

Kind Hearts & Cornets (1949) Harmer

P Michell, 2018.

Considered the great classic of Ealing Studios & ushered in the great British Comic Cinema of the 1950s.

With – Dennis Price, Alec Guinness & Alec Guinness & c, Valerie Hobson & Joan Greenwood

Based on Rolf Horiman's book – 'Israel Rank: Autobiography of a Criminal', where the child is half-Jewish (not half-Italian). Suggested as a film by Michael Pertwee (brother of John who was BBC's Doctor Who) to Ealing studios.

Synopsis:

An heir to a Dukedom plots to murder those member of his estranged family who stand in his way, thereby avenging his mother's death and winning the heart of a young gentlewoman.

Creative Personnel:

Robert Harmer (1911 -1963) – Director co-writer and John Dighton some additions by Nancy Mitford. Evelyn Waugh contributions were not used.

Made some 14 films between 1943 – 1960. Sadly died quite young – 52 years.

Wrote additional dialogue for 55 Days at Peking (1963).

Chronic alcoholism ended both his marriage and his career as a director, and it eventually led to his early death. At the time he died, he was almost penniless and had only a monthly allowance from his father to support himself with.

Quote on Kind Hearts:

It became evident that we had a subject with most agreeable possibilities. What were the possibilities that thus presented themselves? Firstly, that of making a film not noticeably similar to any previously made in the English language. Secondly, that of using the English language, which I love, in a more varied, and, to me, more interesting way than I had previously had the chance of doing in a film. Thirdly, that of making a picture which paid no regard whatever to established, though not practiced, moral convention.

John Dighton – co scriptwriter (47 films).

The Man in the White Suit (1951), Roman Holiday (1953) and The Happiest Days of Your Life (1950). Latter film and West End play. Screen play for Summer of the Seventeenth Doll (1959) movie.

Two years older than Harmer and like him no film work after 1962.

Douglas Slocombe – cinematographer. 80 films ranging until 1989 when he had filmed three of the Indian Jones films – starting with Raiders of the Lost Ark (1981).

London-born Douglas Slocombe has long been regarded as one of the film industry's premiere cinematographers, but he began his career as a photojournalist for Life magazine and the Paris-Match newspaper before World War II.

During WWII he became a newsreel cameraman, and at war's end he went to work for Ealing Studios as a camera operator, making his debut as a full-fledged cinematographer on Ealing's [Dead of Night](#) (1945). Slocombe is credited with giving Ealing's films the unique, realistic look it was famous for.

[William Kellner](#)- Art Director. Austrian. 23 films.

Lavender Hill Mob (1951), I am a Camera (1955) Suddenly last Summer (1959)

[Ernest Irving](#) – Composer (uncredited) – 110 films

Unfortunately not a lot of info on this prolific film composer. Clearly well thought of by his contemporaries and conducted the RPS. He composed, among others, scores for the Ealing comedy [Whisky Galore!](#) and [Turned Out Nice Again](#) starring [George Formby](#). [Ralph Vaughan Williams](#) dedicated his [Sinfonia antartica](#) (1953) to him.

Irving's achievements earned him the rarely awarded honorary membership of the [Royal Philharmonic Society](#) in 1951. [William Walton](#)'s second string quartet in A minor was dedicated to him. He died in [Ealing](#), London, aged 74.

Trivia:

Initially [Alec Guinness](#) was only offered four of the roles; it was Guinness himself who insisted on playing all eight.

[Alec Guinness](#) nearly drowned in the scene where The Admiral goes down with his sinking ship. Guinness was held down by wires while the set filled up with water. Once the scene was wrapped, the crew started to leave until one technician suddenly realised that they had forgotten to release the actor from the wires holding him underwater. He immediately dived into the waters with some wire-cutters and freed Guinness. Fortunately for all concerned, Guinness took great pride in his ability to hold his breath for long periods of time.

The right of peers to be tried in the House of Lords was abolished in 1949, the same year the film was released. The two were not connected, the right was abolished due to a combination of a Labour Government and reaction from a drunk driving case where the lordly defendant was tried in the House of Lords.

The scene where six members of the D'Ascoynes family, all played by [Alec Guinness](#), are seen together took 2-3 days to film. The camera was set on a specially built platform to minimize movement. In addition, the camera operator spent the night with the camera to ensure that nothing moved it by accident. A frame with six black matte painted optical flat glass windows was set in front of the camera and the windows opened one at a time so each of the characters could be filmed in turn. The film was then wound back for the next character. Most of the time was spent waiting for Guinness to be made up as the next character.

[Alec Guinness](#) took his extensive role very seriously, always showing up to work every day thoroughly professional and prepared. Playing eight different roles did come with its challenges, however. "Quick transformation from one character to another has a disturbing effect," he told Collier's magazine in 1952. "I had to ask myself from time to time: 'Which one am I now?' I had fearful visions of looking like one of the characters and thinking and speaking like one of the others. It would have been quite disastrous to have faced the cameras in the make-up of the suffragette and spoken like the admiral."

The title refers to the following lines from [Alfred Lord Tennyson's](#) 1842 poem "Lady Clara Vere de Vere": "Kind hearts are more than coronets, And simple faith than Norman blood."

Although tame by today's standards, [Dennis Price's](#) love scenes with the purring [Joan Greenwood](#) shocked Ealing Studios head [Michael Balcon](#) and almost led to a major re-edit of the finished film.

The original 'mint' camera negative was saved from the Henderson's Film Laboratories fire of 1993, just before a massive nitrate explosion destroyed the negatives of many other films including several other Ealing comedies.

Fire Link:

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/ealing-film-classics-destroyed-in-fire-1486095.html>

Contrary to popular rumor, [Dennis Price's](#) character actually only killed six of the eight [Alec Guinness](#) characters. The second "victim," the bank manager, dies of a stroke or heart attack; Price had grown fond of him, and even says at one point he was glad he didn't have to kill him. Another Guinness character, Admiral Horatio D'Ascoyne, goes down with his ship when the vessel collides with another, and is only seen saluting as the water rises over his head. This collision is possibly a reference to the real-life disaster which involved the battleships HMS Victoria and HMS Camperdown in 1893.

Reviews:

*** [Roger Ebert](#)

September 15, 2002

In the years after World War II, there emerged from the Ealing Studios of England a series of comedies so dry and droll, so literate and cynical, that the phrase "Ealing comedy" described them and no others. Many starred [Alec Guinness](#), then in his 30s, so anonymous in appearance that he was told by an early teacher, "you will never make an actor." It was like that until the end of his days; once, while dressed as Hitler for a

costume fitting, he stepped outside and failed to raise the eyebrow of a passing policeman. While the other great actors of his generation--Olivier, Gielgud, Richardson--attracted crowds wherever they went, Guinness could, he reported, go to the cinema without ever being asked for his autograph.

If he was unremarkable in person, he played a series of remarkable characters in the movies, each one a newly-minted original. He was shy, stammering Herbert Pocket in "[Great Expectations](#)" (1946) and two years later the diabolical Fagin in "[Oliver Twist](#)." He blew up "The Bridge On the River Kwai" (1957), was an eccentric painter in "The Horse's Mouth" (1958), a genial colonel in "Tunes of Glory" (1960) and the same year a vacuum-cleaner salesman as "Our Man in Havana." He was a desert prince in "Lawrence of Arabia" (1962), a Soviet official in "Dr. Zhivago" (1965), an imperturbable Indian doctor in "[A Passage to India](#)" (1984) and Cromwell, Disraeli, Father Brown, Scrooge and of course Hitler. Little wonder his autobiography is titled *Blessings in Disguise*. It is an injustice that he is best remembered as Obi-Wan Kenobi in the "Star Wars" movies, which he told me were boring to make because he spent most of his time standing alone in front of a back-projection screen, reciting dialogue.

Consider how unnecessary such special effects were in "Kind Hearts and Coronets" (1949), in which Guinness plays eight different members of the same family, of both genders and a six-decade age span, by doing relatively subtle things with makeup, posture and behavior. Because he was nobody he could be anybody, and here he creates characters who are pompous, silly, inconsequential, or even actually nice to Louis. ("I was glad," says the hero of the film about his employer Ascoyne D'Ascoyne, "after all his kindness to me, that I should not have to kill him.")

The film began a classic run of Ealing comedies, which continued with "The Lavender Hill Mob" and "The Man in the White Suit" (both 1951) and "The Ladykillers" (1955), in which a sweet little old lady buys the story that her new roomers, all crooks, are actually musicians. Their rehearsal sessions are priceless.

All of these Ealings were being revived with new prints when I was in London in August 2002. The big screen underlined the quality of the black and white cinematography, which in the case of "Kind Hearts" seems to owe something to "Citizen Kane"--another film that begins at the end and then circles back with narration.

The opening scene of "Kind Hearts and Coronets" shows Dennis Price as Louis Mazzini, a newly-minted Duke who has methodically tried to murder his way to the title. In the last night before he is to be hanged, Louis writes his memoirs, and as he reads them aloud we journey back through his life. His mother, we learn, was a daughter of the aristocratic D'Ascoyne family, who ran away with an Italian tenor and was disowned. After the tenor died on the day of the boy's birth, his mother's appeals to her family were coldly rejected, and mother and son were reduced to a life of genteel poverty. But Louis' mother always held out the hope that he might someday inherit the title (which in the D'Ascoyne family descended through women as well as men). After his mother dies she is cruelly barred from the D'Ascoyne family crypt, Louis buries her in "a hideous suburban grave" and vows revenge.

He pastes the family tree onto the back of his mother's painting of the family home, where she spent her happy early days, and one by one he crosses off D'Ascoynes as they die. A "fortunate epidemic of diphtheria" carries off one, but Louis will have to personally murder some of the others, and as he takes a sixpenny tour of the family seat he wonders how he will get close enough, observing sadly, "It is so difficult to make a neat job of killing people with whom one is not on friendly terms."

Price is impeccable as the murderer: Elegant, well-spoken, a student of demeanor. That is what gets him a job in the family bank, where an uncle takes pity on him. The uncle and all of the other D'Ascoynes are played by Guinness (the list includes the Duke, the Banker, the Parson, the General, Admiral, Young Ascoyne D'Ascoyne, Young Henry, and Lady Agatha D'Ascoyne). What is intriguing is that all of these characters, while obviously members of the same family, are not obviously Guinness, unless we insist on thinking of them in that way. One tactic that helps his impersonations is the tendency of the director, Robert Hamer, to shoot mostly in long and medium shot, generally avoiding closeups that can be too carefully scrutinized.

Guinness plays D'Ascoynes who are tall, short or stooped, young or old, male or female, finding the characters largely in his body language and a few wigs or beards. It is helpful, probably, that the focus of most of the scenes is on young Louis; it is significant, somehow, that the actor playing eight characters is not given top billing and the movie is not about him.

The methods of Louis' murders are in the spirit of George Orwell's famous essay "Decline of the English Murder" (1946), in which he regretted the modern practice of simply shooting people and being done with it. Praising the ingenuity of an earlier generation of English murders, Orwell examines those crimes "which have given the greatest pleasure to the British public," finding that poison is the preferable means, and that an ideal murderer is a member of the middle class who hopes to improve his social position or get hold of a legacy.

"Kind Hearts and Coronets," set circa 1900, admirably meets his criteria. One D'Ascoyne is dispatched by poison, another is blown up at tea, and a third is swept over a waterfall after Louis unties his boat. (The victim was spending an illicit weekend with his mistress at the time, and Louis observes: "I was sorry about the girl, but found some relief in the reflection that she had presumably during the weekend already undergone a fate worse than death.") My favorite murder involves a suffragette D'Ascoyne who is demonstrating in a hot air balloon when Louis shoots her down, observing "I shot an arrow into the air/She fell to earth in Berkely Square."

In the course of his rise to the Dukedom, Louis conducts parallel affairs, one with a woman he loves, the other with a woman he needs. Sibella ([Joan Greenwood](#)) is the daughter of the family where he boarded after his mother's death; she loves him, but believes he has no prospects, marries a boring man, and then begins to call on Louis. Greenwood's performance is luscious, with her little lisp and air of languorous petulance. The other woman, Edith ([Valerie Hobson](#)), is the widow of one of his victims, and well-placed with money and position in society. When the amoral Louis is not with the one he loves, he loves the one he's with.

Despite its murders and intrigues, its betrayals and blood feuds, "Kind Hearts and Coronets" has a dry and detached air, established by the memoirs of Louis, who maintains a studied distance from the evils he has committed. Wounded by the slights to his mother, he essentially believes the D'Ascoynes are asking for it. The movie is unusually dependent on voice-over narration, objective and understated, which is all the funnier by being so removed from the sensational events taking place. Murder, Louis demonstrates, and Orwell would agree, can be most agreeably entertaining, so long as the story lingers on the eccentricities of the villain rather than on the unpleasant details of the crimes.

Note: The title comes from Tennyson, whose advice Louis should have taken: "Kind hearts are more than coronets, And simple faith than Norman blood."

Scott Tobias (USA) 2006. AV Film.

If the Ealing Studios classic *Kind Hearts And Coronets* isn't the blackest of black comedies, then it may well be the driest: It's loaded with devastating slights dropped into the most formal of British sentences. It's the story of a commoner who murders his way to the dukedom, all while comporting himself in such a gentlemanly fashion that it feels like he's merely ushering his rivals gently to their fate. This cognitive dissonance comes into play when he goes out bird-hunting with his next victim, but refuses to carry a shotgun, claiming that "my principles will not allow me to take a direct part in blood sports." The screenplay bristles with such sharp little ironies, but *Kind Hearts* remains memorable less for its caustic dialogue than for the cold-blooded matter-of-factness in which it's delivered.

While carrying out a diabolical revenge scheme, Dennis Price keeps a gentleman's countenance at all times, and his darker thoughts are mostly relegated to the voiceover narration. Though connected by blood to the aristocratic D'Ascoyne family, Price's mother was exiled from her birthright after marrying a peasant for love. After her death, Price vows to avenge her by ascending to the dukedom. In order to make this happen, he first has to get through the eight D'Ascoynes ahead of him on the family tree, so he quietly facilitates their deaths, using such means as poisoning, an explosive jar of caviar, and an arrow through a hot-air balloon. All the D'Ascoynes are played by Ealing's prize star Alec Guinness, including Lady Agatha, a rather broad-shouldered women's-rights activist.

As Philip Kemp's liner notes (DVD) reveal, *Kind Hearts And Coronets* couldn't be further from Ealing's tradition of folksy, light-hearted comedies, and for that reason, it was treated coolly by the studio and American censors, who forced the filmmakers to tack on a thuddingly literal ending. Even still, the film proves just how little the production code could do to keep sinful content from the screen so long as it played by the rules; its scenes of sinister deviance and eroticism follow the letter of the code while ignoring its intent. For that and other reasons, it served as the model for all black comedies that followed.