X-Ray Milland

Retro is pleased to share an exclusive sneak preview from Dashing to the End, Eric Monder's new biography of Ray Milland

One of the questions that inspired my book is why does Ray Milland, one of the most consequential actors from Hollywood's Golden Age – and an Oscar winner – not have a comprehensive biography. In most biographies, the author's assertion that the subject is complex has become a cliché, but in the case of Ray Milland, the complexity is the point, and it helps explain why he has been accorded so few accolades in recent decades, let alone a complete account of his life story.

Still, there is no question Ray Milland was a major movie star – of the handsome, debonair variety – specifically from the late Thirties to the late Forties, at a point when some of the complexity was airbrushed away. For nearly six decades, from 1928 to 1985, he appeared in more than 135 theatrical releases, on top of dozens of radio and television programmes.

The sheer size and variety of Milland's canon is remarkable, especially when you consider his lack of formal training and belated start in the business. He was reliably exemplary in everything from forgettable pictures to flawed gems to outright classics – most notably Alfred Hitchcock's Dial M for Murder (1954) and Billy Wilder's The Lost Weekend (1945). If Milland was only known for this Oscar-winning turn in The Lost Weekend he would still hold an important place in movie history and beyond. His selfish, suicidal barfly, a role antithetical to the matinée idol type, was proof to the world that this leading man of comedies and action adventures could be a superior dramatic actor. There wasn't anything phony about it, and the role elevated him, at least temporarily, from star to icon.

Occasionally, the material was subpar and he went through the motions, yet even a bored Milland was more interesting than many other stars. Milland would no doubt have more prominence in the public imagination today had he not passed up or been ➤

passed over for several landmark roles. Of the former, he rejected Howard Hawks's Bringing Up Baby (1938), and the original Broadway production of My Fair Lady (1956). He was considered for both Ashley Wilkes in Gone with the Wind (1939) and the hero of How Green Was My Valley (1941), and Paramount bought Shane (1953) with him in mind. But there's a deeper, more profound reason for both Milland's lack of recognition and the misreading of his contributions: it's that the actor upset the status quo and turned the notion of what it meant to be a matinée idol – the smooth, gallant and slightly roguish but always engaging hero – on its head and then paid the price for it.

DEFYING EXPECTATIONS

Between his troubled upbringing in Wales and a Celtic desire for adventure, Ray Milland possessed an alternately moody and rebellious disposition well before he entered the movie business. With a military background and no stage experience, Milland got a job as a marksman on the British version of The Informer (1929). He then went to Hollywood, slowly proceeding to become an actor and American citizen, with many stumbles and setbacks along the way.

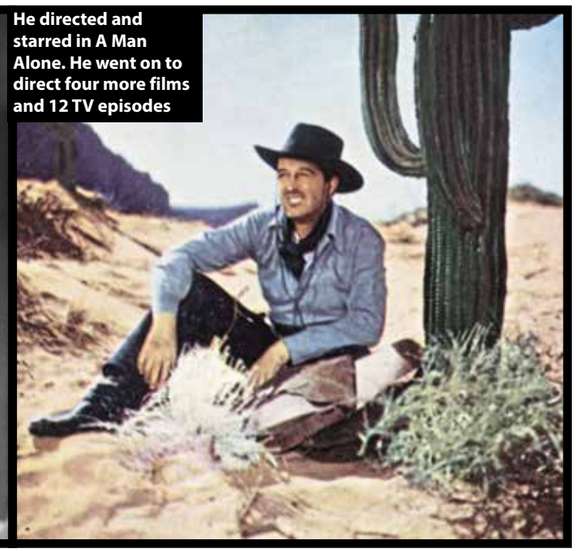
For a few years, Paramount attempted to mould new contract player Ray Milland into 'the next Cary Grant,' once Grant left the studio in 1936. Significantly though, unlike Grant and his brethren, Milland embraced dark material and sinister roles, imperilling his methodically established hero image. Yet it wasn't that alone that set him apart. Milland's greatest virtue was also his greatest vice: understanding his 'shadow' self (after Jung), Milland's less theatrical, more cinematic, intensely personal style held up a mirror to viewers, showing them that his flaws and frailties were theirs, too.

Toward the end of his Paramount years, Milland chose to play the Devil in seductive human form in the noirish Alias Nick Beal (1949), a personal favourite of his. While Cary Grant had just personified a guardian angel in the feel-good Christmas hit The Bishop's Wife (1947), Milland was unafraid of the career repercussions from appearing as the most heinous of all possible characters. Alias Nick Beal was sandwiched between two of Milland's most memorable homicidal cads, Mark Bellis in So Evil My Love (1948) and Tony Wendice in Dial M for Murder. Despicable as they are, all three show moments of weakness and even a little regret. The extra layers are supplied by Milland's performance, the merits of which are easy to overlook because they are so subtle. The different sides to Ray Milland on screen manifest themselves as much within films as between films.

Milland gave an Oscar-winning performance as Don Birnam in The Lost Weekend

On the set with director Billy Wilder

Milland was happy to play the villain opposite Grace Kelly in Dial M for Murder



He directed and starred in A Man Alone. He went on to direct four more films and 12 TV episodes

NO FEAR OF THE DARK

As a leading man, Milland was both an insider and outsider. Briefly, he embodied the manufactured matinée idol, but the limits of that persona became clear, and his career veered into iconoclastic territory. He brought a Byronic edge to his work – something dark and unplanned, which resonated beneath his suavity. The public saw the cool, urbane exterior; insiders recognised the complexity churning below the surface. This duality gave his performances their unique tension and resonance, setting him apart from the more straightforward projections of his peers.

Yet for all his classical reserve and gentlemanly bearing, Milland seemed most at home inhabiting characters with burdens to bear. He excelled at playing men straddling the line between order and chaos, between composure and collapse. This was never clearer than in The Lost Weekend, where his portrayal of an alcoholic is unflinchingly raw. Here was a leading man brought low and made vulnerable, changing perceptions of what stars – male stars, especially – were permitted to show on screen.

After Paramount, Milland's willingness to gamble with material and roles further distinguished his filmography. He was drawn to complexity far more than comfort, his career zigzagging across genres and registers, from comedies to thrillers to horror, often resisting typecasting to stretch himself. His directorial debut, A Man Alone (1955), and later projects would reflect a similar restlessness – sometimes at odds with commercial expectations, but always a testament to his passion for taking chances.

Milland's private life mirrored his professional contradictions. Stories about his temperament, his opinions, and even his relationships are frequently at odds. Colleagues could describe him in glowing or disparaging terms, and his own memoir doesn't always settle the matter. What is clear is that Milland was propelled by a drive to work on his own terms, exploring nuances of masculinity and vulnerability rare for his generation of male leads. Whether as an actor, a director, a friend, or a rival, Milland's iconoclasm shaped not just a career, but also a legacy.

Ray Milland was a man of contradictions and charisma – someone who, over a long and varied career, steadfastly refused to be reduced to a single persona or type. He possessed the surface grace of a matinée idol and the internal turmoil of a brooding antihero. More than most, he challenged Hollywood's formulas, bringing psychological depth to every role, and betting on himself with daring professional decisions. In doing so, he left a legacy as one of the Golden Age's most fascinating, multifaceted, and enduring figures.

Dashing to the End: The Ray Milland Story by Eric Monder is available now from the University Press of Mississippi (£31).