

[*Lion of Hollywood: The Life and Legend of Louis B. Mayer, Scott Eyman, Simon and Schuster, 596 pages*]

Family Man in Babylon

By Clark Stooksbury

OTTO VON BISMARCK famously said, “Laws are like sausages, it is better not to see them being made.” After reading *Lion of Hollywood*, Scott Eyman’s biography of Louis B. Mayer, one is tempted to add movies to the category of things best not seen being made. In the classic MGM films of the 1930s, the images on screen were of glamour and beauty. Behind the camera, the reality was very different.

It was different in the obvious sense that most of the movies in those days were filmed on a studio lot. What looked like a castle or grand hotel was actually just a set with no roof and a mass of lights, cables, and supports just out of range of the camera. A closer look might reveal that the short leading man is always positioned in a way to appear taller than his leading lady. The image was also false in the sense that the people making the films didn’t come close to living up to the values depicted on screen.

Although his name is not as well known as some of his stars, such as Clark Gable and Greta Garbo, L.B. Mayer is a critical figure in 20th-century history. During his reign as the most powerful man in Hollywood, movies were far more central to American culture than they are today. In 1930, for example, 65 percent of the population attended movies every week, compared to less than 10 percent in 2000. Despite his great power, after the merger that created Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer in 1924, Mayer was an employee of Loew’s Incorporated, which had previously owned Metro Pictures. When the studio’s declining performance in the years after

the Second World War weakened his position, he was fired.

For its first two decades, MGM was the dominant studio, consistently making money and earning Oscar nominations. Eyman notes “in the 1930s, MGM came to symbolize an alternate reality from the drabness and squalor of the worldwide Depression, an escape into a dream world of Park Avenue swells. . . . For audiences at home and abroad, MGM was Hollywood at its most Hollywood in the best sense of the word.” *Grand Hotel* (1932) and *Dinner at Eight* (1933) are quintessential MGM films. Both feature John and Lionel Barrymore and Wallace Beery. The former includes Greta Garbo and Joan Crawford; to the latter add Jean Harlow and Marie Dressler. Both feature numerous interlocking stories involving rich and beautiful people. It was on the basis of such films that Mayer built his studio. He didn’t get directly involved in the creative process, but he did make sure to preserve the proper appearance of his films. If a script called for a woman to be rising from bed, Mayer still wanted her to look fabulous. Glamour trumped reality. Jean Harlow first appears in *Dinner at Eight* sitting up in bed wearing a gown she might have worn to the Oscars.

Irving Thalberg is an essential part of the MGM story. Alternately known as the “boy wonder” or “boy genius” of MGM, the sickly Thalberg rose almost instantaneously from being a secretary to Carl Laemmle of Universal Pictures to being in charge of production at that company at the tender age of 21. In 1923, while still a very young man, he joined L.B. Mayer Productions. According to Eyman, part of Thalberg’s appeal to Mayer—other than his already demonstrated talent—was ethnic and class-based. “Mayer had the Russian Jew’s automatic respect for the more learned and aristocratic German Jew.” Their father/son-like relationship soured over the years when Thalberg, after an illness, ceased being in charge of production for the studio and was allowed to form an independent unit within the

company. Eyman describes a “cult of Thalberg” within the studio whose “central doctrine was that Irving Thalberg was a creative genius and Mayer was a glad-handing pencil-pusher—a theology Irving implicitly believed.” Creative genius or not, Thalberg’s heart was damaged by a bout with rheumatic fever as a child, and his poor health led to his death at age 37 in 1936. His funeral was the “Hollywood equivalent of a state occasion Every studio observed five minutes of silence, and MGM suspended operations for the day.” Eyman quotes an MGM executive opining at the funeral that the studio would “begin to feel the squeeze” within two years after Thalberg’s demise. That would not be the case, as the studio’s run of success lasted until the mid-1940s.

Both of Mayer’s daughters married into the movie business. Irene Mayer, who had considerable experience as a Broadway producer, married David O. Selznick. Selznick is an industry legend on par with his father-in-law. He worked for several studios, including MGM, where he produced *Dinner at Eight*, before forming Selznick International Pictures. His greatest accomplishment was the Herculean task of making, with MGM backing, *Gone With The Wind* in 1939. He followed that with Alfred Hitchcock’s classic *Rebecca* in 1940. Both movies won the Academy Award for Best Picture.

Men as talented as Selznick are few and far between, and Mayer’s other son-in-law, William Goetz, married to Mayer’s daughter Edie, pales in comparison. Mayer invested heavily in the creation of 20th Century Pictures and brought in Goetz as a partner. He later gave a portion of his stock in that company to Goetz and Edie. Eyman writes, “for a man of Mayer’s orthodox, patriarchal sensibilities, Edie deserved an equivalent standing with Irene, and if her husband couldn’t earn it, then he, L.B., would have to buy it.” Later, when Goetz left what had become 20th Century Fox, Mayer gave him one million dollars to form an independent production company.

Goetz would earn the enmity of Mayer—a staunch Republican—for supporting Adlai Stevenson in 1952. He could have forgiven the political apostasy, except for one detail. Mayer was fired by MGM in 1951 after the studio had struggled for several years. The following year, Goetz co-hosted a Stevenson fundraiser with Dore Schary—the man who engineered Mayer’s removal from the studio that bore his name. Mayer was so enraged by the incident that he broke off all relations with Goetz and Edie. It was a very strong statement from a man who put such emphasis on the importance of family.

No one studio, not even MGM, could totally define a decade, but Mayer’s studio came close in the 1930s. The glamour and glitz on the screen contrasted sharply with the bleak economic times, and that was no accident. When the classic six-movie *Thin Man* series was released on DVD recently, it went to the top of the Amazon.com sales chart. This inspired a *New York Times* column by Adam Cohen who, referring to the

novel by Dashiell Hammett that inspired the series, wrote, “Hammett knew that in hard times, when people opened a popular magazine or a novel, they wanted to read about penthouses, not breadlines.” The same is true of the movies.

MGM’s success began to wane after World War II. The studio did not adapt to the public’s changing tastes. Sometimes when it did, it was over Mayer’s objections. “After 1945,” Eymann writes, “the memorable MGM movies tended to be musicals, or exuberant adventures like *The Three Musketeers*. ... The studio tried to come up with the bleak thrillers posterity would call film noir, which were increasingly popular, but MGM values were simply not compatible with noir.” When the studio achieved success with *The Postman Always Rings Twice* in 1946, Mayer told a colleague that the film was “evil.”

The studio also had a poor reputation with directors at a time when their prestige was increasing in the industry. Clarence Brown, described as a “Mayer loyalist,” enjoyed the greater freedom he was allowed when he was loaned out once to 20th Century Fox. Elia Kazan was dismayed by his experience directing *The Sea of Grass* (1947) for MGM. The script was finalized, and the studio had already designed the sets and costumes. When he complained about the realism of the costumes, suggesting that the setting was supposed to be the “backcountry,” he was told by the costume designer that film takes place in “Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer land, where you and I are sitting this minute.”

The importance of family and family values is evident in MGM’s movies. Mayer was fond of pointing to the pictures of his two daughters on his desk and proclaiming that nothing in his movies would embarrass his children. Of course, even the films of which Mayer disapproved are tame compared to movies today. Mayer was proud of the Andy Hardy movies and Judy Garland-Mickey Rooney musicals. Eymann says that Mayer “took an overt moral position in his movies—a provincial

nineteenth-century Victorian propriety.” It is a rather quaint notion for the head of an organization that seems at times to have been formed for the purpose of debauchery. The studio featured an opium den and had a Christmas party that regularly turned into an orgy. On top of that, the studio publicity apparatus worked to ensure that no information damaging to a star’s or the studio’s reputation came to light. There was no reason for the public to know the true nature of a star such as Spencer Tracy, famous for playing Father Flanagan in *Boys Town*, among other roles.

The studio’s publicity chief, Howard Strickling, described the drill if Tracy was publicly drunk and causing a disturbance. “We kept an official-looking ambulance on call at the studio. Every bar owner and hotel manager in the area knew what to do if Tracy showed up drunk and began causing a problem. They’d phone me, and I’d phone [MGM police chief] Whitey [Hendry], and the ambulance would take off with a couple of security men dressed as paramedics. They’d go to the scene, strap Tracy to a stretcher, and then rush him away in the ambulance ...” The 1933 MGM picture *Bombshell* ably satirized the machinations of the studio publicity man, although in that film the publicist sullies the reputation of the title character—played by real-life bombshell Jean Harlow—to increase her value as a sex symbol.

It would be easy to indict Mayer and his studio for hypocrisy, pointing to the yawning gap between the behavior that the movies depicted on screen and that of the people making the films. But that would miss the point. L.B. Mayer wanted anything but realism in his movies. Part of the price of operating a dream factory was tolerating—and often whitewashing—the behavior of the creative types who worked inside. It was a price that Mayer was willing to pay, and at times the results were magic. ■

Clark Stooksbury writes from Knoxville, Tennessee.

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Statesman and Swordsman



Duff Cooper was a brave, farseeing British statesman and hedonist of the '30s and '40s, a man of taste and literary skill, a great womanizer and a

very good diarist. He has now been dead for exactly 50 years, and his son, Viscount Norwich, the Byzantine expert and writer, has published his diaries from the year 1915 until the end of 1951. I first heard of Cooper when I read his definitive biography of Talleyrand, a book still in print and which made the French statesman come alive—no small feat if one takes into account the mask of exaggerated manners he had perfected. (Talleyrand, like Cooper, chased the fairer sex nonstop in the middle of wars and political crises, topping it off by seducing three generations of the duchesses of Dino.)

Duff Cooper became a household name in England in 1919, when he married the greatest beauty of her time, Lady Diana Manners, daughter of the Duke of Rutland, who was courted and admired by everyone but who chose to marry the penniless civil servant and inveterate philanderer. Diana, however, was the daughter of the duchess of Rutland but not of the duke. Her real father was another great swordsman, Harry Cust, yet the duke loved his illegitimate daughter even more than his other children. *Noblesse oblige*, I suppose. I had the opportunity to meet Lady Diana back in 1986, but by then her great beauty, as well as her brain, was gone, and I do believe she mistook me for ... Talleyrand.

Joie de vivre is the hallmark of the Cooper diaries. Duff loved life and enjoyed it to the full at a time when life could really be enjoyed. The drinking and partying were heroic. Having survived the slaughter of the Great War, the boys were out for a good time. As were the girls. Cooper served with distinction

in the First World War, having volunteered the moment he passed his physical, then entered Parliament in 1924 as a Conservative and went on to become First Lord of the Admiralty, a post from which he resigned in 1938 in protest against the Munich agreement. He returned to the cabinet in 1940 and later was appointed ambassador to Paris, where he remained until the end of 1947. The Paris parts of the diaries are my favorites, probably as I knew some of the people mentioned. Gaston Palewski, lover of Nancy Mitford and close adviser to de Gaulle, arrogant and a charming womanizer, had me and my first wife to

a few: "Monday April 26, 1915. Rupert Brooke has died of sunstroke at Lemnos. Terribly sad. I knew him well. A very good poet and a very beautiful man." "July 11, 1916. Dined at 10 Downing Street. The Prime Minister and Mrs Asquith, Lords Curzon and Kitchener. Kitchener said he could take Baghdad but couldn't hold it. Curzon said, Don't take it unless you can hold it. Curzon is right." "September 18, 1916. Prime Minister's eldest son killed in action. It is the worst shock I have ever had. I wish I were with Diana to comfort her. Poor Mrs Asquith ..." "September 27, 1916. Mark Tennant and his cousin Bimbo have both been killed. One grows callous ..." (This incident is not in the diaries, but when Mark Tennant arrived fresh to the front, a muddy sergeant looked at him, smiled ruefully and said,

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lunch at the Elysee back in 1967—he had eyes for my sweet 20-year-old—and Cooper describes him perfectly 35 years before. Vicomtesse Marie-Laure de Noailles, collector, novelist, poet, and patron of the arts and artists, had a "disgraceful" war because of her penchant for good-looking young German officers. I was invited to her "salon" whilst in my twenties and she in her seventies. It was one of the few times I've backed off in my life.

Plus ça change, as they say. The bittersweet parts are those during the first war when news arrives daily of friends, schoolmates, and relatives killed after volunteering for duty. All upper-class men went off as quickly as they could be measured for a uniform, and the same applied for the other side. Here are

"We're going over the wire in five minutes, sir, you better write to your mother because you're most likely not coming back." Tennant did write a short letter. "Dearest Mama. The noise ... and the people! Your loving son, Mark." He died immediately while leading the charge.) "August 10, 1918. Brassey is an attractive boy of whom I am quite fond and who is fond of me. He is fresh from Eton [Cooper's school] and fresh in every way ... Brassey is killed in action later that day ..."

And on it goes. While reading the diaries I also read a Bob Herbert column decrying the present bloodshed in Iraq as a reckless, indefensible war that has been avoided like the plague by the children of the privileged classes. Think about that and weep. ■