

OPINION

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Old whiskey and young women

By R. Marc Kantrowitz

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HISTORY

He was the original Tasmanian devil: a charming rogue, as dashing and devilish off the screen as he was on it. At a fit and muscular 6 feet 2 inches and 180 pounds, the seemingly permanently bronzed hulk, complete with cleft chin and dimples, looked every bit the movie star that he was.

Perhaps far more insightfully than he intended, he said, "I like my whiskey old and my women young." Little did he know he was describing his downfall.

Errol Flynn was born on June 20, 1909, in Australia. Tasmania to be exact. After a somewhat turbulent school career that found him in trouble for fighting and having sex with the daughter of a school official, he left for a succession of jobs before finding his true calling: acting.

His first role, a minor one filmed in New Guinea, was in 1933. Two years later he married the French actress Lili Damita, who bore him one son. The lore of Hollywood beckoned and soon he was in America.

His big break came when Warner Brothers, searching for a film to ride in the wake of MGM's popular "Mutiny on the Bounty," cast him as the lead of "Captain Blood." The movie was a major hit. Soon he starred in a film that would forever define him, "The Adventures of Robin Hood," in which he again played the debonair swashbuckler.

As busy as he was working, and despite being married, his nightlife was never-ending. He partied and he drank, not necessarily in that order. Many of his female cohorts, whom he often met in the fast lane of show business, were attractive and young.

It thus came as little surprise, to the Hollywood crowd at least, that in 1942, the year of his divorce, he was charged with two counts of statutory rape — of having sexual relations, at different times, with 17-year-old Betty Hansen, an aspiring actress, and 16-

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year-old Peggy Satterlee, a nightclub dancer.

The trial, which ran for nearly a month in early 1943, was itself like a Flynn movie, complete with his multitude of adoring fans mobbing the court scene.

Starring in the role of his primary defender was Jerry Geisler, the high-powered attorney to the stars. The jury was packed with women. Geisler hoped they would be drawn to the charismatic defendant, who sat quietly as the two young girls detailed the lurid details from the witness stand.

The pretty and innocently attired Betty Hansen took the stand first and described how she had dinner with Flynn at the home of one of his friends, and of how she drank some foul-tasting drink that sickened her. Flynn took her upstairs where they had sex.

Satterlee, similarly, told the enraptured jurors that Flynn took advantage of her on his yacht. Indicative of their relationship, Flynn had nicknamed her "J.B." for jail bait.

On cross, Geisler had a field day with both witnesses, which at some points had spectators either laughing or shaking their heads in disbelief. The witnesses confused their stories and readily admitted to sordid pasts.

Although he probably didn't need to, Flynn took the stand and casually testified that he never had sexual relations with the two young ladies. After deliberating for 13 hours, the jury entered a packed and tense courtroom and rendered its verdict.

In a scene worthy of a Hollywood drama, bedlam broke out. The crowd cheered wildly as the defendant spontaneously leapt to his feet, a broad smile stretching his handsome face. Flashbulbs popped. Female admirers rushed to touch the star.

The judge rendered the final review when he told the jury, which had just presided over a lengthy trial involving the alleged ravaging of two young females, "I have enjoyed the case, and I think you have."

While similar scandals had wrecked careers in the past, this one had the opposite effect. Flynn's popularity soared. Indeed, indicative of his devil-may-care persona, a term was coined that found popularity throughout the world: "In like Flynn!"



AP PHOTO

Actor Errol Flynn

As always, Flynn remained in character. During the down time of his trial, the bad boy spent much of his time wooing 18-year-old Nora Edgington, who worked at a nearby food stand. When she became pregnant, they wed. They had two children before divorcing in 1949.

Epilogue

A year later he wed for the third time. Despite being married, as always he took up

with another female, this one an aspiring actress, Beverly Aadland. Calling her by her nickname, he sighed, "Here I go again, Woodsey." She was 15.

That romance, however, would not end like the others. His lifetime of drinking and carousing took its ultimate revenge. His good looks, like his career and health, faded. He died in 1959, having just turned 50.

MAYNARD