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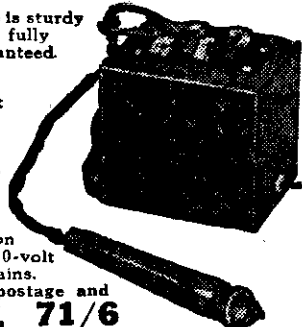
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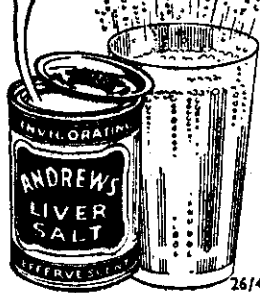
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Film Reviews by G.M.

SPEAKING CANDIDLY

WESTERN APPROACHES

(Crown Film Unit)



AVOIDING the word "significant" because it is so horribly overworked these days, I should like to suggest that it is at least worthy of comment that most of the finest pictures of the war (e.g., *In Which We Serve*, *San Demetrio*, *Lifeboat*, and now *Western Approaches*) have been stories of the sea, that three of those mentioned were British-made, and that the best of them all (*Western Approaches*) was produced by the Crown Film Unit. The first fact is less noteworthy than the others because it merely emphasises that the sea is one of the best possible sources of dramatic material. The second fact also underlines what should already be fairly obvious: that Britain is now making better pictures than America. But I find the third fact particularly interesting, because it shows that a Government-controlled enterprise can do a better job than a commercial studio. This statement perhaps needs to be qualified by the admission that the Crown Film Unit is a rather special kind of Government enterprise: all the same it is clear that when you have film-workers who are interested in doing a good job for the sake of the job itself and who have a free hand and the right kind of background and training (many of the men in the Crown Film Unit received their schooling under Grierson), they can wipe the floor with their higher-salaried colleagues in the realm of private enterprise. This is not an irrelevant issue; in fact, the recent decision of the Czech Government to nationalise the Czech film industry makes any evidence along these lines, for or against, worth collecting. One might even hope, too, that our own documentary enthusiasts at Miramar will find some encouragement and inspiration in *Western Approaches*. And I think one should certainly hope that the Crown Film Unit, now that its wartime job is done, won't be disbanded along with its parent, the British Ministry of Information, but will be allowed to continue, if only for the purpose of keeping J. A. Rank and his satellites on their toes.

SINCE both pictures deal with the Merchant Navy and in particular with the hardships and courage of a group of torpedoed seamen adrift in an open boat, some comparison between *Western Approaches* and *San Demetrio* cannot be avoided, I think that *Western Approaches* marks an improvement. To say this is not to make any reflection on *San Demetrio*, which was an exceptionally fine film; it simply means that the Crown Film Unit boys have learnt certain lessons and have created an even stronger impression of realism than was done in *San Demetrio*. They have also added Technicolour, which has some faults but more virtues.

Instead of shooting some of the sequences in a water-tank at the studio, as was done in *San Demetrio* with not

wholly convincing results, the Crown Film Unit actually went to sea with their cameras; they spent months in a real lifeboat photographing storms, sunrises, and sunsets as they happened, and beards as they grew on the faces of their cast. Instead of using some movie actors, as *San Demetrio* did, they employed only officers and men of the Allied Navies and Merchant Fleets; and instead of presenting them with neatly-prepared scripts which told them exactly what to say and when to say it, they relied mainly—though probably not entirely—on the natural conversations of these ordinary seamen. There are some drawbacks to this latter technique; you may justify the casual quality of the dialogue as it reaches you in snatches above the sound of waves, wind, and machinery, on the ground that this adds to the realism; but that does not make it any easier to hear. Similarly with the Technicolour. It was a bold and difficult venture to film a full-length documentary of this particular kind in colour, and often the venture succeeds magnificently. Those huge, deep-blue combers in the opening scene create the atmosphere for the whole film immediately; and some of the seascapes at dawn and dusk are—I was going to say, like nothing seen on earth. And perhaps that is just the point; though I could not help wondering sometimes whether a few of the more vivid hues were ever seen on water either. Still, having never been afloat on the Atlantic in a lifeboat I am not prepared to press this argument. And quite apart from the colour, it is remarkable what effects of composition the cameraman has sometimes achieved, just by silhouetting the stubbly profile of a weary seaman against a threatening sky and a hopelessly empty horizon.

IT is characteristic of *Western Approaches*, however, that it does not often go in for such effects for their own sake. This documentary belongs to the newer school of realism and human values; it is a good long way from the earlier *Song of Ceylon* school, when the emphasis was all on impressionism and the "symphonic build-up" technique. The scenic effects in *Western Approaches* are only important in so far as they give focus to the predicament of the 24 survivors in the lifeboat, their fortitude and their courage as the weary days drag by. There are other settings in the film besides the lifeboat, of course, and other people, too; there are, for instance, the men of the merchantman in an East-bound convoy from New York which steams off its course to pick up the lifeboat crew and runs into a U-boat trap; and there are the Germans who constitute the underwater menace of the film and supply it with a more genuine feeling of suspense and excitement than almost any studio-made picture I can remember. But it is the lifeboat that holds most of our hopes and fears.

WESTERN APPROACHES is a tribute to heroism and endurance, but since it deals with life and not with