

Document Citation

Title	The life and death of Colonel Blimp
Author(s)	Harlan Kennedy Nigel Andrews
Source	<i>Film Comment</i>
Date	
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	The life and death of Colonel Blimp, Powell, Michael, 1943

The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp

The first truly "Powellian" films were the three he made in the late war years: *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (1942), *A Canterbury Tale* (1944), and *I Know Where I'm Going* (1945).

All were scripted by Pressburger, who came to England from Germany after working for ten years with UFA, and there is no doubt that the films owe much of their sardonic outsider's-view of the British character to him. *Colonel Blimp* is still war-preoccupied in theme, but by no stretch of definition could it be called a "war film." Powell's camera has pulled back to take in a huge satiric panorama of British military history. Framed by a "modern" sequence in which the aged, Blimp-like hero (Roger Livesey) has a brush with a group of rebellious young cadets on the eve of World War Two, the film is mostly a flashback account of "Blimp's" life, showing how he too was once a young hothead (in the time of the Boer War) and how age and experience slowly mellowed him through sixty years and one earlier world war.

A recent item in the British Press has revealed that Powell and Pressburger, who seem to have been born to controversy, incurred the wrath of Winston Churchill over this project. Convinced during the shooting of the film that it was to be a vicious lampoon of army manners (the name "Colonel Blimp" was borrowed from a jingoistic cartoon character created by British artist David Low), Churchill issued memo after memo: asking first that the production be terminated, and later—when it wasn't—that the film itself be banned from export. In neither aim did he succeed, but the memos and their replies exist to this day as a cautionary reminder of how close he came.

It is in *Colonel Blimp* that the first full flush of Powell's genius as a visual stylist—and as a colorist—appears. Designed by Alfred Junge (another refugee from Nazi Germany), the film has a wonderfully rich sense of period, and shows a Hitchcockian flair for using trick effects (especially "glass shots") to give studio settings an extra dimension.

What the film also boasts, more importantly, is the first lengthy elaboration of a motif that was to run right through

Powell's work, made with or without Pressburger. Raging quietly at the heart of every Powell film is a battle between emotional contraries—a battle working either toward a wisdom-bringing synthesis or to outright victory or defeat. Powell's emotional contraries are almost all variants on the same archetypal and markedly "British" counterpoint: between inhibition and free-spiritedness. The first category takes under its wing a multitude of Powellian sins—puritanism, moral or artistic conventionality, religious self-denial—while "free-spiritedness" is a living-out of one's own needs and desires in an often self-destructive defiance of social rules.

In *Blimp* the subtle ebb and flow of the story sweep the central character now to one side of this counterpoint, now to the other. The Establishmentarianism against which "Blimp" declares himself early on an enemy is an agent of inhibition; yet Blimp finds an instant kinship with the forms and manners of Prussian gallantry as exemplified by his German friend (Anton Walbrook), whom he first meets in a dueling incident and runs up against regularly during the film.

The film would seem to switch Blimp's character around gradually from freedom to formality, in a sort of two-and-three-quarter-hour moral *volte-face*. But the "present-day" framing sequence—the clash with the cadets—is subtler than that. It presents Blimp as an individual, however much inculcated

with social orthodoxies, in conflict with a rebellion which, however anti-establishment in spirit, expresses itself in homogeneous, "mob" form.

Nigel Andrews & Harlan Kennedy, Film Comment