

'Pimpernel' Smith

Decades before Indiana Jones first cocked a snook at Hitler, Professor Horatio Smith of Cambridge University paved the way for Nazi-punching daredevil archaeologists on the silver screen. Now largely forgotten, Leslie Howard's 1941 movie Pimpernel Smith is a classic of British wartime propaganda, one that inspired real-life resistance to the Nazi Holocaust.

A spectre is haunting Nazi-occupied Europe. As the Gestapo hunt down dissident scientists and artists they find their victims gone – smuggled to safety by a mysterious rescuer known as The Shadow. As the hero grows more daring and his fame spreads, Gestapo General von Graum (Francis Sullivan) vows to capture him. Soon his suspicions fall on Professor Horatio Smith (Leslie Howard), a mild-mannered Cambridge archaeologist. Smith and his students are hard at work on their dig, looking for evidence of Germany's ancient Aryan culture. But are Smith and his excavation really all that they seem?

Best known for his portrayal of the mildly tragic Ashley Wilkes in *Gone with the Wind*, British actor Leslie Howard was at the peak of his fame when he produced, directed and starred in *Pimpernel Smith*. By then a Hollywood star, Howard had returned to Britain in 1939, determined to contribute to the fight against the Nazis.

In 1934 Howard had starred as Sir Percy Blakeney in *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, based on the novels of Baroness Orczy. Like Bruce Wayne and Batman, Blakeney hid his identity as the scourge of Revolutionary France behind a foppish, foolish façade. As the leader of the twenty-strong 'League of the Scarlet Pimpernel' he and his men rescued French nobles from Robespierre's guillotine with feats of swordsmanship, cunning, and derring-do. In the shadow of war, Howard imagined a revival of the Pimpernel legend set in Nazi-occupied Europe.

Howard had learned of the Nazis' persecution of intellectuals and artists from an Austrian friend, the painter Alfons Walbe. Together with refugee screenwriter Wolfgang Wilhelm, he began work on a film treatment about rescuing a famous artist from Nazi-occupied Europe. Howard spent months securing financing for the film, which was shot, like *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, at Denham Film Studios in Buckinghamshire during the spring of 1941, and released in July of that year.

Set in the spring and summer of 1939, the film opens with the rescue of scientist Dr Beckendorf (Allen Jeayes), whisked from his Berlin home moments before the Gestapo arrive at his door. Like many real-life refugee scholars, Beckendorf finds his way to Cambridge. There he encounters his old friend Professor Smith, striding through the cloisters reciting Lewis Carroll's *Jabberwocky*. Beckendorf, oblivious to Smith's secret identity, tells him of his escape and of his rescuer who 'came and went like a shadow'. Meanwhile, in Berlin the Propaganda Ministry deny all news of The Shadow's latest escapades, insisting that 'In Nazi Germany no-one can hope to be saved'.

We first encounter Professor Smith in his museum, gazing lovingly at a marble statue of Aphrodite. Smith's affection for the statue – 'the one sublime woman' – is a definite nod to

Howard's major screen success as Henry Higgins in the 1938 adaptation of George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*.

Thus distracted, Professor Smith arrives late for his lecture on the Parthenon, with one student lamenting that 'archaeologists are always a thousand years behind the times!' Having driven the female students from his classroom with deliberately crass misogyny, Smith announces his plans to excavate in Germany with a cohort of male students:

For some time past, I have been making excavations in central Europe for the purpose of discovering traces of an Aryan civilisation. [students snigger] Oh I'm perfectly serious, gentlemen, it may surprise you to learn that the German government is most interested in the idea!

Smith and his rag-tag gang of undergraduates begin their excavations in Germany close to the Swiss frontier. Unknown to his students, Smith is already smuggling refugee scholars across the border. Baffled Nazi border guards can only hear his signature, whistled, refrain: *There's a Tavern in the Town*.

On a mission to rescue famous pianist Karl Meyer (Hector Abbas) from a forced labour camp, Smith – disguised as a scarecrow – is shot in the arm by a suspicious guard. Reports of Meyer's escape thrill Smith's students, who declare them 'Better than burrowing like rabbits for bits of the past!' But the newspaper mentions The Shadow's bullet wound, and a sharp-eyed student notices a matching injury on Smith's arm. With his identity revealed, Smith's students enthusiastically insist on joining his cause.

Meanwhile in Berlin, Gestapo General von Graum – a thinly-disguised Herman Goering, played by a wonderfully hammy Francis Sullivan – continues his single-minded pursuit of the Shadow. A gaggle of Gestapo officers and musicologists puzzle fruitlessly over the tune to *There's a Tavern in the Town*, and a clue leads von Graum to a British Embassy reception.

At the Embassy party Miss Coles, a Gestapo informant, guesses Smith's secret identity. But Miss Coles is really Ludmilla Koslowski (Mary Morris), daughter of an imprisoned Polish anarchist newspaper editor, who has been blackmailed by the Gestapo. She pleads with Smith to rescue her father from a concentration camp.

Back on the excavation Smith, Ludmilla and the students plan a daring rescue. Their plotting is interrupted by a student with a broken ceramic vessel, sending Smith into raptures: 'a thousand BC, I should think. Never dreamt they had anything like this here. Wait 'til Oxford University hear about this, they'll be green with envy! Oh this is astonishing!'

Smith blusters his way into the Propaganda Ministry disguised as Herr Vodenschatz, a German-American Nazi, and brow-beats the hapless bureaucrats into providing press passes for the students, disguised as six American journalists, to visit the concentration camp where they rescue Koslowski (Peter Gawthorne) and four others.

As von Graum's suspicion of Smith grows, the Gestapo search the archaeological site but fail to discover the escapees hidden in a secret chamber. Smith shows von Graum their

discoveries, including a rich burial with weapons, and hints at a revelation concerning the ancient Aryan origins of Germany.

At the climax of the film, the students smuggle the refugees and the archaeological finds across the border to safety. Smith returns to rescue Ludmilla from the Gestapo, leading an enraged von Graum to declare 'I will not be beaten by that archaeologist, it is a matter of personal honour!'

In their final showdown at the border, von Graum reveals that Germany is about to declare war. In a speech of pure and splendid propaganda, Smith replies that the Nazis will be destroyed by the wilderness of misery and hatred that they are conjuring. Before slipping across the border to safety, Smith tells von Graum that his excavations have conclusively disproved the notion of an early Aryan civilization in Germany.

By the time the film appeared in 1941, Leslie Howard was a leading figure in British propaganda, working tirelessly as an actor, director, producer, broadcaster, and public speaker. Amidst this heavy workload, *Pimpernel Smith* was a labour of love for Howard, who worked with novelist Archibald Macdonell to develop Wilhelm's original treatment for the film. While the updated plot sticks quite closely to Baroness Orczy's original, Macdonell proposed that a modern hero should not be a common man – 'Smith' – rather than an aristocrat. He also proposed that he should be a professor of archaeology.

With its portrayal of the Nazis as thuggish, humourless, uncultured, and comically dim-witted, *Pimpernel Smith* is blatant propaganda and its international success, including in then-neutral America, infuriated the Nazis. Macdonell, Howard, and screenwriter Anatole de Grunwald gave Professor Horatio Smith a complexity and richness of character that drives the film and elevates it far above typical wartime propaganda.

The story of *Pimpernel Smith* has an odd and inspiring final chapter. In the winter of 1942, Swedish businessman Raoul Wallenberg attended a screening of the film at the British embassy in Stockholm. Wallenberg travelled in occupied Europe on business, and had witnessed the horrors of Nazi persecution. He saw in Professor Smith an inspiration – a quiet man like himself, there was even a physical resemblance. On the way home from the screening Wallenberg told his half-sister that he would like to do something of the same sort.

Two years later, Wallenberg joined the Swedish legation in Budapest as an agent of the US War Refugee Board. He immediately began to issue unofficial Swedish 'protective passports' of his own design to Hungarian Jews facing deportation to Auschwitz. Wallenberg worked feverishly to provide documents, safe-houses, jobs, and other lifelines even as thousands of Hungarian Jews were being loaded onto trains. The full extent of his work is shrouded in uncertainty, conflicting accounts, Cold War propaganda, and the mystery of his own fate. Raoul Wallenberg disappeared as the war came to a close, and is thought to have died in Soviet captivity. His efforts in Hungary saved unknown thousands of lives, but by that time his inspiration Leslie Howard – himself of Hungarian Jewish parentage – was already dead.

In 1943 Howard travelled to neutral Spain and Portugal to give a series of lectures. On his way back to Britain on 1 June he was killed when his civilian airliner was shot down by German fighters over the Bay of Biscay. Josef Goebbels' newspaper *Der Angriff* boasted that 'Pimpernel Howard has made his last trip!'

For archaeological audiences there is plenty to enjoy in *Pimpernel Smith*, including a comically-bad excavation set – something like a cavernous megalithic tomb – where the escapees are concealed. Howard makes a brief appearance digging in a rather desultory trench, and the students are occasionally spotted half-heartedly wheelbarrowing. The 'artefacts' are typically crude and somewhat corny mock-ups.

Most interestingly, the students' mockery and Smith's triumphant debunking of prehistoric Aryans suggests that the Nazis' obsession with archaeology was widely known and generally derided. For Heinrich Himmler and other leading Nazis, the search for traces of ancient Germanic cultures was a genuine fixation. The doomed hunts for the both the Ark of the Covenant and the Holy Grail in two *Indiana Jones* movies are grounded in at least a little truth. Leading German archaeologists were complicit in war crimes, following behind the advancing Wehrmacht to loot captured museums and identify Jews for execution. The realities of Nazi archaeology are brilliantly described in Heather Pringle's 2006 book *The Master Plan*.

The only German archaeologist to appear in *Pimpernel Smith* is Dr Fulroth of the Berlin Museum, who arranges the division of finds. Fulroth is an ally of The Shadow: Smith thanks him for his help and Fulroth replies 'I wish I could do more. One has to be careful'. In reality, those German archaeologists who openly opposed the Nazis or fell foul of their race laws were fired from their jobs, with many finding refuge in Britain, including classical archaeologist Paul Jacobsthal and Egyptologist Elise Jenny Baumgartel. For these scholars, the real-life Pimpernels were the Academic Assistance Council, a charity founded in 1933 to help rescue academic refugees from the Nazis. As the Council for At-Risk Academics their work continues to this day.

The dusty academic archaeologist transforms into an action hero to recover artefacts and thwart Nazis. The obvious *Indiana Jones* parallels aside, *Pimpernel Smith* is a fun film that deserves to find new audiences, and can be found quite easily, and freely, online. Keen archaeologists can play spot the howler, while everybody else can enjoy the wit and humour of the script, the splendour of the cinematography, and the power of Leslie Howard's performance.

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