

# 2

## **Gone with the winds that never were: The David O. Selznick archive and unmade historical cinema**

*David Eldridge*

In the fall of 1935, David O. Selznick left Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) to launch his own independent production company, Selznick International Pictures (SIP). Determined to 'compete with the best', his blueprint was to release just a handful of high-cost prestigious films annually, personally supervising each one (Schatz 1996: 178). In fact, SIP produced merely eleven titles before it was liquidated in 1940, only a few months after its most monumental picture, *Gone with the Wind* (GWTW), swept the Academy Awards. Yet during its brief existence, SIP's team of readers scouted countless books, plays, magazines and radio broadcasts as inspiration for potential movies. On the East Coast, Kay Brown covered the New York publishing and theatre worlds, while Selznick's story editor in Los Angeles, Val Lewton, submitted a constant stream of synopsisized 'promising material' for his boss's consideration (Miller 1986: 11). As a result, for every *A Star is Born* (1937) or *Rebecca* (1940) that SIP made, there were hundreds of unproduced story ideas and proposals, now preserved in the David O. Selznick Collection, at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center in the University of Texas at Austin.

With over three million items, the Selznick archive is the fullest record of independent film production from the classic Hollywood era, documenting every aspect of SIP operations. It contains a mass of correspondence, financial records, treatments, scripts, set and costume designs, call sheets and publicity material, as well as Selznick's legendary lengthy memos which attest to his 'fanatical attention' to the 'thousands and thousands of details that go into the making of a film' (Lambert 1976: 35; Behlmer 1989: xxv). Film historians have already used this documentation to challenge the long-standing perception that *GWTW* emerged as a masterpiece almost in spite of Selznick being a 'troublesome meddler' who chopped and changed writers and directors on a whim (Vertrees 1997: x). Rather, archive-based studies like Thomas Schatz's *Genius of the System* (1996), Ronald Haver's *David O. Selznick's Hollywood* (1980) and especially Alan Vertrees's *Selznick's Vision* (1997) have demonstrated how Selznick was the 'chief architect and prime mover' at every stage of the films made by SIP and that *GWTW* in particular was very much the determined product of his 'personal vision' (Vertrees 1997: xi-xii). Indeed, use of the collection has led not only to a greater appreciation of Selznick himself but also consequently informed debates in film studies about the director-oriented concept of the *auteur*, as well as generating invaluable material for scholars of adaptation studies, star studies, the studio system and film history in general.

Rarely, however, has the extensive material relating to unrealized projects been drawn upon; and this chapter considers the additional insights which can be gained from research into the film ideas which SIP did not pursue. Some attention has been given to the 'sinking' of Selznick's project about the *Titanic*, which was intended to be Alfred Hitchcock's 'American debut' after he signed a contract with SIP in 1938 (Schaefer 1986: 57). However, this perpetuates the notion that shadow cinema is only of interest when it concerns the 'unmade masterpieces' of canonical directors; whereas a crucial significance of the Selznick collection is that it reveals just how much time, energy and creative talent is devoted by filmmakers to unmade ideas and works. The major part of the archive, which spans the years 1916 to 1966, is arranged on the basis of the departmental division of the studio: Administrative (containing 1094 boxes of material), Casting (36), Distribution (248), Financial (847), Legal (332), Music (116), Production (214), Publicity (268), Research (53), Story (1012) and Talent (18). Most material relating to unrealized projects is to be found in the Story Department series, which includes 89 boxes labelled as 'Scripts 1935-54'. The files within are organized alphabetically, starting with a copy of Robert Sherwood's play *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* and ending with Mark Reed's comedy *Yes, My Darling Daughter* (both of which eventually became films produced by other studios in 1940 and 1939, respectively). Also, an additional 366 files in the Story Department series consist of an alphabetical run of synopses of plays, novels, short stories and non-fiction

publications, with commentary by the readers. At the most conservative estimate, at least 45 per cent of the Story Department records pertain to unproduced projects; and this does not take into account correspondence in other boxes which are organized according to the person heading each of Selznick's different story offices (the most important of those being the offices of Lewton and Brown, as well as scenario assistant Barbara Keon and Elsa Neuberger on the East Coast). Furthermore, there are also five boxes in the Administrative Series concerned with all of the stories Selznick considered while at MGM, dating from 1933 to 1935, with many unrealized projects among them (some of which such as 'Lloyd George' or 'S.S. Morro Castle' are substantial enough to have a file of their own). An additional 11 boxes catalogued likewise under 'Administrative' are 'Story Files 1936–1953', ranging from 'American Cavalcade Film' to 'Young Man with a Horn'. These concern most any project where the idea progressed beyond an initial synopsis of source material to at least the assigning of writers or the consideration of casting possibilities. The organization of the archive therefore requires the researcher to range across many boxes, files and series in order to piece together the different memoranda and material pertaining to a particular title or subject, but the fullness of the collection as a whole certainly rewards that detective work in enabling an effective reconstruction of just how far a project did or did not progress at any given time.

Indeed, the huge number of ideas for screenplays brought to Selznick's attention by Lewton, Brown and others, and his reasons for passing them over, are highly informative both of Selznick's own *modus operandi* and of the forces acting on (and against) independent filmmakers in an industry dominated by the major studios. They also raise questions about what constitutes shadow cinema, since often Lewton's team submitted 'only the germ of a workable idea' to their boss (Miller 1986: 7). How should film historians regard such 'germs' or determine which, out of the thousands of 'workable ideas' documented in the archives, merit further research? For the purposes of this chapter, I have taken my lead from *GWTW* itself, to focus on some of the events and figures from American history about which Selznick professed himself to be 'crazy' and in which he saw the potential for 'showmanship' (so often the decisive, if nebulous, factor in the productions he pursued most vigorously). Infamously, *GWTW* was very nearly an unproduced film itself, after Selznick initially told Brown that he was 'most sorry to have to say no' to her enthusiastic entreaties to acquire the rights to Margaret Mitchell's novel (Haver 1980: 3). Indeed, although this epic of the American Civil War was ultimately to fulfil his desire to make 'The Great American Motion Picture', the archive shows that even as *GWTW* was being filmed, Selznick continued to consider the possibility that other American histories might have served that ambition instead (Vertrees 1997: 184).

## Andrew Jackson and the censoring of history

In the first weeks of SIP's existence, Selznick listed the key impediments to the company's prospects of developing projects with compelling 'showmanship possibilities'. A key factor was the lack of established stars under contract to him. Then there was 'the public's ennui with all the old story formulas'. 'Legal difficulties' in acquiring rights to material were a particular challenge for any new operator given that major studios had already registered so many titles with the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association (the MPPDA, headed by Will Hays). Also, among 'an increasing number of obstacles placed in producers' paths', Selznick highlighted the matter of censorship, especially the industry's own self-regulatory system, administered since July 1934 by the MPPDA's Production Code Administration (PCA) (Selznick 1935b). Though each of these elements would be significant in discouraging the development of at least one of Selznick's American history projects, censorship was a *bête noire* which preceded the formation of SIP.

Enjoying the considerable artistic freedom at MGM which led to such moneymakers as *Manhattan Melodrama* (1934) and *David Copperfield* (1935), Selznick had proposed in February 1934 a historical subject that he saw as brimming with showmanship: a 'daring treatment' of the life of President Andrew Jackson. Alexander Korda had recently scored an unprecedented success for a British film in the US market with his saucy *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (1933), convincing Selznick that 'a sex story dealing with an actual outstanding American historic figure, against the background of the White House, was a sensational idea that would have the same appeal' (Selznick 1934b). Jackson's biography offered *two* sex scandals to exploit. First, Jackson's political opponents had accused him of encouraging Rachel Robards to desert her husband, Lewis Robards, and live with Jackson adulterously for two years before she was officially divorced. The second drew on gossip that, following the death of Rachel just days after his election in 1828, Jackson had taken as his mistress Peggy Eaton, the wife of his secretary of war. With his imagination fired with the prospect of showing how 'Jackson actually forced his mistress down the throats of Washington society and fired his cabinet members when their wives would not receive her', Selznick was quick to inform MGM's head, Louis B. Mayer, that he was 'very hot about the possibilities' (Selznick 1934a).

Understandably, the Production Code administrators were less than 'hot' when they got wind of the idea. The Code had been adopted by the MPPDA in 1930 as a set of guidelines to encourage higher standards of morality in Hollywood movies and thereby deflect the pressures building externally for federal film censorship laws. One central tenet of the Code was that adultery should never be 'explicitly treated or justified or presented attractively' (Leff and Simmons 2013: 287). Selznick would have contravened this in his plan

to depict 'Jackson's marriage to a woman who hadn't been divorced' as an 'amusing' but 'romantic' episode, and with his idea for a 'three-cornered love story between Jackson, his mistress, and some young man' (Selznick 1934a). It was precisely because producers like Selznick were ignoring the Code and reawakening the spectre of government-endorsed censorship being imposed on the industry that, on 5 February, Joseph Breen was appointed by Will Hays to take over the Studio Relations Committee (SRC, soon to become the PCA) and bring filmmakers into line. Selznick's Jackson project was thus one of the very first problems Breen encountered. Determining how best to proceed, Breen dispatched staffer Islin Auster to the Los Angeles Public Library to investigate the historical truth.

Reporting on the accusations of 'improper conduct' levelled at Jackson, Auster clarified that Jackson and Rachel had married in 1788 in the mistaken belief that Lewis Robards had already divorced her. Once this unintentional bigamy was realized and the divorce properly secured, Jackson had immediately remarried his beloved Rachel. This less 'sensational' truth was unlikely to rile potential censors and could be handled under the Code. On the 'main punch' of Jackson's 'relations' with Peggy Eaton, however, Auster had been 'unable to locate but little' (Auster 1934). The MPPDA therefore cautioned Selznick that 'it was our unanimous opinion that it was a dangerous policy to portray the irregular living of a past president of the United States'. Audiences could be 'offended at the dragging in of a scandal of a past president's life', and the MPPDA would not countenance setting a precedent for an 'objectionable cycle of films' which might, for instance, revisit the alleged mistresses and illegitimate children of Grover Cleveland or Warren Harding. Apparently with no knowledge (or at least no irony) concerning President Franklin Roosevelt's own extramarital affairs, the SRC also warned that Roosevelt 'might himself object to having presidents portrayed as practicing adultery in the White House' ('Memoranda for the Files' 1934). Further, as Breen insisted with specific regard to the cinematic portrayal of Jackson, 'his importance as a heroic figure in American history must be kept in mind throughout' (Breen 1936).

Faced with this obstacle, Selznick responded in two ways which were to prove characteristic in his career. First, the notion of creating an original screenplay was supplanted by the search for a suitable pre-existing narrative in popular historical fiction. When adapting such material, Selznick could try to argue with the Code administrators that the American public had already accepted its version of events without taking offense. Second, Selznick switched the focus onto the women in Jackson's life. Rather than 'besmirching' the public image of Old Hickory, this strategy would enable filmmakers to present Jackson as the chivalrous defender of the reputations of 'wronged' women (Lewton n.d.). The pending publication of Samuel Hopkins Adams's fictionalized novel about Peggy Eaton, *The Gorgeous Hussy*, proved the catalyst for aligning these two approaches. Inspired by

Eaton's own memoirs, Adams's book scotched rumours of the affair between her and Jackson (along with earlier allegations of adultery with John Eaton while she was married to her first husband). Instead, Peggy was presented as the innocent victim of slanders spread by Jackson's political enemies; and Jackson was depicted as 'indefatigable' in 'corralling proofs to annihilate each insinuation' against her 'female virtue' (Pollack 2011: 92). Adapting this solved the censorship problem, absolving both figures of any 'sin', and Selznick quickly acquired the rights. Yet this version of history also reduced Jackson to a secondary figure in what was now Peggy's story.

Selznick retained some initial passion for *The Gorgeous Hussy*, as he could see showmanship value in such 'a marvellous title' if it became a vehicle for MGM's 'sex goddess' Jean Harlow (Selznick 1934b). At one point he even contemplated casting Mae West simply because such a title, linked with the comic actress's reputation, would 'draw the crowds' (even if it would mean writing 'an entirely new story') (Lewton n.d.). But by the time MGM made the decision to cast Joan Crawford, the impact of adapting to the demands of censorship had clearly eroded Selznick's enthusiasm. He had resigned in 1935 while *The Gorgeous Hussy* was in pre-production and did ask his agent to see if the studio might sell the option to him in December, so as to make it one of the first releases for SIP (Selznick 1935c). However, he did not push hard for it and readily brought *Little Lord Fauntleroy* from MGM instead. That MGM did eventually release *The Gorgeous Hussy* (with Lionel Barrymore playing Jackson) raises the question of whether a film idea which evolves into a different movie ought to be classed as shadow cinema. However, in this case, Selznick's original vision of a film centred on the life, career and presidency of Andrew Jackson was one which remained unrealized. Moreover, as the first of a run of possible biopics concerning other male figures in US history upon which Selznick fixated, it warrants particular attention. It is also the case, that Selznick was later to gain a reputation for 'pushing back' at the Production Code, famously fighting for Rhett Butler to be able to say the word 'damn' in his parting line in *GWTW*, and for railing against it as 'insane, inane and outmoded' during the making of *Rebecca* (Selznick 1939b; Doherty 2009: 134). The files of this unmade Jackson project pointedly suggest that Selznick's attitude towards the Code originated much earlier, in the disappointing compromises occasioned by one of his very first 'Great American Motion Picture' ideas.

## Canfield, Colman and costumes

Another preoccupation of SIP's story discussions stemmed from Selznick's association of showmanship with 'sensational' casting. In contrast to MGM's boast that it had 'more stars than there are in the heavens', SIP faced particular challenges as a 'company without stars' (Selznick 1935b).

It was not until the end of the decade that Selznick was able to assemble his own stock company of contracted performers, including the likes of Vivien Leigh, Ingrid Bergman, Jennifer Jones and Gregory Peck within 'The Selznick Players' (Bowers 1976: 15–16). Prior to this, SIP had to secure the services of stars on loan from the major studios or find projects which would entice non-contracted players to sign picture-based deals. Therefore, potentially prestigious historical films – and the leading roles within them – were often considered as good bait for actors Selznick wanted to work with. Several archival files therefore identify historical figures as hypothetical matches for particular stars. One document, for instance, lists 'historic women ... prominent at the age of fifty', including the founder of the American Red Cross, Clara Barton, social reformer Jane Addams and French actress Sarah Bernhardt (Bucknall 1934). The older actress Selznick evidently had in mind remains unidentified in the document, but when he was seeking to entice stage actress Maude Addams out of retirement, the notion of her playing Abraham Lincoln's mother, Nancy Hanks, was similarly advanced. There are also various lists like 'Material for Mae West' (Lucretia Borgia being one surprising suggestion) or ideas for 'an Amelia Earhart story for Katharine Hepburn' (Wright and Lewton 1935a; Lewton 1938c). Readers were also frequently instructed to keep certain actors in mind when evaluating novels and plays. Synopsis files are full of comments such as 'Alexander Hamilton's life should make a fine screen story, perhaps for Leslie Howard, since Hamilton was inherently English' (Seilaz 1937). As evidence of performances that 'might have been', these were often just ideas in the ether, but they still represent telling commentary on how an actor's star persona was perceived within Hollywood. Moreover, when some historical projects did progress further as potential star vehicles, their eventual failure to be produced revealed some of the limitations of SIP's set-up.

A notable example was evident in the studio's work on a biopic of Richard Albert Canfield, the 'Prince of Gamblers' who in the 1880s established America's most prestigious (and illegal) casinos in New York and Rhode Island. Canfield was also known for investing his wealth in art, being the patron of James Abbott McNeill Whistler. Selznick (a compulsive gambler himself) first displayed interest in early 1936, when searching for a project to tempt actor Edward Arnold, who had just played the lead in Universal's *Diamond Jim*, the biography of another legendary gambler and entrepreneur, Jim Brady. Arnold was under personal contract with independent producer B. P. Schulberg, who had previously been Selznick's boss at RKO Pictures, and SIP evidently hoped to capitalize on this relationship. Kay Brown was already trying to buy the screen rights to Alexander Gardiner's 1930 biography, *Canfield: The True Story of the Greatest Gambler*, and was clearly thinking of Arnold's performance as Brady when she argued strongly that Canfield should be his next role (Brown 1936). Selznick, however, was cautious about this being 'so close to Arnold's other pictures', especially



when Schulberg informed him that Arnold was also going to play yet another nineteenth-century tycoon, railroad baron Jim Fisk, in RKO Pictures' *The Toast of the Town* (1937) (Selznick 1936b). When it transpired that *Diamond Jim* had not been as big a hit as Universal had anticipated, Selznick grew even colder on the idea (Selznick 1936c). By then, however, SIP had invested considerable money in paying writers Oliver Garrett and Parker Morell for treatments on a Canfield screenplay. Consequently, Selznick's thoughts soon turned to casting another actor: Ronald Colman.

Selznick had worked very successfully with Colman when making MGM's *A Tale of Two Cities* (1935), nominated for an Academy Award for Best Picture. Colman was contracted with Samuel Goldwyn at that time but then signed with 20th Century-Fox, where he starred in *Clive of India* and *Under Two Flags*. When the latter proved a 'slowing moving' flop, Colman's contract was not renewed and he struck out as an independent. SIP thus negotiated with him to play the dual roles of Rudolf Rassendyll and King Rudolf V in *The Prisoner of Zenda* (1937), and, thrilled with Colman's performances, Selznick signed him to a seven-year contract (Smith 1991: 141–2). The Canfield project was thus resurrected specifically with this actor in mind. Yet, as made clear by Morell's contribution of 'Four Ideas on Canfield Story', it proved challenging to tailor the biographical reality to Colman's persona (Morell n.d.). The 'virtues of uncompromising integrity, strength of purpose and generosity of mind' were those which 'defined [Colman's] character and sustained his popularity' throughout his most successful performances (Smith 1991: 291). Morell could see how Colman's 'British' image was somewhat suited to 'the character of Canfield as he actually was in his later days ... a very cultured gentleman'. However, integrity and honour had featured little in the youth of the real Canfield, who appeared driven only to make money (and 'lots of it'). Having lived 'riotously' at Europe's best gambling houses, he had spent several years learning their tricks, only returning to America in order to then exploit the 'sucker money' at home (Morell n.d.: 1–4).

Morell therefore devised a variety of possible openings for a screenplay, which would recast Canfield as a sympathetic character with values more aligned to Colman's image. One scenario invented a rival suitor to the girl young Canfield loves. Said suitor then conspires to get Canfield 'out of the way', having him arrested unjustly as a 'common gambler'. Another involved Canfield's employer similarly 'framing' him, this time for the embezzlement of company funds which the employer himself had lost in games of cards. In both cases, after his release from prison, the embittered Canfield would decide 'he might as well have the game as the name' and embark on his career as the calculating 'Prince of Gamblers'. Only at the end would he find redemption, giving it all up for the love of a good woman (Morell identified this woman as Genevieve Martin, whom Canfield did indeed marry; yet somewhat inconveniently for Morell's purpose, the real Canfield continued



his gambling career while married to Martin, opening his famous clubhouse in Saratoga Springs the year after their wedding). Another suggestion reflected Morell's awareness that Colman was to play the medieval poet Francois Villon in Paramount's *If I Were King* (1938), resulting in the idea that 'it might be possible to do a very interesting Coleman [*sic*] story' by making Canfield 'a Villon type, an engaging, gay, devil-may-care fellow who spends a lot of his time playing an excellent game of cards' in New York's cafes. When 'one day he becomes aware of the fact that the poor people of the neighbourhood are being fleeced of their savings by certain unscrupulous bankers and brokers', Canfield would then become a latter-day 'Robin Hood', using his talents to win back 'huge sums of money' to return to the victimized poor (Morell n.d.: 1-6). Perhaps unsurprisingly, none of these ideas persuaded Selznick that the role of Canfield was right for Colman, illustrating the drawback SIP faced in having few actors under contract. The studio's scope for successfully developing movies was restricted by having to weigh up material against its small (sometimes singular) selection of available players.

Moreover, SIP also lacked the leverage over actors that major studios possessed. Various other historical figures were considered for Colman. Theatre impresario David Garrick was seen as appropriately 'gallant', and the actor Edwin Booth, brother of Lincoln's assassin, was also thought right for Colman, though his life story was deemed too 'episodic' (Wright and Lewton 1935b; Wright 1936). However, a biopic of Sir Robert Peel, founder of the British police force, was quickly rejected with the simple statement that 'Colman wasn't interested' (Lewton 1938b). Indeed, one historical idea on which Selznick was most 'hot' clearly demonstrated the ability of actors to derail his plans. Exploring the 'possibility of a tie-up with the U.S Navy' for an epic film, Selznick saw ideal material in the biography of John Paul Jones, the 'great naval hero' of the Continental forces during the American Revolution (Lewton 1936a). If that was not enough, Jones's subsequent role in the victory of the Imperial Russian Navy during Catherine the Great's war against Turkey would have given the film a truly international and epic scale. Brown and Lewton shared their boss's passion for the project, especially after reading F.A. Golder's *John Paul Jones in Russia*, which recounted the hero's rivalry with Catherine's lover and Commander-in-chief Grigory Potemkin. Sidney Howard (who was engaged in writing *GWTW*) was apparently 'extremely enthusiastic'. Selznick himself was sold on the 'marvellous casting opportunities', envisaging flamboyant Russian star Alla Mazimova as Catherine and, of course, Colman as Jones (Selznick 1936a). Yet there it floundered. For while everyone else at SIP agreed *John Paul Jones in Russia* would be a 'splendid Colman', Colman did not. As an exasperated Lewton explained in May 1936, 'Mr Colman, after the signal failure of *Clive of India*, feels that the uniforms of that time are unbecoming to him' (Lewton 1936b).

That such a 'trivial' objection killed off John Paul Jones might be dismissed as one of the odd contingencies by which many films are undone. However, Lewton's disappointed acceptance that 'we must bear in mind that [Colman] is an actor and such things seem important to him' represents a marked difference to MGM's handling of Clark Gable after Selznick cut the deal for him to play Rhett Butler (*ibid.*). Illustrating the limitations of an independent filmmaker faced with the Hollywood's established star system, SIP was almost entirely dependent on Selznick's personal ability to persuade an actor that an individual production was of significant value to their career. The performer essentially had the final say. In fact, despite his contract, Colman never did take a role in another Selznick production after *Prisoner of Zenda*, also rejecting the leads in *Intermezzo* and *Rebecca*. In contrast, while Gable initially resisted the role of Rhett, telling Selznick it was 'too big an order' and that he didn't want 'any part of him', he ultimately had little choice (Haver 1980: 17). Once MGM agreed terms with SIP, Gable was contractually obliged to take the part; a suspension and loss of income was his only alternative. Ironically, for what was to become the reluctant Gable's career-defining role, Selznick's first choice had been none other than Ronald Colman (Smith 1991: 143).

## Benedict, Burr and struggling with the story

Even without the pressure of trying to make a historical figure into a 'good fit' for a specific actor, the histories that most absorbed Selznick proved challenging to adapt. Documents spanning the years 1935–51 demonstrate that, throughout his career, Selznick showed far more interest in the American Revolution and the early Republic than the Civil War period of *GWTW*, and that two characters in particular 'fascinated me more for years more than any other[s] I know' (Selznick 1940). Both Benedict Arnold and Aaron Burr had reputations as the 'bad guys' of early American history. This was especially true of Arnold, once the most successful general in the Continental Army, having won pivotal victories in the capture of Fort Ticonderoga in 1775 and at Saratoga in 1777, yet infamous for subsequently plotting to surrender West Point to the British. Burr was likewise accused of treason in 1807, charged with conspiring to provoke a war with Spain and establish his own rule over Mexican territory in the Southwest. This followed his effort to wrest the presidential election from Thomas Jefferson in 1800 and his killing of Alexander Hamilton in a duel in 1804. Selznick was evidently drawn to the complexity of these figures and their motivations, rather than the straightforward hagiography surrounding Washington or Lincoln, and believed that biopics about them would challenge the 'old story formulas' (Macconnell 1946). However, his writers struggled to find a balance between

making Burr and Arnold empathetic while not alienating a public that 'does not like to be deprived of its villains' (ibid.).

The development of original screenplays about both men was attempted as soon as SIP was formed. Having heard the playwright Philip Barry was 'enthusiastic' about Burr, Selznick tried, without success, to entice him to Hollywood in early 1935 (Selznick 1935a). He had more luck with writer Oliver Garrett, whose co-authored screenplay for Selznick's production of *Manhattan Melodrama* at MGM had won an Oscar earlier that year. When Garrett agreed to write a treatment about Arnold with the working title 'Sir Judas', Lewton sent staff to the libraries to provide the author with research materials. They returned with notes on such subjects as 'Arnold's wooing of Peggy Shippen' or 'General Procedure in Court Martials', along with a detailed summary of the conspiracy between Arnold and the British major John Andre, who had been executed as a spy (Harris 1935). The treatment delivered in February 1936 drew on this work and tried to find some 'positive' aspects within Arnold's treachery, such as his loyalty to George Washington shown in the refusal to hand his friend over to the British, and emphasized his desire to 'end the bloodshed' of the war (Garrett 1936; Meyer 1936). Yet, without whitewashing Arnold entirely, it was impossible to overlook the motives attributed to him in most histories: of his 'monetary distress'; of his anger at the charges of financial malfeasance brought against him by Congress; of his wounded pride in having been passed over for promotion despite his acumen in the field. Certainly American viewers would have found it difficult to empathize with the man in Garrett's suggested ending, which had Arnold claim, with thwarted ambition, that had his plans succeeded, 'I might have been the savior of the British Empire, perhaps Royal Governor of America' (Meyer 1936). Denting Selznick's certainty that audiences would be as 'crazy' about Arnold as he was, the project stalled at this point (Selznick 1934c).

As accounts of the making of *GWTW* attest, perhaps the greatest challenges faced by SIP arose from delays created by Selznick himself. As Thomas Schatz suggests, Selznick was simultaneously 'supremely confident and insecure'. This duality was evident in his obsessive tinkering with scripts even when shooting was underway, demonstrating simultaneously his level of engagement and his feeling that 'no script was ever quite ready for production' (Schatz 1996: 179). This was a prime reason why SIP completed so few films. As the projects concerning Burr and Arnold also indicate, Selznick lacked confidence in entirely original screenplays, feeling far more secure when adapting books or plays (or remaking films) that had already been tested on the public. The sheer volume of readers reports in SIP's archives is itself evidence of this. While Garrett's 'Sir Judas' sat on the shelf, Selznick's interest was revived each time a new book on Arnold was brought to his attention, hoping that it might contain a solution. From Edward

Dean Sullivan's *Benedict Arnold: Military Racketeer* in 1937 through to a 1946 'sketch' of Charles Burr Todd's *The Real Benedict Arnold*, various accounts were 'rushed out' to Lewton's team for review (Lewton 1937b; Macconnell 1946). One of the more promising candidates came in March 1938, when Frank O'Hough's *Renown* was published. Reader Dorcas Ruthenberg thought this fictionalized biography had 'great possibilities' as 'capable of fine treatment in the hands of a gifted actor' (Ruthenberg 1938).

However, while Selznick prevaricated, MGM beat SIP to the chase, buying an option on O'Hough's novel. As Lewton reflected forlornly to Selznick, if MGM was to act upon its purchase, it would 'destroy one of your cherished plans' (Lewton 1938a). Yet, once MGM producers read the novel they too got 'cold feet' about casting a major star like Gable or Spencer Tracy as a turncoat. In the end, for all of Selznick's personal fascination with 'the bizarre career of a military genius and a traitor', and for all the 'fortune' he had invested in pursuing it, he never could find a version of Arnold's story that overcame his uncertainty about potential public antipathy (Selznick 1940). In the case of Aaron Burr, the drive to find an adaptable pre-sold story was even more pronounced. Selznick first expressed interest in Burr as a possible role for Lionel Barrymore while at MGM, but it was in 1936-7 (by which point the Benedict Arnold project had hit a dead end) that it became one of SIP's priorities. Among the works considered were Booth Tarkington's play, *The Aromatic Burr* (read by the story department in July 1936), Holmes Alexander's fictionalized biography, *Aaron Burr: The Proud Pretender* (February 1937), and a play by John Francis Larkin and Anthony Edward O'Beirne, entitled *Aaron Burr, Corsair of Empire*, which concerned 'the fiasco of Burr's attempt to conquer Mexico' (June 1937) (Lewton 1936c, 1937a; Wilson 1937). Even Gertrude Atherton's *The Conqueror*, though primarily about Alexander Hamilton, was evaluated for its account of his fatal rivalry with Burr (Lewton 1941). As Lewton was to note, by the summer of 1938, he had read 'literally dozens of Burr stories' (Lewton 1938d). Yet none were quite right. *Corsair of Empire*, for example, made Burr an honourable and sympathetic man but achieved this by showing him as being manipulated by the Machiavellian General James Wilkinson. In this plot, even the fatal duel against Hamilton became something contrived by Wilkinson, who calculated that 'Burr will be more easy to seduce into the Mexican venture if, politically, he is disgraced for firing a gun'. As SIP's reader observed, this unsatisfactorily reduced 'friend Aaron' to little more than a 'puppet and complete victim of others' cleverness' (Wilson 1937).

In June 1938, however, Lewton thought he had 'finally' found a story 'that seem[ed] to solve most of the difficulties' through the 'very simple device of marking Theodosia Burr, his daughter, the heroine'. Born in 1783, and later the wife of the governor of South Carolina, Joseph Alston, Theodosia had shown a fierce devotion to her father, publicly defending Aaron against all accusations of impropriety even to the detriment of her own husband's

political career. Following the lead of a play by William Perlman and John Dennis Keyes simply titled *Theodosia*, Lewton argued that in telling Burr's story from her perspective, it could become 'a very human tale of a daughter's passionate attachment to her father and her deep-rooted feeling that he can do no wrong' (Lewton 1938d; Ruthenberg 1939). *Theodosia*'s anguish when she then discovers that the charges against her father were based in truth might inspire a great performance from an actress. This deflecting of narrative attention onto a sympathetic female protagonist mirrored the strategy earlier adopted with *The Gorgeous Hussy*. It had also been mooted as an option for the Arnold story, to tell it through the eyes of his wife, Peggy Shippen. Selznick himself, however, opposed this move.

It is often claimed that *GWTW*, *A Star is Born* and later productions such as *Duel in the Sun* reveal Selznick as a 'women's producer', with a distinctly 'feminine sensibility' (Leff 1999: 188). However, the unproduced Burr and Arnold projects suggest that this view needs qualification, for a crucial reason they never got made was because Selznick refused to countenance making them 'women's pictures'. While Selznick recognized the value of Lewton's suggestion regarding *Theodosia* Burr, for him it was 'the story of the man' himself which was 'inherently exciting and unusual' and that any showmanship for an 'outstanding picture' about Aaron Burr would reside in the more 'direct approach' (Selznick 1938). Yet without a property in which he possessed full confidence, the life story of Burr (like that of Arnold) never made it to the screen. Or rather, it never made it as the epic biopic Selznick envisaged. In 1946, Universal Pictures did release a film starring David Niven as Burr, directed by Frank Borzage. But their *Magnificent Doll* reduced Burr to secondary importance in exactly the way the 'Theodosia' project might have done; in this case making him the dashing but self-destructively ambitious rival for the affections of Ginger Rogers's Dolley, the future wife of President James Madison. *Magnificent Doll* indicated that Lewton may have been correct in his appraisal of the narrative solution; however, its disappointing critical and box-office performance seemingly proved Selznick right in his assessment as well.

## Conclusion

That in the end *GWTW* was the only major SIP production to focus on American history was, of course, the result of other factors too. The archive demonstrates, for instance, that the actual registration of titles for possible historical subjects became an unanticipated source of vexation on many occasions. While MPPDA regulations stated that 'the names of historical ... characters ... as original titles cannot be pre-empted by any registrant', Selznick was frustrated and concerned that MGM had registered 'The Life

of Benedict Arnold' long before him and that Warner Bros. appeared to even 'own' the very name 'Benedict Arnold' (Lewton 1937b, 1937c). Similar anxieties arose, as Schaefer has documented, in the case of the planned *Titanic* movie (Schaefer 1986: 57–74). Moreover, given the length of time it took SIP to develop a project, Selznick was always apprehensive that registering particular titles would disclose to other producers the subjects he was considering. Such disclosure carried the risk of the major studios being able to put a similar movie into production ahead of him. This actually occurred after SIP registered the title 'Billy the Kid: Story of a Killer' in 1937, when MGM's announcement that it was then going to develop a remake of its 1930 *Billy the Kid* eventually compelled Selznick to drop the idea (Selznick 1939a).

In fact, the papers relating to SIP's unmade version of 'Billy the Kid' also show how archival materials relating to unproduced films are of value in film history in adding to our understanding of why other movies actually *did* get made. It has long been established that Selznick famously 'lost' the classic John Ford western *Stagecoach* (1939) after he pulled rank on executive producer Merian Cooper (Roberts 1997: 151). Schatz records how Selznick's 'nixing' of *Stagecoach*, as a film for SIP's sister company, Pioneer Pictures, led to a fallout which prompted Cooper to resign and dissolve the partnership. Cooper and Ford then set up Argosy Pictures and made *Stagecoach* in conjunction with Walter Wanger and United Artists (Schatz 1996: 273). The Selznick Collection, however, demonstrates that prior to this, Cooper was planning the 'Billy the Kid' project as the next release for Pioneer Pictures, with Selznick's productive input and support. Indeed, Selznick had director William Wellman 'wild' on Cooper's idea and had taken inspiration from Wellman's earlier seminal gangster film, *The Public Enemy* (1931) (Selznick 1936d). His conception was to exploit the 'great showmanship' inherent in making 'what would amount to the first debunked Western' in its 'portrait of a cold-blooded killer who had great charm' (Selznick 1936e). However, as with the Canfield, Burr and Arnold projects, finding the right script proved difficult. In January 1937, Jock Whitney reviewed the scenarios then written and found them lacking both in 'epic quality' and 'originality in theme and treatment'. As the chief financial backer of the company, Whitney (not Selznick) took the decision that 'this is not for Pioneer in its present form' (Whitney 1937). Considering the contingencies on which shadow cinema rest, if Whitney had not made that decision, if a suitable screenplay for 'Billy the Kid' had been developed in 1937, then Cooper would not have been searching that spring for alternative material for an original western; and it might have been *Stagecoach* which never got made.

Of course, *GWTW* itself was also one of the biggest reasons why films about Billy the Kid, Benedict Arnold, Aaron Burr, John Paul Jones or any number of other historical figures never progressed to completion at SIP. That film's prioritization and sheer ambition simply absorbed so much of the



company's energies, talent and resources, as well as Selznick's personal focus. As Selznick's obsession with *GWTW* grew, he developed the conviction that 'a single block-buster, if properly exploited and released, could outperform a dozen top features combined' (Schatz 1996: 273). Though the archives prove that Selznick's ambition to surpass D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and 'make the greatest motion picture to date' could have resulted in very different epics of American history, that conviction ultimately meant there was only room within SIP's schedule for one *GWTW* (Vertrees 1997: 184).

## References

### Key

- DOSC: David O. Selznick Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin
- PCA: Production Code Administration records, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Los Angeles
- Auster, I. (1934), Auster to Joseph I. Breen, 'Memoranda for the Files', 13 February, Andrew Jackson (Unproduced) file, PCA.
- Behlmer, R. (1989), *Memo from David Selznick*, New York: Samuel French.
- Bowers, R. (1976), *The Selznick Players*, South Brunswick, NJ: A.S. Barnes.
- Breen, J. (1936), Breen to Louis B. Mayer, 10 March, *The Gorgeous Hussy* file, PCA.
- Brown, K. (1936), Brown to David O. Selznick, 7 January, Story File: Canfield, 3352-23, DOSC.
- Bucknall, N. (1934), Bucknall to David O. Selznick, 'Historic Women', 6 January, MGM Research Department Interoffice, 655-10, DOSC.
- Doherty, T. (2009), *Hollywood's Censor: Joseph I. Breen and the Production Code Administration*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Dutton, J. (1936), Synopsis of *John Paul Jones in Russia* by F.A. Golder, 21 January, Synopses 1934-56: Joanna - The Jones, 2988-1, DOSC.
- Garrett, O. (1936), 'Sir Judas: Second Treatment', 14 February, Story File: Benedict Arnold, 510-10, DOSC.
- Harris, A. (1935), 'Benedict Arnold (*Sir Judas*)', 23 December, Story Files 1936-1953: Benedict Arnold, 3078-3, DOSC.
- Haver, R. (1980), *David O. Selznick's Hollywood*, New York: Knopf.
- Lambert, G. (1976), *GWTW: The Making of Gone with the Wind*, New York: Bantam.
- Leff, L. (1999), *Hitchcock and Selznick: The Rich and Strange Collaboration of Alfred Hitchcock and David O. Selznick*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Leff, L., and Simmons, J. (2013), *The Dame in the Kimono: Hollywood, Censorship and the Production Code*, Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.
- Lewton, V. (n.d.), 'Notes on *The Gorgeous Hussy*', Story Files 1936-1953: *Gorgeous Hussy*, 3354-18, DOSC.



- Lewton, V. (1936a), Lewton to David O. Selznick, 6 January, Lewton-Selznick Correspondence, 2587-4, DOSC.
- Lewton, V. (1936b), Lewton to Kay Brown, 9 May, Lewton: Correspondence: Katherine Brown, 2584-8, DOSC.
- Lewton, V. (1936c), Lewton to Kay Brown, 31 July, Story Files 1936-1953: The Aromatic Aaron Burr, 3351-19, DOSC.
- Lewton, V. (1937a), Lewton to David O. Selznick, 19 February, Lewton-Selznick Correspondence, January-June 1937, 2587-6, DOSC.
- Lewton, V. (1937b), Lewton to David O. Selznick, 7 December, Lewton-Selznick Correspondence, January-March 1938, 2588-2, DOSC.
- Lewton, V. (1937c), Lewton to David O. Selznick, 13 December, Lewton-Selznick Correspondence, January-March 1938, 2588-2, DOSC.
- Lewton, V. (1938a), Lewton to David O. Selznick, 8 March, Lewton-Selznick Correspondence, January-March 1938, 2588-2, DOSC.
- Lewton, V. (1938b), Lewton to David O. Selznick, 11 June, Lewton-Selznick Correspondence, April-June 1938, 2588-3, DOSC.
- Lewton, V. (1938c), Lewton to David O. Selznick, 21 June, Lewton-Selznick Correspondence, April-June 1938, 2588-3, DOSC.
- Lewton, V. (1938d), Lewton to David O. Selznick, 22 June, Lewton-Selznick Correspondence, April-June 1938, 2588-3, DOSC.
- Lewton, V. (1941), 'Story Correspondence Notes', 18 February, Lewton-Selznick Correspondence, 2589-8, DOSC.
- Macconnell, F. (1946), 'Benedict Arnold: Research Material', 17 April, 1027-5, DOSC.
- 'Memoranda for the Files' (1934), 16 February, Andrew Jackson (Unproduced) file, PCA.
- Meyer, E. (1936), Synopsis of *Sir Judas* by Oliver Garrett, 10 April, Lydia Schiller Files, 1119-15, DOSC.
- Miller, J. M. (1986), 'Frankly My Dear I Just - Don't - Care: Val Lewton and Censorship at Selznick International Pictures', *Library Chronicle of the University of Texas at Austin*, 36: 10-31.
- Morell, P. (n.d.), 'Sucker Money (Four Ideas on Canfield Story)', Script Development 1936-46: Canfield Story, 390-4, DOSC.
- Pollack, Q. (2011), *Peggy Eaton: Democracy's Mistress*, Rockville, MD: Wildside Press.
- Roberts, R. (1997), *John Wayne: American*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Ruthenberg, D. (1938), Synopsis of *Renown* by Frank O'Hough, 31 January, Synopses 1934-56: Relay Race - Retreat from Love, 3005-6, DOSC.
- Ruthenberg, D. (1939), Synopsis of *Theodosia* by William Perlman and John Dennis Keyes, 30 August, Synopses 1934-56: That Lady - There Are Thirteen, 3013-5, DOSC.
- Schaefer, E. (1986), 'The Sinking of David O. Selznick's *Titanic*', *Library Chronicle of the University of Texas at Austin*, 36: 57-74.
- Schatz, T. (1996), *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era*, New York: Henry Holt.
- Seilaz, A. (1937), Synopsis of *The Conqueror* by Gertrude Atherton, 2 January, Synopses 1934-56: Concealed Weapon - Conspirators, 2970-2, DOSC.

- Selznick, D. O. (1934a), Selznick to Jerry Sackheim, 9 February, Story Files: Jackson, Andrew, 3355-9, DOSC.
- Selznick, D. O. (1934b), Selznick to Robert Rubin, 26 February, Story Files: Jackson, Andrew, 3355-9, DOSC.
- Selznick, D. O. (1934c), Selznick to Kate Corbaley, 20 July, MGM Files 1933-5 Story Department (Interoffice), 655-19, DOSC.
- Selznick, D. O. (1935a), Selznick to Val Lewton, 30 January, MGM Files 1933-5 Story Department (Interoffice), 654-7, DOSC.
- Selznick, D. O. (1935b), Selznick to John Wharton, 12 November, Story Files 1936-1953: Captain Macklin, 3352-24, DOSC.
- Selznick, D. O. (1935c), Selznick to Kay Brown, 2 December, Story Files 1936- 1953: Gorgeous Hussy, 3354-18, DOSC.
- Selznick, D. O. (1936a), Selznick to Kay Brown, 6 February, Lewton-Selznick Correspondence, 2587-4, DOSC.
- Selznick, D. O. (1936b), Selznick to Kay Brown, 25 February, Story Files 1936- 1953: Canfield Story, 3352-23, DOSC.
- Selznick, D. O. (1936c), Selznick to Kay Brown, 10 March, Story Files 1936- 1953: Canfield Story, 3352-23, DOSC.
- Selznick, D. O. (1936d), Selznick to Merian C. Cooper, 23 December, Story Files 1936-1953: Billy the Kid, 3352-9, DOSC.
- Selznick, D. O. (1936e), Selznick to John Hay Whitney and John Wharton, 28 December, Story Files 1936-1953: Billy the Kid, 3352-9, DOSC.
- Selznick, D. O. (1938), Selznick to Val Lewton, 'Theodosia Burr', 5 July, Lewton- Selznick Correspondence, July-Sept 1938, 2588-5, DOSC.
- Selznick, D. O. (1939a), Selznick to Val Lewton, 7 March, Story Files 1936- 1953: Billy the Kid, 3352-9, DOSC.
- Selznick, D. O. (1939b), Selznick to John Hay Whitney, 'Hays Code', 6 September, Production Files - Rebecca - Censorship, 170-15, DOSC.
- Selznick, D. O. (1940), Selznick to Norman Taurog, 16 February, Consolidated Files 1936-54, Benedict Arnold, 846-8, DOSC.
- Smith, R. D. (1991), *Ronald Colman, Gentleman of the Cinema*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland.
- Vertrees, A. D. (1997), *Selznick's Vision: Gone with the Wind and Hollywood Filmmaking*, Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Whitney, J. H. (1937), Whitney to David O. Selznick, 16 January, Story Files 1936- 1953: Billy the Kid, 3352-9, DOSC.
- Wilson, L. (1937), Synopsis of *Aaron Burr, Corsair of Empire*, 11 June, Synopses 1934-1956: Aaron Burr - Alibi, 2968-10, DOSC.
- Wright, W. (1936), Wright to David O. Selznick, 29 September, Story Files 1936- 1953: Booth, Edwin Story Idea, 3352-14, DOSC.
- Wright, W., and Lewton, V. (1935a), 'Material for Mae West', 14 August, Lewton- Selznick Correspondence, Prior to 1935, 2587-3, DOSC.
- Wright, W., and Lewton, V. (1935b), 'Material for Ronald Colman', 14 August, Lewton-Selznick Correspondence, Prior to 1935, 2587-3, DOSC.