

The Lady Killers (1955) Mackendrick

P Michell, 2023

The Ladykillers is a 1955 British [black comedy crime film](#) directed by [Alexander Mackendrick](#) for [Ealing Studios](#). It stars [Alec Guinness](#), [Cecil Parker](#), [Herbert Lom](#), [Peter Sellers](#), [Danny Green](#), [Jack Warner](#), and [Katie Johnson](#) as the old lady, Mrs. Wilberforce.^[2]

[William Rose](#) wrote the screenplay,^[2] for which he was nominated for an [Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay](#) and won the [BAFTA Award for Best British Screenplay](#). He claimed to have dreamt the entire film and merely had to remember the details when he awoke.

(Wikipedia)

Huge success on its release.

Filmed in colour. Most of us only know the black and white version.

BFI ranks it as the thirteenth greatest British film.

There is an excellent analysis below from the BFI. Recommended reading before film.

[Alexander Mackendrick – Director / co-scriptwriter \(12 credits\)](#)

See below for BFI article.

Overlooked director. American grew up in Scotland. Due to box-office failure of ‘Success’ (now considered a masterpiece) he soon moved into academia.

Known for this, *Sweet Smell of Success* (1957), *Man in the White Suit* (1951), *The Blue Lamp* (1950).

Trivia: Worked in an advertising agency in London. One of his animators was the future producer/director George Pal.

[William Rose – Script \(20 credits\)](#)

Another American. Five scripts for Ealing between 1954-1957.

Known for this, *Smallest Shown on Earth* (1957), *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* (1967), *The (maniacal) It’s a Mad Mad Mad Mad World* (1963), *The Russians are Coming* (1966).

[Produced – Michael Balcon, Ealing Studios \(268 credits !\)](#)

Michael Balcon started in films as a distributor, then a producer from the early 1920s, helping to launch the career of [Alfred Hitchcock](#). In the 1930s, Balcon was prominent in building up a huge annual production programme of films for both Gainsborough and Gaumont-British. Head of MGM-British, 1936-38, then in charge of production at Ealing. Director and Head of Production at Ealing 1937 – 1959.

“A great many motives were attributed to why we (Ealing) made the films we did; all I can say is that we just enjoyed making films.

We made films at Ealing that were good, bad and indifferent, but they were indisputably British. They were rooted in the soil of the country. I always look for people whose ideas coincide with mine, and then I'm ready to give them a chance and to make a name for themselves.

Music – Tristram Cary (44 credits)

Known for this, Fourth Wish [filmed in Oz] (1976), Blood from Mumm's Tomb (1971) Son of novelist Joyce Cary. Worked at Ealing and Hammer (horror) studios. Immigrated to Australia.

He was a pioneer in electronic music. Built the first electronic studio at the Royal College of Music, and was instrumental in the invention of the synthesizer.

Composed over 70 concert works, of which 29 make use of electronic instrumentation.

Trivia

The producers originally rejected director [Alexander Mackendrick](#)'s choice of [Katie Johnson](#) for the role of Mrs. Wilberforce on the grounds that she might be too frail for the project, and so they cast a younger actress who died before filming began.

Because [Katie Johnson](#) (who played the old lady) was already 76 when she got the role, director [Alexander Mackendrick](#) went to the distributor and asked if her name could be prominently above the title, saying that this might be her last movie. The distributor agreed. Two years later, Johnson died. She only made one more movie.

Critics have praised [William Rose](#)'s script as a first-rate example of British comedy and for doing an excellent job of capturing the world of British manners and tradition. Rose, in fact, was an American, who after World War II, had decided to stay and work in Britain, where he ended up also marrying a British woman, and so he was no stranger to British culture at the time.

The role of Professor Marcus was written with [Alastair Sim](#) in mind. Sim was unable to take the role so [Alec Guinness](#) was cast instead but the uncanny likeness to Sim was not accidental as Guinness was aware that the character had originally been written for Sim. Therefore he decided to play the role in the humorous but sinister manner that Sim was known for.

Sir [Alec Guinness](#) has said that he based his characterization on [Alastair Sim](#). Accordingly, the make-up for Guinness, including the hairpiece and oversized teeth, result in a marked resemblance to Sim.

[Herbert Lom](#) wore the black hat most of the time because he was often bald underneath it as he was playing the [Yul Brynner](#) role of King Mongkut of Siam on stage in The King and I.

An in-joke: The portrait of Mrs. Wilberforce's late husband, who she says went down with his ship, is a photograph of a captain in Alec Guinness's masterpiece, *Kind Hearts and Coronets*, who did indeed go down with his ship.

According to British movie historian John Huntley [1921-2003], this movie was placed on the prison "Banned List" after it emerged that a gang of recently-released convicts had carried out a 'Copy-cat' robbery after having seen the movie whilst under sentence.

Aside from the remake, [The Ladykillers \(2004\)](#), the film has been adapted several times in different mediums. There was a Czech opera by composer [Ilja Hurník](#) titled "Dáma a Lupici" ("The Lady and the Robbers") that premiered in Brno in October 1973, a radio adaptation for BBC Radio 4 in 1996 and a play by [Graham Linehan](#) that premiered in Liverpool in November 2011.

Excellent Analysis from BFI / Sight and Sound

Satire with tweezers: Alexander Mackendrick's *The Ladykillers*

In this piece from our July 2004 issue, Philip Kemp revisits Ealing Studios' classic 1955 comedy *The Ladykillers*, and finds in it a wickedly satirical satire about an England in terminal decline.

(<https://www.bfi.org.uk/sight-and-sound/features/ladykillers-1955-alexander-mackendrick-ealing-satire>)

[**The Ladykillers** 4K restoration is in cinemas from 23 October 2020. A 4K UHD Blu-ray five-disc collector's edition is released on 9 November.]

Alexander Mackendrick's **The Ladykillers** (1955) marked the end of an era in more ways than one. It wasn't only the last of the great Ealing comedies, but was the last film to be released by Ealing before the studios were sold to the BBC and Michael Balcon led his depleted team away to live out a sad, ghostly afterlife in a corner of the MGM lot at Borehamwood.

Like so many worthwhile films, *The Ladykillers* is at least partly about the circumstances of its own making. The rickety, dilapidated little house in St Pancras with its air of faded gentility can be seen as standing as much for Ealing – that most English of studios – as for England, two once-proud institutions in a state of what then appeared to be (and in Ealing's case, actually was) in terminal decline.

Both Mackendrick and his screenwriter William Rose were semi-outsiders, able to adopt a detached view of the country they lived in. Mackendrick was born in the US and brought up in Scotland; Rose was a native of Missouri who had moved to Britain in his early twenties. The two shared a common attitude to England: a mixture of affection and exasperation, of amusement and infuriation at the seemingly incurable national attachment to picturesque inefficiency.

In **Genevieve** (1953), also scripted by Rose, a young couple stuck in a nightmare Brighton hotel explode with fury on discovering that hot water is only available, at prior request, for some 30 minutes a day. The manageress (Joyce Grenfell) is astounded at their reaction. “Nobody’s ever complained before,” she gasps, while a little old lady (Edie Martin, later to play one of Mrs Wilberforce’s teatime guests in *The Ladykillers*) totters up to enquire: “Are they Americans?”

As Mackendrick acknowledged years later, *The Ladykillers* is “obviously a parody of Britain in its subsidence. That we were all aware of at a certain level. But it was never openly discussed, and it would have been fatal to discuss it.” All the film’s imagery – its lovingly detailed paraphernalia of lopsided cottages (situated in a dead-end street), steam trains, chintzy parlours and little old ladies in pastel dresses and floral hats – conjures up a post-imperial Britain hopelessly resistant to change, inextricably mired in the faded detritus of the Victorian era. (The link is made explicit in a key speech from Katie Johnson’s Mrs Wilberforce, recalling her 21st birthday party, “When someone came in and said the old Queen had passed away.”)

But this superannuated Britain embodied by Mrs W, outwardly enfeebled and moribund, proves unexpectedly tenacious. The speech by Alec Guinness’s Professor Marcus, as he descends into babbling lunacy, seems to carry a hint of the filmmakers’ own delighted, appalled reaction to the indestructible figure they’d conjured up. “We’ll never be able to kill her, Louis. She’ll always be with us, for ever and ever and ever, and there’s nothing we can do about it.”

Mackendrick was always the most politically aware of the Ealing directors, and in the films he made there it’s possible to trace the growing disillusionment, from a non-conformist left-wing viewpoint, of someone who voted for change in the crucial general election of 1945 hoping to see a new social dispensation, only to watch all the old class-ridden, tradition-encrusted barriers against change come creaking back into place.

Whisky Galore! (1949), the most light-hearted of his films, merely pokes fun at the dour bureaucratic excesses of the post-war Labour government with its regime of austerity and ration-books. But in his second feature **The Man in the White Suit** (released in 1951, the year in which Labour was ousted from power by Churchill’s Tories) Mackendrick created Ealing’s only true political satire.

Satire, Mackendrick once observed, is “the snarl behind the grin”. Most other Ealing films (1949’s **Kind Hearts and Coronets** excepted) are too essentially good-natured to snarl; but there’s real anger underpinning the comedy of *The Man in the White Suit*. It

depicts a world where virtually everyone operates within rigid, predetermined patterns of thought; where bosses and workers have taken up entrenched positions of mutual suspicion and contempt; where the supposedly progressive cadres of the left reveal themselves, when it comes to it, as no less hostile to change than the moneyed interests of the right.

The forces of enlightened liberalism, represented by mill-owner Alan Birnley (and played by Cecil Parker, with Mackendrick's encouragement, as a sly portrait of Ealing studio boss Michael Balcon), are exposed as bumbling and ineffectual, and disinterested science (represented by Guinness's naive young chemist) as recklessly indifferent to the consequences of its work. (The film had its origins in Mackendrick's attempt to find a way of making a comedy about the invention of nuclear weapons.)

All this, as Mackendrick remarked, would "if made seriously" constitute "a horrendous attack on contemporary society. But I hope we did it with enough good humour that the undercurrents in it – which are also fairly melancholy, if you like are not oppressive."

Mandy (1952), Mackendrick's only non-comedy at Ealing, shares the same bleak view of British society, with the accumulated weight of ossified convention bearing down, in this case, on a young deaf girl. Mandy's physical handicap shows up the mental handicaps of the adults who surround her; she can't hear, but they can't or rather won't see, and her mother has to fight to rescue the girl from the rigid family structure that oppresses them both.

In **The 'Maggie'** (1954) the underlying tensions in the story all but sink the comedy, with the crew of an ancient puffer-boat, supposed representatives of freedom and independence, shown up as mercenary, irresponsible, incompetent and again, hopelessly mired in a stagnant way of life.

So it's easy enough to see *The Ladykillers* as Mackendrick's sardonic, shrugging farewell to 1950s Ealing and 1950s England – having completed it, he left for Hollywood and the noir acridities of *Sweet Smell of Success* (1957). Some commentators, indeed, have floated it as a very specific political parable. In his definitive study *Ealing Studios* Charles Barr suggests an ingenious (if partly tongue-in-cheek) reading: "The gang are the postwar Labour government. Taking over 'the House' they gratify the Conservative incumbent by their civilised behaviour (that nice music) and decide to use at least the facade of respectability for their radical programme of redistributing wealth...

"Their success is undermined by two factors, interacting: their own internecine quarrels, and the startling, paralysing charisma of the 'natural' governing class, which effortlessly takes over from them again in time to exploit their gains (like the Conservatives taking over power in 1951, just as the austerity years come to an end). The gang are a social mix, like Labour's: a mix of academic (Alec Guinness), ex-officer (Cecil Parker), manual worker (Danny Green), naive youth (Peter Sellers) and hard-liner (Herbert Lom)."

Barr's reading, elegant and diverting though it is, doesn't quite mesh with the imagery of the film, since here the gang, no less than Mrs Wilberforce, seem essentially figures from the past. Professor Marcus, with his mincing, swooping gestures and vampiric teeth, appears a 19th-century construct by Bram Stoker out of Wilkie Collins; his confederates hail from the never-never London underworld of the Pabst/Brecht *The Threepenny Opera*.

The whole gang, in fact, look remarkably like something that Mrs Wilberforce, dozing off in her cluttered front parlour with her knick-knacks and parrots, might have conjured in a dream, drawing on confused memories of penny-dreadfuls and gaslit melodramas. Which would be appropriate enough, since *The Ladykillers* had its origins in a dream: William Rose always maintained that he had dreamed the story one night, "whole and complete".

The story's provenance delighted Mackendrick. "The fact that it was something Bill had quite literally dreamed up really entranced me. Dreams are a wonderful source of imagery for movies."

Even better, it allowed him to cut loose from Ealing's cherished tradition of documentary-based realism and treat the story as a fable, full of cartoon characters. "The characters are all caricatures, fable figures; none of them is real for a moment. Indeed, one of the stylistic problems is that it's very dangerous when you let a single note of reality creep into something that's as inflated, in terms of near-fantasy, as this. You have to keep within the enclosed, fabulous world."

There's certainly a strong cartoon element to *The Ladykillers*, where each of the characters arrives ready-labelled in the visual equivalent of capital letters: The Little Old Lady, The Mad Professor, The Genteel Con-Man, The Dumb Bruiser and so on. Even the violence, which shocked many contemporary critics, has a comic-strip quality about it. People are pushed off buildings, or banged over the head, and die instantly, with no blood or mangled limbs to disturb the joke.

And as in the cartoon world, certain characters are set up to be immune to harm. No matter what the forces ranged against her, Mrs Wilberforce is as invulnerable as the Road Runner.



Peter Sellers, Danny Green, Alec Guinness and Alexander Mackendrick on set of *The Ladykillers*

Mackendrick liked to describe himself as “a political cartoonist manqué”. A gifted artist, trained at Glasgow School of Art, with an exceptional talent for lightning sketches, he did in fact work as a political cartoonist for a while, drawing propaganda pieces to undermine German military morale during his war service in Italy. Then just after the war he collaborated briefly with Halas Batchelor on an abortive scheme to distribute a weekly animated political cartoon.

This frustrated talent was redirected into his films, most obviously into *The Man in the White Suit* and more obliquely into *The Ladykillers*. In the case of the latter, the obliqueness was probably a deliberate tactic since he suspected a more direct approach would run him into trouble. Michael Balcon had been alarmed by *White Suit*'s cutting edge and Mackendrick related how, while *The Ladykillers* was in preparation, “Mick had me into his office and said, ‘I want to tell you that I’ve given a promise on your behalf that there’s no satire in this one.’”

The promise had almost certainly been made to John Davis, the much-feared MD of the Rank Organisation, which distributed all Ealing’s films. Casting his eye over Rose’s script, Davis had detected elements that disturbed him. “It is, of course,” he wrote to Balcon, “a very satirical document. I suppose the success or failure of filming this subject will depend upon how it is played, as broad comedy or strong satire – as the latter I do not think it would be a great success.” (Since Davis’ personal ideal of broad comedy was the films of Norman Wisdom, it’s probably as well that his views, for once, didn’t prevail.)

Fastidiously holding the word ‘comedy’ between inverted commas as if with tweezers, Davis continued: “I would also assume that you will ensure that the ending of the

‘comedy’ is materially altered, because at the present time it shows Scotland Yard and its officials in a very bad light.” Balcon replied soothingly that “our relations with Scotland Yard as a result of The Blue Lamp are quite satisfactory and ... they will have no objection to our having good humoured fun at their expense.”



The original release poster.

The main satirical thrust of *The Ladykillers*, though, seems to have escaped Davis’s notice: there’s no hint in his correspondence with Balcon that he saw the film as mocking not just the forces of law and order but the country as a whole.

Nor did the critics of the period. Opinions differed widely over whether the film’s shift into black comedy and multiple murder worked: for some reviewers like Paul Dehn in the *News Chronicle*, “the mood falters and ... the comedy has collapsed like a house of cards”; Virginia Graham in the *Spectator* found the climax “in thoroughly bad taste”. In *Sight & Sound*, though, Penelope Houston hailed “a comic idea of splendid, savage absurdity”, reckoning the film “the most consistently ruthless comic fantasy produced by a British studio since *Kind Hearts and Coronets*”; Dilys Powell in the *Sunday Times* even wished for “a shade more of the macabre; it would be a better film if it were blacker.”

But no reviewer seemed to sense the film’s allegorical level, or to see it as what it now inescapably appears: an ironic portrait of a country slipping into post-imperial desuetude, clinging to outworn conventions and dreaming of past glories. Perhaps it needed the distancing effect of time for Mackendrick’s political subtext to show through as clearly as it does now.

Yet it’s this satirical element – still not without relevance in Britain of the 21st century – and the dark tinge of the comedy that have kept *The Ladykillers* fresh when so many of its Ealing stablemates have faded into a faintly musty period charm.

Brilliant early dark comedy; much better than the remake

[MovieAddict2016](#) 26 June 2004

London, 1955. Professor Marcus (Alex Guinness) plans to rob two armored cars with the help of a gang of crooks, played by an ensemble group of actors. They include: Louis (Herbert Lom), The Mayor (Cecil Parker), One-Round (Danny Green) and Harry (Peter Sellers). None of the men have previously met each other, but join together for the single heist.

Their strategic planning takes place in the upstairs of a Victorian home owned by Mrs. Wilberforce (Katie Johnson), a somewhat eccentric older woman who is under the impression that Professor Marcus and his "friends" are part of a music orchestra and unite daily to rehearse. This leads to a film comprised of misconceptions, confusion, and bumbling antics, as the Professor has to spend more of his time keeping Mrs. Wilberforce off their backs than devoting it to planning the robbery.

The film shares resemblance to Danny DeVito's "Duplex" in the scenes where Mrs. Wilberforce continuously interrupts the criminals' scheming, asking them to run errands for her. They reluctantly put up with her constant irritating questions and demands, since she is unknowingly a vital ingredient of their plan. They must use Mrs. Wilberforce in their robbery, and after a while she realizes this, then demands that they return the money, which leads them to the conclusion that they must kill the old woman or else risk losing their entire fortune. However, their constant mistakes and arguments only postpone the inevitable, and it soon seems that the group of tough guys aren't so tough after all. "I can't! I can't!" screams one of the criminals when he pulls the shortest toothpick and is handed the task of "whacking" the poor sweet lady.

All actors are at their peaks here -- Guinness as the Professor is superb, but Sellers in his screen debut is especially noteworthy. The script by William Rose relies on macabre humor rather than constant slapstick. Admittedly, I expected the former when I sat down to see the film, although I came away rather surprised at its sophistication.

The Coen Brothers remade the film in 2004, although the remake failed to capture the essence of this dark comedy. Made before political correctness (in the Coens' version there is the token black character of course), this is a delightfully irreverent black comedy. To be fair, most of the jokes don't hold up as well nowadays. It does not deliver a constant barrage of jokes, but rather a steady mix of black humor and plot -- a very good plot, too. One that keeps our interest and quite often manages to make us smile. "The Ladykillers" is a rare treat, better than the remake, a classic of the genre, and something that will be remembered years from now. It's a real gem of a movie, hard to devote long paragraphs to, much easier to devote 100 minutes of your life to.