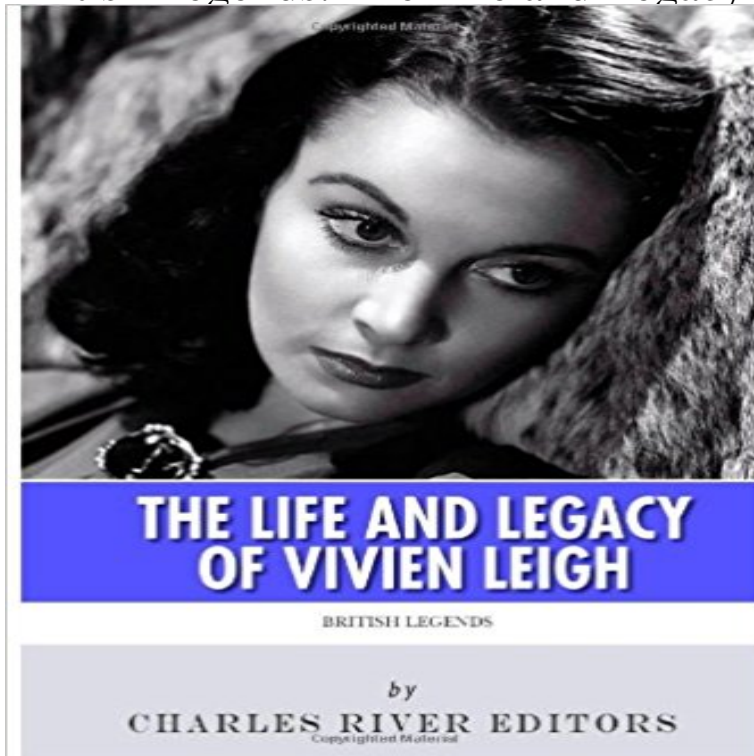


## British Legends: The Life and Legacy of Vivien Leigh



\*Includes pictures. \*Includes quotes about Vivien's life and career, including her own quotes. \*Includes a bibliography for further reading. I'm not a film star, I am an actress. Being a film star is such a false life, lived for fake values and for publicity. Vivien Leigh A lot of ink has been spilled covering the lives of history's most influential figures, but how much of the forest is lost for the trees? In Charles River Editors' British Legends series, readers can get caught up to speed on the lives of Britain's most important men and women in the time it takes to finish a commute, while learning interesting facts long forgotten or never known. The 1930s were the height of the classical Hollywood era, and it is no accident that 1939 has historically been designated as the pinnacle of Hollywood film history. The era was known for its lavish studio productions, with MGM, RKO, Warner Brothers, Paramount, and 20th Century Fox all operating at the height of their powers. Every major studio possessed a long roster of contract players, with films released at such a rapid pace that it made for an especially competitive environment within the industry. Even while America remained in the throes of the Great Depression, the film industry continued to flourish, and movies easily supplanted the theater as the main attraction for American entertainment. Of course, what made 1939 the watershed year was the release of several critically acclaimed movies, including *The Wizard of Oz* and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. But the most famous of the bunch, and perhaps the most famous movie of all, is *Gone With the Wind*, and one of the most remarkable aspects of the film is that the quintessential Southern belle was played by Vivien Leigh, a British actress still relatively unknown in Hollywood. Vivien was an accomplished stage actress and had already appeared in foreign films during the 1930s, but she was a complete dark

horse to get the iconic role she's still associated with, and it only came about because of her persistence in getting cast for the role. 30 years after *Gone With the Wind* was released, one film critic credited Selznick's inspired casting of Vivien Leigh as Scarlett with the film's success. Another 30 years later, the same critic wrote that Leigh still lives in our minds and memories as a dynamic force rather than as a static presence. While *Gone With the Wind* made Leigh a big name practically overnight, she continued to buck the usual trend by doing Broadway and even appearing on stage in London during the 1940s, instead of focusing on movies. A lot of this was no doubt due to her famous marriage to Laurence Olivier, himself an accomplished stage and film actor. At the same time, Vivien became notorious for being difficult to work with and unusually temperamental, a byproduct of bipolar disorder that frequently affected her mood and occasionally left her incoherently hysterical. Nevertheless, Vivien was able to recapture the magic in the 1950s *A Streetcar Named Desire*, which cast her in the role of Southern belle Blanche DuBois. Phyllis Harnoll praised Leigh's Blanche DuBois by saying that, in the London stage production of the play, she showed proof of greater powers as an actress than she had hitherto shown. In fact, it was actually during her time as DuBois that she reached the pinnacle of her stage career. Likewise, her role in the movie was described as one of the greatest performances ever put on film and one of those rare performances that can truly be said to evoke both fear and pity. Unfortunately, her life and career faced constant upheaval by both her mental and physical maladies, including tuberculosis, which led to a premature death in 1967. *British Legends: The Life and Legacy of Vivien Leigh* examines the life and career of one of Hollywood's most famous actresses.

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