

# Sir Michael Elias Balcon - Film Producer

BALCON WAS THE YOUNGEST SON AND FOURTH OF FIVE CHILDREN OF LOUIS BALCON (1858–1946) AND HIS WIFE, LAURA (NÉE GREENBERG; 1863–1934), JEWISH IMMIGRANTS FROM EASTERN EUROPE WHO HAD MET IN BRITAIN AND LIVE AT 30 ALEXANDRA ROAD. GROWING UP IN A RESPECTABLE BUT IMPOVERISHED SETTING, IN 1907 BALCON WON A SCHOLARSHIP TO BIRMINGHAM GEORGE DIXON GRAMMAR SCHOOL, WHERE A PLAQUE IS ERECTED, BUT HAD TO LEAVE IN 1913 OWING TO HIS FAMILY' FINANCIAL NEEDS. HE WORKED AS A JEWELLER'S APPRENTICE, WAS TURNED DOWN FOR SERVICE IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR BECAUSE OF DEFECTIVE EYESIGHT, AND JOINED THE DUNLOP RUBBER COMPANY'S HUGE PLANT AT ASTON CROSS IN 1915, RISING TO BECOME PERSONAL ASSISTANT TO THE MANAGING DIRECTOR.



AFTER THE WAR, BALCON'S FRIEND VICTOR SAVILLE SUGGESTED A PARTNERSHIP TO ESTABLISH A FILM DISTRIBUTION COMPANY. THE COMPANY, VICTORY MOTION PICTURES, LED TO THEM SETTLING IN LONDON, AND AN OFFICE IN SOHO WAS OPENED IN 1921. IN 1923, THEIR FIRST FEATURE FILM WAS RELEASED, THE SUCCESSFUL MELODRAMA *WOMAN TO WOMAN*, STARRING CLIVE BROOK AND BETTY COMPSON AND DIRECTED BY GRAHAM CUTTS. THEY LEASED ISLINGTON STUDIOS AND FORMED THE MORE LONG-LASTING GAINSBOROUGH PICTURES. RECENTLY VACATED BY THE HOLLYWOOD COMPANY FAMOUS PLAYERS-LASKY (LATER PARAMOUNT PICTURES), IT WAS SMALL BUT WELL EQUIPPED AND FULLY STAFFED. A YOUNG ALFRED HITCHCOCK WAS ONE OF ITS EMPLOYEES. BALCON GAVE HITCHCOCK HIS FIRST DIRECTING OPPORTUNITY, AND GAINSBOROUGH GAINED A REPUTATION FOR PRODUCING HIGH-QUALITY FILMS.

BETWEEN 1931 AND 1936, BALCON PRODUCED A NUMBER OF CLASSICS, INCLUDING A STRING OF HITCHCOCK SUCCESSES (LIKE *THE 39 STEPS*) AND *MAN OF ARAN*, KNOWN AS 'BALCON'S FOLLY' FOR GOING WELL OVERBUDGET. HE ALSO HELPED INDIVIDUALS ESCAPE NAZI GERMANY, INCLUDING THE ACTOR CONRAD VEIDT, WHO HAD STARRED IN HIS 1934 FILM *JEW SUSS*. BY 1936, GAUMONT WAS LOOKING FOR AN ENTRY INTO THE AMERICAN MARKET, BALCON SPENT SEVERAL MONTHS IN THE COUNTRY

FORMING LINKS WITH THE BIG HOLLYWOOD STUDIOS. ON HIS RETURN, HE FOUND GAUMONT IN FINANCIAL RUIN AND JOINED MGM-BRITISH STUDIOS THAT NOVEMBER. THE YEAR AND A HALF HE SPENT THERE WAS A TRYING PERIOD FOR BALCON, WHO CLASHED FREQUENTLY WITH STUDIO HEAD LOUIS B. MAYER.

WHEN BALCON WAS INVITED BY AN OLD ASSOCIATE OF HIS, REGINALD BAKER TO HEAD EALING STUDIOS IN 1938, HE READILY AGREED. UNDER HIS BENEVOLENT LEADERSHIP AND SURROUNDED BY A RELIABLE TEAM OF DIRECTORS, WRITERS, TECHNICIANS AND ACTORS, EALING BECAME THE MOST FAMOUS BRITISH STUDIO IN THE WORLD, DESPITE TURNING OUT NO MORE THAN SIX FEATURE FILMS A YEAR. *WENT THE DAY WELL?*, *DEAD OF NIGHT*, (THIS WAS THE FIRST HORROR FILM MADE AFTER THE WAR AND INDEED HORROR FILMS HAD BEEN SUBJECT TO A BAN IN BRITAIN ALL THROUGH THE WAR YEARS). *UNDERCOVER* (1943) AND OF COURSE THE EALING COMEDIES WERE RELEASED DURING HIS TIME THERE. OTHER FILMS FROM THE STUDIO INCLUDE *DANCE HALL* (1950) WITH PETULA CLARK AND DIANA DORS; AND *THE BLUE LAMP* (ALSO 1950), WHOSE LEAD CHARACTER, GEORGE DIXON, TOOK HIS NAME FROM BALCON'S SCHOOL, AND LATER RESURFACED IN THE LONG-RUNNING TELEVISION DRAMA *DIXON OF DOCK GREEN*.



HE WAS KNIGHTED IN 1948 FOR HIS SERVICES TO FILM.

