

HIPPODROME silent film festival

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Rob Roy (1922)

HippFest Opening Night Premiere & Commission: Wednesday 20 March 2019

Performing Live: David Allison

'To Scotland, not to Scott, did we go for the facts on which our story is built', declare the opening titles, but it is a disclaimer which lacks conviction as Sir Walter Scott's influence, if not his text, permeates the entire film. The romanticising of the clan, the heroics, the tartanry, and the use of the Scots language on the inter-titles, can only be attributable to Scott, who in effect invented the Highland Scotland so attractive to his huge readership.

Scott's cultural influence in the nineteenth and early twentieth century was simply immense and it is not surprising that cinema was keen to cash in on his works. Everybody knew of the Waverley novels, and so a film with one of their titles would surely attract customers. The Bioscope description of the *The Fair Maid of Perth* (1923) is 'purely a title booking that may get over with suitable music and effects'. In other words, any work purporting to be based on a novel by Scott was sure to attract the public, irrespective of its quality.

No such reservation was necessary for Gaumont's spectacular *Rob Roy* of 1922. Remarkably, it was the fourth *Rob Roy* – fifth, if you include *The Adventures of Wee Rob Roy* (1916). The first two were made in 1911, one of these also by Gaumont, but the other, by United Film Ltd of Glasgow, was actually the first British feature film – "produced by Scottish actors on Scottish ground by a Scottish firm". In contrast, the next *Rob Roy* (1913), by Eclair, was made entirely in America, but with such attention to detail that "one would have said that the picture could only have been made in Scotland by Scottish artistes".

In fact, there was a plethora of Scott-based silent films – *The Bride of Lammermuir* (1909); *Kenilworth* (1909); *Lucia di Lammermoor* (Italy 1910); *Bride of Lammermoor* (USA 1914); *Lochinvar* (1909, 1911, 1915, 1923, etc); *Quentin Durward* (1910, 1912); *Ivanhoe* (1913); *Lady of the Lake* (two in 1912 and one in 1913); and plenty more. It is reckoned that about a third of films with Scottish subjects made during the silent period were based on works by Scott, Stevenson, or Barrie.

This popularity explains why Gaumont returned to the subject of *Rob Roy* in 1922, and they did so with some style. For director, they chose William P Kellino (1873–1957), with David Hawthorne (1888–1942) in the title role. Kellino was a former clown and acrobat turned film director, who founded Teddington Studios in 1912 and had already directed half a dozen films before *Rob Roy*. He would go on to make a further eleven including *Lochinvar* (1923). Hawthorne, too, had a good record, both in theatre but also with some twenty screen credits, mainly as a leading man; *Rob Roy* was his sixth film, as it was also for Gladys Jennings, his leading lady.

Other cast members include a 7th baronet, Sir Simeon Henry Lechmere Stuart, as Montrose, and Wallace Bosco (1880–1973) whose long list of credits took him well beyond the silent era and include *A Canterbury Tale* (1944), *Brief Encounter* (1945), and *Richard III* (1955).

Rob Roy required 800 extras, supplied by the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders who, splendidly, also provided the troops for the Disney version of 1953 starring Richard Todd, though not for *Rob Roy* (1995). That starred Liam Neeson, was directed by Michael Caton-Jones (from Bathgate), received an Oscar nomination, and was very proud to have been made in Scotland.

The boast that a film has been shot in authentic locations always features heavily in its promotion, and Kellino's excellent use of genuine landscape in 1922 is perhaps his singular achievement. In such a setting, with its action-packed and melodramatic drama, it certainly makes for great cinema.

By David Bruce. *David is a former Director of the Scottish Film Council, the British Universities Film and Television Council and the Edinburgh International Film Festival. A historian of film and photography, he is the author of a number of books including Scotland - the Movie and has contributed widely to other publications.*

Dir. William Kellino | UK | 1922 | N/C 12A | b&w | English & Scots intertitles | 1h 26m

Story: Alice Ramsey

With: David Hawthorne, Gladys Jennings, Wallace Bosco, Simeon Stuart

Screening material courtesy British Film Institute National Archive

