

GROANS FOR "MRS. MINIVER"

THAT heading, "Groans for Mrs. Miniver," is an echo of the headline "Cheers for Mrs. Miniver" under which I reviewed this M-G-M film two weeks ago, and it is occasioned by several critical comments on the film which *The Listener* has received since then. Frankly, I cannot remember any production of recent months which more fully justifies the publicity claim to be a film that "the whole town is talking about," and it is interesting (and one might almost say encouraging), that so much of the talk is intelligently critical. Writing before my review appeared, one correspondent said, "My faith in your little man will wane if he does anything but slump, incredibly bored, in his chair"—which means, presumably, that his faith must by now have waned almost to vanishing point, because there was the little man, not recumbent, but upright and enthusiastic. I do not, of course, apologise for the little fellow's behaviour; at the same time, it is important that the other viewpoint should be aired.

Here is one letter:

Sir,—I am English, and saw the blitz at close quarters, but *Mrs. Miniver* left me cold. Trying to think why, I came to the conclusion that the film has all the trappings of England without a jot of its spirit. English boys do not emote all over their parents, especially when down from Oxford. An Oxford man might be as green as the son in the picture, but never as gauche. Not a corner of the Miniver mansion rang true, nor did the fact that Mrs. M. had no evacuees and no war duties of any kind. All the glamorous war adventures happened to this family and none of the irritating, boring, everyday grind that has really shown the spirit of England. The film was lush, loud, emphatic, where England is dry, subtle, and reserved.

Those M-G-M dollars got in the way as usual. *Mrs. Miniver* is probably good sentimental entertainment, but as a picture of England it is phoney.—H.W. (Wellington).

"Gross Over-Simplification"

And here are the chief points of criticism in a long letter from another correspondent, Sgm. Bruce Mason (in a military camp):

"I would describe *Mrs. Miniver* as a routine film; a collection of routine people doing routine things . . . All the old staggers are there: the sour old female dihard whose bulk and acidity conceal a heart of old gold; the dear old station-master, the clumsy, giggling housemaid, the kindly, discursive grocer, the village flower-show, held under the very shadow of the Luftwaffe, and, of course, the local choristers fluting away in uneasy abandon. All very amusing, but pre-1914. The foreword of the picture is the grossest over-simplification of the present war I have yet seen. It refers smoothly to the blithe and happy England of 1939 and the English "way of life" which the aggressor threatened to destroy. One can understand the Minivers' indignation. Their way of life is charming. A sumptuous house, a car, servants, make life a pleasant business which I would like to feel is typically English. Unfortunately, it is not, although the film cunningly insinuates that it is so. If Mr. Miniver does anything, it is not apparent: he must have some very good shares. I am informed that living on this scale is true of about two per cent of the English people. Yet the film purports to be America's tribute to the English people in their hours of stress. To generalise through the Minivers on the English as a whole is no doubt most satisfactory to Messrs. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, whose continued existence depends on a society whose upper crust is composed of Minivers and Lady Beldons. This is not to say that the personal struggle of the Minivers, their trials and vicissitudes, are not important and worthy of record, but they are not typical, and should not be made so"

Lejeune was Lyrical

Even though I cannot wholly agree with them, these are good letters, and

the comment from an Englishman who experienced the blitz is particularly worthwhile. On this point, however, I took the trouble to turn up the review of the film by Miss C. A. Lejeune, noted critic of the *London Observer*, who must have been in at least as good a position to judge the English spirit under blitz conditions. Yet, as you can see, her review is positively lyrical.

" . . . The plain fact remains that *Mrs. Miniver* is the most moving, sensitive, and inspirational film that has come out of the war yet in any country. Doubtless we could have made a better film of England at war here at home, but doubtless we never did, as Dr. Butler said of God and the strawberry. *Mrs. Miniver* presents a family of English country people . . . with an insight that is little short of magical. It is years since I remember being so touched by any film."

"We Take Grave Exception"

As against this, my attention has been drawn to comment on *Mrs. M.* by a writer in the *English Documentary Newsletter* for August, 1942, in which he joins issue with Miss Lejeune. In fact, he takes almost the same line as Bruce Mason above, and follows it even more implacably:

"*Mrs. Miniver* is not one of the easiest films to review, because in some ways it is very good, and in a lot of others it is just repulsive. You can sit in the theatre and hear practically the whole house weeping—a British audience with three years of war behind it, crying at one of the phoniest war films that has ever been made. So you can tell it is well made, superlatively well made. It is hard to be unkind to *Mrs. Miniver*, because William Wyler is such a good director, but the film is so untrue that it has got to be done. . . .

"If the film made a less strenuous attempt to be realistic, one could have accepted it for its entertainment value. But the film sets out to tell a true story of blitzed England and comes too close to a historical record to treat it thus lightly. We therefore take grave exception to the view that the Minivers were and are the backbone of Britain. The subject of the film is important and the excellence of the film is important, so the impact on audiences of this Hollywood idea of Britain's behaviour in wartime is of some moment. The Minivers, or people like them, were there under the bombing (though the little Minivers were assuredly tucked away in a safe area and quite rightly, too), but the Minivers were in the minority. The cooks and housemaids, grocers and station-masters, bargees and tugmen were certainly there in the middle of it, and overwhelmingly in the majority. . . . It is a pity that so much ability has been misused by an allied country in presenting Britain so badly.

"The Best People's War"

And here, in brief, is similar comment from William Whitebait, critic of *The New Statesman*:

"*Mrs. Miniver* sets out to be as English as can be, and up to a point succeeds. But the most that *Mrs. Miniver* achieves is an easy pathos; sentimentality (and class sentimentality at that), takes on a tone of holiness, of smug simplicity, which, personally, I found it rather difficult to bear. 'This is a people's war,' says the vicar, delivering a sermon in his bombed church; but it isn't, it is only (look round at the faces, look back over the story!) the best people's war. In fact *Mrs. Miniver* seemed to me for the most part as remote as old drawings in *Punch*; but that it is successful in its genre I don't for a moment deny."

Explanation, Not Excuses

Since this controversy was started by correspondence, it may be appropriate for me to use the same method of reply, in the form of a letter to the soldier who wrote from camp:

"You will appreciate, I hope, that the cheers of the little man at the top of my review were as much for the personal triumph of Greer Garson as for the picture itself, but still I cannot expect you to be anything but disappointed in the little fellow. I am not,

of course, making excuses for him. He just didn't see the picture in exactly the same light as you. But partly he did, as you will admit, and he got off his chest the very same line of criticism as you—that *Mrs. Miniver* does not deal with The People of England, but only with the very small minority who live on about £2,000 a year. But the difference was that, having got this off his chest, he was able to enjoy the show, whereas it apparently coloured and spoiled your entertainment throughout. For myself, however, while I think that, to put it mildly, Hollywood producers have got things badly out of perspective and that their preoccupation with the status quo and with what they themselves regard as "the good way of life" is easily the most disturbing (and even sinister), aspect of modern film-making, I think at the same time that there is a danger that critics like us may get things almost equally out of perspective. The foreword to *Mrs. Miniver* was, of course, a misleading over-simplification: but I think it was sufficient for me to make that point, as I did, and then go on to appreciate the film's manifest good qualities. And, speaking as one who hopes to see a great social and economic change coming from the war, this was even, I suggest, better tactics than an all-out frontal assault. Obviously, the vast majority of picturegoers will quite sincerely (and quite rightly), enjoy *Mrs. Miniver*, and will regard it as a "beautiful picture," and to have concentrated on scoffing at it because of its over-simplification and subtle distortion would merely have annoyed them and stiffened their resistance, whereas my less direct approach (in which I made my point and then passed on), was perhaps more effective. You military people call this the method of attack by infiltration, I believe."



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