

Remembering Greer Garson

By Bruce Bawer

Today's movie stars are, by and large, a sorry lot. If they haven't been to Jeffrey Epstein's island or P. Diddy's parties, they've accepted money from Kamala Harris to support her presidential campaign. Or they've used the occasion of some dopey awards ceremony to hold forth about politics. As Ricky Gervais [said](#) at the Golden Globes, "If you do win an award tonight, don't use it as a platform to make a political speech. You're in no position to lecture the public about anything. You know nothing about the real world. Most of you have spent less time in school than Greta Thunberg."

It was not ever thus. My own favorite era of Hollywood is the period from around the mid-1930s to the mid-1960s. And one of the great stars of that era was a woman named Greer Garson, who I fear is now less remembered than she should be. Louis B. Mayer, who from 1924 to 1951 was in charge of the biggest of all the Hollywood dream factories, MGM, once asked the studio's legendary hairdresser Sydney Guilaroff: "Who do you think is the most brilliant and glittering of my stars?" "Greer Garson," replied Guilaroff. Meyer agreed. "She has the best education, she's the most cultured and, if she were a man, she could be the prime minister of England."



Greer Garson and Walter Pidgeon in the film "Madame Curie" (A. Marino/Shutterstock)

Garson (1904-1996) starred in four of my very favorite movies: *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* (1939), *Blossoms in the Dust* (1941), *Mrs. Miniver* (1942), and *Random Harvest* (1942). They're all first-rate tearjerkers, and the characters that Garson plays in them are all of a type: noble, selfless, good-humored, loving. I've watched each of these pictures innumerable times. I adore them. It makes me happy to know that they exist – and that they will exist long into the future. They are totems of civilization and culture; they are tributes to love and goodness and courage and decency.

It was while watching one of them the other day that I realized I really didn't know anything at all about Greer Garson's life – about Greer Garson the person. So I went online and ordered a [biography](#), *A Rose for Mrs. Miniver*, written by Michael Troyan and published 25 years ago. I was glad I did. Admittedly, looking into the life of someone you admire can be risky, for the person may prove to be – in fact, probably *will* prove to be – less impressive than you expected. Thankfully, that didn't turn out to be the case with Greer Garson. In fact, she was a marvel. Critics sometimes wrote that the characters she played were too good to be true. But so, it appears, was Greer Garson herself.

As Louis B. Mayer said, she was well educated, especially for a movie star: raised in London, she earned a B.A. in English at the University of London, then studied architecture and French theater at the University of Grenoble. After graduating, she found a job running the research library at an advertising firm, though by now she realized that her real ambition was to become an actress. And so she did, although it wasn't smooth going at first. After auditioning for the Birmingham Rep, she heard the producer saying: "There will be no standing her. Too ladylike. Too brainy. A business woman with a B.A., too!" (Back then, a B.A. meant a lot more than it does now.)

But she got the job – for a while, anyway – and went onstage

for the first time in 1931. After that gig was over, she interviewed with London producer Sydney Carroll, who later said that he'd been "struck by the depth and richness of her voice. It made music for me. It was soft and yet penetrating. Her elocution was, if anything, a little too precise...With a singularly sweet smile the young woman quickly convinced me of her possibilities. Very well educated and of unusual intelligence, she suggested in her poise and authority, a future tragedienne." During the next several years, Garson performed in a wide range of plays on the West End – and accumulated a massive collection of glowing reviews.

Although at first she had no interest in film acting, in 1937 Mayer himself saw her in a play called *Old Music* and made an offer she couldn't refuse. In *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* (1939), her first picture for MGM, she played the loving wife of an aloof, unpopular classics instructor at an English boys' school who, by example, teaches him how to become a beloved friend and mentor to his pupils. (The title role was played by Robert Donat, who on Oscar night beat Clark Gable in *Gone with the Wind* for Best Actor.) Garson considered her role in *Chips* insignificant – technically, it was a supporting role – but to her surprise, it won her an Oscar nomination for Best Actress and made her a star.

Blossoms in the Dust (1941) tells the true story of [Edna Gladney](#), who ran an orphanage in Fort Worth and successfully lobbied the Texas legislature to remove the word "orphan" from birth certificates. At first, Garson was unimpressed by the role, feeling that the noble heroine was "too similar to Mrs. Chips." But she changed her mind when she was told that "Mrs. Gladney, herself, had expressed the wish that I play the part." She ended up enjoying the experience and befriending the director, Mervyn LeRoy, who said that in addition to being "exquisite-looking," she had "the most beautiful speaking voice of any actress the screen has ever seen." *Blossoms* was a hit and brought Garson another Oscar nomination.

But these triumphs paled alongside *Mrs. Miniver* (1942), the story of a middle-class English family in wartime. Once again, Garson was wary about the part that required her to play the mother of a college-age son, and which, like the role of Edna Gladney, she felt was too similar to Mrs. Chips. Then Mayer called her into his office, where he “appealed to her patriotism” and actually performed the screenplay for her himself. “To this day,” Garson later said, “I still think Louis Mayer played Mrs. Miniver better than I did.”

Mrs. Miniver was a massive hit, breaking all records at Radio City Music Hall and winning praise from both FDR and Winston Churchill, who famously said that it was “more powerful to the war effort than the combined work of six military divisions.” Even Joseph Goebbels, Hitler’s propaganda minister, recognized its effectiveness. “Never before in the history of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer,” writes Troyan, “had the perfect marriage of actress and role created a superstar who was also revered as an international heroine.” At the Oscars, Garson beat out Bette Davis and Katharine Hepburn for Best Actress (and gave an acceptance speech that was so long that it instantly made history).

After *Mrs. Miniver*, Garson wanted to cancel her MGM contract and return to Britain “to help the war effort” by being an air warden or running a soup kitchen or some such thing. But Mayer wouldn’t permit it. Neither would the British ambassador, who told her that as far as the war effort was concerned, the value of what she was doing in Hollywood was “incalculable” compared to anything she might do back home. So she stayed in America and went on a series of highly successful war-bond tours around the U.S. and Canada. (In Quebec she made her pitch in French.) She described the bond tours as “my personal discovery of America.” Her love for her adopted country would grow steadily over the years; she became a U.S. citizen in 1951 (which did not keep Queen Elizabeth II from investing her in 1993 as a Commander of the British Empire).

Then came what Garson later called “the happiest film I ever made.” Like *Goodbye Mr. Chips*, *Random Harvest* was based on a book by James Hilton. It’s about an amnesiac veteran of World War I (Ronald Colman) who’s suffering from what we would now call PTSD and who’s helped back to mental health by the music-hall performer (Garson) who becomes his wife. Their marital bliss, however, is cut short by a heartbreaking twist that leads them down unexpected paths. It’s a beautiful movie – perhaps my favorite ever – and it brought Garson yet another Best Actress nomination.

Garson stayed at MGM until 1954, receiving Oscar nominations for *Madame Curie* (1943), *Mrs. Parkington* (1944), and another one of my favorite movies, *Valley of Decision* (1945). She was loved as much by her MGM coworkers as by her devoted fans. Film crews were impressed by “her energy and willingness to work late hours.” She habitually rewrote her scripts, a practice which almost invariably leads producers, directors, and scenarists alike to go berserk, but she did it with such skill that producer Sidney Franklin not only accepted her script changes but also “offered her – only half in jest – a position in the Writers Building.” In brief, her dedication to her work was incomparable: while filming *Strange Lady in Town* (1955) in the Arizona desert, she developed appendicitis but put off an appendectomy for weeks so as not to shut down production, and finally underwent the operation, back in L.A., writes Troyen, “just in time to save her life.”

After leaving MGM, Garson continued to act until almost the end of her life, playing such roles as Calpurnia in *Julius Caesar* (1953) and Eleanor Roosevelt in *Sunrise at Campobello* (1960) – the latter earned her yet another Oscar nomination – in addition to appearing many times on radio, TV, and the stage. But the second half of her life centered not on acting but on her life with her third husband, Col. E.E. “Buddy” Fogelson, a Texas oilman and rancher who, when Peter Lawford, on the set of *Julia Misbehaves* (1948), offered to

introduce him to the film's star, asked, "Who is Greer Garson?"

A quick word about Garson's first two marriages, both of which ended in divorce (a situation of which Garson was not proud). The first was to a fellow who went off to India not long after the honeymoon; the second was to Richard Ney, who played her son in *Mrs. Miniver*. It seems fair enough to describe both of these unions as unfortunate. But Garson's marriage to Fogelson was a remarkable love match that would endure until his death in 1987 – and that would result in wonderful dividends not only for the Fogelsons but for countless other people as well.

As it happens, Fogelson was rich. Immensely rich. And he was not your typical oilman and rancher. Educated as a lawyer, he'd made – as Garson had in *Mrs. Miniver*, although in a very different manner – a major contribution to Allied victory in World War II. Serving for six and a half years on the staff of General Eisenhower, Fogelson, Troyer tells us, "was largely responsible for the conception and implementation of the oil pipeline that made possible the Allied invasion and rapid advance in Europe."

During most of their marriage, the Fogelsons had four residences: his ranch in Pecos, near Santa Fe, New Mexico (which would later become part of the Pecos National Historic Park); a penthouse in Dallas; a cottage in Palm Springs (where the Fogelsons, who were both Republicans, frequently dined with the Eisenhowers); and her house in Los Angeles (later replaced by an apartment). But Garson didn't lead the idle life of a tycoon's trophy wife. In Dallas, she "enjoyed dozens of civic duties," serving on the boards of theaters, symphonies, and museums; over the years the Fogelsons also made countless generous donations to educational and cultural institutions in L.A., Dallas, and Santa Fe.

In particular, they enjoyed a deep long-term relationship with the College of Santa Fe. Garson's contributions to the college

went far beyond check-writing: eagerly, she participated in the planning and design of facilities, and on the campus could be seen tending to flowers and the like. Eventually, she even agreed to star in student plays and advise the other actors during rehearsals. Although the college closed its doors in 2018 due to financial problems, its theater center, named for Garson, still exists, as does Garson Studios, a complex of motion-picture soundstages that she founded in 1989.

Simply put, the second half of Garson's life seemed to have been at least as happy as the first. She loved Texas, loved Santa Fe, loved ranch life, and loved the friends that she made in the Southwest. Among them was the pianist Van Cliburn, who lived in Fort Worth and who, when he found out that she was dying, canceled a world tour and flew back from Tokyo to be by her bedside. Troyan writes that Garson, unlike probably every other MGM star of her era – many if not most of whom despised the man – “continued to keep in touch with Louis B. Mayer until his death in 1957.” While making *The Happiest Millionaire* (1967), she befriended the producer, Walt Disney, to whom she sent a teddy bear and flowers when he was hospitalized; when he died shortly after filming concluded, she and Buddy established an endowment in his memory at St. John's College library in Santa Fe.

In her middle and later years, Garson was a devout Christian, and enjoyed playing supporting roles in movies like *The Singing Nun* (1966) because she believed that “entertainment should lift people...Faith is the most essential thing in anyone's life.” In the 1970s, aging stars like Bette Davis, Joan Crawford, and Olivia de Havilland starred in horror flicks like *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* to keep their careers afloat. Not Garson: “I've been offered nymphomaniacs, kleptomaniacs, pyromaniacs, homicidal maniacs, and just plain maniacs,” she said, the theory apparently being that there would be “shock value” in seeing actresses who'd played “noble and admirable characters” essaying such parts. “But I prefer

upbeat stories that send people out of the theater feeling better than they did coming in.”

In fact, Garson was displeased by many of the movies of the 1970s. “I’m not a keyhole peeper in real life, so why should I go to the cinema to be a keyhole peeper?” she asked. Calling for film producers to “have more courage,” she spoke up for happy endings, for motion pictures in which the mirror is “tilted slightly upward when it’s reflecting life – toward the cheerful, the tender, the compassionate, the brave, the funny, the encouraging.” That’s certainly what her most memorable movies did. And however great an actress she was, it was always obvious that the profound goodness that shone out of her eyes on the big screen in *Mrs. Miniver*, *Blossoms in the Dust*, and other classics simply couldn’t be faked.

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