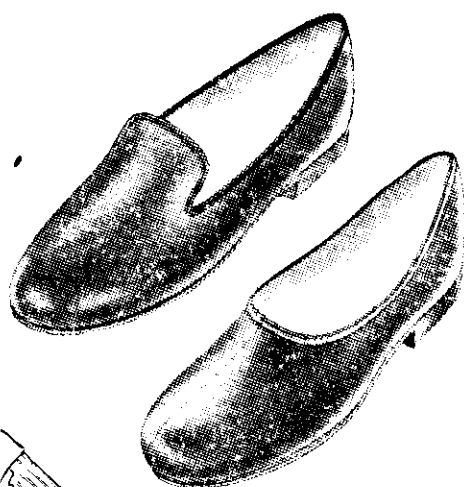
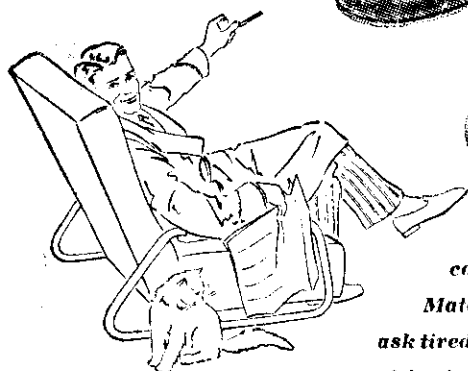


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## FILM REVIEWS, BY F.A.J.

# Salute to a Pioneer

## THE MAGIC BOX

(Rank)

WHAT (I wondered) could  
even a director like John  
Boulting do with sixty stars  
in the British cinema's big co-op-  
erative effort for Festival year,  
well over 10,000 feet long and  
Technicolored? How pleasant it was,  
then, to find *The Magic Box* interest-  
ing throughout, enjoyable and—yes, I  
think a good film. Its appropriate sub-  
ject is the life of William Friese-Greene,  
a British pioneer of the cinema. At first  
a successful photographer, he spent so  
much unprofitable time on inventions  
that he died with only the price of a  
cinema ticket. His first wife had died  
and his second had left him, unable to  
put up with it any longer. That, at any  
rate, is how Eric Ambler's script has it,  
and I believe it's factual.

The film opens with Friese-Greene  
(Robert Donat) visiting his wife (Mar-  
garet Johnston) and ends with his fatal  
collapse the same day after an appeal  
to a cinema industry conference to let  
the film grow up. Between these points  
the inventor's story is told in two cleverly  
ordered flashbacks—one covering  
his second wife's life with him, the  
other his early years till just before the  
death of his first wife (Maria Schell).  
This means that the highlight of the  
film, Friese-Greene's first flickering  
pictures, his joy and excitement, comes  
very near the end.

*The Magic Box* moves at a good  
speed, and the story is interesting in  
itself and must, I think, have a greater  
impact if you know it's true. Robert  
Donat, in an excellent performance,  
makes Friese-Greene an eager, gentle,  
likeable character, who doesn't mean  
to make things difficult for his family—  
but does. We feel especially sorry for  
his second wife, when, to ease the bur-  
den, her under-age sons go off to the  
war—one high price that is paid for the  
little man's ruling passion. The film's  
many top-line players are quite as un-  
obtrusive as their roles allow.

Blessed, then, with an interesting  
story and players who know when not  
to be stars, *The Magic Box* still  
wouldn't have come to much without  
good direction and photography, and a  
script that is not only cleverly ordered  
but intelligible. These Mr. Boulting,  
Jack Cardiff and Mr. Ambler have given  
it. I know, anyway, that I went along a  
sceptic and came away with the impres-  
sion that I had seen a difficult job well  
done by a team of skilled craftsmen  
who understood their medium.

## THE RED BADGE OF COURAGE

(M.G.M.)

A FRAID on the eve of battle, a youth  
runs away after his first spell under  
fire, but returns to distinguish himself.  
This is the story of *The Red Badge of  
Courage*, Stephen Crane's novel of the  
American Civil War. The book was  
written without experience of war and  
is largely subjective—the youth's  
thoughts and feelings are extensively  
explored.

With Audie Murphy as the youth  
and John Dierkes and Bill Mauldin as

## BAROMETER

FAIR TO FINE: "The Magic Box."  
FAIR TO FINE: "The Red Badge of  
Courage."

the tall soldier and the loud soldier,  
John Huston, writer-director, has made  
what is on the whole a faithful screen  
translation of the Crane classic. Much  
of the atmosphere of the story is cap-  
tured, and with good acting by Audie  
Murphy and an outside voice occasion-  
ally speaking passages from the book,  
even the youth's thoughts and feelings  
are conveyed to a greater extent than  
I had dared to expect. The rest of the  
cast give solid support. The photo-  
graphy is excellent (the best of it bril-  
liant), and since much of its power and  
beauty depends on the dramatic qual-  
ity of the shots, Mr. Huston is probably  
entitled to share some of the credit with  
his photographer, Harold Rosson. Some  
who know the book will object that  
here and there cuts in the story in  
translation make it seem disjointed, and  
that in other places its development is  
unsatisfactory; but they will remember  
the film if only for such powerful se-  
quences as the one which ends in the  
tall soldier's death.

Edward Garnett, who admired the  
book, named war's malignant, cold  
ironies, prosaic dreadfulness and dreary,  
deadening tedium among the factors  
Crane underestimated. I think this is  
largely true, too, of the film, and since  
in a prologue it hints at a "point" in the  
story in both the youth and the nation  
reaching maturity through the trials of  
war, it is a fault—we are entitled to  
know the worst. The film is perhaps  
more telling than the book in some of  
its pictures of war—for example, the  
fallen soldier half rising to replace his  
spectacles—but it needs to be, since it  
is less subjective.

There are two interesting changes in  
the story. The capture of the Confed-  
erate colours is, inexcusably, treated poet-  
ically; and at the end, the youth, having  
proved his physical courage, starts to  
confess his desertion (in the book he  
has only troubled thoughts), but is  
afraid to tell more than half the truth.

M.G.M. re-edited this film to give it  
greater box-office appeal, so it is not  
pure Huston. Even so, it is a fine piece  
of work.



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