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History on the Screen

LAST ROUND IN THE BATTLE OVER "TENNESSEE JOHNSON"

We have received another letter from Ruth Elizabeth Shire (her last, she says) in reply to G.M.'s comment (January 21) on her protest about his review of "Tennessee Johnson":

HAD I been the printer of "G.M.'s" reply to my attack on *Tennessee Johnson*, I doubt whether I could have refrained from setting his name as "M.G.M." Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer worked overtime to publicise the myth that *Tennessee Johnson* is "notably faithful to the facts," the words which G.M. quotes from a publication of a millionaire who wants the U.S.A. to take over the British Empire after the war.

Booth's bullet was the signal for M-G-M to stand history on its head. The aim of the Civil War was the emancipation of the Negro slaves. Johnson betrayed the aim. He allowed the slaveholders to arrogantly return to the Senate and their federal privileges. M-G-M and G.M. applaud. G.M. wonders what I have to say about Lincoln's phrase, "with malice toward none." Ilya Ehrenburg, speaking for the Soviet people, writes: "We speak not of malice but of hatred, not of revenge but of justice. This is no mere verbal distinction; they are different sentiments... We hate Fascism because we love life. The stronger our love of life, the stronger is our hatred." I say it is an outrageous defilement of Lincoln to misrepresent his phrase to mean that he favoured appeasement of the slaveholders by continuing under a thin camouflage the slavery which he hated so strongly. This is not a matter of personal feeling on my part, as G.M. believes; it is a matter of the record of Lincoln supported by his Cabinet during the war, and the record of Johnson opposed by Lincoln's Cabinet after the war.

Thaddeus Stevens is one of the noblest figures in history. M-G-M, with the enthusiastic assistance of Lionel Barrymore, smears this figure in the same fashion as G.M. smears mine when he associates me with D.A.R. and the K.K.K. Throughout the film M-G-M misquoted Stevens as shamelessly as they composed a fictitious letter from Lincoln testifying to Jackson's sobriety. But Stevens dared to demand that the Negroes be given the franchise and their share of the land. Lincoln was killed and Stevens was punished and, as the film shows, Johnson (who advocated lynching his opponents) was finally cheered by Senators representing Southern poll tax States which permitted 10 per cent of their inhabitants to vote. These were the men the K.K.K. supported, and I am furious at being stood on my head by a reviewer still in his political diapers.

Considering the aims of the war, M-G-M allowed a few Negroes on the screen. They were the old nauseating Hollywood servant-clowns, to bolster up the first point that a glorification of

Andrew Johnson makes: Negroes have no rights. The American Civil Liberties Union and the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People strongly opposed that point along with probably 90 per cent of organised labour.

It is such win-the-war and win-the-peace organisations—determined to exact full justice on the Fascists—who strongly oppose the second point the film makes; restore the *status quo ante bellum* of defeated countries. Lincoln won the war but Johnson lost the peace. This time a 100 per cent victory of democracy will win equality for the Negro people at last. For G.M. to hope that there will be more of Johnson and less of Stevens in America's post-war attitude is, I believe, disruptive to our war effort in the same way as was the release of Mosley.

G.M. has crawled right out on a limb. I believe Abe Lincoln would be pleased at my endeavour to saw it off.



G. M. Replies

From the precarious position to which Mrs. Shire claims to have driven him, G.M. replies as follows:

I HAVE no wish to provoke your correspondent much further because she already appears to be in some danger of exploding, and anyway, even so good a film as *Tennessee Johnson* seems hardly worth so much paper and energy. So I'll deal with only a few of the extravagances of which her latest letter is wholly composed.

Most glaring of all perhaps is her contention that "the aim of the Civil War was the emancipation of the Negro slaves." Every second person makes this error; it is one of the great fallacies of history; but a mistake is no less a mistake because it is often committed. If Mrs. Shire would care to read the article

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