



Butterfly McQueen Remembered

Stephen Bourne

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Butterfly McQueen will always be remembered for her first screen role as Scarlett O'Hara's hysterical servant girl, Prissy, in *Gone With the Wind* (1939) and for her most famous line in the Civil War epic: "I don't know nuthin' 'bout birthin' babies!" Though many criticized her for playing an offensive caricature of black womanhood, film scholar Donald Bogle claims her performance is "a unique combination of the comic and the pathetic." Tired of playing what she called "stupid maids," however, Butterfly turned her back on Hollywood in the 1940s and spent the next fifty years in obscurity. On several occasions she tried to revive her theatrical career, but her identification with Prissy made it difficult for her to be taken seriously by producers and casting agents. Mostly she supported herself by taking menial jobs.

In the 1970s she was active in social work projects in Harlem, and was awarded a degree by the City College of New York. In 1989, as one of the last surviving members of the cast of *Gone With the Wind*, Butterfly happily participated in the film's 50th anniversary celebrations. At the time of the celebrations she said: "Now I am happy I did *Gone With the Wind*. I wasn't when I was 28, but it's part of black history. You have no idea how hard it is for black actors, but things change, things blossom in time."

In *Butterfly McQueen Remembered*, author Stephen Bourne, who corresponded with Butterfly for many years, draws upon two decades of research to document her life and career. From her memorable role in one of Hollywood's greatest films to her last big screen appearance opposite Harrison Ford in *The Mosquito Coast*, the details of McQueen's life are captured in this intimate portrait. Bourne chronicles the ups and downs of this talented and generous woman's life, both in front of the camera and far from its glaring spotlight.

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