

WINNING
HURST, FILM &
THE WAR
PROPAGANDA

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The Lion Has Wings
(1939)

To mark the 80th anniversary of the outbreak of war, the Northern Ireland War Memorial has worked with the Brian Desmond Hurst Estate to highlight the role of propaganda and filmmaking in the Second World War. This is the first of a series of publications which will deal with the wartime films of Brian Desmond Hurst, Northern Ireland's greatest film director.



"THE LION HAS WINGS"

AN EPIC OF THE ROYAL AIR FORCE

By IAN DALRYMPLE

Produced by ALEXANDER KORDA

Associate Producer: Ian Dalrymple

The Producer expresses his gratitude for the co-operation which he received from the Cast, Production Personnel, Naval Companies, the General Post Office and other Documentary Film Units during the making of this Picture

DIRECTED by MICHAEL POWELL,
BRIAN DESMOND HURST, AND
ADRIAN BRUNEL

COMMENTARY by E. V. H. EMMETT
(By courtesy of GAUMONT-BRITISH NEWS)

DISTRIBUTED BY UNITED ARTISTS

Length: 6,850 ft.

CERTIFICATE "U"

Running Time: 1 Hr. 15 Min.

★

THE PLAYERS

MERLE OBERON as Mrs. RICHARDSON

RALPH RICHARDSON as A WING COMMANDER

JUNE DUPREZ as MERLE'S FRIEND

FLORA ROBSON as QUEEN ELIZABETH

ROBERT DOUGLAS as
CHIEF OF R.A.F. INTELLIGENCE

AUSTIN TREVOR as
CHIEF OF NAZI AIR STAFF

BRIAN WORTH as A SQUADRON LEADER
and

ANTHONY BUSHELL

IVAN BRANDT CHARLES CARSON

G. H. MULCASTER JOHN PENROSE

HERBERT LOMAS FRANK TICKLE

MILTON ROSMER JOHN ROBINSON

RONALD ADAM DERRICK DE MARNEY

ROBERT RENDEL CARL JAFFE

JOHN LONGDON GERALD CASE

ARCHIBALD BATTY TORIN THATCHER

IAN FLEMING BERNARD MILES

★

THE TECHNICAL STAFF

Supervising Editor William Hornbeck

Supervising Art Director Vincent Korda

Production Manager David B. Cunyngame

Film Editors Charles Freed
Henry Cornelius

Recording Director A. W. Watkins

Musical Score Richard Addinsell

Musical Director Muir Mathieson

Photographed by Osmond Borradaile
Harry Stradling
Bernard Browne

Technical Adviser Squad.-Ldr. H. M. S. Wright



RALPH RICHARDSON & MERLE OBERON

¹Alexander Korda was a leading figure in the British film industry and the founder of London Films

IN THE DAYS BEFORE THE OUTBREAK of the Second World War, renowned film producer Alexander Korda¹ gathered three of the United Kingdom's top film directors, including Belfast's Brian Desmond Hurst. Secret plans were laid to prove that Britain could match Hitler on the big screen. The film *The Lion Has Wings* was to be the first film output from British studios in the Second World War. It propelled recruitment into the Royal Air Force (RAF) and helped keep cinemas open when air raids threatened their closure.

Filming commenced on 4 September 1939, the day after war was declared and Korda promised Churchill that he would ensure the rapid delivery of his film which proclaimed, 'This is Britain where we believe in freedom'.

The Lion Has Wings premiered on 31 October 1939 and then opened throughout the United Kingdom on 3 November 1939. It portrayed Britain as a sleeping lion that, against appearances, was readying itself to strike, while keeping an eye on its target. The film uses the RAF as its centrepiece to show the power of the lion now that he has wings. The importance of air power remains the key message throughout the film. It is impossible to say how many military careers it influenced at the time and how many subsequently played their part in the RAF and Civil Defence in the Battle of Britain and beyond.



Allan Esler Smith, great-nephew of Brian Desmond Hurst, administers the Brian Desmond Hurst Estate

Allan Esler Smith

MAKING THE FILM *THE LION HAS WINGS* (1939)

Hurst was known for rapid work and cost efficiency and he had just worked with actor Ralph Richardson on an adaptation of F.L. Green's *On the Night of the Fire*². Richardson was to be the lead in *The Lion Has Wings*. He took a short period of leave to play the role of Wing Commander Richardson before embarking on military service with the Fleet Air Arm, becoming a Sub Lieutenant at the age of 36 and rising to the rank of Lieutenant Commander.

² *On the Night of the Fire* (1939) is an acclaimed example of early film noir, directed by Brian Desmond Hurst and starring Ralph Richardson and Diana Wynyard. The film is based on the novel of the same name by F. L. Green



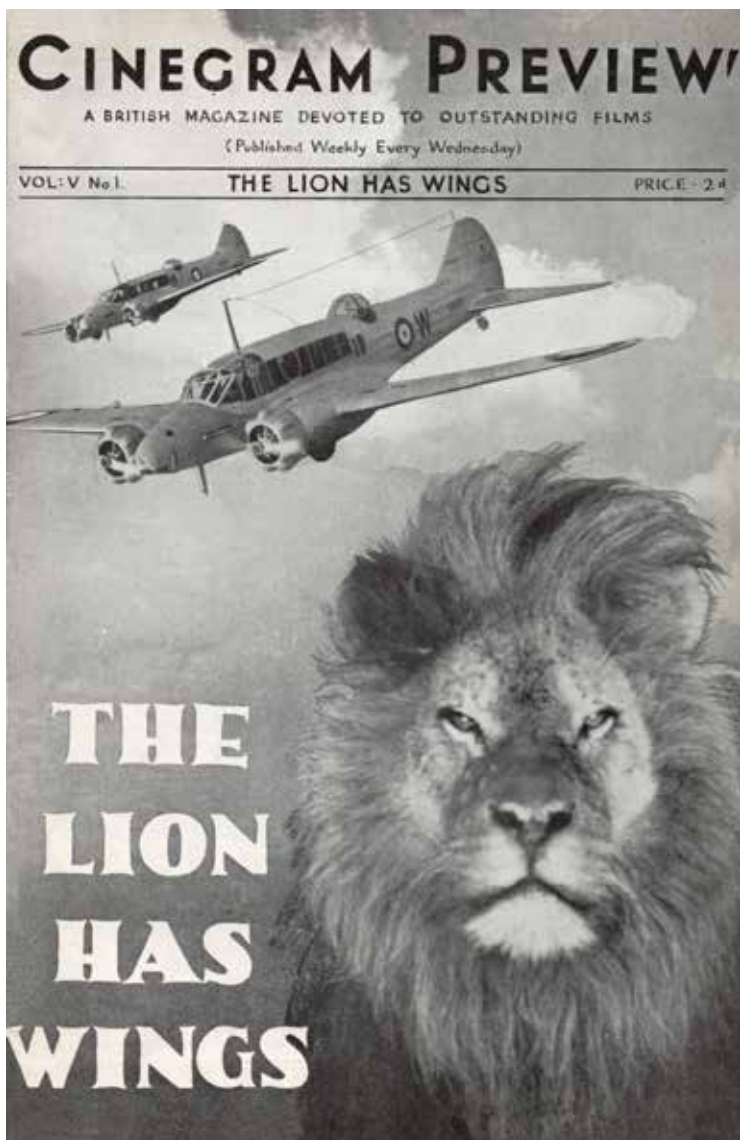
Ralph Richardson and Merle Oberon in *The Lion Has Wings* 1939

The opening line of dialogue in *The Lion Has Wings* slams home the message to the nation, 'This is Britain where we believe in freedom.'

The purpose of this propaganda was to show that the nation was prepared to fight back and was ready for the Germans when their inevitable aerial bombardment began. The prospect of an air raid would have loomed large in the psyche of people living in the United Kingdom in the early months of the war.

Hurst in his memoirs sets the scene:

When the war broke out, it was decided to make a film called The Lion has Wings to give Britain confidence in her gallant but not over-numerous air force. There were three directors: Michael Powell, Adrian Brunel and myself. I directed all the scenes with



The cover of
Cinegram Preview for
8 November 1939
showing a poster for
The Lion Has Wings

Ralph Richardson and Merle Oberon and also had to do many of the air scenes. We went to Hatfield aerodrome. The whole film unit was waiting as we had been promised that three Spitfires would come and dive right down into our cameras. We went to wait for the aeroplanes. They didn't arrive. I became rather impatient. 'Where the hell are those Spitfires?' I was then put properly in my place by the squadron leader. *'They'll be over as soon as possible, Sir, but at the moment they're fighting over France'. When they eventually did come, they gave a marvelous [sic] dive right into the cameras, scattering the unit until there was nobody left except the camera and myself.*

Co-director Michael Powell explained in his autobiography *A Life in Movies*³ that the plans for *The Lion Has Wings* were laid before the declaration of war occurred on 3 September 1939 and that Korda had gathered Powell, Oberon, Richardson and Hurst to make it happen.

³ Michael Powell, *A Life in Movies: An Autobiography* London: Faber and Faber 2000

Powell continues:

Alex (Korda) explained his personal agreement with Churchill, and how it affected us all... Denham⁴ was already a classified area... when war was declared filming on The Thief of Bagdad⁵ would stop. The next day, everybody at Denham would start working on a feature propaganda film which Alex had promised Churchill would be ready in one month.

Extract from *A Life in Movies* by Michael Powell

⁴ Denham Film Studios were founded by Alexander Korda in 1935 and operated from 1936 to 1952

⁵ With the outbreak of the Second World War, work on *The Thief of Bagdad* was suspended. It was later completed and released in December 1940

There appears however to have been another dimension at play as Korda's lifeblood was audience-filled cinemas and this was under threat. Upon the outbreak of war, the government ordered the closure of all places of entertainment, including cinemas. While this was never introduced in Northern Ireland, cinemas in mainland Britain closed until the order was rescinded two weeks later. The closure order had been prompted by fears of bombing and large crowds gathering but it seems the authorities quickly realised that the nation needed entertainment to keep up its spirits.



Copyright and courtesy of the Belfast Telegraph

With Korda's persuasive powers and the support of Churchill the outcome was cinemas reopening. It was a remarkable achievement for Korda and any edit glitches now visible with the benefit of hindsight can be forgiven as the film was completed for a budget of £30,000 and shooting scenes were accomplished in just under two weeks.

As S.P. Mackenzie⁶ observed, the timely completion and delivery of *The Lion Has Wings*,

...depended on the government reversing the decision it made on the outbreak of war to close the cinemas because of the danger posed by bombing ...[and] support from the new wartime propaganda arm, the innocuous sounding Ministry of Information: and of course, the backing of the RAF itself.

Extract from *The Battle of Britain on Screen* by S.P. Mackenzie

⁶ S.P. Mackenzie, *The Battle of Britain on Screen: 'The Few' in British Film and Television Drama* (Edinburgh; Edinburgh University Press, 2007)

THE STORY OF THE FILM

The film begins with a documentary style comparison of British life to the 'false ideals and black and sinister emblems' of Nazi Germany. Britain's progress in advancing modern housing, building hospitals, schools and welfare centres is profiled.

The nation's desire to enjoy sports, rather than solely focus on winning is emphasised. The recently filmed Royal family singing at Abergeldie Castle (near Balmoral) in August 1939 contrasts the leadership styles of Hitler and King George VI. The Royal family, including Princess Elizabeth and Princess Margaret, are seen singing *Under the Spreading Chestnut Tree*.

King George, Queen Elizabeth and Princess Elizabeth sing and do the actions of *Under the Spreading Chestnut Tree*



In contrast Germany is represented by darkness, oppression and marching jack boots. This is accompanied by harsh military music. Listen for the audio dubbing of sheep *baaing*.

The film then shows the build up to war in the 1930s, including the 'formidable' new Vickers Wellington bombers and Hurricane fighters under production. The prospects of a long fight are laid down;

If it should be a long war... If that forecast of a three-year struggle should really come true, it is not hard to calculate which side will endure.



German Nazi iconography

A still from *The Lion Has Wings*

Visual images show the intent concentration of audiences around radios at 11.15am on 3 September 1939 and the declaration of war. Newspaper billboards are shown portraying German atrocities including one committed on the first day of the war – the German sinking of the SS *Athenia*.



Evening Standard reporting on the events that encouraged American assistance to Britain in the fight against Germany

A still from *The Lion Has Wings*

The film is then devoted to the RAF, Fighter Command and the combination of air defence weapons and tactics. The RAF's raid on Kiel on 4 September 1939 is shown and includes the actual Wellington squadron that took part in the raid. Co-director Michael Powell managed to get himself to the airfield armed

with a camera after being alerted to the raid by the film's attached military adviser Squadron Leader Wright (who plays an uncredited part in the film as Squadron Leader of the *Sunflower* squadron).

RAF personnel gather around a Wellington bomber which has just returned from a raid on Kiel on 4 September 1940

A still from
The Lion Has Wings



The film also profiles the new Spitfire fighter and the interconnecting work of Fighter Command with anti-aircraft guns, barrage balloons and secret listening posts. No indication is given of radar. Propaganda, consequence and effect then come together in the closing scene where actor Merle Oberon playing Mrs Richardson, the wife of Wing Commander Richardson, reflects on a woman's tragic part in war giving up their menfolk:

First to the earth to defend their land, then to the sea and now they've got to give them to the air. They've never complained. Often and often they've lost the one man in the world that counted, that expressed the whole of life to them. They've bitterly resented the stupidity and brutality that made it necessary. But that it was necessary they never questioned.

There is also the echo back to the film's opening line of dialogue in her final sentence;

We must keep our land darling. We must keep our freedom. We must fight for what we believe in, truth and beauty, and fair play and kindness, so that even if we don't live to enjoy life founded on the good things at least our children may, eh darling?

BRIAN DESMOND HURST

Hurst came from a working-class background, having been born at 23 Ribble Street, East Belfast on 12 February 1895. He was the seventh child of a shipyard metal worker. Aged 19 and bored with life working in Bloomfield linen factory, Hans Moore Hawthorn Hurst (he changed his name to Brian Desmond Hurst after the war) joined the 6th Battalion of the Royal Irish Rifles in the first few weeks of the First World War. His battalion were thrown into the enemy's machine gun fire on 9-10 August 1915 on the slopes of Chunuk Bair at Gallipoli. By the end of the day all the officers were dead or wounded.



Private Hurst in hospital at Cairo

Hurst returned to Belfast and found it a place of turmoil and riots. He left Northern Ireland in 1920 and attended art schools in Canada, Paris and New York where he trained as an artist. Hurst then moved to the USA and then Hollywood where he worked in the art department of John Ford⁷ films. There he learnt the art of filmmaking from his mentor and great friend.

⁷ John Ford (1894–1973) was an American film director whose career spanned from 1913 to 1971

The scale of Hurst's thirty films is vast and covers four decades and three continents. Fellow director Powell recalled that Korda described Hurst as 'the brilliant Irish Director, a follower of Renoir, with the gift for poetic realism.'

Hurst is now recognised as Northern Ireland's greatest film director, with his Director's Guild of Great Britain plaque erected in Belfast, as well as having one of the gigantic Titanic Film Studios sound stages named after him.

For more on Brian Desmond Hurst and his films see *Theirs is the Glory*. *Arnhem, Hurst and Conflict on Film* by David Truesdale and Allan Esler Smith. Published by Helion.



Hurst made ten films on war and conflict. The *Winning The War: Hurst, Film and Propaganda* series explores many of the themes he linked to warfare, such as propaganda, enduring love, duty, self-sacrifice, unflinching loyalty to cause or comrades, the work of woman in war, hate, injury and death.

FUTURE SCREENINGS

Look out for upcoming screenings of

A CALL FOR ARMS!

(1940)

MISS GRANT GOES TO THE DOOR

(1940)

DANGEROUS MOONLIGHT

(1941)

A LETTER FROM ULSTER

(1942)

THEIRS IS THE GLORY

(1946)

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