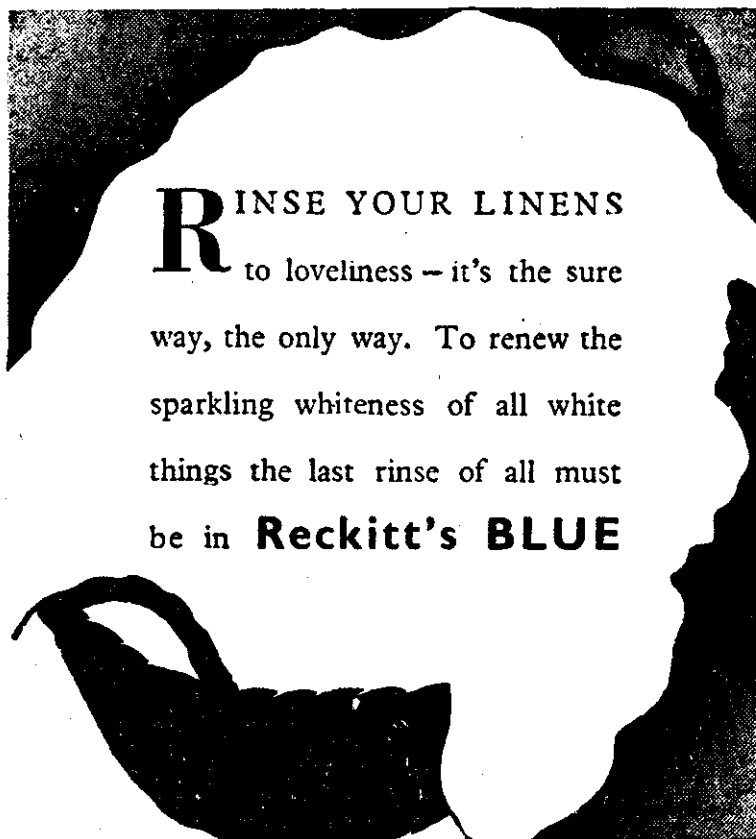




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Film Reviews by G.M.

THE VARNISHED TRUTH

PPOINTING out historical or technical inaccuracies in a film or book in order to display one's superior knowledge can be a most annoying form of intellectual snobbishness. If I seemed last week to be indulging in it in my reviews of *The First of the Few* and *The Prime Minister* (after having visited the reference-library to get the required superior knowledge!) it was because those films are striking examples of a tendency very prevalent through the film industry — a tendency to prefer fiction to fact; to give the truth such a heavy coat of dramatic varnish that it is almost unrecognisable. Are real events and real people so uninteresting that they must always be glamorised and dramatised before audiences will accept them? Is the truth so dull that it can't get by without being pepped up? The majority of film-makers would appear to think so. I don't; but even if it were so, it would scarcely excuse the disfigurement of truth.

OBVIOUSLY, the producers even of historical and biographical films must be allowed a good deal of dramatic licence in the manner of presenting their stories. In the case of the *Spitfire* film, for instance, one might legitimately disagree with its treatment of the social background of England in the 'thirties; one might feel, for example, that the film is unduly sympathetic toward big financiers and armament-makers for the "risks" they took, and too much inclined to blame officialdom for apathy. But those are matters of opinion. What we are here concerned with is not the presentation of opinion, nor the interpretation of facts, but with the facts themselves. Would either *The First of the Few* or *The Prime Minister* have suffered in entertainment or dramatic value if the facts had been correctly reported? I don't believe they would: in any case there would have been a compensating gain in authenticity.

THAT an historical film can be almost wholly accurate and at the same time remain well worth seeing is proved by that new picture, *Tennessee Johnson*, which I review elsewhere. I'll only say here that the factual basis of its plot emerges unscathed from the reference-library test. And there are, of course, other examples of truth triumphant on the screen. But there are many more examples on the other side. Almost any keen filmgoer could give a list of features in which historical truth was at a discount, if not actually treated as a liability by the producers. Not only features, either; the same thing happens frequently in shorts — for example, in that very well-produced series called *Passing Parade*. This has an introduction to the effect that historical facts have not necessarily been followed, but that an attempt has been made to present the spirit of the subject—a blanket clause which covers a multitude of sins against the truth. The trouble is that the average person forgets the foreword and remembers only the exciting contents. He doesn't bother to visit the reference-library to check up. So he may go through the rest of his life believing

that Napoleon was defeated because he had a vendetta with a fellow-Corsican who trailed him all over Europe and who was solely responsible, among other things, for persuading the British to launch the Peninsular Campaign and the Russians to burn Moscow!

I HESITATE to introduce the subject of education on the film page—but, after all, the cinema is the greatest educator of the people. It has advantages over every other medium. Thanks to George Arliss, Paul Muni, and Charles Laughton, countless thousands of people know at least something about Disraeli, Alexander Hamilton, Voltaire, Pasteur, Zola, Henry VIII., Rembrandt, and the Mutiny on the Bounty which they would probably never have known if those stars had not made films about them. A serious responsibility therefore rests upon the film industry. What earthly use, one might ask, is it for our school-teachers to go on teaching children the true facts of history if Hollywood is going to teach them the wrong ones? For Hollywood will always win. It was all very well for Milton to write, "Who ever knew truth put to the worse in a free and open encounter?" Milton didn't know about the cinema. For there the encounter is neither free nor open: all the advantage is on the side of the false but exciting screenplay as opposed to the accurate but comparatively dull text-book. "My dear," you may say, patiently but firmly, "Parnell wore a big beard and did not in the least resemble Clark Gable. Nor is it strictly true that Ferdinand de Lesseps built the Suez Canal because he couldn't marry the Empress Eugénie." It is no use. "But it must have been that way," she will reply. "I saw it on the films!"

IN general the studios are fairly accurate in their "background" details of costumes, furnishings, and so on for this type of picture. They should be: they spend enough money maintaining "research" departments. Occasionally, however, they make extraordinary blunders; and sometimes even apparently minor technical inaccuracies may have a special importance. Thousands of boys in the A.T.C. whose job is to get to know all about the evolution and design of aeroplanes will flock enthusiastically to see *The First of the Few*, yet if we accept the expert opinion which I quoted from *The Aeroplane* last week (and there is no reason not to), what they will find on the screen will merely confuse them—if it does not do worse. And so far as one can see, no good purpose at all—not even a dramatic one—is served by thus tampering with facts. It would almost seem as if film producers, as a breed, have been doing it now for so long that it has become a congenital habit.

ONE of the gravest charges we make against the Nazis is that they deliberately and ruthlessly twist and rewrite history to suit their own wicked purposes. The difference between what they do and what our films do is that they pervert the truth and we merely distort it; and, of course, perversion is criminal, while distortion is merely stupid.

(continued on next page)