

Document Citation

Title	Hitchcock -- excerpt
Author(s)	Claude Chabrol Éric Rohmer
Source	<i>Editions universitaires</i>
Date	1957
Type	book excerpt
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Jamaica inn, Hitchcock, Alfred, 1939



Jamaica Inn (1939), a period film starring Charles Laughton, may in some ways be considered "a rough sketch for one of his later masterpieces, *Under Capricorn* (1949)." (PHOTO COURTESY OF MUSEUM OF MODERN ART)

Before leaving for America, Hitch received a tempting offer from Charles Laughton and Erich Pommer. The two men had just founded a producing company, Mayflower, and asked him to make a movie for them (with Laughton, naturally) of Daphne du Maurier's novel *Jamaica Inn*. He quickly accepted for two reasons: he wanted to direct Laughton, and one can understand why; and he wanted to accept the Hollywood contract offered him by David O. Selznick, provided that the latter, who had bought the rights to *Rebecca*, another Daphne du Maurier novel, would allow him to make a movie of it. To film *Jamaica Inn*, therefore, could only reinforce his position with Selznick.

Jamaica Inn is a period film (the action takes place at the end of the eighteenth century), a genre Hitchcock had not attempted since his sad experience with *Waltzes from Vienna*. He did not fall into the trap of historical reconstruction but focused instead on making a baroque and highly embellished work. This *Jamaica Inn* may be a rough sketch for one of his later masterpieces, *Under Capricorn* (1949).

The heroine is a young Irish girl, Mary, who goes to England to stay with her Aunt Patience, whose husband, Joss, is the owner of the Jamaica Inn, a disquieting hospice on the Cornish moors. On the way, Mary meets Sir Humphrey Pengaltan (Charles Laughton), a magistrate, who is greatly attracted to her but of whom she is instinctively mistrustful. Little by little, Mary becomes aware that Joss and his tavern provide a hideout for fearsome wreckers. Unaware that Sir Humphrey is their ringleader, she seeks refuge with him and witnesses the pillage of ships that have been wrecked after being lured onto the rocks. Fired by a desire to make Mary his own, Sir Humphrey does away with the innkeeper and his wife and flees with the young Irish girl, whom he forces to embark with him for France. Luckily, the police have been tipped off by a member of the force who has penetrated the gang, and they surround his ship just as it is about to lift anchor. Rather than surrender, the eccentric Sir Humphrey eludes capture by climbing the rigging and then commits suicide by throwing himself from the mast.

We were unable to resee this film, which has not been shown in France since 1945, but several sharp and entertaining images remain vivid in our memories: the heroine taking down a hanged man, a pirate whistling a mazurka as he wipes his bloody cutlass on his shirt, the carriage rolling through the brush, and above all Sir Humphrey's fall onto the deck. Twenty years before Max Ophüls, the camera plunges from atop a mast and seems to crash against the ground: the final stunt in a minor work that is a little too much like its artificial and bizarre protagonist, admirably played by the innately and inventively prodigious Charles Laughton in a role actors dream about.