

LAND OF MINE

A review by Jonathan Lighter

WHICHEVER INDUSTRY BRAIN TURNED the Danish title *Under sandet* (“under the sand”) into *Land of Mine* (2015) should probably be demoted to snack-cart management—even though the movie does feature plenty of live, buried land mines. (If punning is in order, “*In the Presence of Mine Enemies*” might have served as well.) But fortunately, *Land of Mine*, addressing an obscure episode of 1945-46, is provocative, gripping, and even edifying as it quarries new ground. Those who don’t cringe a little at its well-meaning contrivances should find it sad and moving as well. (It was nominated as Best Foreign Language Film at the 2017 Academy Awards.)

In April, 1940, German land, sea, and air forces, sent supposedly to “protect Danish neutrality,” overran Denmark in less than a day. Allowed to retain their national government and treated as “fellow Aryans,” the population remained mostly acquiescent for half the war. But in 1943, when the Germans took absolute control and Hitler targeted the nation’s Jews, members of the Danish resistance ferried more than 90% of the country’s nearly 8,000 Jews to safety in neutral Sweden almost overnight. And of more than four hundred Danish Jews who did fall into the hands of the Nazis, most—astonishingly—were released through Danish governmental negotiations with Heinrich Himmler. The rescue of the Jews earned Denmark a reputation for unusual gallantry and humanity under the Nazi regime.

But, in his third feature film, Danish writer-director Martin Zandvliet questions the assumption that his country had a special edge on virtue in the 1940s, as he takes on a morally ambiguous policy exercised after V-E Day by the Danish government (among others). With the surrender of German forces in Denmark, more than a quarter million prisoners fell into Allied hands. Most were repatriated within weeks, but more than 2,500 were held in captivity for the express purpose of clearing land mines from the Danish coast and elsewhere—more than 2,000,000, according to the movie. Not unreasonably, PWs forced to stay behind were members of the German corps of engineers. But few had had much experience with mines, and as a result, the mine-clearing teams suffered an aggregate of 20% casualties by the time the operation ended early in 1946—a high casualty rate even for battle, even in World War II.<sup>1</sup>

In Zandvliet's version of events, the detailed prisoners are confused, innocent teens dragged into the crumbling *Wehrmacht* in the last weeks of the war. They're just homesick Boy Scouts from an out-of-town troop, sadly victimized by a pitiless new scoutmaster.

That scoutmaster is the merciless Sergeant Rasmussen (Roland Møller), who's in charge—from a safe distance—of one of the mine-clearing teams. Rasmussen is a generic isolato whose only backstory is his Danishness, his British paratrooper's uniform, and his absolute hatred for Germans. Looking a little like Brian Donlevy as the evil Sergeant Markoff in *Beau Geste* (1939) (who was “expelled from a Siberian penal colony for cruelty”), Møller's Rasmussen starts out as surely the least charitable war-movie sergeant since R. Lee Ermey's Gunny Hartman in *Full Metal Jacket* (1987); but unlike these predecessors, Rasmussen's brutality is not motivated by ambition, social role, or personal craziness, but by a jingo's thirst for vengeance—which many will interpret as legitimate patriotic indignation. In the opening sequence, Rasmussen hops from his jeep to yank a prisoner out of a passing column and beat and kick him for unwisely smuggling out a souvenir *Dannebrog*. “This isn't your flag! It's my flag!” he roars as he grabs it away. Then he beats up a second man too. Then he drives off to meet his squad of lost boys to ramrod them into a few months of forced labor.

“If you're old enough to go to war, you're old enough to clean up your mess,” Rasmussen tells them. But the war's over, and obviously they haven't planted any mines. Zandvliet makes them harmless victims of Allied retribution, and the mines are *their* mess only by dint of theories of collective guilt. Moreover, Article 32 of the 1929 Geneva Convention, to which Denmark was signatory (as was the UK, technically in charge of the prisoners), prohibited the employment of *any* PWs other than volunteers on work that was “unhealthful or dangerous.” Thus the boys' treatment is not just morally questionable: it is a seeming contravention of international law. In other words, a war crime of the Third Reich variety. Get the idea?

So with minimal instruction and no equipment save fingernails and metal rods, Rasmussen's teens must find and disarm 45,000 mines planted under the blowing sands of a single stretch of beach; some of the mines, moreover, are defective and, if jiggled, may blow up even the most cautious technician. If they clear the mines on schedule, the prisoners will go home by the end of summer. If, that is, each boy can safely unscrew the pressure plate and pluck the firing mechanism from one land mine every ten minutes, all day long. That is the expressed goal. And just when you're convinced that the sadistic Rasmussen is the only real

fascist here, you're reintroduced to Lieutenant Jensen (Mikkel Boe Følsgaard), his even less sympathetic C.O., whom Rasmussen, by now incrementally more human, petitions for minimally adequate rations for his famishing charges. But Jensen doesn't care if Rasmussen's boys starve: in fact, he'd be happy to help them do it. (Look what they did to us.) By portraying Jensen as indistinguishable from a Dachau commandant, Zandvliet pushes his radical comparison of "Us" and "Them" nearly to the breaking point. That Rasmussen finally proves himself "capable of growth," as some would phrase it, and that Zandvliet shows this almost convincingly, just saves the movie from a heavy-handed moral equivalency.

Møller's riveting performance and Zandvliet's terse, matter-of-fact dialogue generate much of the movie's effectiveness. Also striking is the stark clarity of Camilla Hjelm Knudsen's cinematography. It makes of the low-lying, distant horizons and blinding, wind-pummeled dunes a beautiful wasteland, inhabited, aside from the sergeant, his prisoners, and waving beach grass, only by a haggard farm wife (who also despises the Germans), her adorable little daughter, and daughter's adorable little dog. Some of the mines are on her property. Is there any need to relate the episode involving the girl and the dog and the brave German lad? For good measure, Rasmussen has a dog too. Unfortunately.

Zandvliet's repudiation of a victor's vindictiveness is, of course, an old theme, implicit in the gospels and explicitly condemned by Churchill when, as part of the "motto" of *The Second World War*, he chose the declaration "In Victory: Magnanimity, In Peace: Goodwill." But the crimes of the Nazis were so foul and endemic that Zandvliet's focus on hapless teens in *Feldgrau* to wring sympathy for the Enemy Other is too easy. Contrast the way Wolfgang Petersen works hard and successfully to waken our sympathy for his hard-bitten U-boat crew in 1981's *Das Boot*. And, yet more appositely, contrast Bernard Wicki's doomed teenage defenders of *The Bridge* (*Das Brücke*, 1959), whose readiness to die pointlessly for the SS is ideologically motivated by long indoctrination in the Hitler Youth. Like Petersen's, Wicki's victims are more complicated.<sup>2</sup>

Many seem to have found a simple "message" in *Land of Mine* that "*We* committed war crimes too!" only to deduce that, morally, both sides were not just bad but equally bad—apparently the position of pacifist Nicholson Baker in his tendentious anthology *Human Smoke* (2008). They might consider the line in Cecil Day Lewis's "Where are the War Poets?" (1943) asserting that in a corrupt world, it is a virtue to "defend the bad against the worse."

War is the great desensitizer. Besides its extraordinary violence, it is definable in part by its moral dissonance. The temporary dragooning of German PWs by the Allies for mine-removal in the early days of peace looked like pretty small potatoes among tens of millions of deaths and unquantifiable moral chaos. Few noticed or opposed the policy, then or now. Zandvliet's cinematic statement may be imperfect or simplistic, but it's worth experiencing—even pondering.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Information in English on Danish policy is not easy to find. But see Roly Evans, "Lessons from the Past: The Rapid Clearance of Denmark's Minefields in 1945," *Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction*, XXII (2018): <http://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/vol22/iss1/4/> . German PWs were similarly employed by other Allied nations in Europe. According to Evans, the number of mines buried by the *Wehrmacht* in Denmark was just under 1.5 million

<sup>2</sup> As David M. Rosen puts it in *Child Soldiers in the Western Imagination* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers U.P., 2015), p. 125:

[L]ooking at the actual circumstances of children's participation in the Nazi agenda, we are left with a sense of both fascination and repulsion at the virtually unparalleled embrace of collective violence by children and youth in modern history.

THE ZOOKEEPER'S WIFE

A review by Jonathan Lighter

OVER THE PAST TWENTY YEARS, mawkishness and melodrama injected into writing about the Holocaust have given rise to the term “Holo-kitsch.” One prominent critic of films that exploit Hitler’s Final Solution as just one more setting for sentiment or adventure is cartoonist Art Spiegelman, whose Pulitzer-winning *Maus* interpreted in striking form his father’s recollections of Auschwitz. Polish director Agnieszka Holland, who’s directed two critically acclaimed Holocaust films—*Europa, Europa* (1990) and *In Darkness* (2011)—has expressed equal disapproval. Holo-kitsch is easy to identify: happy endings, historical distortions, gratuitous sex, stock characters, thrilling adventures, heart-warming characters and situations, comedy, or any other softening of the Final Solution for popular consumption. Almost by definition, Holo-kitsch is patronizing, false to history, and, sadly, false to human nature. Works dependent on Holo-kitsch are sometimes called, derisively, “Holocaust lite.”<sup>1</sup>

Which brings us to *The Zookeeper’s Wife* (2017), posters for which show a solicitous Jessica Chastain cuddling a lion cub in her arms, while distant, nearly invisible airplanes wing their way toward the unsuspecting pair. Yet the film is about a remarkable, real-life case of defiance of the Nazis in Poland, its script loosely drawn from Diane Ackerman’s 2007 bestseller about Jan and Antonina Żabiński, operators of the Warsaw Zoo and unexpected saviors of Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto—a neighborhood transmuted into a concentration camp for some 400,000 Polish Jews.

In accord with the posters, *The Zookeeper’s Wife* opens on an idyllic summer day in 1939—reminiscent of the “golden” pre-war summer of 1914 beloved of English sentimentalists. The Zoo is such a peaceable kingdom that the Żabińskis’ young son, Ryszard, sleeps in perfect safety with lion cubs in his bed; and a baby camel trots worshipfully behind Antonina (Chastain) as she bikes about the Zoo, bidding a chirpy good morning to each of her animal friends, calling them “darling” and “my loves,” and pausing to hand-feed an apple to a full-grown hippo (not recommended).

That evening at a reception we meet the personable Dr. Lutz Heck (Daniel Brühl), director of the Berlin Zoo, an animal lover like the Żabińskis and a rescuer of orphaned cubs. Heck’s quiet response to rude mutterings from another guest about German designs on Poland is that he’s a zoologist, not a politician. The small talk is interrupted as Antonina rushes

to the elephant compound to save the life of a newborn elephant, while its anguished dam looms menacingly over her. Dr. Heck is impressed. We, however, are braced by now for a light, Disney-style look at the vilest aspect of the cruelest war of the bloodiest century: a cross, perhaps, between the animal adventures of *Dr. Dolittle* and the whorish consolations of *Life is Beautiful*.

But thankfully *that* movie never quite happens. *The Zookeeper's Wife* is a fictionalized take on Ackerman's account, which (unlike the movie) wobbles between the Żabińskis themselves, the Holocaust in Poland, and the natural history of vertebrates and bugs. *The Zookeeper's Wife*, moreover, is surely the first motion picture about war or the Holocaust made by a woman director (Niki Caro) and a woman screenwriter (Angela Workman) from a non-fiction account by a woman author (Diane Ackerman) who's drawn on the writings of a woman memoirist (Antonina Żabińska).<sup>2</sup>

Antonina is presented as a strong character whose strength comes straight from her nurturing femininity (see the posters); the film, says director Caro, is "a very feminine look at the Holocaust," and it "speaks about war in a very feminine fashion." Other than the film's focus on Antonina, however, it's hard to tell what that means. Likewise Caro has enthused to an interviewer that Belgian actor Johan Heldenbergh was cast as Jan Żabiński because, correspondingly, "He's so masculine. A total man, and yet he's completely emotionally open." But in spite of dramatic liberties and a putative post-feminist subtext, the broad outline of the Żabińskis' story remains materially true to its source.<sup>3</sup>

To the occasionally overlapping genres of "movies about the Holocaust" and "movies about women in wartime," *The Zookeeper's Wife* does succeed in bringing something new and different. Unlike women in other films, Antonina Żabińska is a civilian mother in a subjugated and occupied country who, with her husband, decides to risk death daily—for years—to get innocent people out of the hands of the Nazis. The choice to act is all the more difficult because she is clearly more at ease with her zoo animals, with whom she has a deep connection, than she is with strangers. When Antonina first suggests that they shelter one Jewish friend indefinitely, Jan is dubious: discovery means a death sentence for all concerned, probably including young Ryzsard. But as one good deed leads to another and another, Jan is soon aiding the Resistance by smuggling Jews out of the Ghetto in vats of garbage and sheltering them, with Antonina's help, in cellars and disused cages beneath the Żabińskis' villa on the Zoo grounds. The turnover is rapid at first, as the Jewish underground helps get the Żabińskis'

“house guests” out of Warsaw. Yet some must stay in the basement for months or years, especially after the SS destroys the Ghetto and resistance is effectively dispersed.

As Holocaust heroes, the Żabińskis are nearly unique in the movies. Oskar Schindler, for example, of *Schindler's List*, relied on bribes and his connection to Military Intelligence to protect his Jewish workers: he did not personally smuggle fugitives or conceal them, to his peril, in his cellars. Working with both the Ghetto underground and the partisans of the Polish Home Army, Jan and Antonina Żabiński hazarded their lives with a fixity of purpose that few could muster; at the same time, they accepted constant mortal peril at a level most of us would find intolerable—even as we might wish otherwise.

But director Caro and scenarist Workman seem unsure as to whether their main purpose is to illuminate or to entertain. Of her animals, Antonina muses, “You look into their eyes, and you know what exactly is in their hearts.” Well, maybe. But humans are different, and as the plot begins its drift toward melodrama, Lutz Heck is Exhibit A. Herr Dr. Heck, an affable colleague in 1939, returns in 1940 as a movie Nazi who wants the Żabińskis’ bisons for a breeding experiment and Antonina for something not dissimilar. If Heck’s return to Warsaw as an SS officer and a personal, continuing threat to Jan and Antonina feels hokey, that’s because it is: during the occupation, Ackerman tells us, the real Heck (who thought he could recreate the extinct wild aurochs from the selective breeding of domestic cattle) made a single visit to the Zoo to remove desirable animals to his collection in Berlin. But Holo-kitsch needs a heavy, so when movie Heck returns to the Zoo in SS uniform, he immediately shoots a bald eagle (“Have it mounted!” he tells a minion); and when the Germans evacuate Warsaw in January, 1945, Heck tries to rape Antonina (who thwarts him with a hissed “You disgust me!”), commands her son to lock her in an animal cage, then takes the boy around a corner to shoot him.<sup>4</sup>

None of this happened. Nor, it appears, did Jan thrillingly use vats of garbage to get people out of the Ghetto. Relying on his access as a minor city official, he walked them through the gates, one by one, with false papers—hazardous enough, as the movie shows on one occasion.

The basic weakness of *The Zookeeper's Wife* lies in its unsuccessful balancing act between melodrama and history. In a thoroughly phony twist, Jan begins to suspect Antonina of actually having an affair with *Hauptsturmführer* Heck: his doubts, of course, are quickly resolved in a shopworn, if discreet, bedroom scene. And Chastain is so deft in her leading role that one

may miss the fact that Antonina—like Jan and Heck and everybody else—is pretty much a two-dimensional cut-out: Jan is tough and dependable, Heck quickly becomes slimy and arrogant, Antonina is loving and brave.

A dramatic story like this one should make for a powerful and poignant film. But *The Zookeeper's Wife* mostly comes up short on power and poignancy. It's watchable and interesting, but at almost no point does *The Zookeeper's Wife* match the power of Holocaust films as thematically disparate as *Schindler's List* (1993), *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961), *Seven Beauties* (1975), *The Man in the Glass Booth* (1975), *Sophie's Choice* (1982), *Escape from Sobibor* (1987), *The Grey Zone* (2001), *The Pianist* (2002), *God on Trial* (2008), and *Son of Saul* (2015).

Caro's film nevertheless includes a few exceptional, telling scenes: it briefly establishes the poisonous antisemitism that was on the rise in Poland even before the Nazis came; soon, when bombs hit the Zoo on the first day of blitzkrieg, animals run wild—a wallaby flees hopping down a street, lions prowl the boulevard, and Polish soldiers shoot a charging elephant in spite of Antonina's pleas; the following year, German soldiers patrolling the Ghetto rape a Jewish schoolgirl (even off-camera a shocking, emblematic episode); a sightseer poses prettily for a photo in front of a Ghetto gate with starving Jews in the background; later, as men, women, and children are herded into cattle cars, blank-faced soldiers seize their untagged suitcases and hurl them into a pile to be stolen, searched, plundered, and burned at the leisure of the SS. When at Passover 1943 (no coincidence) the Ghetto is "liquidated" by flamethrowers mounted on armored halftracks—block by block, street after street—the ashes fall like snow on the struggling pig farm that was once the Warsaw Zoo.

The seemingly pat finale is essentially and amazingly true: Jan, an officer in the clandestine Home Army, returned from German captivity in 1946 after being badly wounded and taken prisoner in the 1944 Warsaw Rising. Also true is that Jan and Antonina eventually rebuilt the Warsaw Zoo and were eventually recognized by the State of Israel as among "The Righteous among the Nations": non-Jews who had risked their lives to aid Jews marked for eradication by the Nazis during World War II. The Żabińskis are estimated to have saved some 300 lives. But the children who hid in their cellar certainly never decorated the walls with drawings of animal-headed people kitschily resembling Art Spiegelman's own *Maus* cartoons.<sup>5</sup>

In 1968, the very year that the Żabińskis were named among the Righteous, the Holocaust survivor and Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel wrote that "At Auschwitz, not only man died but also the idea of man.... It was its own heart the world incinerated at Auschwitz."<sup>6</sup>

But in scattered places beyond the Auschwitz gate, deep within the Żabińskis' villa, for example, the "idea of man" just managed to survive. *The Zookeeper's Wife*, for all its kitschy flaws, provides a useful reminder of that significant fact.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>"The Mouse with the Sting in His Tale," *The Times* (Dec. 2, 2003): *The Times Digital Archive*; "MetaMaus': The Story Behind Spiegelman's Classic" <https://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=141085597> (2011, accessed Feb. 9, 2018); "So Many Holocaust Films...." <https://www.thejc.com/culture/film/so-many-holocaust-movies-are-just-lies-says-oscar-nominee-1.32142> (2012, accessed Feb. 11, 2018). Films that might be described as Holo-kitsch or Holocaust lite include *Life is Beautiful* (1997), *Black Book* (2006), *The Reader* (2008), *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* (2008), *Inglourious Basterds* (2009), *Sarah's Key* (2010), and *Woman in Gold* (2015). And Hollywood's first attempt to foreground the Holocaust at all, 1959's *The Diary of Anne Frank*, was commercially successful partly on the strength of its finale, as the thirteen-year-old Anne—now on her way, with her family, to death at Bergen-Belsen after years in hiding—explains in voiceover that, "In spite of everything, I still believe that people are good at heart."

<sup>2</sup>The first feature film to be set in a death camp, however, was the Polish director Wanda Jakubawska's semi-autobiographical *Ostatni etap* (*The Last Stop*), released in 1947.

<sup>3</sup>"An Interview with Niki Caro," *The Aquarian Weekly* <http://www.theaquarian.com/2017/04/26/an-interview-with-niki-caro-the-zookeepers-wife-interview/> (accessed Jan. 31, 2018).

<sup>4</sup>A germ of truth lies behind the episode: Ackerman relates how several SS men came to the Zoo in the wake of the Rising, verbally intimidated Antonina and her son, then sadistically pretended to have shot him and another child; it was, they laughed, only a "prank."

<sup>5</sup>As of February, 2018, more than 6,500 Polish men and women had been so honored: *Polish Institute in Israel*, "Righteous Among the Nations" <http://www.polishinstitute.org.il/en/2018/01/25/righteous-among-the-nations-a-monthly-story/> (accessed Feb. 15, 2018). Another honoree, Polish nurse Irena Sendler, personally saved some 400 children from the Warsaw Ghetto and was instrumental in rescuing more than two thousand more: Dennis Hevesi, "Irena Sendler, Lifeline to Young Jews, Is Dead at 98," *New York Times* (May 13, 2008) (accessed Feb. 15, 2018); she was the subject of a TV movie, *The Courageous Heart of Irena Sendler* (2009).

<sup>6</sup>*Legends of Our Time* (1968; rpt. New York: Schocken, 1982), 190.

*DUNKIRK* (2017) AND *DUNKIRK* (1958)

A review by Jonathan Lighter

ON MAY 12, 1940, THE SOUTHERN PINCER of the German *Blitzkrieg* swept into France, two days after the northern pincer had struck Holland, Belgium, and Luxembourg. Allied forces were split in two by armored divisions that churned through the supposedly impassable (and thus nearly undefended) Forest of the Ardennes. The coordinated attacks sent the British and French falling back in retreat toward the English Channel, with tanks and mechanized infantry of the *Wehrmacht* and aircraft of the *Luftwaffe* in relentless pursuit.

Within three days a despairing Prime Minister Reynaud was telling Winston Churchill that France was beaten. The Germans, strafing columns of troops and refugees indiscriminately, locked the Allies into a perimeter screening the port of Dunkirk, near the Belgian border. As other French formations were collapsing, the disciplined withdrawal of the French First Army effectively shielded the retreat to the Channel. But the Allies' position looked hopeless. The only way to save even a part of the Allied armies would be through an ad-hoc evacuation by sea to Dover. Dubbed by the British Admiralty "Operation Dynamo," the attempt to remove tens of thousands of troops from twenty miles of beach was launched on May 25. It was an operation unprecedented in military history.

By the time Dynamo ended on June 4, the British and French navies had saved more than 215,000 British, as well as some 140,000 French and other Allied soldiers from imminent captivity, numbers that exceeded the planners' hopes by a factor of ten. Only this "miracle of deliverance," as Churchill later called it, worked by more than 220 naval vessels and an amazing seven hundred private boats from England—crewed by their civilian owners—enabled Britain to fight on after the fall of France. Had the British Army lost 215,000 of its most seasoned troops and junior officers at Dunkirk, a weakened Britain would have been open to invasion, and Hitler might well have won his war while suffering relatively few casualties and not a single strategic defeat.

Rooted in these events, Christopher Nolan's lavish land-sea-and-air drama *Dunkirk* promises much, and Nolan, famed for his Batman and sci-fi films (notably *Interstellar*), spent a reported \$150,000,000 on an army of extras and screen professionals, including cinematographer Hoyte Van Hoytema and composer Hans Zimmer. Nolan also sought detailed authenticity. He spared little expense in ordering, for example, the manufacture of

thousands of period uniforms, said to be authentic down to the direction of the twill. Rather than resort overmuch to CGI, which he reserves largely for his ship sinkings and howling, dive-bombing Stukas, Nolan borrowed a retired French destroyer (launched in 1953) to impersonate a wartime British vessel, and for dogfights he secured three British Spitfires and a lantern-jawed, postwar version of the German Messerschmitt 109. Nolan's advertised passion for realism prepares us for a near-definitive dramatic take on the most famous military evacuation since Xenophon, about which Nolan has observed that it's "one of the greatest stories in human history, and it's never been told in modern cinema."<sup>1</sup>

According to *Rolling Stone* Nolan's *Dunkirk* may be "the greatest war film ever." But Nolan, who also wrote the screenplay, jarringly reveals that *Dunkirk* "is not a war film. It's a survival story and first and foremost a suspense film." Whatever Nolan's intentions, *Dunkirk* winds up as a beautifully filmed, thrill-packed, but vapid exercise, whose most conspicuous elements—danger, death, and spectacle—are precisely those of *The Poseidon Adventure* and other disaster movies. Historical context is mostly adrift, and the on-screen intro is as minimalist as the characters: "The enemy have driven the British and French armies to the sea. Trapped at Dunkirk, they await their fate. Hoping for deliverance. For a miracle." That's less back story than the opening crawl of *Star Wars*, and little enough for "one of the greatest stories in human history," which *Dunkirk* is promised to "tell." You have to listen carefully during the 106-minute running time to learn that "the enemy" is actually the *Wehrmacht*, the *Luftwaffe*, and the *Waffen SS*.

Nolan's films are known for unconventional narration, and an intertitle acknowledges *Dunkirk*'s three interweaving strands: a week-long beach episode about a frightened English private generically named Tommy (Fionn Whitehead); a Channel episode, lasting a day, focusing on a civilian boat owner named Dawson (Mark Rylance, giving a crisp performance); and a mission flown by a pair of Spitfire pilots, Collins and Farrier (Jack Lowden and Tom Hardy), that lasts only an hour. (Van Hoytema's bright, stainless seas and skies give the dogfight scenes, shot from the Spitfire pilot's point of view, a grace and purity and airiness not often seen elsewhere.)

These three narratives—sequences of events rather than developed plots—momentarily converge (though to no particular purpose) on what is explicitly the last day of the main evacuation, which was June 2. (Additional evacuations of the French rear guard continued through June 4.)

As though the reality of Dunkirk wasn't bad enough (the unsheltered beaches were under heavy bombardment by German artillery and the *Luftwaffe*), Nolan pumps up the drama as Commander Bolton (Kenneth Branagh), the only person with a clear idea of what's going on, explains that to protect Britain from invasion "they" have called home all but one of the big destroyers. So, as in the *Mrs. Miniver* version of Dunkirk, the rescue is mainly up to the plucky civilian boats, which Nolan has arriving *en masse* in the nick of time. But in fact, the Admiralty ordered the withdrawal of just eight destroyers after three others had been sunk on May 29, and it rescinded the order the very next day. (Thirty-nine British, nineteen French, and four Canadian destroyers evacuated troops during Dynamo, and nine were sunk; more than 220 vessels of all kinds were sunk in the operation, though Nolan's *Dunkirk* includes nothing to suggest such a huge scale of naval activity.) Throughout Dynamo, most soldiers were ferried from shallow-draft vessels to the larger destroyers, which could not closely approach the beaches; and, as in the movie, most evacuees were taken off Dunkirk's Eastern Mole—a long and exposed pier that Nolan authentically rebuilt so that he could film (in IMAX and 65mm) entirely at the scene of the event.

If a broad historical sense is largely missing from *Dunkirk*, so are such other presumably distracting elements as characterization, plot development, emotional depth, and more than transactional human relationships; once or twice the dialogue sinks to the peculiar, as when sixtyish Mr. Dawson exclaims, "Men my age dictate this war. Why should we be allowed to send our children to fight it?" (Say again?) *Dunkirk's* splendid superficiality threatens to turn it into an excuse for lavish depictions of aerial skill and surface wretchedness, with probably more frantic drownings and near-drownings than any movie since *Titanic*. (Critics have complained that there's virtually no blood and gore, meaning that *Dunkirk* just isn't violent enough to be a decent war movie; but Nolan's direction is so intense they shouldn't have noticed.)

More serious than the dearth of gore is the sheer claptrap of Farrier's miraculous rescue of Dawson's motor sloop—at the last second—by blasting a strafing Messerschmitt out of the sky after his own propeller has stopped, having run out of gas. In a dreamlike sequence, Farrier steers his unpowered Spitfire over the beach for many miles in a silent glide to a perfect landing. The trouble is not that such a feat is reportedly just barely plausible, but that it looks quite impossible (though beautiful) on the screen. (It doesn't help the movie that

the Dunkirk in the background is clearly the town of today and not the burning wreck of June 2, 1940.)

So much for a consistent realism. But none of *Dunkirk*'s trivial missteps can match the inexpertly contrived, signature episode of the marooned and shell-shocked officer (Cillian Murphy, called simply "Shivering Soldier" in the credits) taken on board by Dawson, and the predicament of the Beached Dutch Trawler. In both cases Briton turns on Briton, but the Trawler sequence defies logic: the beached vessel is rapidly filling with water from fresh German bullet holes below the water line, but the men sheltering inside her believe they can make the vessel seaworthy through lightening the load by forcing somebody out to certain death—even though the water already flooding the hull at high tide should prevent the boat from even righting itself. (It's possible to watch this several times without seeing the sense in it.)

The courage of the pilots in the air and the skipper at sea is realistically underplayed; but except for the crucial teamwork of the fighter pilots, *Dunkirk* suggests that soldiers are merely isolated individuals with no personal ties and for whom teamwork and solidarity with the men to one's left and right is rudimentary at best. Tommy is a blank, a cipher who rarely speaks; all he does, really, is void his bowels and then try repeatedly to get on board a ship before anybody else. He also seems as unaffected by the deaths of all his squad mates as is Dawson by the accidental death of his cabin boy at the hands of the Shivering Soldier.

One gets the feeling that Nolan was anxious to make a popular but "important" epic about Dunkirk and just couldn't pull it off except, as he said, as a suspense film. Not that there's anything wrong with that. *Dunkirk* is nifty direction, much suspense, sometimes breathtaking visuals, but not a lot else. (As General Bosquet said of the Light Brigade's charge at Balaclava, "It is magnificent, but it is not war.")

As the modern age of motion pictures is usually dated to the 1960s, Nolan's remark that "modern cinema" hadn't dealt with Dunkirk is technically correct; but the larger story was rather well served in 1958 by British director Leslie Norman in an identically titled (and regrettably neglected) film with a script by war correspondent David Divine (who was wounded at Dunkirk) and the prolific screenwriter W. P. Lipscomb. Norman's unsensational *Dunkirk* opens with irony-laden period news clips (a device adopted throughout in Carl Foreman's antiwar *The Victors* in 1963). Neville Chamberlain meets with Paul Reynaud a few weeks before the *Blitzkrieg*, "so look out, Hitler, here we come!"; Belgium's capacity to beat

the *Wehrmacht* is advertised, as is the “Miss Streamline 1940” pageant. The images bespeak public complacency during the uneventful “phony war” of 1939-1940, an attitude expressed and reinforced by comic music-hall songs like “We’re Going to Hang Out the Washing on the Siegfried Line” and “Run, Adolf, Run.”

Among the singers are the very soldiers whose costly toils in Belgium and France are about to begin. Like the untested Corporal Spence (Henry Fonda) in *The Immortal Sergeant* (1943), the untested Corporal Binns (John Mills) leads most of his men to safety from behind enemy lines. But in *Dunkirk* the arduously achieved “safety” proves to be an illusion as the Germans bomb and shell the unprotected beach. A parallel plot concerns civilians, particularly a hard-nosed journalist, Charles Foreman (Bernard Lee), who distrusts official briefings that remain blandly evasive one day before the attack on the Low Countries. The unfolding Allied debacle is explained for us with animated maps, while the singing continues off camera. Day-by-day news of the Allied retreat turns Foreman’s skepticism to disgust, and his own reflexive reassurances can’t assuage the grief and anger of a French colleague who recognizes that the fall of France to Hitler is now inevitable.

Meanwhile, Foreman’s friend, timid manufacturer and new dad John Holden (Richard Attenborough), has been ignoring the war while dabbling in a small way in the black market. He is, however, clearly disconcerted by the willingness of some of his employees to take in the propaganda broadcasts of Lord Haw-Haw. (That there was some sympathy for the “German point of view” in Britain before the explosion of the western front was not something the public cared to be reminded of in later years.) Peer pressure and a long-buried sense of patriotic duty eventually prompt Holden to take his small boat with the flotilla headed for the French coast. Needless to say, Foreman, Holden, and Corporal Binns all meet on the Dunkirk beach, where Norman’s images of confusion and vulnerability look far realer than Nolan’s artier, surprisingly tidy visuals. As a technique, Norman’s introduction of documentary footage into his combat sequences is now obsolescent, but it’s done more smoothly here than in most war movies, going back to Abel Gance’s *J’Accuse* (1919), where it originated. Norman’s Stukas are thus “real,” and in one skillfully edited scene they obliterate a grove concealing a battery of British field guns whose stoic crews have been ordered to hold at all costs.

While dated in style, talky and low-key by current standards, Norman’s *Dunkirk* (called by the *New York Times* “uncompromising” and “awesomely realistic”) was surely the most ambitious reenactment of a real military operation before Darryl Zanuck’s yet more elaborate

D-Day panorama, *The Longest Day* (1962), which immediately became the touchstone for the *genre*.

Both Dunkirk films honor the indomitable will to beat the odds that made Operation Dynamo succeed. Though the pious epilogue of Norman's *Dunkirk* (1958) tries rather too hard ("No longer were there fighting men and civilians. There were only people. A nation had been made whole"), Norman seeks coherence, unity, and positive meaning in the tale. Nolan, in contrast, through quickly sketched, isolated characters who, with the borderline exception of the fighter pilots, appear to have no emotional connection to anyone, seems to say that at bottom Dunkirk was a narrowly avoided disaster in just another war. (When Norman's Corporal Binns silently blinks back tears at the death of his friend, he shows more emotion than there is in all of the later film.) Nolan's movie ends with a Spitfire consumed by flames—a phoenix-like symbol, perhaps, of the coming Battle of Britain—paired with Churchill's defiant promise to fight on the beaches, in the fields, in the streets, and on the landing grounds, read somewhat doubtfully from a newspaper by Tommy, who must know that he'd be doing some of the fighting.

The narrative closure of the 1958 film grants Dunkirk permanent significance as a unifying demonstration of national and individual character. In contrast, even though Nolan presents the evacuation itself as a great success, the open ending of his 2017 film is entirely noncommittal. Norman dramatizes history; Nolan historicizes spectacle. Norman overtly criticizes policies that created a "shambles"; Nolan is largely detached from politics and history.

The most memorable lines in each film well represent the contrast of ethos between Nolan and Norman. Awaiting evacuation in *Dunkirk* (1958) Corporal Binns asks journalist Freeman "What happened, sir? What caused all this?" Regrettably, Freeman's bitter reply is still relevant:

Stupidity. Everybody saying that war was so damnable it couldn't happen again, shoving their heads in the sand like a lot of ostriches. But the Germans didn't think that way. To them war meant guns or butter. They chose guns. We chose butter.

In absolute contrast, in *Dunkirk* (2017), an anonymous soldier threatening a comrade while they cower in the bottom of the Dutch trawler just as memorably hisses that human “[Survival] is shit! It’s fear and greed! Fate squeezed through the bowels of men! Shit!” In this *Dunkirk*, interpretation yields to nihilism, and meaning yields to hysteria. Compared to the new film, Norman’s 1958 *Dunkirk* looks positively cerebral.

In the end, the 2017 *Dunkirk* will inform millions of people that Dunkirk happened, but what it may have meant beyond a rescue, or what it meant for the survival of democratic institutions in Britain and elsewhere, is above its pay-grade. If you know a little about Dunkirk, Nolan will teach you nothing new, not even emotionally, and if you’ve never heard of it you’ll come away thinking it made a great disaster flick. As Leslie Norman realized in 1958, war by turns inspires and dismays. Christopher Nolan’s *Dunkirk*, a missed opportunity, is unlikely to inspire or dismay anybody, even as it makes their pulses pound.<sup>5</sup>

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Kevin P. Sullivan, “How Christopher Nolan crafted his WWII masterpiece, Dunkirk.” *Entertainment Weekly*. <http://ew.com/movies/2017/07/18/christopher-nolan-dunkirk-feature/> (accessed Oct. 5, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Sammy Nickalls, “Christopher Nolan says Dunkirk isn’t a war movie.” *Esquire*. <http://www.esquire.com/entertainment/movies/news/a54310/christopher-nolan-dunkirk-film/> (accessed Oct. 5, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Jason Murugesu, “How realistic are Dunkirk’s Spitfire flight scenes?” *New Statesman*. <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/film/2017/08/how-realistic-are-dunkirks-spitfire-flight-scenes> (accessed Sept. 11, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> There’s a *tour-de-force* interpretation of Dunkirk in Joe Wright’s mostly peacetime drama *Atonement* (2007). As three filthy, exhausted soldiers catch their first sight of the beach under a livid sky, jammed with men, wrecked vehicles, shattered boats, and even some refugees and French cavalry horses, one exclaims, “Fuck me, it’s like something out of the Bible!” What follows is a masterful five-minute traveling shot of Private Turner (James McEvoy) pushing his way through a chaotic scene reminiscent of Bruegel’s sixteenth-century “Fall of the Rebel Angels.” Wright’s Dunkirk is part fever-dream and part historical expressionism. Its semi-surreal images powerfully evoke confusion, exhaustion, and dread. Perhaps the most moving of any screen depiction, however, is the brief Dunkirk sequence in Noel Coward’s classic of wartime realism, *In Which We Serve* (1942); these images—soldiers numb with fatigue, unkempt, defeated but not bowed—surely convey a truthful sense of what that retreat and week-long evacuation under fire must have felt like.

<sup>5</sup> For Dunkirk in British popular memory, see, e.g., Mark Connelly, *We Can Take It!: Britain and the Memory of the Second World War* (London: Pearson Longman, 2004), 54-94. For the recollections of more than a hundred Dunkirk veterans recorded by the Imperial War Museum, see Joshua Levine’s *Forgotten Voices: Dunkirk* (London: Ebury Press, 2010).

## *JOURNEY'S END*

**A review by Jonathan Lighter**

HAVING LED HIS COMPANY “through all sorts of rotten times,” Captain Dennis Stanhope, M.C., is anxious, irascible, jumpy, unable to sleep, and plagued by a constant stabbing pain behind his eye; the Great War has led him to drink, and the bottle is his lifeline to what’s left of his peace of mind. Bad enough, surely, but making it worse is a lacerating belief that while he still cuts a trim figure on the march, he is no longer a real man—at a time, a century ago, when chronic fear and an undue affinity for the sauce were popularly imputed to a “weak” or “unmanly” character. (In his familiar essay “Courage,” Emerson had written in 1870 that the right-thinking combat soldier grows ever more fearless as he is repeatedly exposed to shot and shell.) The well-bred Stanhope (Sam Claflin), a top graduate of Barford School, so fears that he’s become unworthy of his sweetheart Margaret, in England, that he’s skipped his latest home leave out of shame. And yet, in the eyes of Lieutenant Osborne (Paul Bettany)—his older, avuncular second in command—Stanhope is still the “best company commander in the battalion.” This is more plausible in the movie than in R. C. Sherriff’s famous 1928 play, because the movie has less whiskey.

But Stanhope’s exhaustion is just the beginning. Add to it the sudden arrival in C Company’s trenches of nineteen-year old Lieutenant Raleigh (Asa Butterfield), Stanhope’s frighteningly bright-eyed younger admirer from school—and, incidentally, brother of Margaret. (He’s wangled his posting to Stanhope’s company through his uncle, the general.) Stanhope fears that the hero-worshipping Raleigh, stunned by what he sees, will write Margaret of his slow disintegration. And there’s a looming, even more dangerous problem: in three days British positions are expected to come under massive German assault. Stanhope knows the naïve Raleigh has come at an ill-starred hour. Of course, nobody’s chances against the German Spring Offensive of 1918 are very good: as Sherriff’s audiences didn’t need to be told in the ‘20s, it shattered the British line and made Allied defeat an imminent possibility. Emotionally it was something like the Tet Offensive, only British—and many times worse.<sup>3</sup>

Dibb’s strong direction, Simon Reade’s adaptation, the high production values, and fine work by the actors usefully obscure the fact, harder to recognize in the ‘20s, that Sherriff’s characters are ultimately types, rather than fully imagined persons. Yet as types, larger than life in their very simplicity, they become tragic figures, and a fittingly oppressive atmosphere

pervades the film—above ground no less than below. (An irresistible quibble is that Claflin and Bettany, whose performances, one should say, could hardly be bettered, look ten years too old for their parts. Toby Jones as the mess cook looks even older than that. When twenty-one-year old Laurence Olivier created the role of Stanhope in 1928, he was just the right age.)

Stanhope's "type" is the grown-up version of the boys celebrated in Thomas Hughes's English classic *Tom Brown's School Days* (1857): the promising, good-hearted youth refined at public school by adversity and guidance into a true gentleman, a boon to himself, his family, his acquaintances, and his country. Indeed, it was a conservative tenet that the battle of Waterloo had been "won on the playing fields of Eton."<sup>4</sup> The once admired, inspirational "Vitaï Lampada" (1897), by the idealist imperialist Henry Newbolt, elaborated that idea with a lurid picture of disaster in the Sudan bathetically transcended by the chipper, never-say-die spirit of an Etonian-model subaltern:

The sand of the desert is sodden red,—  
Red with the wreck of a square that broke;—  
The Gatling's jammed and the Colonel dead,  
And the regiment blind with dust and smoke.  
The river of death has brimmed his banks,  
And England's far, and Honour a name,  
But the voice of a schoolboy rallies the ranks:  
"Play up! play up! and play the game!"

*Journey's End* almost unwittingly elegizes that sentimental faith in patriotic, boyish pluck by showing the outstanding schoolboy Stanhope racked almost to breaking, in a war drastically unimaginable to an earlier generation—what Siegfried Sassoon called "that hell where youth and laughter go." *Journey's End* contends implicitly that the discipline imparted by Bunyan, Cato, and cricket no longer sufficed against high explosives, machine-guns, poison gas, flame, and the whole diabolical, post-Waterloo arsenal of the Great War. It may have been obvious, but it still needed saying.

Yet Newbolt's own "Etonian" ideal—even if mawkishly expressed—is not too far from the stoic Conradian virtues of courage, endurance, loyalty, self-discipline, and decency—and the 2018 *Journey's End* concludes with a newly written scene reminiscent, in its way, of the

ironic conclusion of *Heart of Darkness*. Osborne (who's a former schoolmaster) and Lieutenant Trotter (who isn't) have these Conradian qualities, but it is Osborne—sympathetic, proficient, nearly unflappable—who's the movie's most fully drawn character and Sherriff's model of the ideal officer. (Trotter, up from the ranks, and ably played by Stephen Graham, is too stolid and unsophisticated to be an ideal.) Stanhope, of course, was once a future Osborne, but time and exhaustion have worn him down—and he knows it.

Should anyone doubt Stanhope's reserves of toughness and decency, however, we see him make himself look "cheerful" (as the officers' manual required) as he encourages his men. There is also the ambiguous case of Lieutenant Hibbert (Tom Sturridge). Hibbert too has been depressed, complains of chronic headaches, and "looks rotten." He requests to see the doctor at the battalion aid station. Stanhope, morally certain that Hibbert is shamming, replies that he's just as sick, and Hibbert will go nowhere. When Hibbert insists on leaving, Stanhope pulls his service revolver on him. Stanhope slowly counts to ten, daring him not to give in, then embraces him for his courage when he doesn't flinch. He appeals to Hibbert's sense of honor and, comradeship and duty being stronger than fear, to the privilege of serving with those who outface terror: "Don't you think it's worth standing in with men like Osborne? Trotter? They all feel like we do. But they stick at it. It's the only thing a decent man can do."

With Stanhope's support, Hibbert reluctantly does his duty, but during the climactic German shelling, when everyone else is diving for cover too, we see him cowering in a corner. Is Hibbert a "sniveling coward" (as reviewers have it), or is he a man closer to the end of his tether than Stanhope? (Poor character and breeding are the cause either way, as we see when Hibbert boasts drunkenly about caddish adventures with "tarts"; Sherriff's stage directions describe him as "a small, slightly built man...with a pallid face.") And the melodrama with the revolver is more interesting when we read that Sherriff himself suffered severe neuralgia headaches at the front, and, when he finally had to go sick, feared that they evinced a deep defect in his own moral fiber. The battalion surgeon disagreed and prescribed a respite from the front line at the divisional rest station.<sup>5</sup>

Sherriff had served as a twenty-year old subaltern in the East Surreys in 1916 and '17 and was permanently posted to England after being badly wounded at Passchendaele. After the war, he resumed his tedious job with an insurance company, and as a diversion he wrote short plays for his rowing club: *Journey's End* was his professional debut. It differed from preceding war plays, which, according to an American contemporary, had been utterly

“deplorable,” infuriating veterans with their “sentimental claptrap.”<sup>6</sup> *Journey’s End* resurrected the war with startling immediacy, being set entirely in front-line trenches with no women, no ravaging Huns, and no love-story plot: there’s hardly a plot at all, just a sequence of events linked in time and mostly determined by circumstance. The lone theatrical set was a cavernous yet stifling underground dugout, dimly lit by candles, and smelling, as the dialogue tells us, “like a cesspit.” It was a jolt for period audiences accustomed to a more genteel realism. (On opening night at the Savoy, they sat “stunned” before erupting into applause for nineteen curtain calls.<sup>7</sup>)

Sherriff’s *coup de théâtre* gained canonical status in the British repertory. It was seen by some half million West End theater-goers in 1929 before being filmed the following year by James Whale (soon to direct *Frankenstein*). Its prompt international success shows how well Sherriff’s vision defined the war for audiences of civilians and veterans whose national experiences of 1914-18 had been very different: the London run was complemented by productions in New York, Stockholm, and Paris; the Berlin version, *Die andere Seite*, casting German veterans in the British roles (with Conrad Veidt as Stanhope) came to the screen in 1931. By November, 1929, *Journey’s End* was being acted in twelve countries (Mussolini had banned it in Italy, presumably for debunking his notions of glory).<sup>8</sup> Sherriff and Vernon Bartlett then amplified the story in a 300-page novelization (1930) which has also contributed to Dibb’s film. By the 1970s, the play had been translated into 27 languages, including Japanese and Hindi.<sup>9</sup> Including TV movies and an adaptation to the RFC in *Aces High* (1976), Dibb’s version is no less than the sixth film adaptation of Sherriff’s play—which itself was revived successfully in the West End in 1972 and 2004, on Broadway in 2007, and again in London in 2011. Few modern creative works about war have seemed more universally relevant than *Journey’s End*.

Even more than earlier directors, Saul Dibb takes advantage of the screen to open out the spatial dimension absent from the play, with views of the trenches, brigade and battalion headquarters, slab-sided ruins, a wheat field blighted by mustard gas. Raleigh sees stacks of wooden crosses being unloaded behind the lines—the equivalent of the foreboding body bags of *Platoon*. Through a periscope over a sandbagged parapet all you can see is a junkyard of barbed wire, mud, and ruin. The finale, a perpendicular shot of the trench line from high in the air will remind some of Owen’s surreal, nihilistic poem “The Show” (1918):

My soul looked down from a vague height with Death,  
As unremembering how I rose or why,  
And saw a sad land, weak with sweats of dearth,  
Gray, cratered like the moon with hollow woe,  
And fitted with great pocks and scabs of plaques....

At the film's crisis, Osborne and Raleigh lead a daylight raid on German trenches just sixty yards away—effectively filmed by cinematographer Laurie Rose with strobing, hand-held cameras. Even the colonel has said the raid is “absurd ... If I could cancel it, Stanhope, I would.” But “the brigadier is adamant.” (We may recall that the brigadier is Raleigh's uncle.) As the clock ticks, there's a remarkable dugout scene where Osborne successfully distracts Raleigh—and himself—from what's coming. Above ground, in schoolmaster mode, he gently admonishes Raleigh, “There is a job to be done. It should never have arisen. But that is not the point.” Less persuasively, Osborne has written to his wife (in what he assumes will be his last letter) that she is “too clear-headed” to take comfort in the fact that he “went down fighting for [his] country.” To say so seems foolishly unfeeling and out of character, but writer-producer Simon Reade is only following the novel here. “I have had so very much out of life,” Osborne writes philosophically (he is the movie's most thoughtful and saddest figure) “but all these youngsters do not realize how unlucky they are, so new are they to their very existence.” Then he tears up the letter.

In 1928 (as in 2018), *Journey's End* was widely understood as a forceful antiwar statement. But Sherriff quickly rejected that interpretation:

I have not written this play as a piece of propaganda. And certainly not as propaganda for peace. Neither have I tried to glorify the life of the soldier, nor to point any kind of moral. It is simply the expression of a kind of ideal. I wanted to perpetuate the memory of some of those men.<sup>10</sup>

At the end of a successful career (which included the screenplays of *Invisible Man*, *The Four Feathers*, *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*; *That Hamilton Woman*, and *The Dam Busters*), Sherriff in his autobiography thought back to the tribulations of a half century before and passed a final judgment on the varied and often violent events that had led to *Journey's End*. For Sherriff, a

teenaged insurance clerk in 1915, the war

...was a merciful, heaven-sent release.... There had been bad times in France, but all in all it had been a magnificent and memorable experience, and with my wounds gratuity I bought myself a sculling boat.<sup>11</sup>

So, when you thought about it, it had all been, er, quite agreeable, really. (As Osborne suggests to young Raleigh, “Think of it all as—as romantic. It helps.”)

But the archetypal quality of *Journey's End*, no matter how often it's performed or filmed, is unhindered by Sherriff's later remarks, and audiences will come away from its 2018 incarnation with appropriate feelings of sorrow and pity. It is, in any case, one of the most believable distillates of 1918 trench warfare yet filmed. The awkwardness of some brief, schmaltzy bits from the 1920s fades away before the force of superlative moviemaking, including Laurie Rose's handsome, desaturated cinematography. Enhanced by the commentary of cello discords by Icelander Hildur Guðnadóttir, it is all so well realized that some indistinct creakiness hardly detracts from its doom-laden climax. That climax seems like not much today, but it was a shocker in 1929.

It is fair to say that Dibb and company have created a Tory companion to two earlier cinema landmarks, Kubrick's Marxian *Paths of Glory* (1957) and Milestone's internationalist *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930). If the characters are a little pat, and Sherriff's story a little tarnished by age, *Journey's End* rises above these flaws to be one of the truest and best films about the First World War.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Sassoon, *Counter-Attack* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1918), 1.

<sup>2</sup>Steven Trout, “Glamorous Melancholy: R. C. Sherriff's *Journey's End*,” *WL&A* (Fall/Winter, 1993), 1-19; Rosa Maria Bracco, *Merchants of Hope: British Middlebrow Writers of the First World War, 1919-1939* (Providence, R.I.: Berg, 1993), 145-95. Both writers discuss the play perceptively and at length. Also insightful are the observations in Samuel Hynes, *A War Remembered* (N.Y.: Atheneum, 1991), 441-43.

<sup>3</sup>“Operation Michael,” as it was called, resulted in 1.5 million casualties all together; the Germans fired an astonishing 3.2 million explosive and chemical shells at British positions on March 21 alone—the most massive artillery barrage in history to that time. A successful Allied counterattack began on July 18; it led to a further 2.2 million dead, wounded, and missing before Germany capitulated on November 11. See, e.g., David T. Zabecki, ed., *Germany at War: 400 Years of Military History* (Santa Barbara: ABC-Clio, 2014), 1145.

<sup>4</sup>The saying was attributed to the Duke of Wellington—seemingly not for the first time—in the anonymous article “Cricket” in *Baily’s Magazine of Sports and Pastimes* XXXII (Sept., 1878), 348. The supposed attribution is well known, but Wellington’s biographer, Elizabeth Longford, doubts that he ever “said or thought anything of the kind”: *Wellington: The Years of the Sword* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1969), 16.

<sup>5</sup>Bracco, 158. Sheriff seems to have hidden his anxiety well: his colonel described Sherriff afterwards as “a steady, unassuming young fellow of good presence. Carried a warm charm in his personality, had a certain calm, quiet air of distinction, much respected by his men” (Michael Lucas & Andrew Lucas, *The 9<sup>th</sup> East Surrey Battalion* <https://media.nationalarchives.gov.uk/index.php/the-journeys-end-battalion-the-9th-east-surrey-and-r-c-sherriff-in-the-great-war/>).

<sup>6</sup>Anne Shannon Monroe, “Charms of French Capital Recited by Oregon Writer,” *Sunday Oregonian* (Portland) (July 28, 1929), Sec. II, 4. Monroe, who saw an English-language production in Paris, called *Journey’s End* “the most absorbing play I ever saw in my life” and suggested that its performance “everywhere in civilization” would “do more to arouse the fighting spirit of the whole civilized world against war, and against the war-minded in places of power, than could any other move.” A critically admired progenitor was Anderson & Stallings’s pioneering *What Price Glory?* (1924; filmed 1926) in the U.S.A.; but most of it took place behind the lines, with a good deal of romantic, if cynical, comedy.

<sup>7</sup>George Perry, “The Man who Staged the Great War,” *Shaw Review* XV (Sept. 1972), 104-09.

<sup>8</sup>Bracco, 153.

<sup>9</sup>Perry, 104

<sup>10</sup>Bracco, 178.

<sup>11</sup>R. C. Sherriff, *No Leading Lady* (London: Gollancz, 1968), 316.

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