Not Just Batman's Butler

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# Not Just Batman's Butler

## *The Autobiography of Alan Napier*

ALAN NAPIER
*with* JAMES BIGWOOD

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On the cover: Alan Napier as Alfred Pennyworth in *Batman*, 1966-1968, (20th Century–Fox Television/ABC/Photofest)

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# *Acknowledgments*

## James Bigwood

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# *Introduction*

## James Bigwood

Alan Napier had appeared in close to 100 films by the time I first became aware of him—twice a week, starting in 1966—as Alfred Pennyworth, faithful butler to millionaire Bruce Wayne in the legendary ABC television series, *Batman*. I was not alone. Despite his busy twenty-five year Hollywood screen career, this was how most Americans came to know him. Unlike many character actors who established themselves in the public's mind by playing countless variations on the same role (brilliantly, I hasten to add), Alan was a chameleon. Rarely the same in appearance from film to film, he was only occasionally requested to present his quite handsome features to the camera unadorned by wigs, prosthetics or crepe hair. As a result, unlike most of his colleagues, he was never typecast, but, conversely, he never became famous. Until *Batman*. Nearsighted all his life, Alan was allowed by producer William Dozier to wear his own very thick eyeglasses on the show, making Alfred appear almost bug-eyed and establishing his look to such an extent that all Alan had to do to become unrecognizable was remove them. This he rarely did. In addition to needing them to see, he had enough of an actor's ego to take immense pleasure in public recognition after decades of professional anonymity. In fact, while he varied his facial hair significantly in his remaining years, from mutton-chop sideburns to full beards to various sizes and types of moustaches, he kept the same style of eyeglasses until almost the end of his life.

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My next encounter with Alan Napier was in 1973, while compiling program notes for a high school production of Noël Coward's musical, *Bitter Sweet*. One hundred and twenty episodes of *Batman* had firmly embedded his name—listed third in the opening credits after Adam West and Burt Ward—in my memory, so I was quick to notice him listed in the cast of the original 1929 London production of the play. Yet I was confused. He had apparently played the Marquis of Shayne, a character described in Coward's script as "a distinguished old man." In 1929? Distinguished, yes, but "old" in 1929 would have put him in his nineties in *Batman*, which Alfred definitely had not been. Perhaps I had come across Alan Napier, Sr., who had eventually produced an Alan Napier, Jr.? A reasonable assumption, but an incorrect one. Further research revealed that there was only one Alan Napier, and that he had played the sixty-five-year-old Marquis of Shayne for two and a half years on London's West End starting at the ripe old age of 26.

It would be another two years before I met Alan face-to-face. I had profiled his fellow Brit, Norma Varden, for Leonard Maltin's *Film Fan Monthly*, a magazine which specialized

in articles on lesser-known Hollywood actors. She had acted with Alan in seven features (and an episode of *Batman*; although they didn't share any scenes) and was kind enough to tell me how to contact her friend, who I hoped to profile in my second article for Maltin.

Alan very graciously invited me to his home for an interview. I started by revealing how I had tracked him down. "Dear Norma!" he interjected. "You've reminded me that we were both in *Mademoiselle Fifi*!" I nodded, that film being one of the few titles from either his or Norma's *oeuvre* that I had actually seen in those pre–VCR days. "The awful thing is I don't keep very good records," he continued, "It's all in my memory. I *know* that I've been in over a hundred films, yet if I can remember fifteen of them I'm doing well. But then something crops up and it comes back into the memory." He held up a thick bound typescript and went on. "I've written an autobiographical work full of fascinating stories" (the word "fascinating" was modestly surrounded by verbal quotation marks), "but unfortunately, since I've never committed a major crime and I'm not known to have slept with any famous actresses, it's very difficult to get it published." Then, conspiratorially, "I've not tried very hard actually, but I had to do research for it so it sort of jogs my memory."



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**"Dear Norma! You've reminded me that we were both in *Mademoiselle Fifi*!" Alan Ward, Jason Robards, Sr., Alan Napier, Norma Varden and Fay Helm in *Mademoiselle Fifi* (RKO, 1944). Collection of James Bigwood.**

Alan allowed me to borrow a copy of the full manuscript after that initial interview (there were actually three volumes in all) and my profile was completed just in time for Leonard Maltin's announcement that he was ceasing publication of *Film Fan Monthly*. This turned out to be a blessing in disguise. My article was accepted by *Films in Review* instead, but, due to a backlog of material, was not published until 1979. This required my staying in touch with Alan in order to keep the piece up to date. When the profile finally appeared, he was typically generous. "What a splendid job!" he wrote me. "Conscientiously researched, admirably composed and magnificently illustrated. I congratulate you and I thank you. I shall keep several copies on hand and when anyone asks me 'What have you done?' thrust *Films in Review* (30th anniversary edition, no less!) into his or her hand." I was grateful for his praise, of course, but couldn't help thinking that my sixteen-page article was a poor substitute for the three-volume autobiography that I had been allowed to read.

It is now more than twenty-five years since Alan's death and, thanks to the generosity of his daughter Jennifer Nichols, his autobiography is finally seeing the light. I am honored that she was willing to entrust the process to me. I have added some annotations into Alan's text (in *italics*, or occasionally brackets when needed for clarity), made minor cuts and provided chapters that fill in some gaps, most importantly the fifteen years between Alan's completion of the manuscript in 1973 and his death in 1988, but this is primarily Alan Napier's story in Alan Napier's words. And a remarkable story it is.

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