

James Hilton

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James Hilton

Born: September 9, 1900



Leigh, Lancashire, England,
UK

Died: December 20, 1954 (aged 54)



Long Beach, California, USA

Occupation: Novelist

Genres: Fantasy, Science fiction

James Hilton (September 9, 1900 – December 20, 1954) was a Oscar-winning novelist, and author of several best-sellers including *Lost Horizon* (which popularised the mythical Shangri La) and *Goodbye Mr Chips*.

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Biography

Born in Leigh, in Lancashire, England on 9 September 1900, he was the son of John Hilton, the headmaster of Chapel End School in Walthamstow. His father was one of the inspirations for the character of Mr Chipping in *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*. (Hilton was born on Wilkinson Street in Leigh - there is a teacher in *Goodbye, Mr Chips* called Mr Wilkinson, which seems too deliberate to be a coincidence.) The setting for *Goodbye, Mr Chips* is believed to have been based on the Leys School, Cambridge, where James Hilton was a pupil. Chipping is also likely to have been based on W. H. Balgarnie, one of the masters of the school who was in charge of the *Leys Fortnightly*, where Hilton's first short stories and essays were published.

Novel

Hilton found literary success at an early age. His first novel, *Catherine Herself*, was published in 1920, at the age of 20. Several of his books were

international bestsellers and inspired successful film adaptations, notably *Lost Horizon* (1933), which won a Hawthornden Prize; *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* (1934); and *Random Harvest* (1941). *Lost Horizon*, which sold briskly in the 1930s as one of the first Pocket Books, is sometimes referred to as the book that began the paperback revolution. The novel is said to be inspired by reading the National Geographic Magazine articles of Joseph Rock, an austrian-amerian botanist and ethnologist exploring the Southwestern chinese provinces and Tibetan Borderlands.

Winning Oscar

Hilton, who lived and worked in Hollywood beginning in the mid-1930s, won an Oscar in 1942 for his work on the screenplay of *Mrs. Miniver* by Jan Struther. He hosted *The Hallmark Playhouse* (1948-1953) for CBS Radio.

He popularised the term "Shangri-La" in his novel *Lost Horizon*, which may have been inspired by the Tibetan travel articles of explorer Joseph Rock. It has been claimed that the isolated valley town of Weaverville, California, in far northern Trinity County, was an inspiration, but this is the result of

a misinterpretation of a comment by Hilton in a 1941 interview, in which he said that Weaverville reminded him of Shangri-La. Coincidentally, Junction City (about 8 miles from Weaverville) now has a Tibetan Buddhist center with the occasional Tibetan monks in saffron robes. US President Franklin Delano Roosevelt named his Maryland presidential retreat "Shangri-La" after it, and the name has become a byword for a mythical utopia - a permanently happy land, isolated from the world. (Later, President Dwight David Eisenhower renamed the retreat Camp David after his grandson, the name by which it is known today.) Zhongdian, a mountain region of southwest China, has now been renamed Shangri-La (Xianggelila), based on its claim to have inspired Hilton's book.

Hilton's Books

- Catherine Herself 1920
- Storm Passage 1922
- The Passionate Year 1924
- Dawn Of Reckoning (Rage In Heaven) 1925
- Meadows Of The Moon 1926
- Terry 1927
- The Silver Flame (Three Loves Had Margaret) 1928

- Was It Murder? (Murder At School) 1931
- And Now Goodbye 1931
- Contango (Ill Wind) 1932
- Knight Without Armour (Without Armor) 1933
- Lost Horizon 1933
- Goodbye, Mr Chips 1934
- We Are Not Alone 1937
- To You, Mr Chips 1938
- Random Harvest 1941
- The Story Of Dr. Wassell 1944
- So Well Remembered 1947
- Nothing So Strange 1948
- Twilight Of The Wise 1949
- Morning Journey 1951
- Time And Time Again 1953

Hilton's books are sometimes dismissed as sentimental celebrations of English virtues. This is true of *Mr. Chips*, but some of his novels had a darker side. Flaws in the English society of his time -- particularly narrow-mindedness and class-consciousness -- were frequently his targets. His novel *We Are Not Alone*, despite its inspirational-sounding title, is a grim story of legally approved lynching brought on by wartime hysteria in Britain.

He was married and divorced twice, first to Alice Brown and later to Galina Kopineck. He died in

Long Beach, California from liver cancer on December 20, 1954, aged 54.

Trivia

- Following the Doolittle raid on Tokyo in 1942, when a force of normally land-based bombers were successfully embarked on and flown off an aircraft carrier, the Japanese were baffled as to how such aircraft were able to reach and bomb Japan, given that there were no American land bases within range at that time. President Roosevelt claimed that the aircraft had flown from Shangri-La. Later, an Essex class aircraft carrier was named 'Shangri-La', commemorating both the raid and the witticism.
- Hilton's novel *So Well Remembered* was filmed in 1947 with John Mills in the lead role of George Boswell. Hilton himself narrates the film.
- Hilton co-wrote the book and lyrics for *Shangri-La*, a disastrous 1956 Broadway musical adaptation of *Lost Horizon*.
- A furor was caused in the late 1990s, when the Wigan Council (the Metropolitan Borough responsible for Leigh) announced that a blue plaque in honour of Hilton would

be placed not on his house in Wilkinson Street, but on the town hall. This caused great debate amongst the populace of Leigh, which considered it more appropriate to have it on the house itself, which is only a few hundred yards from the town hall.

- There are two sequels to *Lost Horizon*, *Messenger* by Frank DeMarco and *Shangri-La* by Eleanor Cooney / Daniel Altieri.
- James Hilton was for some time the Chairman of Leigh Rugby League Football Club, now Leigh Centurions. During the War, the club was forced to leave its ground as the adjacent cable factory extended onto the land. The townsfolk of Leigh, under Hilton's inspiration, cleared some fields on the edge of the town, and built a new stadium, including moving and rebuilding the old grandstand from the original ground. In 1947, the ground was renamed 'Hilton Park'.

External links

- James Hilton Society
- James Hilton at the Internet Movie Database

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