

Gone With the 'Oscars': Civil-War Epic Sweeps Awards of Motion Picture Academy

In 1934, Columbia's "It Happened One Night" hit the jackpot for the major awards of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. On Feb. 29, at the Academy's twelfth annual dinner at the Ambassador Hotel in Hollywood, "Gone With the Wind" surpassed that feat by winning eight out of sixteen possible prizes and garnering two special awards for good measure.



'Oscar' winner Vivien Leigh

Although many producers and directors had protested that David O. Selznick's nearly four-hour-long Civil War epic was in a class by itself and that the garden variety of film shouldn't have to compete with it, the 12,000 writers, actors, extras, directors, and technicians who voted in the Academy poll thought otherwise.

In addition to earning Selznick the Irving Thalberg award as the outstanding producer of 1939, and William Cameron Menzies a special plaque for his use of color, "Gone With the Wind" rolled up an impressive score. Comparatively unknown in this country until she appeared as Scarlett O'Hara, the English Vivien Leigh won an Academy statuette—known as an "Oscar"—for the best performance by an actress. Honoring a Negro for the first time, the Academy gave Hattie McDaniel another "Oscar," voting her "Mammy" the best supporting role by an actress. Victor Fleming's direction and the late Sidney Howard's screen play were likewise honored,

1939 Oscars

and in addition "Wind" technicians won prizes for art direction, film editing, and color photography.

Of the few remaining important awards, Robert Donat helped his compatriot, Vivien Leigh, establish something of a sweep for England when his characterization in the title role of "Goodbye, Mr. Chips" was voted the best performance by an actor. Best performance by an actor in a supporting role went to Thomas Mitchell for his impersonation of a drink-sodden doctor in Walter Wanger's "Stage Coach." A contender for "best film" honors, "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington" gathered a lone prize with recognition of Lewis R. Foster as the author of the best original screen story of the year. Among the other awards was the perennial prize for Walt Disney, who maintained his domination of the cartoon field by winning in that class for the sixth consecutive year with his short, "The Ugly Duckling."

Introduced by Frank Capra, whom he succeeded as president of the Academy, Walter Wanger presided over the 1,400 Hollywood great and near great who jammed the Ambassador's Coconut Grove to applaud screen history, and Spencer Tracy passed out the various awards with the poise of an actor who has two "Oscars" of his own at home.

¶ Earlier in the week more than 600 reviewers of the newly organized Newspaper Film Critics of America announced their own "bests" for 1939: best picture: "Goodbye, Mr. Chips"; best actor, Robert Donat for his work in that film; best actress, Bette Davis for her performance in "Dark Victory."

Newsweek

March 11, 1939: p. 34