

HISTORY ON THE FILMS

The Case of Tennessee Johnson

IN our last issue a correspondent (Ruth Elizabeth Shire, who is an American), wrote protesting against our film-reviewer's grading of the film *Tennessee Johnson*. The protest was forwarded to G.M. who makes the following comment:

"When I reviewed *Tennessee Johnson* I had no idea that I might be reopening some of the old wounds of the Civil War, but your correspondent's letter suggests that some people will not let them be closed. Which were the 'progressive organisations' that protested against the film in the U.S.: did they, I wonder, include the Daughters of the Revolution and the Klu Klux Klan? Your correspondent complains of the 'blatant falsification of history.' In this case it happens that I did take some trouble to check up on the facts as far as they can be discovered, but even so, since Mrs. Shire is an American, one might expect her to know more about her own country's history than any New Zealand writer. It is obvious, however, that there is more than one kind of America. There is, for instance, the critic of *Time* who, in the issue of January 11, said that *Tennessee Johnson* is one of Hollywood's grown-up moments. Not only is it notably faithful to the facts of Johnson's life but (it) actually illuminates a dark chapter in U.S. history. No more adult picture of Washington politics has come out of Hollywood. Reference to the American Dictionary of National Biography, the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, and to one or two other sources, would also support the argument developed in my detailed review (*Listener*, November 5), that the film was much above the Hollywood average of accuracy.

Of course there still remains the great gulf of personal prejudice or preference, which no facts can bridge, between one interpretation of Johnson's character and achievements, and another. This is not so much a matter of

reason as of emotion: it is the same gap as you might find between one person's sentimental estimate of Charles I. as a sainted martyr and of Cromwell as a bigoted tyrant, and the exactly opposite view which somebody else would take. I remember that as a boy I hero-worshipped General Gordon and was greatly shocked when my headmaster declared that he was not a hero but a bad soldier because he disobeyed orders. One might come much closer home and apply the same test to the memory of Michael Joseph Savage.

It is thus with almost any figure in history: but President Andrew Johnson was perhaps more unlucky than some. Southerners were suspicious of him because, although himself a Southerner, he remained loyal to Lincoln and the Union, while Northerners, led by Thaddeus Stevens, reviled him because once the war over, he favoured reconciliation with the South rather than retribution and revenge. If this is "comforting the defeated in any war we win," and if it is to be scorned as bad policy, I wonder what your correspondent has to say about Lincoln's phrase "with malice toward none. . ."? I can only hope that there will be more of Lincoln and Johnson and less of Stevens in America's coming post-war attitude.

However, in spite of this difficulty of personal feeling, I say emphatically that *Tennessee Johnson* did better than the average movie in maintaining some critical detachment; in showing something of Johnson's grave faults as well as some of his virtues: and because it did this in conjunction with good direction, good acting, and good script-writing, I would still describe it as "the best sort of historical drama"—the same biographical sort as *Pasteur*, *Zola* and *Marie Walewska*, which is the best sort. Indeed, now that your correspondent has reminded me of this film's outstanding qualities, I would go further, and if I had to choose not the Ten Best Pictures of the past year, but the Five Best, I would place *Tennessee Johnson* among them.

UNDERGROUND PRESS FOR CHILDREN

An item of news from the latest "BBC London Letter," just received:—

TODAY thousands of girls and boys in terror-ridden Poland are reading an underground newspaper — *Diedronka* ("Ladybird") — the only such paper known to be printed specially for children.

Each word in its pages breathes defiance to the Germans, who, in their attempt to obliterate Polish culture, have burned every child's book that mentions the name of Poland.

Copies of a recent issue of *Diedronka* have just reached the BBC. The first item is a prayer. It reads:—

"I, the child of a country which has been tortured, beg Thee, O Lord, and pray to Thee that I may be always brave. Give me the courage of a real man, and the pride of a man, that my heart may beat so strongly for Poland that it will conquer all.

Let my heart be full of the love of a son, and the faithfulness of a soldier. Please protect my own home. Keep it free from defeat and mourning. And please protect all who fight for Poland on land and sea, and in the air."

The next item in the book is a story, a true story of a sixteen-year-old Polish boy who escaped to Britain and joined the Polish forces in the expedition to Norway. There he lost a leg. He was brought back to England and awarded a medal. Later he was sent to America, where he is now at school again.

That is followed by a tale about "Ciapiek" (Spotty), mascot dog of the Polish Bomber Squadron in Britain.

Lastly, there are items of advice, including these two. "Don't look at passing Germans. Learn because the Germans want you to be stupid. Good learning is as important as good fighting against the Germans."



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