

BOOK REVIEW

Lisa Colletta

British Novelists in Hollywood, 1935-1965: Travelers, Exiles, and Expats
Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, \$85.00 / £53.50, 201 pp.

Reviewed by Jeffrey Manley

This is an academic study of how several British writers reacted to and assessed the US film industry specifically, and Southern Californian culture (if that's the right word) generally, during the years straddling WWII. As the subtitle suggests, some were on short visits and others stayed on for more extended lengths of time; some went voluntarily while others, out of necessity or perceived necessity.

Those who made brief visits and then wrote about them include Anthony Powell, JB Priestley, John Fowles and Evelyn Waugh. Others who made more frequent or extended visits or even settled in Los Angeles include Aldous Huxley, Christopher Isherwood, PG Wodehouse and Dodie Smith. Except for Isherwood and Fowles, most had passed through or passed on well before 1965 when the period under review closes.

Most of the book covers the period from 1935 to 1950. The extension beyond the immediate post war period would appear designed to include some of Isherwood's later works as well as Fowles, although the latter's experience is little mentioned. Powell's visit took place in Summer 1937 and lasted about 2 months. Waugh's visit was in February-March 1947 and may have been a bit shorter than Powell's. Isherwood's tenure was the longest, and he could fairly be said to have become a Californian. Wodehouse remained in the USA until his death in 1975 but lived mostly on Long Island, apparently visiting Hollywood when his presence was

required there or it was too cold on the East Coast. Dodie Smith, more playwright than novelist, moved to the US in WWII because of her husband's status as a conscientious objector and would thus join Isherwood and Wodehouse in the exile category. She eventually returned to the UK.

Conspicuously absent is Jessica Mitford. While she may not qualify as a novelist and lived in Oakland, not Los Angeles, she wrote extensively about the US funeral industry in much the same satiric vein as Waugh. Also missing is Graham Greene, who visited Hollywood at least twice in connection with film productions of his work: in 1948 (*The Third Man*) and again in 1952 (*The End of the Affair*) [Norman Sherry, *The Life of Graham Greene, Volume II: 1939-55*, pp. 253-54, 442-43]. Greene also wrote about the US (or at least about Americans) as well as about American films, in at least one case, giving rise to a notorious libel case, as noted below.

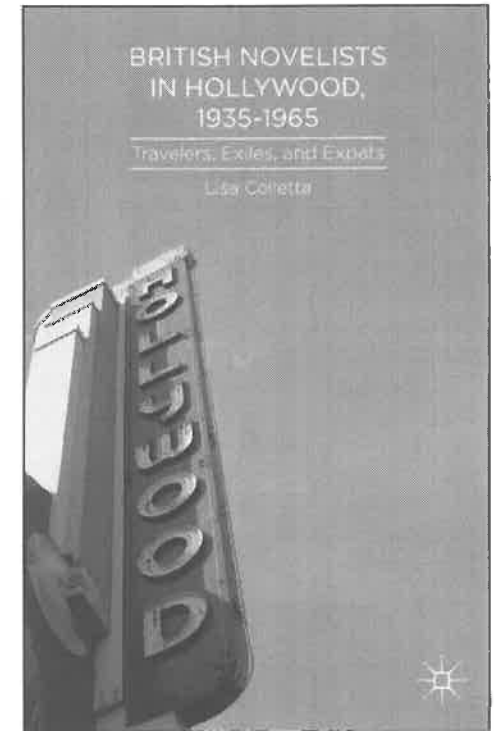
The first part of the book explains how these writers applied British sensitivities to such things as climate (all seem to notice the glare in Los Angeles), harsh landscape, exotic vegetation, discordant architecture, lack of any historical context and confusion of a commercial product (motion pictures) with culture. Professor Colletta summarizes their assessment of Hollywood as "there being no there there," borrowing Gertrude Stein's description of her hometown of Oakland. Some of the

novelists went to work for the studios as scriptwriters: Isherwood, Huxley, Wodehouse and Dodie Smith. AP tried but failed to find such a job. Others (eg. Waugh) sought unsuccessfully to sell their work (*Brideshead Revisited*) to the studios or cooperated in translating their work (*The Collector*) into film (Fowles).

Powell, along with Fowles and Dodie Smith, and unlike the others Colletta considers, wrote no book length treatment (fiction or non-fiction) of his travels in the US. AP gives us a chapter in his memoirs (*Faces*, Chapter III, "North Palm Drive");** Fowles, a section of his novel *Daniel Martin* as well as entries in his journals; and Smith, some memoirs. Waugh wrote both a novella (*The Loved One*) and several articles, letters and diary entries about Hollywood; Huxley, the novel *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan* (1939); Isherwood, a novel (*A Single Man*) as well as diary entries, letters and articles; and Priestley, a travel book (*Midnight on the Desert* (1937)). Wodehouse left a number of stories and novels involving Hollywood. These latter writers, not surprisingly, receive far more coverage than Powell, Fowles and Smith.

Powell's work is cited most frequently in the early chapters that describe the reactions of British writers to the film industry and to the architecture, landscape and population of Los Angeles. His meeting with F Scott Fitzgerald is mentioned twice, most prominently in the chapter on celebrity, which is something

** If there is a paperback edition of Colletta's book, those page references in the endnotes citing volume 2 of Powell's memoirs (*Messengers*) should cite volume 3 (*Faces*) which is where the corresponding quoted material appears. The pages and quotations are correct, but the wrong volume seems to have been inadvertently cited.



Fitzgerald had largely ceased to possess by the time Powell met with him. That chapter also deals with the assessments by British writers of Charlie Chaplin. Here they encountered not a shallow celebrity but a genius who had enjoyed a great deal of success. Although Colletta says [125] that "nearly every British writer that went to Hollywood met [Chaplin]," Powell was one of the exceptions. Perhaps he wasn't deemed sufficiently important in 1937 for a VIP visit. But Powell did meet several movie figures, notably including C Aubrey Smith, described by Colletta as "the prototype English gentleman of the Old School" [129] and the one who was parodied by Waugh in the character of Sir Ambrose Abercrombie in *The Loved One*.

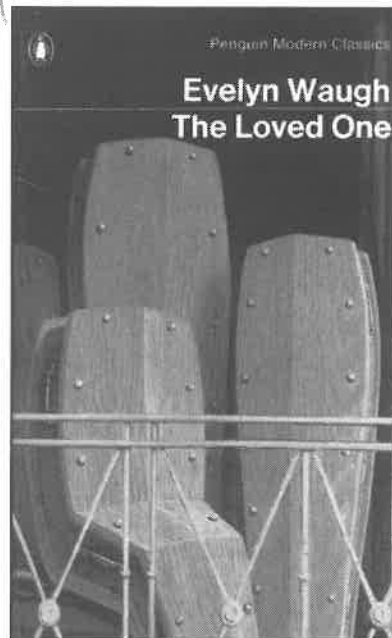
Another film genius who emerged in this period but who gets less attention in this book is Walt Disney. It tends to be

forgotten that before the “Disneylandization” of his reputation, Disney pioneered high-quality, original animated feature films, beginning with *Snow White*. He did this without the apparent support of the major studios and struggled financially with projects that were extremely costly, time-consuming and slow to return the large investments that were necessary. Powell doesn’t mention meeting with Disney, but Waugh describes in his *Diaries* (675) a visit to the Disney studios in 1947 and he pays homage to both Disney and Chaplin as “the two artists of the place”. Waugh, on the other hand, missed out on an opportunity to meet Fitzgerald who had died 6 years before his visit.

While he was in Hollywood, Powell wrote two articles for the London periodical *Night and Day* in a column entitled “A Reporter in Hollywood”. This gig was arranged by Graham Greene who was one of the editors. The article mentioned in this book [129-30] is Powell’s report on the screening of a film about the Spanish Civil War at which Ernest Hemingway (who had contributed to the script of the film) gave a talk. The other was a report of a Negro stage production of *Macbeth* at the Mayan Theater. This was sponsored by the Federal Theater Project, a New Deal agency [see also John Powell in *Secret Harmonies* # 4/5, 67]. These articles are both reproduced in Christopher Hawtree’s edition of collected material from the magazine published in 1985. Powell also mentions meeting the child film star Shirley Temple who contributed to the demise of *Night and Day* a few months after Powell’s visit when her studio, 20th Century Fox, sued the magazine for allegedly libelous references

to her in a review by Graham Greene of the film *Wee Willie Winkie*.

The concluding chapter describes what Prof. Colletta calls “British Hollywood Fiction”. This is based primarily on the fictional writings of Waugh, Huxley and Wodehouse, with brief look-ins from Fowles and Isherwood. Powell never wrote a “Hollywood novel” but did include a character in his last two *Dance* novels who had a Hollywood filmmaking career – Lewis Giber, and both Polly Duport and Mona Templer had aspirations to film stardom. Nick Jenkins and Chips Lovell both worked at the British subsidiary of a Hollywood studio (as did AP) and there are several scenes in which they discuss filmmaking with their fellow employees. Powell’s fictional works might, therefore, have qualified for a brief mention of the sort accorded to *Daniel Martin* and *A Single Man*.



The book is well written and thoroughly researched. Powell’s brief Hollywood sojourn is accurately depicted and fairly placed into appropriate contexts. I read the book in three or four sittings and, when I got to the end, I was wishing for more. An epilogue summarizing what happened to the British Hollywood novel after 1965 would have made interesting reading. Or better yet, a sequel covering the years 1966 to the present, if that’s not too much to hope for. One would like very much to hear what Prof. Colletta has to say, for example, about Martin Amis’s 1981 novel *Money*. It is mostly set in New York and London but the plot (to the extent there is one) revolves around the financing of a movie to be produced in Hollywood by the narrator, John Self. The movie industry had remade itself by the time Amis writes, and the studios’ domination had ended. Moreover, Amis was keenly aware of his countrymen’s reactions to Hollywood’s earlier iteration. This is demonstrated, if by nothing else, by the appearance in *Money* of a character named Juanita del Pablo, a pornographic film starlet. A character with the same name features in Waugh’s *The Loved One* as a film star who must be physically remade to fit the needs of the studio.

Some useful mention might also be made of the recent BBC/Showtime TV series *Episodes* (2011-13), a satiric comedy primarily devoted to showing how two successful British TV film writers react to and are affected by present-day Hollywood. An epilogue or sequel could appropriately be brought to a conclusion with this description of Los Angeles from *On the Edge*, a 1999 novel about California’s consciousness expansion industry by British writer Edward St Aubyn (whose satirical novels are very

much in the tradition of Powell and Waugh):

One day the whole world was going to look like Los Angeles, he decided, not a city or the absence of a city, but ruined countryside, with houses squeezed between highways which never tired of whispering the lie that it was more interesting to go somewhere than be here. The entire westward move of American history seemed to have piled up on the beach, and the descendants of wagon-crazed pioneers, refusing to accept completely the restraint of the world’s widest ocean, frantically patrolled the edge of the West, like lemmings in therapy.

[*Idem*, 77-78; see also *Newsletter* 47, Summer 2012]

The book is well produced and printed. But the number of typographical errors is unacceptable for a book of this quality and price. As happens all too often, the proofing seems to have done by a computer spell-check program that can spot misspellings and, in some cases, faulty grammar but not missing or misused words. To take just one example, on one page there is a reference to an Eaton Ramblers tie while, in a later reference, the tie is referred to correctly as that of the Eton Ramblers. A computer will not necessarily catch that type of error, whereas a competent proofreader would have. At the price charged for a book of this type and complexity, the publisher should have splashed out for a professional proofreader, and not to have done so is unfair to the reader as well as to the author, whose careful research and drafting is everywhere evident.

Lisa Colletta will be speaking at the Venice Conference in October. ■