

## THE 39 STEPS

Introduced by Dr Mark Glancy

Thursday 19 December 2013

BAFTA, 195 Piccadilly, London W1J 9LN



RELEASE YEAR: 1935

RUNTIME: 86 mins

DIRECTOR: Alfred Hitchcock

SCREEN ADAPTATION: Charles Bennett

DIALOGUE: Ian Hay

Alfred Hitchcock read John Buchan's *The Thirty-Nine Steps* when he was twenty years old and had just entered the film industry at a lowly level. He recalled that the book impressed him so much that he vowed, 'if I ever became a director I would make a picture of it.' Fifteen years later, in the mid-1930s, he was perhaps the best-known British film director and he was under contract to a studio, Gaumont-British, which appreciated his talents. He was given his choice of film projects and the opportunity

of working with some of Britain's best writers, production artists and technicians.

The common ground between Buchan and Hitchcock was their understanding of the need for armchair adventures, and their ability to deliver them effectively. Hannay was their surrogate adventurer, and he served that purpose for fans of the book and film too.

Hitchcock's definition of drama was 'life with the dull bits cut out' and few films demonstrate this outlook as thoroughly and successfully as *The 39 Steps*.

*The 39 Steps* can be seen as a film of its time. As a British film of the 1930s, it is particularly notable for its sharp and at times humorous social observation. Indeed, its minor characters and off-beat settings are among its most memorable features. And, while audiences may not remember precisely what the thirty-nine steps are in the film, few could fail

to recall the odd, nightmarish sense of both mayhem and complacency that pervades the film. It offers an early and chilling warning of the threat that Britain faced from abroad in 1935. Perhaps more remarkably, though, the story also portrays Britain as a country threatened as much by its own disunity and lethargy as it is by any foreign power. There is a sense of impending upheaval that is not at all tempered by the film's ending.

*The 39 Steps* has strengths, charms and surprises of its own. These are greater than the sum of all of these parts and seem to increase with each viewing, and that explains why it continues to be revived, enjoyed, remembered and discussed so many decades after its initial release.

*Extracts from an introduction to  
The 39 Steps: A British Film Guide  
by Dr Mark Glancy*

BRITISH ACADEMY  
OF FILM AND TELEVISION ARTS





#### DR MARK GLANCY

Dr Mark Glancy teaches American and British film history at Queen Mary University of London. His books include *When Hollywood Loved Britain: The Hollywood 'British' Film 1939-1945*, *The 39 Steps: A British Film Guide*, and, most recently, *Hollywood and the Americanization of Britain: from the 1920s to the Present*. His next book will be a study of the film star Cary Grant.

#### BAFTA HERITAGE SCREENINGS

BAFTA Heritage Screenings are a series of quarterly film screenings and on-stage interviews which celebrate British film and TV classics and the great film and TV professionals who made them.



IMAGES: BFI



BRITISH ACADEMY  
OF FILM AND TELEVISION ARTS