience reaction his films inspired. He made and participated in these films and numerous radio broadcasts because he wanted to inspire British, Commonwealth and American citizens to act and support the war effort, to spark discussion about issues the allies were facing in the war and boost people's spirits at home. With my holistic analysis of his entire canon of war time broadcasts and films, I demonstrate that Howard was able to contribute to the war effort by working as a cultural broker between England and America in defending liberal democracy against totalitarian regimes

Instead of focusing on the quantitative data, I delve deeper using the qualitative data the Mass Observation archive provides to get the fuller picture about what made the films successful and their specific impact on cinemagoers. Leslie Howard's constant presence on several radio programs from 1939-1943 are also part of his work to support the war effort and will be evaluated similarly. Using the directives, questionnaires and diaries from the Mass Observation archive, I examine just how important, influential and successful Howard's impact was upon his countrymen before and after his death with his film and radio contributions. While many historians have analyzed the content and power of Howard's wartime films as a tool for propaganda,[40] there is a lack of understanding Howard's contribution to the war effort with his films.

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[40] Historians such Anthony Aldgate, Jeffrey Richards, James Chapman, Phyllis Lassner, Fred Marc Leventhal, John Morris, Robert Murphy, Sarah Street, and Joel H. Weiner with Mark Hampton each analyze a film or two of Leslie Howard's when discussing propaganda films from World War Two. The common films addressed are usually *Pimpernel Smith* (1941) or *49th Parallel* (1941).

There is a reason why he was sought after by the Ministry of Information, the BBC and by colleagues in the film industry during the war. Leslie Howard was an indomitable force for the British war effort. Analyzing quantifying data such as box office numbers or the powerful content of a film storyline simplifies the successes of his films, missing the deeper influence Howard hoped to accomplish with his films and radio broadcasts. Simply put, half the story has been missing. The diarists from the Mass Observation archive provide the missing perspective which demonstrates the success of Leslie Howard's last films, his radio broadcasts and his legacy to Britain and the Second World War in their qualitative evaluation that would have meant the most to him.

Chapter 2. The Voice

> *"Here is only a people facing the worst menace in their history, committed to a life or death proposition and knowing full well all the implications-a people without illusions but with a stronger, I swear it, a more profound conviction that no matter what the cost or how long the time, once again they will triumph."*
>
> - Leslie Howard, "Two Wars-One City," *Britain Speaks* Transcript 60 (29/30 July 1940) BBC WAC, File 910. Reprinted in *Trivial Fond Records*.

In the silent film era of the 1890s to the 1920s, actors on the silver screen focused on the acting part of their jobs as their voices were not part of the film. They did not have to worry about creating accurate accents for their characters, vocal expression, enunciation of words or how they sounded once recorded. With the arrival of the "talkie" in the late twenties and the advancement of audio technology, many film actors soon became obsolete and did not survive the transition due to their squeaky voices or other vocal issues. Some actors tried smoking to lower their voice registers but for many their appearance and acting skills were not enough and they did not survive the new changes.[41] This was not a problem for Leslie Howard, whose vocal expression and rich speaking voice were equally as effective as his acting skills and he became famous not just for his dashing good looks, but his tone and eloquent speech. It is no wonder that he was chosen to play the linguistics professor, Henry Higgins, in the 1938 hit film *Pygmalion* for he embodied the role of the English intellectual gentleman and had the linguistic gifts himself.

By the late twenties Howard had been sporadically on the radio. When his film and theatre career progressed in the 1930s, so, too, did his career on the radio waves. By the time Howard's first successful Hollywood hits *Berkeley Square* (1933) and *Of Human Bondage* (1934) made him a household name, he was making regular appearances on American radio stations CBS and NBC performing in radio plays of hit films with other A- list movie stars. He was so popular that in 1936 he was given his own recurring radio

[41] Watch Gene Kelly's 1952 film *Singin' in the Rain* for a humorous musical take on these new transitions.

show on CBS called "Leslie Howard's Matinee" where he continued to entertain listeners with radio dramatizations including interpretations of some of his most successful films such as *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (1934).[42] His last appearance for an American radio broadcaster would be with other British movie stars for an NBC radio tribute to the King and Queen of England, welcoming them to the United States in June 1939.[43] The next time Howard was to be heard on the radio in America would be on the BBC platform from England. Entertainment would not be his main focus.

By the time Howard was working on what would be his most well-known propaganda film *Pimpernel Smith* in 1940, he was regularly appearing on the BBC and had become "moderately popular as a broadcaster."[44] Howard appeared on a number of BBC radio broadcasts from July 1940 to February 1943, including the *Brains Trust* series, *BBC Home Service* and *North American Service* stations, *Answering You* quiz show, the *Britain Speaks* and *Britain to America* programs, and *Postscript,* which was a popular show that followed the Sunday main news bulletin hosted by famous British radio personality J.B. Priestley. It was when Priestley first welcomed Howard on *Britain Speaks* on July 16, 1940 that American audiences heard him back on the radio once again. His eloquent positivity in light of the massive weight on Britain as France had recently fallen to the enemy was impressive:

> Most of you, I'm sure, will know what I mean when I speak of the curious elation which comes from sharing in a high and mysterious destiny. The destiny of Britain we cannot know for certain, but we can guess at it and pray for it, and work towards it as we find ourselves singled out of all the nations of the world for the rare honour of fighting alone against the huge and ruthless forces of tyranny.[45]

He was so successful in his initial broadcast with Priestley that he became a regular presence on BBC radio. Until the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, Howard directed his on-air commentary and discussions at his Canadian and American

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[42] Ginerva Di Verduno, "Radio," *The Inafferrabile Leslie Howard*. https://inafferrabileleslie.wordpress.com/radio/

[43] Ibid.

[44] Eforgan, *The Lost Actor*, 146.

[45] Leslie Ruth Howard, *A Quite Remarkable Father* (Toronto: Longmans, Green and Company, 1959), 271. *Britain Speaks*, July 16 1940.

audiences, mostly trying to engage American sympathies for the war effort in Britain and to counter the Nazi propaganda flooding the neutral United States.[46] Britain was desperate to get the Americans involved in the war. They needed their assistance but between the U.S. government not wanting to finance a European war and American women not wanting to lose their men in another war, an initial goal was simply to engage as many American listeners as possible.[47] The BBC decided to attract female American listeners by featuring celebrities favored by American women; this is where Howard came in. Utilizing his popularity following the release of *Gone with the Wind*, his method of connecting to his foreign audiences involved humanizing the war experience for his foreign listeners by discussing what British and allied people were going through.

> Look around your room, the room where you are sitting as I talk to you. It is warm, friendly, secure and familiar. Try to realise-for one ought to realise these things-that elsewhere in the world there were homes like yours, just as pleasant and comfortable, just as seemingly secure, where in a short moment people like you had it, suddenly, torn away from them. It might have been *your* home, *your* safe room. In Poland people like you have been turned out of their houses at half-an-hours' notice, without food, money or warm clothing, in the depth of the bitterest winter Europe has known for years, and told that they must walk to a town twenty, fifty, a hundred miles away if they want work, food or shelter. And that is going on today in Alsace and Lorraine. In rooms like yours men in France, Poland, Belgium, Holland, Norway, and Britain, have said goodbye to their families and gone out to never return. To rooms like yours in Warsaw, in Rotterdam, in Tournai, in Abbeville, in London, in Coventry, there has come-suddenly out of the sky-a roar and a crash, a cloud of blinding, stifling smoke and dust, and nothing has been left of that room but a mass of rubbish. That is the true measure, and tragedy, of modern war.[48]

Howard soon became very popular with audiences and when he filled in for Priestley for one *Postscript* program on November 10 1940, he was immediately touted as a potential future replacement for Priestley, with critics hailing him as "Priestley's

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[46] Eforgan, *The Lost Actor*, 170.

[47] *Leslie Howard: The Man Who Gave a Damn,* dir. Thomas Hamilton, 2016.

[48] Ronald Howard, *Leslie Howard: Trivial Fond Records* (London: William Kimber & Co. Limited, 1982), 172. *Britain Speaks*, 1940

successor."[49] *Postscript* was a program that 44% of the British adult population listened to. Howard's success was so apparent that when BBC audience research was conducted, 84 out of 135 listeners felt Howard should have his own regular postscript.[50] The popular British photojournalistic magazine *Picture Post* even asserted that "if the BBC makes this switch-over then it will certainly achieve a triumph of contrast."[51] This was a striking compliment for Howard, but with his many upcoming film projects he knew he would soon have limited time and would not be able to commit to as many future broadcasts.[52]

With his American audiences in mind and having spent so much time on Broadway and in Hollywood, Howard made a point of stressing that he considered himself a dual citizen. It was his way of ingratiating himself with his American audience and hopefully legitimizing his connection with them. He used his experiences in the U.S. to demonstrate a community of interest with Americans emphasizing that his commentary "was not propaganda," but a simple expression of how he truly felt as if he were simply chatting with friends.[53] In the May 8th 1941 edition of *The Listener*, a weekly BBC magazine, independent critic W.E. Williams pointed out that Howard's acting experience was apparent in his radio commentaries and should be praised:

> Actors, even when they are not playing radio drama, are far the best speakers on the air. To those I have named there could be added, for instance, several others like Leslie Howard…who speak a postscript or read a poem in a way which sadly reminds us how rarely we hear good wireless speaking.[54]

Howard had a simple and straightforward style of speaking. Although he would always use his charm and eloquence, over time he went from a milder tone in his programs to an increase in intensity. He made 27 appearances on the BBC *Britain Speaks*

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[49] John Dwynn, "Is He Priestley's Successor?" *Picture Post*, November 30, 1940, https://inafferrabileleslie.wordpress.com/is-he-priestleys-successor-1940.

[50] Aldgate and Richards, *Britain Can Take It*, 68.

[51] Ronald Howard. *In Search of My Father: A Portrait of Leslie Howard* (New York: St. Martins Publishing, 1984), 76.

[52] *Pimpernel Smith* would enter into production in November 1940, and as actor, screenwriter, director and producer, he would be more preoccupied moving forward than he had been in 1939-1940. He would continue to work on films continuously until his death in June 1943 and thus his broadcasts were not as frequent as the first two years of the war.

[53] Aldgate and Richards. *Britain Can Take It*, 70.

[54] MOA: TC Art 1938-49, 33/1368/3/B

series with his broadcasts to America initially featuring idealistic, urgent and nostalgic commentary while stirring up images of the Declaration of Independence and subtly hinting at a future problem for the United States if Hitler were to be successful in conquering Britain. By November 1940, Britain had successfully thwarted the threat of an autumn invasion but President Roosevelt's re-election with a smaller congressional majority meant the British ally in the White House now had little chance of convincing his government to enter the war. Subsequently, Howard's talks dropped the subtlety and made room for his fiery passion making sure that listeners, including the Nazi propaganda machine, knew where Britain stood:

> You (in America) think we here are in a jam, fighting against the most terrific odds and feeling pretty bad about it, anxious to be friends in a day of difficulty with those whom we treated rather snobbily in the days before the war. If you think this is the reason [we are trying to appeal to you] you are making a mistake. To tell you the truth we don't feel too bad about this war. The people in these Islands do not feel themselves in a desperate condition. We don't like War, we know war is a black and brutal and bloody business. But we all feel we are going to win this particular war and that we have now in the last month or two set off up the long mountain road to victory.[55]

According to British psychologist F.C. Bartlett in 1940, the fact that Howard was not a politician but from a "wider national culture," made him the ideal candidate for broadcasting to neutral countries. Noting that "all good democratic propaganda was news and news delivered in the idiom of the people to whom you are speaking" made it entirely more effective.[56] However, with the Americans unable to budge on their isolationist stance, Howard made only a few more passionate speeches regarding American involvement in the war before switching to discussions about his films.

The United States was not Howard's sole focus when it came to his broadcasts and he used his platform to address topics that were important to him and felt would be of interest. He spoke about issues with British filmmaking, what epitomized the "British People" and even the general atmosphere in London whether it be in a pub or bomb shelter, such as his November 24, 1940 broadcast of *Britain Speaks*:

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[55] Eforgan, *The Lost Actor*, 172. *Britain Speaks,* November 24, 1940.

[56] Aldgate and Richards, *Britain Can Take It*, 68.

> The shelter is the basement of an old, grey London building. We call it the Catacomb. As we have from twenty to thirty people dossing down there you can guess that by the time the All Clear [siren] sounds in the morning, there is quite a fug….We sleep on small camp beds which lift us about six inches off the brick floor. In our Catacomb we are fairly safe from blast, but if a heavy bomb hit we should be for it….We are a mixed lot in the shelter. Apart from myself, there is a journalist, working men, city men, a soldier or two, or sailor or airman, passing through London. On the other side, separated by a passage and screen are the women- the secretaries, wives, mothers, and Lillian the servant girl of an hotel.[57]

In his casually elegant way, without minimizing the danger, he is able to describe London during the Blitz and give audiences in the Commonwealth a brief peek into that experience. Howard also made a point in his broadcasts to address what propaganda meant to him. Although a calculated response to German propaganda was necessary, he felt that his remarks could be defined as propaganda to some but,

> not in the Goebbels sense. I didn't come to England to be publicity agent. I've spent an awful lot of my life dodging that kind of thing. And I don't care a hang either way. I say to hell with whether what I say is propaganda or not.[58]

Germany and the United States were not the only targets for Howard's criticism while on the air and no one was safe, not even his own country. Howard made remarks about the authoritarian Vichy French regime and how they signed a surrender to the Nazis, British appeasers, the complacent British aristocracy and even his own complacent middle class.[59] He was daring and in the face of censors, chose to mention the racial policies of the Nazis, mentioning Jews twice in one program but "tangentially and not in the context of being persecuted." This was two more times than in any other BBC broadcast by any other broadcaster "including the news and current affairs."[60] Alongside shining a light on those who had been displaced from their homes, he also paid tribute to people or organizations he admired such as the Observer Corps[61] and in particular, the

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[57] Eforgan, *The Lost Actor*, 173. *Britain Speaks*, November 24, 1940.

[58] Ibid., 171. *Britain Speaks*, December 16 1940.

[59] Ibid., 172.

[60] Ibid., 175. *Britain Speaks*, December 23, 1940.

[61] Ibid., 174. *Britain Speaks*, September 2, 1940.

Free French. On August 5, 1940, he told a story shared with him by a group of Free French soldiers who had recently escaped from Brest by ship:

> The ship on which my [Free French] friend found himself was packed with troops and refugees. As it steamed slowly out of the harbour, someone started to sing *The Marseillaise*. Instantly, others began to join in and then all of a sudden the great French song died away. People remembered what the song if the men of Marseilles had meant in the great days of France and they had not the heart to sing it with the Germans overrunning their country.[62]

Howard was not always political in his choice of material, often using his time on the air to speak personally and informally about his own life such as when he discussed going to a local pub after a particularly sour evening, his experiences in World War One, and even interviewing his children starting with his son Ronald who at the time was currently serving in the Royal Navy and easily provided publicity for recruitment. The interview revealed a warm relationship between the two which contrasted with the more edgy interview to come with his daughter. A few months after the interview with his son, he had his daughter Leslie Ruth on air with him, where they discussed his wishes for her to be safe away in America and her challenge that not only did she want to stay in Britain but she wanted to "be part of it all" by getting a "real war job" and being present "for the victory."[63] Both of Howard's children would contribute to the war in different ways; Ronald in the Royal Navy and Leslie Ruth's on air radio comments to her father about being willing and able to defend her country, would inspire him to create two effective female-centric propaganda films which are discussed in chapter five. Howard also made several broadcasts about topics such as democracy and the history of Britain, but his arguments were not new to the broadcast landscape and were also covered by other radio speakers such as J.B. Priestley.

Howard did not have a monopoly on wartime themed broadcasts as other speakers such as J.B. Priestley on *Postscript* and other shows such as *Answering You,* a quiz show discussing issues of the day, often addressed popular reoccurring themes such as the cultural heritage of the West, the war effort and the British experience. It was Howard's direct, simple and elegant style that allowed him to stand apart from his radio peers.

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[62] Ibid., 174. *Britain Speaks*, August 5, 1940.

[63] Ibid., 177. November 25, 1940.

While both Priestley and Howard had the ability to speak freely while appealing to the everyman, Priestley was a "downright, take-it-or-leave-it, North Country" speaker while Howard had an "indolent but elegant diction" which he had honed as an actor allowing him to effectively discuss controversial topics with humour and eloquence.[64] The ease of accessibility to the everyman while using the common vernacular was important to radio listeners as a Mass Observation diarist from Hammersmith emphasized the importance of "someone who can speak so's we can understand."[65] Howard was able to speak with the desired clarity and communicate effectively.

Howard was a constant and continuous presence on BBC programs throughout the war and up until his death in 1943. Even though the BBC "insisted on paying him for his radio work," he continued to refuse and had his assistant send the cheques directly to charity without ever seeing them.[66] Daily, Howard would be found acting or directing at Denham Studios, and then would continue to work on scripts all night at home, but he still made a point of going to London "three or four nights a week…to broadcast or make some public appearance."[67] Besides the 27 broadcasts on the *Britain Speaks* series, he made 9 appearances on the *Answering You* program, 22 talks on the *BBC: North American Service,* narrated 13 shows in the *Britain to America* series, numerous appearances on the *Brains Trust* show, radio plays, features on the *BBC Home Service* and the postscript spot in lieu of J.B. Priestley.

The *Brains Trust* series was extremely popular as well, and had a regular listening audience of 10-12 million every Sunday.[68] Missing an episode of the series was not an option for many listeners as the show was a popular topic of conversation the next day. The show featured a questioner as host who facilitated a discussion of current and relevant topics with a panel consisting of rotating regular guests and new guests for balanced opinions. Howard was often a panel member on the *Brains Trust* and with the

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[64] Dwynn, "Is He Priestley's Successor?" November. 30, 1940.

[65] MOA: TC Radio Listening 1939-44, 74/249- May 30, 1940.

[66] Ernie Pyle, "War Work Keeps Leslie Howard Continuously on the Move." *St. Petersburg Times,* November. 4, 1942. https://inafferrabileleslie.wordpress.com/war-work-keeps-leslie-howard-continuously-on-the-move-1942.

[67] Ibid.

[68] Aldgate and Richards, *Britain Can Take It*, 66.

popularity of the show, his opinions would have had a wide audience. A factory worker and Mass Observation diarist in November 1941 noted that the "favourite topic on Mondays seems to be the previous day's *Brain Trust* session," and that "hardly anyone ever confesses that he didn't hear it."[69] With a huge audience the night of the initial broadcast and 10-12 million people discussing it with their peers the following week, the radio program was a huge platform for many to share their ideas, to inspire and to motivate the British public.[70] Howard was one of those taking advantage of the platform to advocate for his causes and spread more propaganda.

This meant was that Howard's voice was everywhere and not just on British radios but overseas in American and Commonwealth living rooms as well. Howard's persistent and passionate radio presence quickly made him a popular radio personality. On July 31, 1940 the *Daily Mail* newspaper named Howard the "number two public speaker to J.B. Priestley in the overseas service" and a BBC memo from November 5, 1940 stated that Howard was "having great success in the American Transmission."[71] As second only to Priestley, a major British radio personality, the BBC was hoping to keep Howard, whose time was limited, on the air in several programs while he was simultaneously working on his films. The BBC's urgency to keep Howard active demonstrates the extent of his popularity with the British public and their faith in his abilities to connect with listeners. Howard ended up building a large audience in North America and "judging by the reports of German anger at his broadcasts, his words carried some weight."[72] Howard had to have been a very effective propagandist with his broadcasts since the Nazis ended up adding Howard's name to the German black list.[73]

Howard's radio broadcasts quickly gained the attention of the film industry and the Ministry of Information and he became highly sought after for narration and voice over work. Noel Coward's 1942 feature film about the Royal Navy, *In Which We Serve*,

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[69] Calder, *The People's War*, 364.

[70] The high numbers of listeners is due to the fact that *The Brains Trust* was often replayed later in the week which allowed those who missed the original broadcast a chance to listen to the program and others to listen again.

[71] Aldgate and Richards. *Britain Can Take It*, 66-67.

[72] Leslie Ruth Howard, *A Quite Remarkable Father*, 281.

[73] Leslie Ruth Howard, *A Quite Remarkable Father,* 275.

was written and directed by Coward and featured many famous British actors including John Mills, Bernard Miles, Celia Johnson and Coward himself. Made with the assistance of the MOI the film follows the men and women connected with a British navy ship, showing the traumatic losses in battle at sea and the aftermath featuring captivating action sequences directed by David Lean. Noted wartime film critic Dilys Powell believed the emotional impact of the film on those at home in England was "immense" and that "the experiences of civilian and fighting men were presented as essentially one."[74] The "semi-official film" was effective propaganda for the Royal Navy with an emotionally riveting story bookended with not only documentary images of real ships being built and at war, but bookended with narration by an un-credited Leslie Howard.[75] There is a grandeur in Howard's words as he so eloquently speaks about the purpose of the Royal Navy while images of British battleships firing guns into the distance appear on screen. Personally asked by Coward to narrate the piece, the final scenes of the film feature Howard repeating the famous prayer that was often shared on ship decks during the war and whose words gave the film its title: "Be pleased to receive into thy Almighty and most gracious protection the persons of us thy servants, and the fleet in which we serve."[76] Coward later said that "Leslie's quiet voice speaking the lines of the prayer in the stillness following the violence of the action was one of the most moving things he ever heard."[77]

British cinemagoers obviously agreed because in a year when 70% of the population went to the cinema once every two months, *In Which We Serve* became one of three films Leslie Howard was a part of that year that were in the top five at the box office.[78] Howard's hope to inform, inspire and motivate audiences to action was achieved with this film. A 36 year old female shop assistant from Dewsbury named *In Which We Serve* and *The Gentle Sex* (another Howard film) as two of her top three films that year in her Mass Observation directive. She felt that:

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[74] Aldgate and Richards, *Britain Can Take It*, 328.

[75] Robert Murphy, *British Cinema and the Second World War (*London: Continuum, 2000), 64.

[76] Ronald Howard, *In Search of My Father*, 127.

[77] Ibid., 127.

[78] Richards and Sheridan, *Mass-Observation at the Movies*, 220.

> All these [films] made me feel I know nothing of the war-I Live in a backwater and apart from slight and general inconveniences, have no knowledge of the war. That is the value of such films, I think, apart from the story. It brings the war home to such that I am.[79]

Howard's voice in the film helped people who otherwise had no direct connection to the war become better informed as to the gravity of the British situation. A 45 year old female secretary from Warlington went further, not only naming the film as her second favourite of the year, but sharing how the film evoked a fierce patriotic response:

> "…it made me feel I would die for the Senior Service-and I'm hanged if I would die for any other employer."[80]

Other diarists from 1943 called the film "sincere" and with "emotional impact,"[81] appealing "to the emotions and to the patriotism of the audience."[82] One 38 year old former nurse from Glasgow noting how the film made her "visualise it happening to me or any of my friends."[83] The film was a very successful and often viewed propaganda film from 1943. As 36 year old female stenographer from Birmingham wrote, it "knocks all the other semi-propaganda war films I have seen or heard of into a cocked hat."[84] With audiences so emotionally moved by the film and director Noel Coward believing that Howard's narration was incredibly impactful to the tone of the film, I believe that Howard had a direct role in inspiring, informing and invoking a response from the audience with his bookended narration of the film.

As with his narration of other documentary films for the Ministry of Information, he enhanced the intentions of any film he narrated "with his familiar, wry, sonorous tones."[85] While Howard was writing his next feature film *Pimpernel Smith* and working to bring it to fruition, he was asked to narrate a few other documentary short films including *The White Eagle*, a 1941 British made and Oscar nominated film about the

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[79] Ibid., 271.

[80] Ibid., 276.

[81] Ibid., 239, 18-year-old medical student from London.

[82] Ibid., 234, 42 year old chemist from Manchester.

[83] Ibid., 264.

[84] Ibid., 267.

[85] Phyllis Lassner. "Leslie Howard: Propaganda Artist" in *Espionage and Exile: fascism and anti-fascism in British spy fiction and film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 122.

Polish civilians and soldiers who had escaped their homeland to come to England. 1941 also saw Howard narrate a fifteen minute film directed by Alberto Cavalcanti called *Yellow Caesar*. This melded documentary footage and staged sequences in an attempt to show how cowardly Italian dictator Benito Mussolini was, his responsibility for Italy's war against the British, and how the Italian people needed to be seen as separate from him and his actions.[86] Howard's other short documentary film that he provided narration for in 1941 was producer John Hanau's *War in the Mediterranean*, a nostalgic look at the many nations lining the Mediterranean in classical times and how they were now readying to fight in the war.[87] As film historian Jeffrey Richards argues, Howard was known for epitomizing the English intellectual, thinking man as hero and commonly played these archetypal roles as Henry Higgins in *Pygmalion,* Ashley Wilkes in *Gone with the Wind*, Professor Horatio Smith in *Pimpernel Smith* and R.J. Mitchell in *The First of the Few*.[88] Therefore, it is no surprise that when producers and directors were making a film about a foreign place at war and needed a familiar, English and intellectual voice for the audience to connect to, Howard was the popular choice. To have the familiar and recognizable Howard narrate would have given any documentary film a connection to English audiences and, with his involvement in the film, help to legitimize its arguments and have the film seen by many.

When Howard died in a tragic plane crash in 1943, tributes poured in from his colleagues, the newspapers and the public with most of them focusing on his film work. But it was also the loss of his voice that was commented upon as his voice, a familiar and composed constant in so many lives, had been lost. On June 4 1943, three days after Howard's plane had been shot down, a BBC spokesman was quoted in the *Manchester Daily Despatch* commending Howard's radio presence:

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[86] Elisabetta Girelli, *Beauty and the Beast: Italianness in British Cinema* (Bristol: NBN International, 2009), 52.

[87] *War in the Mediterranean* was also released under the title *Common Heritage* and later re-released in the United States in 1943.

[88] Jeffrey Richards, "Thinking Man as Hero: Leslie Howard." *Focus on Film,* no.25, Summer/Autumn, (1976): 37-50.

> His calm, steady confidence and quiet patriotism did much to keep our people overseas in good heart. The services rendered the Empire and indeed the world cannot be too highly assessed.[89]

The article noted that:

> BBC 'feature tests' showed that Howard was one of the most successful of the overseas speakers. His 'fan mail' from all parts of the British Empire and outside it showed that he had struck chords that had wide appeal. This was especially so in the dark days which Dunkirk ushered in.[90]

Radio ensured that Howard's broadcasts were heard throughout the English speaking world. By 1939 nine million British households had a radio and the number steadily climbed throughout the war.[91] With radios readily accessible and in the homes of so many people, Howard's voice was now able to reach more people more often than his propaganda films could. With that accessibility, he was able to instill that "steady confidence" he was known for to those who desperately needed it. To be able to come into people's homes so often and be heard by populations of all ages, genders and backgrounds, the radio became one of the most effective tools to disseminate information as President Roosevelt utilized with his fireside chats and King George VI of England did with his radio address on the day war was declared. But to be truly effective, the broadcaster had to be able to connect with their audience with their vernacular, voice, tone and passion. It is therefore no surprise that Leslie Howard became that "third voice" of the war behind Churchill and Priestley, who were equally well spoken and passionate.[92] With his steely sense of purpose and ability to put listeners at ease with his self-deprecating humour and wit, Howard used his vocal abilities and speech honed on the stage and screen to inspire and inform.

Leslie Howard achieved the impact he desired to inform, inspire and invoke audiences with his numerous radio broadcasts at the beginning of the war and through the voice over narration he provided for numerous films. He was eagerly sought after by the MOI, the BBC and film industry producers, like Noel Coward and John Hanau, to lend

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[89] Aldgate and Richards, *Britain Can Take It*, 66.

[90] Ibid., 66.

[91] Calder, *The People's War*, 358.

[92] Jeffrey Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society in Britain 1930-1939 (*London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1984), 234.

his special skills in order to connect to audiences. His prominence and impact in these areas made him popular with not only his listeners in Britain but overseas in Commonwealth countries such as Canada and isolationist America. Happily, he was also unpopular in Germany for the same reason. Well known for his screen presence, with radio and narration work, Howard had to rely solely on his voice and what he could bring to a particular subject with just his tone and eloquence. He was now playing an invisible role and as his son Ronald Howard later wrote, "he now had to hold them with his voice- and the voice alone had to embody the things he felt most deeply."[93] With only his voice, Howard was able to evoke powerful responses to his words, inform his listeners and connect to his audiences at home and abroad. As a voice that came third to the powerful vocal personas of Churchill and Priestley, one has to wonder what more he could have achieved if he had lived past 1943.

[93] Ronald Howard, *Trivial Fond Records*, 152.

Chapter 3. How and Why We Fight

> *Tonight you will take a first step on a dark road from which there is no turning back. You will have to go on, and on, from one madness to another leaving behind you a wilderness of misery and hatred and still…you will have to go on because you will find no horizon, and see no dawn until at last, you are lost and destroyed. You are doomed…and one day sooner or later, you will remember my words….*
>
> -Leslie Howard, *Pimpernel Smith*[94]

As powerful and popular as Leslie Howard was on the radio for the BBC, he was above all else, a film actor and he understood the power that a visual tool like film could play in bolstering the spirits of the people. The most important contributor to the morale of war-torn Britain was access to leisure, so having a hand in the films appearing in the packed cinema houses was an ideal way to help the war effort. Unfortunately for Howard the war meant that the British film industry was suffering with film studios shut down due to a lack of projects, a lack of funding and a lack of manpower as film workers had enlisted. With government officials busy with the logistics of war with Germany, Howard's ideas and pleas for funding fell on deaf ears; getting his film projects made in Britain became an uphill climb. Leaving Hollywood behind for England meant Howard had lost all the money and assets he had saved and made from the past twenty years through taxes and the confiscation of British assets abroad by the government.

Even though he worked closely with the Ministry of Information, they did not finance his films.[95] The MOI had considerable influence over many British feature film productions, but only because they could supply raw film, supplies and exemptions for film cast and crew from military service; they did not provide financial assistance to producers.[96] Therefore, out of necessity Howard spent most of 1939 to early 1941

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[94] *Pimpernel Smith*, directed by Leslie Howard (1941; London, UK: Anglo-American Film Corporation).

[95] Ernie Pyle. "War Work Keeps Leslie Howard Continuously on the Move." *St. Petersburg Times*, November 4, 1942. https://inafferrabileleslie.wordpress.com/war-work-keeps-leslie-howard-continuously-on-the-move-1942.

[96] Michael Balfour, *Propaganda in War: 1939-1945: organisations, policies and publics in Britain and Germany* (London: Routledge, 1979), 71.

fundraising, writing and re-writing his screenplays in hopes of getting them onto the silver screen. Hence his dedication and availability for radio broadcasts at the time. When he finally pulled back from his BBC broadcasts it was because he had managed to get British National Films to sign a contract with him to produce, direct and star in his next production; a passion project of his that he had also co-written called *Pimpernel Smith.*[97] Starting with *Pimpernel Smith* in 1941, what followed were a series of Howard's films that would be recognized not only as his most financially and critically successful films but as some of the most powerful propaganda films ever made in the Second World War because they showed their audiences how and why the British were at war, inspiring strong reactions in cinemagoers.

In 1934 Leslie Howard starred in what would become one of his best-known roles, playing Sir Percy Blakeney in the British feature film, *The Scarlet Pimpernel*. The action-adventure film tells the story of Blakeney, a Robin Hood archetypal character in France during the Reign of Terror, who instead of stealing from the rich to feed the poor, is secretly the "Scarlet Pimpernel," pretending to be a foppish English aristocrat in order to assist French aristocrats in escaping to England to avoid the guillotine. The film was a huge success in both Britain and America with a *New York Times* correspondent in London calling the film "the best film ever to emerge from a British studio."[98] The Scarlet Pimpernel character became a favourite role for fans of Howard's and he was often called upon to recreate the role for radio dramatizations. When the war started and Howard was trying to think of a film that could serve his country by educating both those at home and abroad what Britain was up against, he fused two of his most famous roles, and adapted *The Scarlet Pimpernel* to modern times with a main character reminiscent of the intellectual Henry Higgins from *Pygmalion*. Instead of the Scarlet Pimpernel rescuing French aristocrats, Howard became a seemingly absentminded English archaeology professor fooling the Nazis and rescuing inmates from concentration camps on mainland Europe. The film practically vibrates with Howard's anger and features moments that were very true to life such as Howard's experiences in Europe before the Anschluss,

[97] Eforgan, *The Lost Actor*, 148.

[98] Ibid., 106.

dealing with bureaucrats and his frustration with the American newspapers and isolationists.[99]

Premiering in Britain on July 26, 1941 and later in the United States in February 1942, the film was unsurprisingly not shown in Nazi controlled Europe. Combining action, romance and Howard's signature English wit, the film became a huge box office success topping box office totals in 1941.[100] While box office numbers and attendance figures are hard to come by for the time period, R.H. "Josh" Billings annual survey of films in the popular *Kinematograph Weekly* film magazine in Britain, provides an overview as to which films were favored by the public each year during the war and is a valuable resource for film historians. In 1941, both of Howard's films would win awards with *49th Parallel* winning in both "Biggest Winner" and "Best British Film" categories, and *Pimpernel Smith* winning in the "Runners Up" and "British Runners Up" categories.[101]

For its time, *Pimpernel Smith* was a bold film as it was one of a few films that not only mentioned but showed Nazi persecutions when other films of the time such as the Hollywood produced *Mrs. Miniver* (1942) showed a more romantic version of England at war. The film was criticized by many for its boldness because it not only "criticized British officialdom for doing nothing" but the "American press for saying nothing."[102] If anything, the film was more daring in that it did not hide the realities of the atrocities happening under the Nazi regime, making it a "direct and emotional appeal for those endangered by the Nazis to be rescued."[103]

Did *Pimpernel Smith* show the war effort by ordinary citizens or in a realistic perspective? No, it was definitely a fantasy adventure film playing up the heroics of one particular individual with some of the Nazi characters coming off as buffoons, but it featured many emotional and powerful images and speeches delivered by Howard that

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[99] Eforgan, *The Lost Actor,* 152.

[100] Ibid., 159.

[101] Lant, *Blackout*, 231.

[102] Eforgan, *The Lost Actor,* 167.

[103] Ibid., 167.

cut straight to the heart. It was moving, impactful and stirred up passionate feelings in many audience members at home and abroad, this is what Howard had intended.

Evidence proving just how powerful the film could be was demonstrated by the actions of Swedish diplomat, Raoul Wallenberg. After seeing the film in the British Embassy in Stockholm, Wallenberg told his sister that "he'd like to emulate the professor" and was inspired to become a real-life Pimpernel Smith.[104] In July 1944, Wallenberg used financial bribes and issued protective Swedish passports to gain the freedom of thousands of Hungarian Jews hoping to escape deportation to death camps. Wallenberg's inspiration to act was directly influenced by Howard's film and can be considered one of Howard's triumphs with the film.

Pimpernel Smith is a film that had a wide accessibility for cinema audiences with different social and political backgrounds. Denis Argent, who was a journalist and Private in the Royal Engineers from Essex, wrote in detail in his Mass Observation diary entry about his efforts to see *Pimpernel Smith* with not only his reactions afterwards, but those of his communist friend. In October of 1941, Argent noted how excited he was to get to the movie theatre after a day of work,

> "I hurried like hell to get washed & changed & out, & had to skip dinner in order to get down to the local Granada by 1:45. But even at that hour there was a hell of a queue waiting….I was late for the beginning of the film I wanted to see, & consequently had to sit through a terrible second feature called 'The Cowboy & the Blonde.' It wasn't even mildly funny. But I found 'Pimpernel Smith' well worth the effort I'd made to see it. It was what I'd call an <u>intelligent</u> film. True the students behaved a bit too much like film students, but the story was good enough & Leslie Howard at his best. The propaganda wasn't laid on too thick either….and what a relief to have film Germans who don't speak in guttural broken English! The idea of having Francis Sullivan & the rest speak <u>English</u> helped to build them up as characters instead of merely being stereotyped blackguards. Everyone I spoke to about the film agreed with this. Quite a large portion of the section saw 'Pimpernel Smith,' notably the more intelligent element (the undergraduate, the bank cashier, the chartered accountant)."[105]

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[104] Eforgan, *The Lost Actor*, 160.

[105] MOA: D 5010, diary for October 4, 1941, p. 1589-1591. Denis Argent was a young journalist from Essex when the war broke out. He became a prolific writer for Mass Observation and subsequently,

Denis Argent not only notes his eager anticipation for the film but comments on Howard's film choices as an actor and as a writer/director with his positive feedback on the decision to have German characters come across as more realistic and less cartoonish than previous war films. So affected was Argent by Howard's film that he chose to sit through a newsreel and terrible second feature in order to catch the beginning of the film once again in the later show. Positive reviews by Argent and his peers demonstrate how the film appealed to the middle class; his later comments on October 17th about his communist friend from Bristol, who had also seen the film are equally enlightening. After writing to Argent about Churchill and his recent speeches about Stalin, Argent's friend wrote that "*Pimpernel Smith*... [was]…a very good film," adding that it had "a great deal of unadulterated propaganda-you know, close-ups of people staring into the camera talking about freedom."[106] The close-ups he refers to was a creative decision that Howard often implemented in his films including *Pimpernel Smith* and *The First of the Few,* where the camera would focus solely on his face. With his understated acting style and a lack of special effects ensuring no distractions, he let the simple power of his speech become the main focal point. Those particular filmmaking choices, when Howard draws his audiences in to make an emotional connection, and allow him to connect with varied audiences, making his films successful and accessible for differing social and political backgrounds.

RAMC clerk and Mass Observation diarist Kenneth Mosley from Oxford also wrote about the films' accessibility, noting that *Pimpernel Smith* was "one of the few pictures which would appear appeals to all the classes…I've heard nothing but praise for it from mental patients to majors."[107] The clerk is correct as the many diarists who mentioned the film in their submissions were from all walks of life, from students, to stenographers, teachers and even an electricity board inspector. What stands out from the numerous diarists who mentioned seeing *Pimpernel Smith* is that many of them, Argent and Mosley included, mention discussing the film with others in their community

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historian James Hinton dedicated a chapter of his book *Nine Wartime Lives: Mass Observation and the Making of the Modern Self* to Argent's collective writings.

[106] MOA: D 5010, diary for October 17, 1941, p. 1692.

[107] MOA: D 5160, diary for Thursday September 20 1942, p. 3. Kenneth Mosley, from Oxford, was born in 1916 and at the time of writing was a student serving in the Royal Army Medical Corps.

creating interest in the film. A General Report from January 16, 1942 described seeing the film in the cinema:

> "Its success was enormous, a packed house at every performance, and a great many people turned away. This large audience was enthusiastic and listened attentively throughout….Many comments were made by people after the film, all very favourable….It is interesting to note that the propaganda contained in it is of a high order."[108]

The success of many films can be traced to word of mouth, and it seems that *Pimpernel Smith* became a popular topic of conversation after the film ended or the next day at lunch, helping to add to packed cinema houses. These conversations would have been exactly what Howard had hoped for; inspiring and informing cinema audiences at home and abroad, and reminding people exactly how and why Britain was fighting the Nazis. In 1941 after almost two hard years of sacrifice, air bombings, rations and more, the film served as a reminder both to keep the hardships in perspective and to encourage hope.

At the same time Leslie Howard was at Denham Studios in England working on *Pimpernel Smith*, the future famous film team of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger were working on their cinematic propaganda contribution that had been commissioned by the Films Division of the Ministry of Information. *49th Parallel*, or *The Invaders,* as it is known in the United States, is a 1941 British propaganda film that aimed at trying to engage the Americans in the war. Since it was later released in the United States in 1942 after the bombing of Pearl Harbor had brought the Americans into the war, the film's initial goal was rendered moot, and so it became a film honoring the role of the Canadians in the war. The film tells the story of six Nazi soldiers who trek across Canada after their U-boat was sunk by RCAF bombers while hiding in Hudson's Bay. What follows are several vignettes featuring cameos of famous actors as the soldiers encounter different stereotypical Canadians and landscapes, including a fur trapper played by Laurence Olivier, a Hutterite leader played by Anton Walbrook, a Canadian Soldier played by Raymond Massey, and of course, an eccentric English ethnologist in the Canadian Rockies played by Leslie Howard. Howard was working on the stage next door so it was easy for him to make it work and in the end was only on set for less than a

[108] MOA-General Reports (17-8-B) Jan 16, 1942, 17-5900.

week.[109] When the remaining two Nazis come across Howard he is oblivious to who they really are until they restrain him and destroy his belongings and research for being a pacifist and an aesthete who was comparing Nazi war methods to the indigenous tribal war customs he has researched. It was important for Howard to speak out against the Nazis in the film and his short speech where he attacks "the half-truths and distortions on which the Nazi system was founded," is one of the most memorable of the film.[110] The end of Howard's vignette has him walking purposely towards a dark cave where one of his Nazi captors is hiding, bravely taking a bullet in his leg and then taking personal revenge physically on the Nazi for destroying his Thomas Mann novel, Matisse and Picasso artwork and abusing his hospitality.

Although the film did not "go with a bang like *Pimpernel Smith"*[111] according to *New Statesman* magazine, its adventurous spirit with action packed sequences and cameos by famous movie stars made the film a top box office moneymaker in 1941. It even won Pressburger an Academy Award for Best Screenplay. Like *Pimpernel Smith, 49th Parallel* appealed to audiences of different socio-economic backgrounds from the working class to the upper class, as evidenced by a submission from a young diarist assigned to report on films named Len England:

> "I saw "49th Parallel," the new and much publicized propaganda film about the escape of six Germans across Canada, and their meeting with various men. I made no direct observations of the audience, but they obviously enjoyed all of it. There was loud applause after the speech made by Peter the Hutterite leader (Anton Walbrook) in answer to Nazi's plea for Hitlerism, and laughter of great relish in the final scenes when the Canadian private (Raymond Massey) gets the better of the Nazi in a verbal battle and then beats him up. Subjectively, but based on my MO work on films and propaganda, I should say this is going to have the greatest influence of any full length propaganda film yet made. Clapping at "freedom" speeches these days is almost unheard of. The propaganda in it is covered, but the speeches and remarks about democracy are put in intelligent and comprehensible language. There are no high flown words, but solid commonsense. [sic] Speaking from a rather more highbrow view,

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[109] Howard, *In Search of My Father,* 102.

[110] Howard, *In Search of My Father,* 102.

[111] Aldgate and Richards, *Britain Can Take It*, 39.

> I enjoyed it immensely, from every point of view; and I think that undoubtedly it would have a good effect on me."[112]

Len England specifically mentions the accessibility of the dialogue in the film for all filmgoers which directly points to the three powerful speeches made by Walbrook, Massey and Howard.[113] The fact that Howard was responsible for one of the films' great "freedom" speeches and that he had a direct hand in crafting that speech further demonstrates his commitment and dedication to creating effective propaganda and raising the morale of the public. The film, and Howard's role in it, were both highly effective in demonstrating to audiences in Britain and abroad "why we fight." Indeed the neutral country of Argentina sought to ban it from playing in their country's movie theatres lest it "injure the cordial relations existing between Germany and Argentina."[114] With his feature films *Pimpernel Smith* and *49th Parallel* both released in Britain in 1941, it was a successful and memorable year for Howard, not only at the box office but for him personally as he had successfully produced his first propaganda film, made a powerful cameo in another and had made an impact on the morale of those who saw his films. Encouraged by his success, he would follow up these films with two memorable and effective propaganda efforts in 1942, one of which would see him honor the Royal Air Force as Noel Coward had previously done for the British Navy.

In what would become the second most successful film of 1942 behind Hollywood's *Mrs. Miniver,* Leslie Howard's second endeavor as director, producer and star was a film dedicated to the Royal Air Force called *The First of the Few.*[115] The film has Howard in a beautifully understated performance portraying the real-life designer of the Supermarine Spitfire fighter plane R.J. Mitchell. Featuring David Niven and Rosamund John in supporting roles, and a sweeping musical score by William Walton, the film has Niven's character telling the story of how the Spitfire was made in a flashback to several RAF pilots on break at a local airfield. Mitchell's dedication to

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[112] MOA: TC Films 1937-48, 17/5850/ November 2 1941.

[113] Len England, who signed his submissions as "LE," became a diarist for Mass Observation as a school boy, was assigned to report on film by Harrisson, and after the war would become the project's managing director in the 1950s and 1960s. Hinton, James. *The Mass Observers: A History, 1937-1949.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, 8.

[114] Aldgate and Richards, *Britain Can Take It*, 40.

[115] Released under the title *Spitfire* in June 1943 in the United States.

creating a fast-flying plane for Britain that was inspired by the image of a bird quickly morphs into his determination to create the fastest fighter aircraft after a holiday in Germany where he realizes the Nazis are re-arming. Working himself to death for months in order to produce a plane that will challenge German aircraft, he succeeds, only to die in 1937 moments after hearing that his plane has finally been ordered into production by the British government. Flashing back to the present, Niven's reverie is rudely interrupted when the squadron is called upon to counter the Luftwaffe flying towards the English coast. With an amazing display of speed, accuracy and bravery, the pilots flying Mitchell's Spitfires shoot down the enemy planes and the film closes with the moving image of the Spitfires flying towards a beautiful sunset and Niven saluting his friend in the heavens above.

Howard's film honoring and featuring the Royal Air Force was not a new concept in 1942, but his choice to focus on the origin of the Spitfire and how he told the story sets him apart. By 1942, there were several films featuring the RAF including two American films, *A Yank in the RAF* (1941) and *Eagle Squadron* (1942), documentary films such as *Target for Tonight* (1941), and documentary style feature films such as *Coastal Command (1942),* Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's *One of Our Aircraft is Missing* (1942), and Alexander Korda's *The Lion Has Wings* (1939). The American films feature American pilots coming to Britain and joining the RAF, and even though the RAF is featured, having an American and Hollywood perspective on the RAF would not have been as impactful with British audiences. The documentary films produced by the RAF and the MOI showed stock footage of planes and featured real pilots doing their duty, but lacked the connection a feature film was able to create with an audience. The documentary style feature films would play a stronger role in impacting audience morale with their combination of raw footage and a narrative that connected to audiences. Even then *Coastal Command* suffers from a feeling of staged "artificial construction"[116] and unfortunately, Powell and Pressburger sacrificed scored music in an attempt to give a more natural viewing experience. Further, the story was more negative in content featuring a RAF plane shot down.

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[116] Bosley Crowther, "The Screen: 'Coastal Command' (1943); Wings over water," *The New York Times,* April 19 1944. https://www.nytimes.com/1944/04/19/archives/the-screen-wings-over-water.

Korda's *The Lion Has Wings,* while incredibly patriotic and featuring clips from his film *Fire Over England,* was made before the war began for Britain and therefore, featured no recent footage of the RAF, only obsolete aircraft.[117] The film, while featuring prominent British film stars Ralph Richardson and Merle Oberon, did not get positive reactions in theatres. Len England noted in a report on "Mass Observation Film Work" on September 10, 1940 that the film was "not given a good reception mainly because the propaganda was so obvious and people did not like it being 'shoved down their throats'…[and]….in addition, the story was not satisfactory and the introduction of Ralph Richardson and Merle Oberon in five-minute parts was not at all popular."[118]

Howard, however, manages to combine all the best aspects of these other RAF films into one package. He does this by telling the patriotic story of British hero R.J. Mitchell, tapping into the documentary film style by featuring real life RAF pilots in contemporary planes with raw footage, and connecting to the audience. He expertly connects with audiences by utilizing feature film techniques such as an exquisitely scored soundtrack, an easy to follow narrative, likeable and identifiable characters and cheering, patriotic moments. Because he was a master storyteller who knew what would best connect to the cinema audience, Howard easily set his film apart.

With its many flying sequences featuring real pilots and Spitfire planes supplied by the RAF, the film had a documentary feel, intertwining a personal story about real events. With his light touch as director, the film is heartwarming, and yet features an underlying tone of restrained anger; anger that Mitchell cannot get his plane design approved when the Nazis are becoming a growing threat, anger that the government will not recognize the seriousness of the immediate threat and anger that the Germans are able to rebuild their air force without being checked. With this film, Howard established himself as one of the most popular British actors on screen, jumping in popularity from

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[117] *Fire Over England* is a 1937 film produced by Alexander Korda and his London Film Productions company about Queen Elizabeth I, the threat and eventual victory by the English over the Spanish Armada. Featuring performances by Laurence Olivier, Vivien Leigh and with Flora Robson in the title role as Queen Elizabeth I, the film is one of the first in the British film renaissance. The scenes featuring the beacons being lit along the English coast and Elizabeth's speech to her soldiers is featured in Korda's quickly produced 1939 propaganda film *The Lion Has Wings.*

[118] MOA- FR- 'Mass Observation Film Work,' by Len England, September 10 1940, p.394.

19th to 2nd according to a poll by the *Motion Picture Herald.*[119] While becoming a popular topic for those writing for Mass Observation when asked about their movie habits. For the many diarists who participated, Howard's performance was often mentioned.

A 20 year old male student from Wallington wrote that the film was "a clear simple dramatization of something topical and important…[with an] accurate, restrained performance by Howard,"[120] while a 42 year old chemist from Manchester echoed this assessment noting the "wonderfully restrained acting of Leslie Howard…[and the] careful combination of fact and fiction throughout the narrative of the film."[121] A 55 year old headmaster from Llangollen agreed that "the acting of Leslie Howard"[122] was what made *First of the Few* his favourite of the year. A 19 year old male student goes further by commenting that Howard was "the backbone of this film" and that it was "his acting which raised it from a hum drum string of facts to a very human story."[123]

The female diarists agreed with their male counterparts. A 34 year old teacher from Masham, Yorks writing that her sixth favourite film of the year was *The First of the Few*, "distinguished by Leslie Howard's restrained acting."[124] For many women in 1942, Howard's film was a favourite and for both sexes his acting in the film was greatly admired, but two other comments, in particular, demonstrate more of the desired effect Howard hoped to have on his film audience. A self-proclaimed "independent," a 57 year old man from Andover, wrote that *The First of the Few "*is just the type of film I hope to see after the war, just light without the heroics showing how men can be truly great without bullying others, just seeing their duty and doing it in spite of every obstacle."[125] A 62 year old former teacher and "provincial lady" from Somerset, wrote that she had not

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[119] Aldgate and Richards, *Britain Can Take It*, 66.

[120] Richards and Sheridan. *Mass-Observation at the Movies*, 234.

[121] Ibid., 234.

[122] Ibid., 256.

[123] Ibid., 246.

[124] Ibid., 262.

[125] Ibid., 248.

seen many films but one of the best was *The First of the Few* and she found it "inspiring and without eyewash or false notes or 'heartiness.'"[126]

These diarists wrote about more than just Howard's acting and revealed how the film was inspiring with its truth, honesty and portrayal of important wartime values of duty and initiative. Perhaps it is their maturity that saw beyond the artistic acting points, but nevertheless, Howard's film had more than just an aesthetic appeal. The film showed audiences at home and abroad how and why the British would fight the Nazis and not only justify their involvement but take pride in the efforts they were taking to win.

With its action sequences, well written dialogue, a storyline about an admired British hero and, as a 37 year old housewife from Huddersfield wrote, "because Leslie Howard in any part is a joy to watch and hear,"[127] *The First of the Few* was a huge success at the box office making it the top grossing British film of 1942. The *Kinematograph Weekly*'s annual film survey named *The First of the Few* as the "Best British Film" of the year and a runner up to the "Biggest Winner" award for 1942.[128] More importantly, however, its propaganda melded with a heartfelt and patriotic story that was directly impactful for many viewers and became a favourite for many film goers from students to an ambassador.

Like *Pimpernel Smith*, *The First of the Few* reached an important international audience member in Ivan Maisky, the Soviet Ambassador to Britain, who like the Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg, was greatly affected by Howard's film. Where Wallenberg was inspired to recreate the Pimpernel character's actions into saving Jewish refugees, Maisky was struck by the power of the film medium itself and how Howard had created a successful propaganda film which "demonstrated well enough its propaganda value for Britain."[129] Inspired, Maisky returned to the Soviet Union and attempted to help

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[126] Ibid., 265.

[127] Richards and Sheridan, *Mass-Observation at the Movies*, 280.

[128] Lant, *Blackout*, 231.

[129] Eforgan, *The Lost Actor*, 205.

his own country by creating a propaganda film called *Liberty Ship* which was later cancelled.[130]

Not limiting himself to just feature films, Howard recognized that short documentary type films could also be immensely effective in cinemas as they could play before or after feature films, be short, to the point and carry a punch. Based on an idea that occurred to him and fellow producer A.G. MacDonnell, the short propaganda film directly financed by the Ministry of Information, *From the Four Corners,* sought to not only show British audiences that they had the support of the Commonwealth but also to draw the Americans in by illuminating Commonwealth camaraderie and brotherhood. Taking advantage of his popularity and playing himself in the film, Leslie Howard comes across three soldiers in London; a Private with the Black Watch of Canada, a Corporal with the Australian Imperial Force and a Private with the 2nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force. As expected, the Commonwealth soldiers immediately know who he is and are familiar with his work, with the Australian soldier remarking that the last time he had seen Howard was in Sydney at the cinema because he had taken "his girl" to the movies and she was quite a fan of his. Every moment of this fifteen-minute film is perfectly done with the symbolism and metaphors coming right at the start as the soldiers come together in the shadows of Trafalgar Square in London, which features the famous statue of Lord Nelson who bravely defeated Napoleon, another aggressor of England and peace. Over a pint at the local pub, Howard initiates a conversation with the soldiers asking them about their hometowns with each sharing individual stories about their homeland interwoven with documentary footage of the actual events they speak of or images of their hometowns. The soldiers discuss why they have come to England, and how they left of their own free will to help fight for the greater good, explaining how each country's government chose to declare war to support England in its fight.

When it comes to Howard's turn to share his thoughts from his "corner," he takes them to a balcony at St. Paul's Cathedral, and, as they overlook London, Howard gives a British history lesson featuring specific aspects of England that personally connect to each of the soldiers. He speaks about how the British have triumphed over historical

[130] Ibid., 205.

invaders such as the Danes and Spanish Armada, the burial site of George Vancouver, the rights outlined in the Magna Carta, and the explorer Captain Cook. By doing so shows how, in his words, "there's something here for all of us" and that the soldiers "own this London as much as we do."[131] Howard demonstrates the interconnectedness of the Commonwealth soldiers to each other, to Britain and therefore the entirety of the British Commonwealth not just by sharing a common heritage, language, governance or historical peoples, but with common ethics, attitudes, morals and values. To drive home his point about common values, Howard finishes his speech by appealing to the American film audience by speaking appreciatively about the American constitution which was created by Americans who were "the sons of British pioneers," and whose ideals of liberty and the pursuit of happiness were nurtured in England.[132]

It is a short yet powerful propaganda film that, as Howard's daughter noted, "contained much of Leslie's own feelings about the city and the men who built it."[133] Like his radio broadcasts, the film features many analogies and anecdotes to connect with every viewer in Howard's signature style of self-deprecating humor and sharp wit. It is a film that Howard had long wanted to create and as screenwriter Sidney Gilliat noted, he remembered being at Howard's house during the making of *Pimpernel Smith,* "discussing a propaganda film for empire audiences, during which an air raid took place."[134] Howard boosted everyone's spirits by playing rather badly but spiritedly on a piano. The "empire" film was to become *From the Four Corners* and debut a year later with Howard as writer and star, but he had been planning it for some time. Working with the Ministry of Information, the film was "part of a wider propaganda campaign, which also covered posters, press, radio and public meetings."[135] What sets the film apart from other documentary short films of the time is Howard's presence and the fact that he plays himself. As an actor popular with British Commonwealth and American audiences, he

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[131] *From the Four Corners* directed Anthony Havelock-Allan. (1942; London, UK: Ministry of Information).

[132] Ibid.

[133] Howard, *A Quite Remarkable Father*, 280-281.

[134] Eforgan, *The Lost Actor*, 150.

[135] James Chapman, *The British at War: Cinema, State and Propaganda: 1939-1945* (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1998), 57.

plays the role of cultural broker between the two countries in the film. In fifteen minutes, he demonstrated to British audiences that they had support in Commonwealth countries, showed Commonwealth audiences that they were appreciated and needed in the fight and to American audiences, while he made the numerous ideological connections between the United States, Britain and all Commonwealth neighbors. The official film is one of the most obvious in Howard's attempts to rally the Americans to Britain's cause. It lacks subtlety at moments, but also shines a light on the aid from the Commonwealth, showing British audiences that they are not alone in the fight against the Nazis.

Documentary short films produced by the MOI on topics such as education, youth, morale and the British forces were being released at a rate of one per week for the first two years of the war,[136] along with longer documentary films such as *From the Four Corners* and films made in a documentary style, such as *The Lion Has Wings.* While there were many British actors at the disposal of the MOI for documentaries. It tried to keep the documentaries more legitimate and authentic by not using actors. The popular 1939 film, *The Lion Has Wings,* did feature short performances by Merle Oberon and Ralph Richardson but they played fictional characters, alongside Flora Robson who portrayed Queen Elizabeth I. In *From the Four Corners,* Leslie Howard plays himself simultaneously honoring the more "British tradition of realism" in film while drawing in viewers with his movie star presence.[137] Just as the other documentary shorts by the MOI featured no actors but real soldiers and servicemen, the rest of Howard's castmates are not actors either, allowing Howard's film to have an appeal of authenticity while still eliciting his star power. The short fifteen-minute government funded film, was a shot in the arm for audiences in war-torn Britain and with Howard's speeches about freedom and common values front and center, the film is effective.

During 1941 to 1942, Howard was making great strides not only in his professional career as a producer, but also for British cinema and wartime propaganda with his feature films *Pimpernel Smith, 49th Parallel,* and *The First of the Few,* and the

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[136] H.D. Waley, "British Documentaries and the War Effort." *The Public Opinion Quarterly,* 6, no. 4 (1942): 606.

[137] Clive Coultass, "British Feature Films and the Second World War," *Journal of Contemporary History* 19, no. 1 (1984): 21.

documentary short, *From the Four Corners.* Before the war Howard was solely known as an actor, but he had long desired to step behind the camera and make a success at being a director, screenwriter and producer. He had produced some unsuccessful short films in the early twenties with his short-lived film production company, Minerva Films Ltd, and would not get a chance to produce and direct his own films again until the peak of his career in the late 1930s. With the power and momentum of his continued successful film career in the 1930s behind him, Howard was approached to star and co-direct *Pygmalion* (1938) with Anthony Asquith while gaining valuable experience behind the camera. Soon after, a determined David O. Selznick implored Howard to star as Ashley Wilkes in his epic Hollywood production of *Gone with the Wind.* Howard was reluctant and had no interest in starring in the film but after Selznick promised Howard a starring role and associate producer credit on his next film *Intermezzo* (1939), Howard relented and accepted the role of the Confederate soldier in order to gain the producing experience.

With *Pygmalion* and *Intermezzo* providing recent training to Howard in directing and producing, he felt confident he could move forward in his plans for his own film, and with England at war, the timing was ideal to finally achieve his goal and serve his country at the same time. Howard's popularity would soar with his wartime films and radio broadcasts, but more importantly, his propaganda films were making the desired impact in inspiring discussion amongst cinema goers, informing the public, and encouraging hope while simultaneously reaching across multiple class levels and people from cinemas to embassies. Howard was able to translate what made him a popular and effective radio broadcaster to the screen by creating powerful images alongside his passionate speeches now in cleverly written screenplays. Add in his talents as an actor, skilled supporting casts, moving soundtracks, artistic camera angles meant to bring forth tears and the support of powerful financiers, and Howard's films were successful. His films were big box office draws for 1941 and 1942, but more importantly, they provided the support, encouragement and strength that the British public needed in the years that saw the London "Blitz" and heavy losses in North Africa. With a new year approaching, and perhaps inspired by the spiritedness of his daughter Leslie Ruth or "Doodie," Howard decided to next shine a light on the female contribution to the war effort, making his next two films a favourite with many female Mass Observation diarists and audiences.

Chapter 4. The Gentle Sex

> *Well, there they are…the women. Our sweethearts, sisters, mothers, daughters…let's give in at last and admit that we are really proud of you. You strange, wonderful, incalculable creatures. The world you are helping to shape is going to be a better world…because you are helping to shape it. Pray silence gentlemen, I give you a toast! To the Gentle Sex!*
>
> -Leslie Howard*, The Gentle Sex*[138]

By 1943 there had been successful propaganda films honouring the Royal Navy (Noel Coward's *In Which We Serve)* and the Royal Air Force with Leslie Howard's *First of the Few.* In what would be Howard's final two films, he chose to shine a light on the female contribution to the war by telling the stories of women serving in the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS) and as nurses.

In November 1940, Howard's daughter, Leslie Ruth "Doodie" was invited by her father to share the microphone in a special broadcast to America, where his 17-year-old daughter was quick to defend her ability to serve her country:

> "You answer me this. Why are you so concerned that women should be exposed to the dangers of war as well as men?...If my brother has to risk his life, why not me?...Women are just as tough as men and a great deal more able to stand suffering….All women are supposed to do is produce the soldiers of the future. But has it never occurred to you that no woman is ever asked to a peace conference?...But they will take part in the next one, believe me. And in the reconstruction of the world. Unless of course the Nazis win…which they won't."[139]

Howard's daughter was passionate about the abilities of her sex and sensitive to the fact that many men at the time questioned whether women were capable of effectively assisting with the war effort. At the end of 1941 conscription had begun in Britain for women who eagerly joined auxiliary services attached to the army, navy and air force. Women were also working in other areas such as nursing, munitions factories and emergency services. "By the end of 1942, women had proved themselves invaluable in all fields, their high morale and hard work giving rise to admiration, or at least a change

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[138] *The Gentle Sex,* directed by Leslie Howard (1943; London, UK: General Film Distributors).

[139] Eforgan, *The Lost Actor*, 194.

in attitude" and "85 percent of the women in the country of a suitable age were involved in war work."[140] Perhaps inspired by his daughter's words and the actions of his countrywomen, Howard helped to produce two female-centric feature films in 1943 with the Ministry of Information Film Division's *The Gentle Sex* about the ATS, and an adaptation of Monica Dickens' novel about nurses in pre-NHS conditions called *The Lamp Still Burns.* Both films would be well received by the public and have a positive effect on audiences, especially female cinemagoers who were finally seeing themselves on the silver screen. With his two final films, Howard not only honours the service of his countrywomen, but again creates films which sought to inspire and inform cinemagoers.

Coming out just a few months before Launder and Gilliat's successful 1943 film *Millions Like Us* about female munitions factory workers, a similar film but about women in the ATS had been in the works at the small Highbury Studios in North London. After some disappointing first scenes, production was halted and eventually moved to Denham Studios by head of the MOI's Film Division, Jack Beddington. Howard was asked to take over as director and producer. According to Leslie's son, Ronald Howard, Beddington moved the film to Denham Studios because he "did not want to see such a useful propaganda film permanently immobilised…[and]…with Leslie's name attached to it the film would have greater appeal."[141] After spending time re-working the script and adding his signature wit, humor and style, production began on the female-centric film under Howard's direction. Howard essentially rescued the film and justified his involvement on the film with a *Britain Speaks* radio broadcast, noting how "women these days…[were]…so far reaching and important that the least a mere maker of films…[could do was]…to express on the screen the significance of their work."[142]

Opening with credit titles quoting a Victorian proverb from 1838 and simulated to look like embroidery, a tongue in cheek tone is immediately created with a deeper symbolism. Along with the stereotypical feminine embroidery is a romantic score that transitions to "regal pomp and circumstance, to a fulsome melody enhancing the

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[140] Eforgan, *The Lost Actor*, 195.

[141] Chapman, *The British at War*, 209.

[142] Lant, *Blackout*, 93.

acknowledgement of the cooperation of the ATS"[143] With these ironic and almost sarcastic nods to Victorian culture, Howard demonstrates in the first opening moments of his film that "in wartime, existing stereotypes of femininity, which to Howard in 1943 seem to have been largely Victorian, have become outmoded."[144] In its first scenes the camera peers over a balcony overlooking a busy train station, not coincidentally Victoria Station, with Howard's cheeky narration introducing us to the seven women who will be the focus of the story. Howard's shadow on the balcony is immediately recognizable and is the last time audiences would see him on film. His presence in the film is important as the film was trying to not only recruit women to the ATS, but reassure men that women could and should have a role in wartime activities and that they could do the job well. His physical appearance overlooking the women at the train station is important because, according to feminist historian Antonia Lant,

> "There is a tension between strategies for addressing a *female* audience-the primary audience for an ATS recruitment film-and a *national* audience that will support the efforts represented. The persona of Leslie Howard plays a crucial role in reigning in these differences in an effort to unify the address of the text."[145]

The audience next meets the female cast in quick vignettes narrated by Howard. Even though having Howard's name attached to the film was supposed to encourage audiences to see the film, "the greatest asset of the film was the gifted group of actresses." With talent like Rosamund John, Joan Gates, Jean Gillie, Joan Greenwood, Joyce Howard, Lilli Palmer and Barbara Waring starring, "they created great enthusiasm for the film."[146] The women are remarkable together and their camaraderie off screen as they went through actual ATS training translates naturally on screen in their many scenes together. After being introduced to each of the leading ladies at the train station, the women from differing backgrounds and classes board the train together seemingly

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[143] Lant, *Blackout*, 94.

[144] Ibid., 94.

[145] Ibid., 111.

[146] Eforgan, *The Lost Actor*, 196.

creating "connotations of class dissolution"[147] which was a symbolic way of showing how the war effort would and should bring everyone together.[148]

From Victoria Station we follow the female ensemble to an ATS training camp where they collect their kit, go through skills testing and share that first army meal together. After many long training sequences, they are eventually posted to new positions as mechanical engineers, lorry drivers, canteen assistants and with the Royal Artillery. A particularly moving and important moment in the film occurs when some of the women visit the older mother of Anne's (Joyce Howard) fiancé, Mrs. Sheridan, for tea. Anne innocently misspeaks by casually stating that "isn't it strange that probably for the first time in English history, women are fighting side by side with the men" and that the war "is going to make a tremendous difference to the status of women after the war is over."[149] What the women do not realize is that their elderly hostess had not only served in France alongside men in the First World War as an ambulance driver, but that she had been wounded in action. After Anne apologizes for her ignorance, Mrs. Sheridan encourages the group to continue believing that their position in society after the war should be improved thanks to their war time contributions, because when she and her fellow service women from the First World War "didn't really know what [they] wanted," she can recognize that this next generation of servicewomen do know what they want and believes they will "get it."[150]

It is a moment that features the impactful eloquence reminiscent of a typical Leslie Howard freedom speech on the BBC airwaves, and one that Howard's daughter no doubt would have appreciated. The scene not only invites the audience to reconsider and reflect upon the efforts of women who previously served their country, it also inspires hope for future equity for women by presenting the perspective of women discovering a new confidence in themselves with their war time efforts. Going further, the film begins

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[147] Lant, *Blackout*, 92.

[148] The opening scene boarding the train which allows for each of the female characters to be on equal footing regarding their classes and backgrounds is bookended with similar symbolic final scenes of the film when all of them queue up for tea and sandwiches after a long night of service and share their meal together.

[149] *The Gentle Sex*, directed by Leslie Howard (1943; London, UK: General Film Distributors).

[150] Ibid., 1:15.

with each of the seven women looking for something more than just a male partner in life, but a self-serving goal of independence and usefulness beyond marriage. The final scene featuring the women collecting a tea and sandwich after a hard and dangerous night helping with the war effort is an important choice of ending, as it demonstrates how their work and not their romantic relationships are their focus. Howard's final voice over addresses each woman individually, mentioning a future regarding romantic love for two of the women but not for all and the film closes with an image of them all sitting together as Howard notes how proud the country is of them. The film was shown several times in private screenings for ATS members "who reportedly were greatly cheered and affected by it;" this would have been a big morale boost for that particular audience to see their work reflected on screen with admiration.[151]

Besides honouring the work of women and the ATS, the MOI also had an ulterior motive in its choice of content and plotline. At the beginning of the war, the ATS had been dealing with rumours and allegations of promiscuity among its members, painting the entire service in a poor light. By 1941 a special investigation had been conducted by a parliamentary committee to address the rumours which resulted in "no justification for the vague but sweeping charges of immorality which have disturbed public opinion."[152] In order to combat these falsehoods attached to the ATS and the women who served with them, *The Gentle Sex* was made. Coincidentally in the same year, Princess Elizabeth joined the Transport Corps both giving "further reassurance that life with the ATS was wholesome and worthwhile."[153] The film delivers the wholesome effect desired with Howard lending his name and voice seemingly to guarantee audiences and create credibility since he was so revered.

The film release coincided "with the peak of female wartime employment" and formed "part of the first wave of wartime films to focus on women."[154] It was very successful, ranking third overall as the most popular film in 1943 for Mass Observation diarists and not surprisingly especially for female diarists, who were clearly detailed in

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[151] Eforgan, *The Lost Actor*, 200.

[152] Murphy, *British Cinema and the Second World War*, 153.

[153] Ibid., 154.

[154] Lant, *Blackout*, 93.

their admiration for the film. Many of the female diarists appreciated that they were seeing realistic and honest portrayals of women for the first time on the silver screen. A 32 year old teacher from Thornaby on Tees wrote that she "liked the documentary mingled with the story…the characters were real and natural and the humour grand…it is present day material presented in a very pleasing manner."[155] Another teacher, aged 34 from Masham, Yorks echoed the realistic portrayals, noting "it seemed natural and was distinguished by straightforward unaffected acting…a film about life as it is now for many girls."[156] For a member of the Women's Auxiliary Air Force from RAF Hopton, the film was a particular favourite of hers that year "for its realistic portrayal of service life which…[she knew]…so well." To have a female service member remark that the film accurately portrays her reality gives the film credibility and indirectly compliments Howard on the directing and writing. The acting ability of the seven leads is also commended as both a 38 year old welfare officer and former nurse from Glasgow, and a 30 year old BBC reporter from Northampton praise the film's "human" reactions or presentation, with the reporter going further and noting its splendid direction by Howard.[157] A 41 year old social worker from London was particularly expressive noting that she liked "films dealing with the everyday occurrences of life in wartime; films which make the significance of our everyday lives more vivid."[158] She chose *The Gentle Sex* as her favourite film of the year. With regards to film, she wrote:

> "This gives the impression of being very like real life. The girls seem like real people, and their experiences in the ATS very much what would be likely to happen in actual fact. I like the way in which we see them all, and know something of their background, before they join up, and the way in which we may observe the development of their characters in Army life."[159]

Howard chose to methodically film the women from the beginning of their ATS experience to the end and focus on their independent, goal-oriented motivations rather than romantic intentions. By filming the actresses completing actual ATS training

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[155] Richards and Sheridan, *Mass-Observation at the Movies*, 260.

[156] Ibid., 261.

[157] Ibid., 266.

[158] Ibid., 278.

[159] Ibid., 278.

exercises and experiencing relevant war-time scenarios, he directed and produced a documentary style film that appealed to female cinemagoers not only for its authenticity but the pride it created in their own sex.

Howard's other goals to inform and inspire are also achieved by evidence that many Mass Observation diarists were moved by the film. A 53 year old housewife from Burnley noted that "though dealing with the present war, this film was a change from the usual style…[and]…interesting and instructive as well as varied."[160] While a 36 year old shop assistant from Dewsbury liked the film because "it showed what our young ladies are doing and have to put up with,"[161] a 27 year old schoolmistress from Burnley had a more in depth analysis of the film, noting that it had a "moral tone that is above the general standard for films" and does "*not* assume 1) that wealth and show are all important 2) that sexual love is the biggest thing in life, and the only thing for women [sic]."[162] Here Howard's choice not to make romantic goals a priority for the seven characters is validated; the film's realistic portrayal of women and their independent goals manages to break barriers for women being portrayed in film inspiring discussion. Ultimately, Howard hoped to inspire action in his film audiences and he achieves that goal with this film as well. Evidence of the power of the propaganda found in *The Gentle Sex* can be found in the diary of a 36-year-old stenographer from Birmingham who, after critiquing the film as being "a little too neat and trim and obvious perhaps, but with some nice touches," believes the film to be "successful, I should say, in that it made even me, over age and ineligible for half a dozen reasons as I am, wish for quite a few minutes that I could join one of the Women's Services."[163]

Perhaps unsurprisingly, men were not as enthusiastic about the film. Many of the male diarists who chose to write about the film did not even remember the correct title, calling the film "The Fair Sex,"[164] or disappointingly, "The ATS film (title forgotten)."[165]

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[160] Richards and Sheridan, *Mass-Observation at the Movies*, 266.

[161] Ibid., 270.

[162] Ibid., 277.

[163] Ibid., 267.

[164] Ibid., 248.

[165] Richards and Sheridan, *Mass-Observation at the Movies*, 249.

For two male diarists who did choose to mention the film as one they had seen in 1943, reviews were favourable. A 20 year old REME Captain and engineering student from Wallington felt that the film was "very interesting to one who has quite a number of ATS to work with, both as documentary of their training, and for the study of the effect on different types of girls."[166] The 57 year old "independent" man from Andover who also had praised Howard's *The First of the Few*, also chose to praise the film for its realistic portrayal of the ATS and the film's power to honour the female contribution, noting that "after war we shall want to show women and those at home in a similar film how they are helping to light and happiness in distant parts of the world.[sic]"[167]

Even though the film was more popular with women, and understandably so, Leslie Howard's *The Gentle Sex* was impactful for both male and female audiences with both able to recognize the importance and significance of the film during the war. It was able to inform and inspire audiences to action creating a film for the MOI that was successful and not just at the box office. With its wholesome female protagonists eager to join in the war effort and putting their romantic interests behind their service goals, the film was great wartime propaganda in not just influencing female audiences but helping change the unsavory perceptions of the ATS.

Another female centric wartime film from 1943 was Launder and Gilliat's *Millions Like Us* about the mobile women in factories serving Britain. The film debuted in November 1943, six months after Howard's film had debuted in April adding to the new film canon of women in wartime service. *Millions like Us* was moderately successful at the time and has since become a popular film reviewed by many film historians.[168]

Yet, what sets Howard's film apart from *Millions Like Us* and the few other female wartime films that came before and after, is that not only did it have a female driven plot and protagonists, it had few male characters further allowing the focus to be on the female ensemble, female experience and female to female relationships. Just like the continuous wartime message to the nation as a whole, in Howard's film there was no

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[166] Ibid., 234.

[167] Ibid., 248.

[168] *Millions Like Us* did not rank anywhere in *Kinematograph Weekly*'s annual survey for "Best Films" or "Best British Films" of the year.

star character or couple to follow as all of the character's narratives were of equal importance. This symbolized the importance of the nation coming together to fight the war regardless of background or class. All of the other films that featured women from the ATS at the time were comedies and/or musicals such as *Old Mother Riley Joins Up* (1941), *King Arthur Was A Gentleman* (1942), *The Next of Kin* (1942), *Women Aren't Angels (*1943), *Somewhere on Leave* (1943) and *Miss London Ltd* (1943). Each of these films were light-hearted and had a male protagonist with the female ATS member playing a secondary character, usually the object of the protagonist's affections or playing a secondary role. While *The Gentle Sex* does feature some light-hearted moments, it is solely a melodrama with an all-female ensemble, with the very few male actors playing minor roles, including Howard himself as the narrator. The film was ground-breaking at the time and in the 1943 annual *Kinematograph Weekly* film survey, the popularity of Howard's *The Gentle Sex* would see the film share the title of "Runner Up" to the "Biggest Winner" and "Best British Film" awards together with his next and final film *The Lamp Still Burns.*[169]

After finishing *The Gentle Sex,* Leslie Howard started work on what would be his final film, *The Lamp Still Burns,* a tribute to wartime nurses before the creation of the NHS. What makes the film unique in context to other female-centric war films of the time, including *The Gentle Sex,* is that it was the first and only feature film focusing on Army Nurses and their wartime contributions. Written by Charles Dickens' great granddaughter, Monica Dickens, the novel "One Pair of Feet" had been published the year before and gave a realistic description of nursing conditions during World War Two. With government backing, Howard produced the film adaptation of the novel, had his favourite screenwriters tackle the adaptation, had his sister help with casting and even took over director's duties rehearsing and directing the actors on set.[170] Even though Maurice Elvey is credited as director he was more of an assistant to Howard, initially taking a secondary role to Howard until he needed to step in in his absence.

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[169] Lant, *Blackout*, 231.

[170] Eforgan, *The Lost Actor*, 212.

Actress Rosamund John once again took on the lead role in a Howard film playing Hilary Clarke, a former architect who, when witnessing the nurses coming to the aid of her assistant after a traffic accident, has a moment of self-realization and leaves her job to train as a nurse. While training, she butts heads with the head nurse over the military type efficiency that is expected and challenges her on what she sees as unnecessary regulations. Complicating matters occurs when a former architecture client of hers, Laurence Rains, played by the handsome Stewart Granger, is in a factory accident that causes both him and his fiancée Pamela to stay in the same hospital to recuperate. After realizing her fiancé is in love with Hilary, Pamela breaks off her engagement to Rains leaving him and Hilary free to pursue their feelings for each other. Expectations at the time were however that nurses had to be able to dedicate their entire lives to the profession leaving no room for marriage or family life. At the end of the film, after Hilary had been fired for arguing with the head nurse and drinking beer with a doctor, she is given the opportunity to defend her case to stay training as a nurse. If she wins her case, she will have to give up any hope of any immediate future with Rains, but if she does not, she is free to marry. Deciding to follow her passion for her vocation, she successfully wins her case, is reinstated and sacrifices her romantic life for one of service. Rains, in the meantime, vows to wait for her and campaign to allow nurses to have both a career and marriage and not be forced to choose between one or the other.

The Lamp Still Burns is a realistic, unglamorous tribute to the nursing profession, which is surprising considering the Ministry of Information backed the film. The Ministry of Information likely felt comfortable with any creative choices Howard would make due to his successful record of previous propaganda films. Howard was meticulous with the re-creation of the hospital wards on Denham Studio stages, making sure that medical instruments and nursing routines would be replicated in exact detail. It is the attention to these details, including voice-overs by Rosamund John with a "documentary intonation," that gives the film a strong documentary tone, making the film feel colder and more detached than Howard's previous films.[171] Like *The Gentle Sex*, the focus for

[171] Christine Gledhill, "An Abundance of Understatement': Documentary, Melodrama and Romance," in *Nationalising femininity: Culture, sexuality and British cinema in the Second World War*, edited by

the lead female protagonist is not marriage or a romantic life with those goals becoming secondary to one of service and career aspirations. In contrast to *The Gentle Sex*, the film barely mentions the war, with only a single scene with an air raid serving to remind audiences the film takes place during the war. The film was still able to connect to audiences enabling its propaganda to impact the audience without the constant reminders of war. A male agricultural worker from Kenton appreciated that "after the nasty, gory, war films from America…[*The Lamp Still Burns*]…was like drinking clear water, listening to English accents, a film removed from war, with a good plot, and finally a message to the public."[172] The message was one of admiration for nurses, service over love, and duty over marriage. A 26 year old male public health official from Birmingham also did not mention the war in his review, praising the film "mainly for good acting [by?] the heroine who breaks all hospital's rules and even answers back to the Matron![sic]"[173] The film is more of a documentary-drama, seemingly disguising its wartime propaganda and toning down its sentimentality.

Perhaps it is the colder tone, or the lack of female camaraderie in comparison to *The Gentle Sex,* that explains why only one woman selected the film to praise in the 1943 "Favourite Film" Directive from Mass Observation. A 57-year-old housewife from Ware simply stated that she was "looking forward to seeing Leslie Howard's last film *The Lamp Still Burns*, when it comes to my district."[174] There were no other mentions of the film for the 1943 Directive. The lack of submissions could simply be a timing issue as the film and the Directive were both distributed in November, and, although the film was a hit in 1943, due to when the film was released it "could not figure prominently in the directive returns."[175] Still, the consensus seemed to be that some people "praised the serious issues in the film, but complained that it was rather too earnest (*Manchester Guardian,* 18 January 1944)."[176]

Christine Gledhill and Gillian Swanson (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1996), 225.

[172] Richards and Sheridan, *Mass-Observation at the Movies*, 248.

[173] Ibid., 233.

[174] Ibid., 288.

[175] Richards and Sheridan, *Mass-Observation at the Movies*, 221.

[176] Eforgan, *The Lost Actor*, 213.

The fact that Howard left the production to go on his lecture tour to Portugal with the intention of coming back to edit the film, leaves me to wonder if the film could have had a stronger impact with his post production finishing touches. *The Lamp Still Burns* is a strong propaganda film yet lacks those softer moments *The Gentle Sex* created with its female interactions, or *The First of the Few* created with Howard's moving dialogue. It is those seemingly simple yet effective moments which endeared both films to viewers and made for an enjoyable cinema experience which is why people were so affected by it. Richards and Sheridan point out that *The Lamp Still Burns* was a hit in 1943, but with Howard's tragic death in June, nearly six months before the film was released, logic implies its success may not have been based on the merit of the film but more on the fact it was the last film Howard worked on and it had sentimental value for English audiences.[177] Either way, the film successfully describes a nurses' training journey in pre-NHS conditions and although it lacks Howard's finishing touches, it is an admirable tribute to those women who sacrificed their personal lives and who served their country. Between the ATS tribute in *The Gentle Sex* and the tribute to nurses in *The Lamp Still Burns,* it is clear that the women serving their country had Leslie Howard firmly in their corner to document, praise and validate their sacrifice by sharing their experiences with film audiences in an effort to promote and inspire those cinemagoers with quality propaganda feature films. No doubt, "Doodie" must have been proud.

[177] Richards and Sheridan, *Mass-Observation at the Movies*, 221.

Chapter 5. Leslie Howard in Historical Context

> *"If historians ever compile a list of Englishmen who helped save their country from going under when the full force of Hitler's might weighed down upon her, they surely will include in it the name of Leslie Howard, actor, writer, and patriot-now posted missing."*
>
> *-Charles Buttrose*[178]

Has Leslie Howard's war work been ignored?

Since Leslie Howard first dominated the box office in Hollywood and Britain in the 1930s, he had been the focus of numerous fan magazines, interviews and film reviews. Although his celebrity status and the mystery surrounding his death in 1943 has meant that there was no lack of interest on the part of the general public, with the exception of some film historians, historical treatments of Howard have been left to a small group of biographers.

The information on Leslie Howard, his accomplishments in film and his contribution to the war effort has been both varied and significant but addressed in depths that differ between biographers and academics. While multiple biographers have written extensively about Howard's life their work is not rigorously scrutinized and provides limited academic value. Yet, historians, whose work is academically and accurately sound have largely ignored Howard's contributions. British historians and historians who specialize in World War Two, propaganda or morale do research that can be broad and non-specific. This means that Leslie Howard and the impact of his work in radio and film are usually relegated to a sentence or two, maybe a paragraph, and, more often than not, it is a comment about his role in *Gone with the Wind.* For some, however, Howard does not come into the picture at all.

In Angus Calder's *The People's War: Britain 1939-1945*,[179] Howard is given a nod in two sentences alongside other British actors and mentions one of his films,

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[178] Charles Buttrose, "Always for England," *The Sydney Morning Herald* (June 5, 1943), https://inafferrabileleslie.wordpress.com/always-for-england-1943.

[179] Angus Calder, *The People's War* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969), 369.

whereas in Peter Clarke's *Hope and Glory: Britain 1900-2000*,[180] he is not mentioned at all. Ross McKibbin at least mentions Howard in his book *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951,*[181] but manages to summarize the war icons' life, work, wartime contributions and death in one short paragraph. Interestingly, however, Angus Calder's later 1991 book *The Myth of the Blitz*[182] addresses an earlier omission in not addressing Howard's significance to the war effort by dedicating a brief three-page overview to Howard's biography, wartime films and radio broadcast contributions, including a review of *Pimpernel Smith* together with references to Anthony Aldgate and Jeffrey Richard's arguments that Howard represented the epitome of Englishness. The content found in most general British history books that address Howard's life and work is severely lacking and more needs to be said about his contributions.

Scholarship on morale and propaganda, echoes the lack of content on Leslie Howard found in British history books. Ian McLaine's renowned publication, *Ministry of Morale: Home Front Morale and the Ministry of Information in World War II* (1979),[183] addresses important topics about morale in wartime Britain including the 'myth' surrounding morale, its place in the national consciousness and how a revival of the 'Dunkirk spirit' is often invoked by politicians since the end of the war. McLaine also examines how, even though the MOI had a division specifically dedicated to sustain civilian morale, it was unorganized and yet the morale of the British people seemed to be unaffected by its inefficiency. Leslie Howard is not valued in McLaine's book, as not only did he create films that affected home front morale, he had been in films produced by the Ministry of Information's Film Division. He had also been a contributor to the MOI's Ideas Committee which created and discussed common themes to be reflected in British propaganda and morale boosting films. Not only is Howard and other wartime film contributors such as directors Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger or Alexander Korda not mentioned in McLaine's book, but neither is the Films Division of the MOI,

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[180] Peter Clarke, *Hope and Glory: Britain 1900-2000* (London: Penguin Books, 2004).

[181] Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England: 1918-1951* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 443.

[182] Angus Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1991), 205-207.

[183] Ian McLaine, *Ministry of Morale: Home Front Morale and the Ministry of Information in World War II* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1979).

which was so prominent and important to the MOI that it received its own division and management. Considering the book was published in the 1970s when academic scholarship on film was in its infancy and was just beginning to be taken seriously in academia, it is possible that McLaine may not have entirely understood the historical significance of the Films Division or his error in excluding it in his book. To not mention Leslie Howard in any book about morale or propaganda during the Second World War, or the MOI, shows that some scholars do not yet understand Leslie Howard and his contributions need to be understood and written about.

The first significant publications on Leslie Howard in the years following his death seem to have been issued in response to each other and are more biographical. In 1957, fourteen years after Howard's death, British journalist Ian Colvin published his book *Flight 777: The Mystery of Leslie Howard*[184] which focuses mainly on the theories around Howard's death. Having worked in pre-war Berlin, Colvin had German contacts that in the 1950s helped him to investigate Howard's death, and he wrote a book that moves from narrative to non-fiction and sensationalizes the mystery behind Howard's death. Therefore, it is no wonder that Howard's daughter published her memoir only two years later, presumably in hopes of changing the current public narrative on her father, due to Colvin's book, from his death to his life. In an effort to try and reconcile their feelings about their loss and what happened to their father, both of Howard's children would publish books based on their own personal perspective. Leslie Ruth Howard, or "Doodie" as she was called, penned a heartfelt memoir in 1959 called *A Quite Remarkable Father,*[185] in which she shared her memories growing up with her father, his work ethic while working on his films and a brief section about the aftermath of his death for her family. Doodie was only 19 when her father died and waiting to write a memoir about her father until she was 35 and had consolidated her feelings and memories about Howard, was likely a therapeutic exercise.

Howard's son Ronald also wrote a memoir about his father but waited until 1982 to start writing, when his "feelings…[had]… solidified," "the wound…[was]…an old

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[184] Ian Colvin, *Flight 777: The Mystery of Leslie Howard* (London: Pen and Sword Books Ltd, 2013).

[185] Leslie Ruth Howard, *A Quite Remarkable Father* (Toronto: Longmans, Green and Company, 1959).

scar long healed," and until the "reactions of youth" became the "reflections of middle age."[186] In his memoir, *In Search of My Father,*[187] Ronald started by focusing on Leslie Howard's life after the First World War, delving into his wartime films but most significantly, exploring what brought his father to Portugal in the first place and the theories surrounding his death. Even Ronald Howard notes in his epilogue that he initially had no intention of delving so deeply into Howard's disappearance and, that with such a lack of evidence, he should have just "put down those events to 'the inscrutable workings of Fate.'"[188] Ronald Howard's other contribution to his father's historiography is a collection of transcribed BBC radio broadcasts called *Trivial Fond Records*[189] published in 1982 as he was simultaneously writing his memoir. In *Trivial Fond Records* Ronald Howard provides brief and minor background information on each selection and lets Leslie Howard's self-written BBC broadcasts speak for themselves.

Each of Howard's children's memoirs come from a perspective that no other biography or academic work could possibly emulate, as they provide personal and heartfelt tributes from children to a beloved father. While they lack unbiased perspectives and a deeper analysis of their father's wartime contributions, they make up for it with personal anecdotes that peel back a previously unknown and unshared layer of Howard's life. Their memoirs are the closest documents we have to an official autobiography of Howard's life and although they are not academic in nature, it can be argued that they provide primary source evidence to help understand and analyze Howard's actions and personal thoughts.

Other biographies of Howard include *Leslie Howard: The Lost Actor*[190] published by Estel Eforgan in 2013, seventy years after Howard's death. Eforgan is widely considered to be Howard's primary biographer and in her book she provides a thorough appraisal of Howard's life in its entirety. Although the book is not considered an

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[186] Ronald Howard, *In Search of My Father: A Portrait of Leslie Howard* (New York: St. Martins Publishing, 1984), 241.

[187] Ronald Howard, *In Search of My Father: A Portrait of Leslie Howard* (New York: St. Martins Publishing, 1984).

[188] Ibid., 241.

[189] Ronald Howard, *Leslie Howard: Trivial Fond Records* (London: William Kimber & Co. Limited, 1982).

[190] Estel Eforgan, *Leslie Howard: The Lost Actor* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2013).

academic text, it is noteworthy that film historian Jeffrey Richards, who is the most prominent academic to write on Howard, provides the foreword. Eforgan provides some evidence from the BBC archive and other credible sources such as Howard's children to discuss his radio work and career, but when it comes to his wartime activities she mentions some films briefly and, like most other historians, focuses only on one or two of his films; in this case, *Pimpernel Smith* and *The Gentle Sex.*

Phyllis Lassner's 2016 essay, "Leslie Howard: Propaganda Artist," does go into depth about his radio broadcasts and wartime films to demonstrate the wide variety of propaganda activities Howard was involved in.[191] However, she does not further explore the impact of his films or use the Mass Observation archive to provide the qualitative evidence that better evaluates the significance of his films. What Colvin, Howard's children, Eforgan, Lassner and even filmmaker Thomas Hamilton,[192] achieve with their individual biographical contributions, is the creation of a picture of who Howard was as a man, father, victim, movie star and wartime icon. While each source is thorough in some areas of his life, allowing me to utilize the information, an analysis of the impact of his broadcasts and each of his wartime films beyond the quantitative data or film review is lacking. This allows room for more interpretation.

The Limitations of Academic Treatments

Most academic treatments of Leslie Howard are limited. In general, academic historians have not shown much interest in Howard's life and the few who have written about Howard have limited their analysis to one or two of his films in order to make a point. A good example is the work done by many gender historians who use Howard's final two female-centric films *The Gentle Sex* and/or *The Lamp Still Burns* as evidence in their academic work of the female experience in the war or how women were portrayed

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[191] Lassner focuses on two films in her article in particular, *Pimpernel Smith* and *49th Parallel.* Phyllis Lassner. "Leslie Howard: Propaganda Artist" in *Espionage and Exile: fascism and anti-fascism in British spy fiction and film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016)

[192] Thomas Hamilton produced a film documentary on Howard's life called *Leslie Howard: The Man Who Gave a Damn* in 2016. He is currently producing another film looking into Howard's death. (2016; London, UK: Repo Films Ltd, 2016), DVD.

on film. These films were inherently unique for the time because they both focused on the female experience, validated women entering the workforce to assist their country, included storylines that focused on duty rather than romantic goals and showcased inter-female relationships. They also were released months apart. Therefore, to utilize one of Howard's female centric films over the other and not mention or recognize the other is a missed opportunity as they both would provide a richness to a gender historians' argument with regards to women at work during the Second World War.

For example, Antonia Lant, in her 1991 book *Blackout,*[193] has a second chapter entitled "The Mobile Woman: Femininity in Wartime Cinema," where she analyzes the female experience in wartime films, and how their presence in wartime films reflected a new sense of realism in filmmaking. With a new documentary style film becoming a prominent artistic choice, realism became key to wartime film narratives and, therefore, women and their experiences needed to be included. Lant also argues that due to the overwhelming size of female cinema audiences, their stories needed to become front and centre but also, and most importantly, "the sudden strategic significance of women for national defense and the consequent need to present her contribution as part of the greater national effort"[194] became the main reason for female centred wartime stories. Therefore, dissecting Frank Launder and Sidney Gilliat's *Millions Like Us* (1943) and Leslie Howard's wartime film *The Gentle Sex,* which both delve into women's wartime contributions, becomes a focus for her analysis. In *Blackout* she quickly reviews Howard's life and wartime accomplishments while choosing rather to focus on his female centric film noting how Howard "recasts screen femininity in [a] patriotic direction" and, "uniforming women ran counter to traditional notions of femininity."[195] While Lant's arguments advance a very interesting analytical perspective on *The Gentle Sex*, (and I make a point of mentioning her research as her arguments help to explain the female response to the film), she curiously does not delve into Howard's other female centric film *The Lamp Still Burns*.

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[193] Antonia Lant, *Blackout: Reinventing Women for Wartime British Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

[194] Lant, *Blackout*, 59.

[195] Ibid., 16.

Judy Suh, filmmaker and professor at Duquesne University, is also a gender relations specialist. In her 2012 article "Women, Work, and Leisure in British Wartime Documentary Realism,"[196] she picks three films including *Listen to Britain* (1942) by Humphrey Jennings and Stewart McAllister, Sidney Gilliat and Frank Launder's *Millions Like Us* (1943) and Howard's *The Gentle Sex* to help recontextualize fiction author Inez Holden's two wartime novels *Night Shift* (1941) and *There's No Story There* (1944) to show how "representations of newfound centrality of leisure and women in documentary realism radically expand the sites of socialist politics."[197] As Lant does in her essay, Suh also briefly mentions Howard's *The Gentle Sex* to make her point, but omits Howard's other female centric film about nurses.

On the other hand, Christine Gledhill, another historian with a focus on women in cinema, did shine a light on Howard's *The Lamp Still Burns* in her 1996 essay "An Abundance of Understatement': Documentary, Melodrama and Romance."[198] She questions how women and femininity are portrayed in wartime British cinema, especially in newly popular documentary realist 'home front film' and costume melodramas that flooded the cinemas during the war. *The Lamp Still Burns*, with its realistic portrayal of nursing during the war is an example of a home front documentary film and yet Gledhill only reviews the film and discusses how the film served as a combination of a documentary, melodrama and romance. This did not give due credit to the significance of Howard's final film in his canon, the Second World War or film history. For any historian with a gender relations focus to analyze only one of Howard's female centric films and not go beyond film reviews, especially considering they were released back-to-back and in the same year he died making them popular at the cinema, leaves room for further interpretation and analysis.

The greatest challenge to my argument that Howard's work has been ignored comes from film historians such as Robert Murphy, James Chapman, Anthony Aldgate

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[196] Judy Suh, "Women, Work, and Leisure in British Wartime Documentary Realism," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 40, (2012).

[197] Suh, "Women, Work, and Leisure in British Wartime Documentary Realism," 54.

[198] Christine Gledhill, "An Abundance of Understatement': Documentary, Melodrama and Romance," in *Nationalising femininity: Culture, sexuality and British cinema in the Second World War*, edited by Christine Gledhill and Gillian Swanson (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1996).

and Jeffrey Richards. The work of these historians has transformed our understanding of the cinema in Britain during the Second World War. Nevertheless, it remains true that none of them have considered all of Howard's creations in the holistic way that this thesis does.

Film historians Robert Murphy, James Chapman, Anthony Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards all share an academic focus on cinema in Britain during the Second World War. They are the lead historians in their field and each have addressed Howard's contributions which usually go beyond a simple review of the film in several of their academic works. Their work on British film in the Second World War, and Howard and his film contributions provide the most significant historical work on the subjects. Murphy, in his book *British Cinema and the Second World War,*[199] argues that certain wartime film genres such as "low budget comedies, stoical Home Front sagas, unrealistic resistant adventures and evocations of English nationalism" are valuable historical resources for and of the time period as they reflected what issues were important to cinema audiences at the time.[200] While Murphy reviewed *Pimpernel Smith, The Gentle Sex* and *The Lamp Still Burns* with background information about how Howard guided the films into fruition, his reviews of each film are brief with Howard being mentioned in a sentence or two, usually just giving him credit for the film he glosses over.

Chapman's research in *The British at War: Cinema, State and Propaganda: 1939-1945*[201] looks into the government involvement with the films being made during the war and their use as propaganda. Given to his propaganda focus, he therefore chose Howard's most powerful propaganda films *49th Parallel*, *The First of the Few* and *The Gentle Sex* to review. Although Chapman does mention how *The Gentle Sex* ranked in a Mass Observation survey, Chapman nor Murphy, address every one of Howard's films or utilize the wealth of evidence to be found in the Mass Observation archive to further their research on Howard or his historiography.

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[199] Robert Murphy, *British Cinema and the Second World War,* (London: Continuum, 2000).

[200] Murphy, *British Cinema and the Second World War*, 7.

[201] James Chapman, *The British at War: Cinema, State and Propaganda: 1939-1945* (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1998).

Historian Jeffrey Richards, on his own, or with fellow historians Anthony Aldgate or Dorothy Sheridan,[202] has published numerous books and articles about British cinema, Mass Observation and the cinema, and about Leslie Howard himself. He is, without a doubt, the first academic film historian to publish on Leslie Howard, which makes his foreword in Estel Eforgan's biography all the more significant. However, even Richards continuously stops short of including Howard's entire wartime film canon and often focuses entirely on *Pimpernel Smith* without considering the rest of Howard's work.

With Aldgate, Richard's 1999[203] and 2007[204] books about British cinema in the Second World War have chosen select films from the war years to analyze and discuss. *Pimpernel Smith* is the common Howard film analyzed with a dedicated chapter where Richards briefly discusses Howard's background before going into some of Howard's popular war films in depth, including behind the scenes anecdotes, discussing how the films were made and Howard's role in each. Even though Richards and Aldgate analyze Howard's *49th Parallel, Pimpernel Smith* and *The First of the Few,* they do not delve into his other war films and, surprisingly, do not reference the Mass Observation Archive. It is surprising because Richards, with Dorothy Sheridan, published a book dedicated to Mass Observation reports on cinema-going and surveys related to popular films of the 1940s.[205] However, his 1987 Mass Observation book Richards only provides the evidence and results from select surveys found in the archive, and does not provide analysis of any of the surveys or diarists mentioning Howard or his films as this thesis does.

Richard's own individual publications from 1976,[206] 1984[207] and 2010[208] which either focus on or argue Howard's significance specifically are fairly repetitious. In each

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[202] Dorothy Sheridan was also the Director of the Mass Observation Archive from 1990-2008.

[203] Anthony Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards, *Best of British: Cinema and Society from 1930 to the Present* (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1999).

[204] Anthony Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards, *Britain Can Take It: British Cinema in the Second World War* (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2007).

[205] Jeffrey Richards and Dorothy Sheridan, *Mass-Observation at the Movies* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1987).

[206] Jeffrey Richards, "The Thinking Man as Hero: Leslie Howard." *Focus on Film*, no. 25, Summer/Autumn, (1976): 37-50.

he provides a biography, glosses over Howard's other less popular war films before reviewing more popular films of Howard's in depth, usually *Pimpernel Smith* and *The First of the Few,* and then discusses the similar character archetypes Howard plays, sometimes adding in reviews on pre-war films such as *Pygmalion.* He does not, however, use the Mass Observation archive to provide further analysis on the success or impact of Howard's films. It needs to be noted, however, that Richard's 1976 article "The Thinking Man as Hero: Leslie Howard" from *Focus on Film* is significant, not only for Howard's historiography but for academic scholarship on film. In the early 1970s, after the advent of academic journals on film such as *Film & History* and organizations such as the Historians' Film Committee, historians started working to "demonstrate that investigation of the mass media constituted serious and important scholarship."[209] For Richards to publish a scholarly article on film and to choose Leslie Howard as his subject during the first wave of academic film scholarship, demonstrates not only Howard's significance to the art form, but Richard's own belief that Howard was an important first subject that needed to be explored.

Murphy, Chapman, Aldgate, Sheridan and especially Richards in particular have been significant contributors to Leslie Howard's historiography continuously since the 1970s when film history started to be taken seriously as an academic field. Although I pull strands from their research as they do include work by Howard, each publication is either missing essential films from Howard's film canon, do not delve into his BBC broadcast contribution, or miss the deeper contribution of his films by solely depending on film reviews or the box office. To better understand Howard, film historians need to look at Howard's entire body of work from the war instead of choosing only a select few films to analyze.

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[207] Jeffrey Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society in Britain 1930-1939* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1984).

[208] Jeffrey Richards, *Cinema and Radio in Britain and America 1920-60* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2010).

[209] Robert Brent Toplin and Jason Eudy, "The Historian Encounters Film: A Historiography," *OAH Magazine of History* 16, (June 2002): 7.

Was Leslie Howard an imperialist?

Leslie Howard's father was a Hungarian-Jewish immigrant to England and as the son of an immigrant, Howard had a fierce pride of being English instilled upon him at an early age. His belief in what he believed to be 'English' values of duty, integrity, determination, honor and hard work alongside a deprecating sense of humor and an appreciation for freedom, democracy and humanity became part of Howard's fabric of life. Although he was a proud Englishman he was often in the United States or travelling back and forth for work.

Howard escaped his traumatic memories of serving as a soldier in the First World War by going to New York where he spent most of the 1920s on stage on Broadway. 1930 saw his Hollywood debut in *Outward Bound* and by the time he left the United States to return to England in 1939, he had made twenty two films, only returning to England for four of them including *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (1934) and *Pygmalion* (1938). Between his time on Broadway and in Hollywood, Howard had spent almost twenty years in the United States with short work trips taking him back to England only to return to the U.S. shortly after.

Howard's extensive time spent working and living in the United States is what made him the perfect candidate to be that cultural broker between the U.S. and England. He understood the values, perspectives and feelings of both countries and was able to effectively communicate with clarity to each country, with his own experiences providing validity to his comments. With his ability to effectively reach both audiences, and in addition to audiences within the Commonwealth, Howard was more an internationalist and his films and radio broadcasts reflect that.

It has been argued by some historians that Howard was an imperialist with a propensity to promote the British Empire and its colonialist agenda in his wartime films and broadcasts. I firmly disagree with this portrayal of Howard for several reasons but primarily because a holistic analysis of Howard's work demonstrates that Howard was an internationalist and a cultural broker, seeking to explain 'England' – and I mean England - not Britain and the British Empire – to the United States of America.

Wendy Webster thinks otherwise. In her engaging monograph, *Englishness and Empire: 1939-1965*[210] Webster "explores how far and in what contexts and unexpected places, imperial identity and loss of imperial power resonated in popular narratives of nation and culture,"[211] Her analysis of evidence drawn from films, documentaries and television programs embraces Howard's 1941 film *From the Four Corners*. She argues that Howard's film, his final monologue and his BBC broadcasts more generally promoted the Empire and the heroism and idealism that linked Englishness with Empire. I contend that a holistic understanding of Howard's work demonstrates that Webster misreads *From the Four Corners* and misunderstands the central message and significance of Howard's wartime work.

The film was made in 1941 and yes, was an original idea by Howard to connect to Empire audiences but also and more importantly, it was created by Howard and financially supported by the MOI to appeal to *American* audiences and urge them to join the war. Webster's analysis of the film begins with her describing the opening of the film when "a woman" greets the three soldiers from Australia, Canada and New Zealand and calls them "'splendid fellows'" before telling them "'how wonderful you are coming all those thousands of miles to answer the motherland's calls to arms.'"[212] She then notes that the woman's greeting is "the dominant view of Empire in the First World War" before concluding that the soldiers are "uneasy" with her "gushing and patronizing" remarks.

Webster notes that Howard, in his conversation with the soldiers, "disputes the woman's claim that the soldiers are answering the motherland's call," to which they all agree.[213] After calling Howard's final speech at St. Paul's Cathedral a "history lesson" she concludes her analysis of the film by stating that the three soldiers are "the most characteristic representations of empire in the war, foregrounding martial masculinity and

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[210] Wendy Webster, *Englishness and Empire 1939-1965* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005)

[211] Ibid, 4.

[212] Ibid, 9

[213] Ibid., 10.

a racial community of Britons."[214] What Webster ignores is the *substance* of this history lesson given by Howard.

When Howard was asked to be a radio broadcaster, it was precisely because of his experiences in both England and the United States and his ability to persuade audiences concerning interconnectedness of the English speaking world. With his ability to be a successful cultural broker, his work on radio and in film was dedicated to appealing to American audiences who were still wary of participating in yet another European war. Until the attack on Pearl Harbor, Howard made a point of trying to engage American audiences by demonstrating what we as English speaking peoples had in common and were at risk of losing if the Nazis succeeded in their goal in attacking civilization. Howard's radio broadcast on December 23rd and Christmas Eve of 1940 encapsulates exactly what he felt and what was motivating him in his work:

> One thing we have contributed to the civilization of the world which was new and our own; something of which the Germans have never known the meaning; something called tolerance. All the English speaking nations have planted that flower of civilization wherever they have taken up their governments. It is one form of that freedom for which the Greeks fought at Marathon, and Bruce's Scots at Bannockburn, and Elizabeth's English in the channel and the French at Valmy, and the American colonists at Saratoga. That the worship of God shall be free; that speech and writing shall be free; that national assemblies may contain oppositions; that racial or political minorities shall live in peace; that neither creed nor colour nor class shall bar a man from the privileges of a citizen; we believe all these things to be good and right and just. That faith we English speaking peoples will maintain as long as we are free nations; and to teach that faith to the world has been, above all, our destiny.[215]

Howard's Christmas Eve speech is not from a man with imperialist or colonial attitudes, but from a man who is an internationalist, a man who, yes, embraced the cultural superiority of the English speaking peoples but his embrace of English speaking civilization did not make him an imperialist.

A majority of Howard's earlier films were also geared towards American audiences and not meant to promote the British Empire or colonial attitudes. *49th Parallel*

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[214] Ibid., 10.

[215] Aldgate and Richards, *Britain Can Take It,* 72. Dec 23/24 1940.

(1941) was solely created to hopefully bring an awareness to Americans that the war could quickly become their problem instead of just a European one if Hitler was allowed to continue his tyranny. Powell and Pressburger specifically placed the story in Canada to do just that, only pivoting to make the film a tribute to Commonwealth countries when the Pearl Harbor attack occurred during filming and brought the Americans into the war. Within the film there is a considerate and kind treatment of different Canadians including French Canadians, Inuit peoples, Hutterites and Indigenous peoples. Yes, Howard's character is in the Rockies to research tribal war customs and the indigenous people could have been represented better, but Howard's character does treat his indigenous hosts with respect and says as such. It should also be noted that again, it is a Powell and Pressburger film with a majority of Howard's lines written by Pressburger except for Howard's speeches on freedom and democracy.

Even *Pimpernel Smith* (1941), which was written by Howard, tried to reach out and affect American audiences. One of the archaeology students, David Maxwell, which accompanies Howard's Professor Smith to Germany is American, and initially he is reluctant to join the trip. It is only when he realizes his strength in a potential physical altercation during the trip might be welcomed and called upon, that he eagerly joins the "archaeology" excursion. The American Maxwell is the one that not only becomes the unofficial leader of the students on the trip, but also cleverly realizes what his professor is hiding and leads his peers into joining the mission. With a simple, secondary character, Howard is able to symbolically demonstrate the need for American involvement in the war and also, his respect for and kinship to his American audience.

From the Four Corners (1942) is another film of Howard's that sought to connect with American audiences and focus on the interconnectedness of English speaking peoples. In his "history lesson" at St. Paul's Cathedral he is not promoting or praising the activities of explorers James Cook or George Vancouver but pointing out that they both had connections to the Commonwealth and England, same as the Magna Carta or how the soldiers all landed at Tilbury which is where their ancestors stood together to fight the Spanish Armada. From a current historical lens the two explorers Howard chose was a poor choice, but their colonial conquests are not mentioned or praised, instead, their burial site and former employment at a local hospital are noted to demonstrate their

interconnectedness to the soldiers. He then goes on to recognize the New Zealander for acknowledging equal rights to the Maoris "as brothers," the Canadian whose French Canadian countrymen "still freely administer their own law freely in Quebec province," and "the South Africans too."[216]

Howard concludes the film with powerful comments obviously directed at American audiences. After stating the connection of all the soldiers' countries to English law and parliament, he praises the Americans for their constitution, noting how Americans are sons of British pioneers, who "founding an independent nation proclaimed we hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness….those words that and spirit were born and nourished here….they are our inheritance from the past, our legacy to the future."[217]

Yes, Howard could easily have featured a soldier from India or South Africa. However, considering the film's purpose was to appeal and connect to American audiences, soldiers from Australia, New Zealand and especially Canada would have been better recognized and especially relatable as they were three countries considered close allies to the United States. Webster's implication that Howard is an imperialist is based on an inaccurate analysis of one of Howard's films that is one of his many efforts to connect to American audiences. When Howard's war work is assessed more holistically as this thesis does, what emerges is a commitment to liberal democracy and someone who worked tirelessly to explain England's struggle primarily to an American audience, but also to the world. He was a cultural broker who saw the war as a struggle between democracy and totalitarianism. Far from an imperialist, this made him an internationalist.

Leslie Howard, in his films and radio broadcasts in Britain during the war made a significant cultural contribution to the war effort. He was an artist and even Dilys Powell, renowned British film critic, included Howard's contributions to the film industry in her

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[216] *From the Four Corners* directed Anthony Havelock-Allan. (1942; London, UK: Ministry of Information).

[217] Ibid.

1948 publication about art in Britain since 1939.[218] Biographers and fans have long appreciated his talent on stage, radio and film, and, in particular, British film historians have long appreciated Howard and his war-time films. The gap lies in the limited perspectives or analysis of all contributors to Howard's historiography, whether it is not analyzing all of his wartime films, not analyzing his BBC broadcast contributions or not utilizing the Mass Observation archive to provide evidence that Howard's impact on the war effort was far more reaching than what box office numbers, film critics or fan magazines could provide. My research, however, adds an additional layer and depth to his historiography by not only reiterating his importance to the war effort, but also demonstrating how he served as a cultural broker between Britain, the Commonwealth and the United States with his BBC radio broadcasts and his films made in England during the war. Howard sacrificed much to his personal mission to raise morale in his home country and to inform, inspire and invoke discussion about what Britain and its people were experiencing during the war. While Leslie Howard and select war-time films have been a focus of historians and biographers before, I present a fuller picture of his contributions by going beyond a simple review of his life and dedicating a substantial amount of research not only to his radio broadcasts but to every film he was a part of in the Second World War until his death in 1943.

What makes my particular analysis of Howard and his contributions critically relevant and different from previous academic scholarship is my ability to pull on many strands of research from multiple perspectives. My use of the Mass Observation archive, which provides not only evidence to his impact beyond the box office and awards, but the personal thoughts and feelings of everyday diarists from the time period. Howard was a man who sacrificed his safety by leaving Hollywood and his comfortable career and earnings, to come home to England and become part of, and lead, a movement of actors and producers creating films and content in hopes that they would inform, inspire, and invoke discussion that, in return, would boost morale on the home front. With his films and broadcasts he was able to reach beyond the British borders and connect with people from the Commonwealth and the United States, effectively becoming a cultural broker

[218] Dilys Powell, *Since 1939:Ballet, Films, Music, Painting,* (London: Readers Union, 1948).

between two worlds that needed to be united in order to successfully defeat the enemy. His sacrifices and contributions need to be effectively reiterated and investigated further, for his absence in some historical texts is a serious omission. When Howard died tragically in 1943, his wartime films and radio broadcasts became his legacy. My research and analysis serve to define that legacy by filling the gaps in an unfinished historiography by evaluating not only his radio broadcasts, but all of his wartime films and utilizing the Mass Observation archive to substantiate what Howard hoped to achieve; not box office revenue or fame for himself but a positive impact on the British people and the war effort.

Chapter 6. Conclusion

"I'm not leaving English soil until this war is won." – Leslie Howard[219]

On June 1st 1943, after having left mid-production on *The Lamp Still Burns* to go on a lecture tour in Portugal promoting British interests for the government, Leslie Howard's return flight from Lisbon was shot down by the Luftwaffe over the Bay of Biscay, killing everyone onboard. Theories on why the plane was targeted have been a source of debate for decades and it is still a mystery. Besides the few that believe it was a complete accident, a popular theory is that the target was actually British Prime Minister Winston Churchill who also happened to be en route home from Algiers. Contemporary RAF personnel agree with this theory as did Churchill and his family at the time.[220] The most prominent theory however is that Leslie Howard was the intended target due to his power as a successful propagandist or that he was secretly a spy with the British Secret Service, and thus either way, a threat to the Nazis. The opinions that really counted however were the ones belonging to Howard's family who had lost a beloved husband and father.

Ronald Howard, Leslie's son, was twenty-five and serving on an armed merchant cruiser off the coast of East Africa when he received the news of his father's death. Ronald spent many years researching and writing his book, *In Search of My Father,* which started initially as a biography but turned into a bigger investigation into Leslie's death. Ronald argued that Leslie was intentionally murdered because not only had Leslie become known as a 'V-Personen' in Germany, a "German term for those connected unofficially to an intelligence agency,"[221] but also, according to Ronald, Goebbels had celebrated Howard's death as if it were a victory in Nazi news headlines.[222] Leslie Howard's biographer Estel Eforgan however, disputes that Goebbels had ever mentioned

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[219] May Mann, "V-Male." *Motion Picture,* July 1943. https://inafferrabileleslie.wordpress.com/v-male-1943.

[220] Eforgan, *The Lost Actor*, 236.

[221] Ibid., 127.

[222] Howard, *In Search of My Father,* 225.

Howard in German newspapers, in his diaries or even had the time to bother with Howard who was not well known in Germany.[223]

For Leslie's daughter, her feelings surrounding the death of her father were much different than her brother's. She noted in her biography, *A Quite Remarkable Father* that,

> "Almost at once, and for years after, the reasons for his death were debated…to us they are not important…that he had died was all we, his family knew…it is his life that was important to us, not a collection of sensational and rather dubious stories about his death."[224]

Although Leslie Ruth said she did not care about the circumstances surrounding her father's death, she did mention in her book that "it was…[her]…father's misfortune to fly on the same day that Churchill was known to be returning from Algiers." For the public, however, adoring fans and film critics alike were understandably shocked. Regardless of why his plane was targeted a whole cinemagoing nation started to reflect upon Howard's body of work and the tributes came pouring in. One of the highest compliments came from the well-known and respected film critic for *The Observer,* C.A. Lejeune, who wrote that, "probably no single war casualty has induced in the public of these islands such an acute sense of personal loss…Howard was more than just a popular actor….since the war he has become something of a symbol to the British people."[225] Her father, Leslie's daughter wrote, "could not have asked more than this."[226]

Today when beloved film, television and music stars die a tragic death their body of work is often immediately advertised for sale on online stores, reissued in theatres, broadcast on television and radio, and they are honoured in millions of social media posts and in award ceremonies. This has been true of recent film, television and music losses such as Robin Williams, James Gandolfini, Whitney Houston and Heath Ledger. During the Second World War these trends differed only in that stars who died not only died tragically, but often in the service of their country thereby endearing them to millions.

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[223] Eforgan, *The Lost Actor*, 239.

[224] Howard, *A Quite Remarkable Father*, 292.

[225] Ibid., 292.

[226] Ibid., 292.

The idea of reissuing a dead star's body of work could be quite controversial. Carole Lombard was a popular 1930s Hollywood actress and comedienne known for her screwball comedy films and her famous marriage to the "King of Hollywood," Clark Gable. She was only 33 when her plane crashed on January 16, 1942 into the side of Potosi Mountain in Nevada due to navigation failures by the flight crew. Lombard was on her way home to be with Gable after campaigning in her home state of Indiana in support of buying war bonds and successfully raising millions of dollars in a one night. When Lombard died, her last film *To Be or Not to Be* was scheduled for previews at theatres only days later. How to proceed after her tragic death became a concern for studio executives.

> "As had happened with Jean Harlow, demand for Lombard pictures increased after death. 'Such films generally have done exceptional business,' stated *The Hollywood Reporter.* The public wanted to see the departed star on the screen again, perhaps out of morbid curiosity, perhaps as a way to deal with personal grief. When theater owners requested prints of Lombard pictures, representatives of producing companies chastised the exhibitors for 'ghoulishness.' Paramount [studios] opted to sit on its seven years of Lombard features. At the same time, Universal sent out old prints…back into circulation, hoping to squeeze a trickle of blood from these two stones."[227]

The results of immediately re-releasing her earlier films and showing Lombard's final film a month after her death resulted in many Los Angeles box offices "doubling usual returns or setting house records." Her last film became "one of United Artist's top all time domestic grossers, one of the top industry grossers of the year" and opened to "record premiere crowds at all situations throughout the country."[228] Immediately after her death "every newspaper in every home in the land and on every newsstand in every town screamed headlines about the dead movie star and ran her picture," keeping her and her films in the public eye. Her last film happened to be a comedy-drama war time film, poking fun at the Nazis. It is now considered a highly respected classic film having been chosen for preservation in the United States National Film Registry in 1996 by the Library of Congress for being culturally, historically or aesthetically significant. With

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[227] Robert Matzen, *Fireball: Carole Lombard and the Mystery of Flight 3 (*Pittsburgh: Goodknight Books, 2017), 306-307.

[228] Ibid., 308.

people flocking to cinemas to catch one last look at Lombard in her final film, they were also being exposed to propaganda about the war in Europe only two months after Pearl Harbor had been bombed; it would have been a great opportunity to change American perspectives on the war.

American big-band trombonist and bandleader, Glenn Miller, also had his work reissued upon his untimely death on December 15, 1944. As was the case with Leslie Howard, Miller's plane disappeared but over the English Channel when he was en route from England to Paris to make arrangements for his band. Miller had volunteered his service in hopes of bringing entertainment and boosting morale for troops overseas because he felt "that American music had a military mission to perform in this war."[229] The speculation and mystery surrounding Miller's disappearance meant he was constantly featured in newspapers, magazines and radio broadcasts for months. Taking advantage of his popularity before and after his death, "the Treasury Department launched the Seventh War Loan Drive in the spring of 1945, and many theatres throughout the United States held a major bond-raising event called 'Major Glenn Miller Day."[230] Months later in June, the WNEW radio station in New York and "several national networks broadcast an entertainment extravaganza…from the stage of the Paramount Theatre in New York, and a significant amount of money was raised."[231] Both Lombard and Miller died doing their duty in service to their country and their work that was later reissued also helped with the war effort whether it was exposing mass cinema going populations to film propaganda or fundraising. Leslie Howard was no different than his American counterparts in that his work was also re-released in 1943 after his death, and as influential as he was in his life, his death also created a further opportunity to have an impact on his countrymen and women.

Besides *Gone with the Wind*, which ran in theatres throughout the war due to its enduring popularity, many of Howard's past films had long left the theatres at the time of his death in June 1943 with the possible exception of *The Gentle Sex* released only two months before. As film critic C.A. Lejeune noted in late June 1943, "'Pimpernel Smith,'

[229] Dennis M. Spragg, *Glenn Miller Declassified* (Lincoln: Potomac Books, 2017), 292.

[230] Ibid., 309.

[231] Ibid., 309.

'The First of the Few,' and 'The Gentle Sex' are easily the most popular pictures made…[in England]…during the war and…since the news of his loss, the press here [in England have] been flooded with demands for reissues of his old films."[232] His older films from the 1930s were also requested continuously such as *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (1934) and *The Petrified Forest* (1936).[233] These requests were granted, for, when reviewing the films Mass Observation diarists mentioned seeing in 1943 in the November 1943 directive on films, many of his films from the 1930s and early 1940s are mentioned. Out of the 216 male and female diarists who were a part of Mass Observation's 1943 Directive Replies on Favourite Films, Howard's *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (1934) is reviewed three times, *The Petrified Forest* (1936) is reviewed five times, *Pygmalion* (1938) is reviewed five times, *Intermezzo* / *Escape to Happiness* (1939) is reviewed three times, *49th Parallel* (1941) is reviewed three times, *The First of the Few* (1942) is reviewed eighteen times, and *In Which We Serve* (1942) is reviewed thirty-eight times.[234] It is interesting to note that Howard's reissued propaganda films were the most frequently reviewed over his other feature films. A 36 year old female stenographer from Birmingham chose *Pygmalion* as one of her favourite films of the year, noting that she "had of course seen [the film] before on its original production ….[and]…this was part of the general revival of Howard's films following his death."[235] She goes on to praise him specifically mentioning "Howard's own playing and direction made…[her]… mourn more than ever his loss to the screen."[236]

Many other diarists also mention the loss of Howard in their film reviews of 1943. One 30 year old female from Northampton asking "alas, why couldn't we have protected LH better?[sic]"[237] and a 37 year old housewife from Huddersfield had four out of her top six films of the year from Howard's filmography. As she noted "it will be gathered that I

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[232] CA. Lejeune, *The New York Times*, June 27 1943. https://inafferrabileleslie.wordpress.com/archives/articles-and-interviews/a-symbol-of-england-1943.

[233] Ibid.

[234] Richards and Sheridan, *Mass-Observation at the Movies*, 222-289.

[235] Ibid., 266.

[236] Ibid., 266.

[237] Ibid., 266. 30-year-old female publicity writer/BBC reporter from Northampton.

am a great admirer of the late Leslie Howard."[238] Outside of the Film Directives, Leslie Howard was also mentioned in other Mass Observation reports including one from June 30th 1943 called "Feelings for the Month of June." In the section asking diarists to write about "Public Men," Howard and his untimely death is mentioned five times out of the ten overall responses. "F35C said the death of Leslie Howard made her think of the risk Churchill ran when he flew about the place," "F45C won8t [sic] sleep until Churchill is back in this country after the Leslie Howard accident," and "F40C and F26C both deplore the death of Leslie Howard."[239] Howard was on people's minds; to be mentioned so prominently and in the same breath as Winston Churchill was demonstrative of not only his popularity but the depth of loss to the country.

Leslie Howard was popular at the time of his death not only because was he a highly revered movie star and director but also because he had become a highly visible cultural commentator. He had become that tangible link between England and the United States, a cultural broker, who, with his eloquence and powerful prose demonstrated to the two countries their interconnectedness and shared values including the defence of liberal democracy against totalitarian regimes. He was on the radio, on cinema screens, narrating films and even posing as Lord Horatio Nelson on the steps at St. Paul's Cathedral reciting "Nelson's Prayer Before Trafalgar" in a notable commitment to dedicate his life and work to the war effort. Howard's radio presence in the early years of the war, while he was trying to find funds to create the films he wanted to produce, were eloquent and passionate speeches on freedom that reached audiences in Britain, the Commonwealth and the United States. He gave hope to those at war and inspired action in those that were not. He was so successful on the radio that he became just as influential and memorable as Prime Minister Winston Churchill and another famous radio personality, J.B. Priestley. Once he had the funds secured, his radio broadcasts became fewer but no less impactful, and he refocused his passionate pleas for hope, justice, democracy and action through his successful propaganda films.

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[238] Richards and Sheridan, *Mass-Observation at the Movies*, 280.

[239] MOA- FR 1840 'Morale in June 1943,' June 30 1943, p. 3.

James Chapman wrote that "war films had been popular with audiences in the first years of the war-*Convoy, 49th Parallel, The First of the Few,* and *In Which We Serve* were the most successful British films at the box-office in successive years from 1940-1943-but the popular trend thereafter was towards more escapist fare." He goes on to suggest that after 1943, the MOI "no longer automatically considered…[war films]…to be of propaganda value."[240] The fact that the MOI would consider propaganda films no longer of value in late 1943, just as Leslie Howard died, raises the question: if Howard had lived would the MOI still have felt this way and what other impactful propaganda films would Howard have created? The Ministry's Film Division had a statement of purpose believing that "film propaganda will be most effective when it is least recognizable as such.…and…the film must be good entertainment if it is to be good propaganda."[241] Howard excelled at exactly this, taking a concept or story idea that would connect to audiences and adding entertainment value so that as people enjoyed the film, the propaganda helped to inform, inspire and provoke action, subtly or otherwise.

With films such as *Pimpernel Smith, First of the Few*, and *The Gentle Sex,* Howard was quickly demonstrating his superior levels of creativity by "combining comedy with politically inflected suspense"[242] and successfully raising the spirits of his countrymen and women in ways no other entertainer could. This is seen in the reports provided by the Mass Observation diarists. Even film and Mass Observation historians, Jeffrey Richards and Dorothy Sheridan noted "the prominence of Leslie Howard" and how his "contribution to the maintenance of national morale…[had]…never been properly appreciated."[243] In the foreword to Estel Eforgan's biography on Howard, Jeffrey Richards writes that "what Howard had done for a few short years in the early part of the war was to demonstrate 'why and how we fight' and in his own way contribute to the ultimate victory of the Allied cause – a cause for which he gave his life."[244] With so many historians, film critics and Mass Observation diarists praising

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[240] Chapman, *The British at War*, 79-80.

[241] Richards and Sheridan, *Mass-Observation at the Movies*, 13.

[242] Lassner, "Leslie Howard: Propaganda Artist," 120.

[243] Richards and Sheridan, *Mass-Observation at the Movies*, 15.

[244] Eforgan, *The Lost Actor*, xv.

Howard and his impact on the war effort, it is no wonder that so many people, Howard's son included, felt that Howard had been specifically targeted on his flight home. One has to wonder what more Howard had in mind? What broadcasts and films was he planning? Was he completely going to remove himself from the screen and permanently stay behind the camera, making clever films with those Howard touches he created in the editing room? On May 15, 1943, less than a month before Howard died, an interview with Howard was published in the film fan magazine *Picturegoer,* where he was asked what his next film would be. Howard responded that his next film idea was "still in its embryonic stage, but it will deal with the future…that is, it will try to envisage what might-or what should-happen when the men and women come back from war to peace."[245] As he was already in the midst of finishing *The Lamp Still Burns,* he could not have been referring to his current film about nurses but another unknown film that no doubt would have been just as inspiring as his previous films. Unfortunately it never came to fruition. Perhaps the success of popular and effective propaganda films would have progressed past 1943 with Howard safely back at Denham Studios had he caught another flight that day in June.

Historian Jonathan Rose said that during the war "individuals mattered, creative individuals mattered, and as in a film or as in a novel, the individual can make a difference."[246] Leslie Howard was such an individual, making an impactful difference and creating a legacy of duty, responsibility, hard work, determination, passionate eloquence and sacrifice along the way. According to Peter Noble in *The British Film Yearbook* in 1946, Leslie Howard's "presence in England constituted…one of the most valuable facets of British propaganda," and his loss was felt deeply.[247] He may have played the fictional Professor Horatio "Pimpernel' Smith on screen but, just like his character, he embodied the quintessential, quiet but thoughtful and humorous Englishman who was a passionate and fiercely creative individual who longed to help his country and fellow man. It is clear that the role he played on screen in one of his most popular and

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[245] Hubert Cole, "It's Up to You, Mr. Howard!" *Picturegoer*, May 15, 1943. https://inafferrabileleslie.wordpress.com/archives/articles-and-interviews/its-up-to-you-mr-howard-1943.

[246] Fleet, *Churchill and the Movie Mogul,* 2019.

[247] Peter Noble, *The British Yearbook* (London: British Yearbooks, 1946), 74.

successful propaganda films reveals his true self. Leslie Howard was, in fact, the real "Pimpernel Smith."

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Appendix.

Certificate of Authenticity-Artwork

Certificate of Authenticity

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