

After talking last week about some British war heroes, I thought I would talk about a different kind of hero today. Probably the three biggest British movie stars of all time were CHARLIE CHAPLIN, CARY (pronounced 'Ka - ree') GRANT, and RICHARD BURTON. We've already talked about Charlie Chaplin, and I expect I will talk about Cary Grant at some point, but today I will talk about Richard Burton.



In the case of both Charlie Chaplin and Cary Grant, you wouldn't know that they were born in Britain unless you were told - once they moved to America, they presented themselves as being Americans, and never made anything of the fact that they were actually British. (The only reference Cary Grant made to his growing up in Britain was in the film *HIS GIRL FRIDAY* when someone tells his character, 'You're finished' and Cary Grant says, 'Listen - the last man who said that to me was Archie Leach, just a week before he cut his throat.' Archibald Leach was actually Cary Grant's real name, and I think Cary Grant was basically saying 'Archibald Leach doesn't exist anymore'.) But however big Richard Burton became as a movie star, he never allowed anyone to forget that he had been born in a mining town in Wales and had risen from very humble beginnings to become one of the most famous people in the world, as well as hugely rich. And it was impossible anyway to forget that Richard Burton was Welsh because of his amazing voice, which owed a lot to his Welsh background. Even in this small clip, where he is simply reciting the verb 'To be' ('I am, you are, he is...') he is utterly spellbinding:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fDNCEp8Ujto>

The combination of that voice and Burton's good looks made him a big film star from the 1950s onwards, until his death in 1984. But Richard Burton never became as great a film star as he could have been. He only made a handful of really great films: *BECKET* in 1964 (about the murdered Archbishop of Canterbury, *THOMAS A BECKET*, who I expect I will tell you about some time), *THE SPY WHO CAME IN FROM THE COLD* in 1965, *WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF* in 1966, *EQUUS* in 1977, and *NINETEEN EIGHTY-FOUR* in 1984. He made a lot of bad films, for which he was paid a lot of money. The biggest bad film Burton made was *CLEOPATRA* in 1963, about the Egyptian *QUEEN CLEOPATRA* and her relationship with the Romans *JULIUS CAESAR* and *MARK ANTONY* (I expect I will tell you about all of those later on as well). It was the most expensive film ever made at the time - 40 million dollars - and at over four hours long, it is also one of the most boring films ever made.

But it was while filming *Cleopatra* that Richard Burton got to know the American mega-star actress *ELIZABETH TAYLOR* - Burton was playing Mark Antony and Taylor was playing Cleopatra. They fell in love and ended up getting married the next year in 1964. They stayed married for 10 years, and Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor became the best known couple on the planet. Harry and Meghan had nothing compared to them! Wherever they went,



photographers would follow them, and newspapers would carry stories about their extravagant lifestyle, with Richard Burton buying a huge diamond for Elizabeth Taylor in 1969 for 1.1 million dollars. The marriage only lasted 10 years, but Burton and Taylor couldn't keep apart from each other and re-married in 1975 - but this time the marriage didn't even last a year, and they finally broke up in 1976.

While Burton always regarded his relationship with Elizabeth Taylor as one of the best things that ever happened to him, it probably made it impossible for him to become the great actor he could have been, making great films. The legendary English actor LAURENCE OLIVIER (pronounced 'Olive - ee - ay') asked Richard Burton, when it became known that he was going out with Elizabeth Taylor, 'Do you want to be a serious actor or a household name?' Burton replied 'Both' - but it proved impossible for him to be both. What made it even harder for Burton to become a truly great actor was that he regularly drank a lot of alcohol, and that made it hard for him to focus on and remember his lines when acting. It also meant he often got very ill and that made it impossible for him to act. Burton did regret the fact that he had wasted so much of his talent for acting, and was very excited in one of the last films of his career - the film WAGNER, about the German music composer RICHARD WAGNER (who I will definitely be telling you something about at some stage) - that he would be acting alongside the three greatest British stage actors since World War II: LAURENCE OLIVIER, JOHN GIELGUD (pronounced 'Geel - good'), and RALPH RICHARDSON, and was very nervous about how he would do beside them.

But ill health made it impossible for Richard Burton to have as long a career as those greats, and he died at the age of only 58 (by contrast, Olivier lived to 82, Gielgud to 96, and Richardson to 80). But Burton managed to sneak in one last great performance before that happened - in the film of GEORGE ORWELL's novel NINETEEN EIGHTY FOUR, made in 1984. (I will definitely be telling you about George Orwell in the future.) There, he played the villain O'Brien and he told the director, 'I have been famous all my career for my voice, so in this film I want to whisper every line.' This is him talking to the hero Winston to tell him that he, O'Brien, and the people O'Brien works for, control the world and that Winston had better give up resisting him:

<https://youtu.be/g1WI8BUe9Eg?t=12>

Richard Burton was a great lover of literature - wherever he went, a big bag of books would come with him for him to read - and he was buried with a book of poems by the Welsh poet DYLAN THOMAS in his hands. This is Burton reading Thomas' poem 'UNDER MILK WOOD' in that amazing voice of Burton's:

<https://youtu.be/gymiPIQsY0?t=6>

So we can be grateful for what we got from Richard Burton's amazing talent, but wish we could have had more. So much potential, and not enough pay-off!