



# Barry Lyndon

**SPOILER WARNING** The following notes give away some of the plot.

One of the mysteries of Stanley Kubrick's career is why he seized upon William Makepeace Thackeray's *The Memoirs of Barry Lyndon* for adaptation, since the novel is most notable for its use of a literary device Kubrick was constitutionally unable to embrace – the unreliable narrator. In Kubrick's films, narrators (like directors) are authoritative. Humbert Humbert (James Mason) of *Lolita*, from Nabokov, and Alex DeLarge (Malcolm McDowell) of *A Clockwork Orange*, from Anthony Burgess, tell their own stories with vivid, revelatory narration. Though they talk of much that is to their discredit, they are honest chroniclers; they may work mendacious wheedles on other characters, but they do not lie to us.

The first version of Thackeray's novel was serialised as *The Luck of Barry Lyndon: A Romance of the Last Century. By Fitz-Boodle in Fraser's Magazine* in 1844, but was revised in 1856, whereupon its title became (deep breath): *The Memoirs of Barry Lyndon, Esq., of the Kingdom of Ireland. Containing an Account of his Extraordinary Adventures; Misfortunes; His Sufferings in the Service of His Late Prussian Majesty; His Visits to Many of the Courts of Europe; His Marriage and Splendid Establishments in England and Ireland; and the Many Cruel Persecutions, Conspiracies and Slanders of Which He Has Been a Victim*. In the earlier version, the narrative of Barry Lyndon (né Redmond Barry) – which purports to have been written as he is dying in Fleet Prison – is mediated by footnotes from 'Fitz-Boodle', a fictional editor who contradicts the autobiographer on points of fact. In the revised text, Fitz-Boodle is dropped: the novelist has gained confidence that readers will perceive a different picture behind Barry's statements such as: 'For the first three years I never struck my wife but when I was in liquor.'

Thackeray's Barry is as much of a monster as Alex, and as murderous a terror to his family as Jack Torrance in *The Shining*. He is a bully, swindler, looter, cardsharp, murderer, cad, spy, deserter, snob, drunkard, whiner, braggart, philistine and rake. He betrays every friend or relation, considers others' misfortunes only insofar as they affect himself and becomes a low-rent gothic villain as his captive wife pens pleas for rescue in lemon juice, between the lines of letters to her milliner. As Fitz-Boodle notes, he is also embarrassingly devoted to his own reputation, and any possible admission of low character or motive is followed by 'a duel, in which he is victorious'.

Kubrick, not usually one to spare his characters, trims away most of Barry's outright villainies and adds incidents that show him in a more sympathetic, honourable light – most notably in the climactic duel, when Barry harmlessly discharges his shot after the pistol of his opponent and stepson, Lord Bullingdon (Leon Vitali), has misfired; a mercy Bullingdon repays by shooting Barry in the leg. The film idealises relationships Thackeray views with cynicism, like Barry's love for his fiercely protective mother, his flighty cousin Nora, his countryman and gaming patron the Chevalier de Balibari (a long-lost uncle in the novel) and his short-lived, angelic son Bryan.

As played by Ryan O'Neal – as big a name in box-office terms in 1975 as Tom Cruise was at the time of *Eyes Wide Shut* – Kubrick's Barry drifts through the 18th century with disinterest, like Keir Dullea's wide-eyed astronaut in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Some critics decried O'Neal's performance as inexpressive, perhaps failing to appreciate the way he underplays – and the way Kubrick films – Barry's several tearful breakdowns and desperate hugging of parental substitutes or lost women and children. Now that O'Neal's major hits (*Love Story*, *What's Up, Doc?*) are rarely revived, his screen reputation rests on *Barry Lyndon*, a film which was not

an immediate commercial or critical success, but whose reputation has grown apace with its widening influence – within a year or two, Ridley Scott was pillaging it wholesale for tonal notes, players, costuming and staging for his debut *The Duellists*.

Few Kubrick films have been well, or even usefully reviewed on their original release (Philip Strick's notice of *2001* in *Sight and Sound* is an honourable exception) because they need a couple of viewings to percolate. Coming after the controversial, futurist *A Clockwork Orange*, which has many similarities in its plot arc with *Barry Lyndon*, the 'new Kubrick' seemed tame in its retreat to history, to proper buttons on uniforms, to beautiful still lives and a respectable, little-read classic source. It remains the least-seen of his major works, but its stock is rising – and it may yet come to be classed as the most rewarding of Kubrick's films. Scorsese has called it: 'one of the most emotional films I have ever seen'.

Kubrick certainly put his stamp on the material. Thackeray's Europe is marked by bloody, corrupt politics, but Kubrick has no room for terrorist strikes against Irish landlords or German princes commissioning the murders of inconstant female dependents, or even Barry's self-serving term as a Member of Parliament. Thackeray's Barry yawns non-stop in the manner of George MacDonald Fraser's Flashman; O'Neal's Barry is reticent, and only tells stories to his son, most affectingly on the boy's deathbed. For the novelist, the duels are divertissements, opportunities for Barry to misrepresent himself as a fine fellow; Kubrick depicts a series of ritual conflicts, which the hero loses even if he happens to win. Barry's adventures in life start with the death of his father in a duel (in the novel, he drops dead at the races), and his wanderings begin when he prevails in a fake duel with Captain Quin (Leonard Rossiter), his rival for his cousin, and has to flee Ireland. Enlisted in the British army, he fights bare-knuckled with a huge bruiser (Pat Roach). Then, in alliance with the Chevalier (Patrick Magee), he collects gambling debts with a sword. His chastisement of the shrill Bullingdon prompts a campaign of insolence that escalates into a horrific beating administered in public on slippery wood floors, a scene that snaps cinematographer John Alcott out of poised, perfect, tracking shots into a flurry of ugly, close, handheld work. Last is the irony-laden duel with Bullingdon, as a good turn earns Barry a crippling reward. Dialogue exchanges, with a bespectacled highwayman or a canny German officer, are similarly cut-and-thrust, and tend to find Barry the loser.

Throughout the mesmeric length of the film, Michael Hordern's narration is a constant presence, at once soothing and peppery. (Hordern's tone of voice and precise, novelistic suggestiveness are the model for the near-identical manner adopted by John Hurt as the narrator of *Dogville* and *Perfume*.) Writing his screenplay without a credited novelist to assist him, Kubrick simply tweaks sentences from Thackeray so that Barry's self-exposing asides become the objective, mildly regretful observations of, basically, God. A note about a soldier's widow who is, like nearby towns, 'taken and retaken several times' during a campaign is self-justifying waffle in Barry's mouth, but coming from Hordern, a more authoritative voice even than the carping Fitz-Boodle, it is a mean-spirited writing-off of a minor character.

Even the celebrated epilogue is a lift from an early passage in the novel in which Barry smugly assesses the troubled times of ancestors whose errors he is about to repeat. Here, despite his reputed misanthropy, Kubrick is diffident and generous where Thackeray was merciless and unforgiving: 'It was in the reign of George III that the aforesaid personages lived and quarrelled; good or bad, handsome or ugly, rich or poor, they are all equal now.'

**Kim Newman, *Sight and Sound*, March 2009**

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## BARRY LYNDON

*Directed by:* Stanley Kubrick  
©: Warner Bros Inc.  
*Presented by:* Warner Bros.  
*Production Company:* Peregrine Productions  
*Made on Location by:* Hawk Films  
*Executive Producer:* Jan Harlan  
*Produced by:* Stanley Kubrick  
*Associate Producer:* Bernard Williams  
*Unit Managers:* Malcolm Christopher, Don Geraghty  
*Production Managers:* Douglas Twiddy, Terence Clegg  
*Production Manager (Germany):* Rudolf Hertzog  
*Production Accountant:* John Trehy  
*Assistant Accountants:* Ron Bareham, Carolyn Hall  
*Location Liaisons:* Arthur Morgan, Colonel William O’Kelly  
*Assistant to the Producer:* Andros Epaminondas  
*Producer’s Secretary:* Margaret Adams  
*Production Secretaries:* Loretta Ordewer, Pat Pennelegion  
*Assistant Directors:* Brian Cook, David Tomblin, Michael Stevenson  
*2nd Assistant Director:* Gary White \*  
*Continuity:* June Randall  
*CASTING:* James Liggat  
*Written for the Screen by:* Stanley Kubrick  
*Based on the novel by:*  
William Makepeace Thackeray  
*Photographed by:* John Alcott  
*2nd Unit Cameraman:* Patrick Carey  
*Colour Grading:* Dave Dowler  
*Camera Operators:* Mike Molloy, Ronnie Taylor  
*Focus Puller:* Douglas Milsome  
*Camera Assistants:* Laurie Frost, Dodo Humphreys  
*Gaffer:* Lou Bogue  
*Chief Electrician:* Larry Smith  
*Camera Grips:* Tony Cridlin, Luke Quigley  
*Editor:* Tony Lawson  
*Assistant Editor:* Peter Krook  
*Production Designer:* Ken Adam  
*Art Director:* Roy Walker  
*Art Director (Germany):* Jan Schlubach  
*Assistant Art Director:* Bill Brodie  
*Set Dresser:* Vernon Dixon  
*Property Master:* Mike Fowley  
*Property Man:* Terry Wells  
*Property Buyer:* Ken Dolbear  
*Construction Manager:* Joe Lee  
*Painter:* Bill Beecham  
*Drapesmen:* Richard Dicker, Cleo Nethersole, Chris Seddon  
*Costumes Designed by:* Ulla-Britt Søderlund, Milena Canonero  
*Costume Makers:* Gary Dahms, Yvonne Dahms, Jack Edwards, Judy Lloyd-Rogers, Willy Rothery  
*Hats:* Francis Wilson  
*Wardrobe Supervisor:* Ron Beck  
*Wardrobe Assistants:* Gloria Barnes, Norman Dickens, Colin Wilson  
*Make-up:* Ann Brodie, Alan Boyle, Barbara Daly, Jill Carpenter, Yvonne Coppard  
*Hairstyles/Wigs:* Leonard  
*Hairdressing:* Susie Hill, Joyce James, Maud Onslow, Daphne Vollmer

*[Music] from works by:* Johann Sebastian Bach, Frederick The Great, Georg Friedrich Handel, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Giovanni Paisiello, Franz Schubert, Antonio Vivaldi  
*Irish Traditional Music by:* The Chieftains  
*Music Conducted by:* Leonard Rosenman  
*Music Adapted by:* Leonard Rosenman  
*Choreographer:* Geraldine Stephenson  
*Sound Recordist:* Robin Gregory  
*Dubbing Mixer:* Bill Rowe  
*Sound Editor:* Rodney Holland  
*Sound Editor’s Assistant:* George Akers  
*Stunt Arranger:* Roy Scammell  
*Gambling Adviser:* David Berglas  
*Historical Adviser:* John Mollo  
*Fencing Coach:* Bob Anderson  
*Candlelight Photography Lenses Made by:* Carl Zeiss  
*Lenses Adapted for Cinematography by:* Ed Di Giulio  
*Special Sound Assistance:* Dolby Laboratories  
*Armourer:* Bill Aylmore  
*Horsemaster:* George Mossman  
*Studio:* EMI-Elstree Studios

## Cast

Ryan O’Neal (*Redmond Barry, ‘Barry Lyndon’*)  
Marisa Berenson (*Lady Lyndon*)  
Patrick Magee (*Chevalier de Balibari*)  
Hardy Kruger (*Captain Potzdorf*)  
Steven Berkoff (*Lord Ludd*)  
Gay Hamilton (*Nora Brady*)  
Marie Kean (*Mrs Barry*)  
Diana Koerner (*German girl*)  
Murray Melvin (*Reverend Samuel Runt*)  
Frank Middlemass (*Sir Charles Lyndon*)  
André Morell (*Lord Wendover*)  
Arthur O’Sullivan (*highwayman*)  
Godfrey Quigley (*Captain Grogan*)  
Leonard Rossiter (*Captain Quin*)  
Philip Stone (*Graham*)  
Leon Vitali (*Lord Bullingdon*)  
John Bindon, Roger Booth, Billy Boyle, Jonathan Cecil, Geoffrey Chater, Anthony Dawes, Patrick Dawson, Bernard Hepton, Anthony Herrick, Barry Jackson, Wolf Kahler, Patrick Laffan, Hans Meyer, Ferdy Mayne, David Morley, Liam Redmond, Pat Roach, Frederick Schiller, George Sewell, Anthony Sharp, John Sharp, Roy Spencer, John Sullivan, Harry Towb  
Peter Cellier (*second to Lord Bullingdon*)  
Michael Hordern (*narrator*)  
Dominic Savage (*young Bullingdon*)\*

USA-UK 1975©

185 mins

\* Uncredited

Please note, both screenings will now have a brief interval of 10 minutes

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