National snapshots: fixing the past in English war films

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AT THE VERY end of *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), Steven Spielberg presents us with a screen-filling view of the Stars and Stripes. The flag is huge, well-travelled, loved and faded, like a Jasper Johns painting. It is held out bravely by the wind, which blows it rollingly across the full screen. It is now unthinkable that a British film would end in such a strong, big-hearted and perfectly unironic way. Even British Airways took the flag off their tail fins, though it is to the point of my argument that a surprising number of people noticed the erasure and expostulated.

In addressing myself to the English and their Englishness I intend no offence, these neurotically offendable days, either to Scots, Welsh or Irish still ambivalently gathered under the heading 'British' (and still formally recognising the Union Jack as their national flag), still less to the 5 per cent of the population whose parents left the old empire some time between 1950 and 1970 or so for the promise of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness as held out in Birmingham, Bradford, Liverpool, East London and elsewhere. In part, indeed, I am addressing that smallish diaspora, since they came to what was thought of, not inaccurately, as the parent-nation in expectation of what parents should give, and that parent in particular: comfort, support, shelter, justice, authority, steadiness, love, trustworthiness. These were qualities which, it was alleged, the British at large and the English as dominant had contrived into the practices of a culture and the formations of a state. Those practices and formations were no doubt spotted and disfigured also by the usual bloody cold of the English as well as their mildish racism, but they would nonetheless pass liberal muster in most historical reviews. Englishness had for a season an honourable moral content and a

I am Professor of Cultural Studies at the University of Sheffield and author, most recently, of *People's Witness: The Journalist in Modern Politics* (Yale University Press, 2002). My immediate interest in the war films of the 1950s was prompted by my national service as a 2nd Lieutenant in the Parachute Regiment and the Middle East during and after the disgraceful Suez campaign of 1956. *Fred Inglis*

place to which it belonged. That place was home, a term as absent from the indexes of the official classics of political science as it is central to the political values each of us instinctively invokes if we want to talk about politics in everyday life.

Englishness, however, has taken a bit of a pasting these past thirty or so years, and the kind that I am talking about was only embarrassed by the efforts of Mrs Thatcher and her cronies to reassert a fatuous Great Britishness, which turned out to be in truth a merely shop-keeping little Englandism. Those same efforts of hers compounded the derision of Englishness so cordially expressed over the borders of Scotland, Ireland and Wales, and concentrated at home by critics flying on the queasy, internationalist wings of academic leftism. Given that politics is now so completely dissolved into culture, those same critics on the left, friends and comrades of mine, found the Englishness of their malediction in every turn of the country's popular narratives. In the poetry of Ted Hughes and Philip Larkin, the novels of John Fowles and Penelope Lively, the music of Benjamin Britten and William Walton, the architecture of Leslie Martin and Colin St-John Wilson and above all in the films of Michael Powell, David Lean, Anthony Asquith, Humphrey Jennings, the Brothers Boulting and company, this small, malevolent church detected a threnody sung over the loss of empire and the decline of British (which is to say English) imperial power.

No one can doubt the facts of that decline, nor regret what was, for many English men and women, the happy evaporation of empire. At the same time, I suggest that 'decline' itself became a reflex rhetorical weapon with which to describe the veerings of English cultural life from the time of the Festival of Britain onwards. Those with plenty to lose from the tidal wavelets of egalitarian change which rippled mildly over England after 1945 not only scoffed at the little surge of modernist culture which flowered at the Festival, but announced the advent of general decline in a way that gripped much of the London literary imagination for the next half-century. The moral and emotional distance from Evelyn Waugh's ugly contempt as expressed for the Sword of Stalingrad on display in Westminster Abbey as well as for the long, shabby and reverent queues of visitors who trooped around it, to the Isle of Wight theme park in Julian Barnes's *England, England* of 1998 is quite short. The ethics of decline, like the tropes of disappointed love, are less a matter of moral vision and more a matter of fashion as compelled by social structures than most writers and art house film-makers would like to believe. There seems to me, however, something solid to rest on in these historical glimpses, and something solid to say about the relations between the English at war and the films the English made about themselves

being at war immediately after the war ended, and for thirty or so years after that.

In affirming a detectable solidity in the relations of history and more-or-less historical films, there is implied a no-nonsense theory of representation in which a flat screen, black-and-white photography, a family parade of extremely familiar and gloriously indistinguishable theatrical heroes and stars playing unknown warrior-heroes, and the direct gaze of unselfconsciously English directors combine to tell true enough stories about real enough events.

Such a task can only be brought off, of course, at those few historically privileged moments since the invention of film at which popular sentiment, technological recording systems, and the forced march of quotidian eventuality can be made to fit together with comparatively little interpretative play or slippage. These conditions held pretty tightly in the 1950s. War itself had provided a comprehensive account of eventuality, not only one in which the mere facts of life could be rendered immediately intelligible by surrounding them with strategic explanations, but also one in which conduct itself, whether admirable or not, rarely provided a moral puzzle. The deadly sins and the cardinal virtues assumed significance in terms dictated by the plot of the anti-fascist war, its compulsory conception of duty and what Conrad called, in *The Shadow Line*, 'the blessed simplicity of its ... point of view on life'.

That perspective was commonly tightened upon the facts by the addition of news photography. In the century or so since Daguerre's amazing invention, the establishment of the news photograph both as incontrovertible testament and cherished revocation of the irrevocable past went unquestioned. Moreover, and in spite of widespread recognition that the same black-and-white photography once it had electrified into motion lent itself to all sorts of unreal mockeries and delirious fantasy, the *authority* of black-and-white images lent likelihood to fairy tale and certified headline and ticker-tape with the stamp of truth.

Finally, in this happy coincidence of camera, fact and feeling, that elusive historical necessity, popular sentiment, was keenly actualised in the forms of contemporary narrative in the 1950s. Men and women in their thirties and forties (and more: the period is also striking for the common lack of distinction in the dominant structure of feeling as between the generations) looked back on their shared experience of wartime as it began to come into an always provisional and evaluative balance. That is to say, they were in a position to judge the films for truthfulness as picturing a people's experience of what Angus Calder called 'The People's War'. For the first time in cultural history a huge and historic sequence of events was narrated and represented

not on behalf of a powerful elite and as redounding to its credit, but on behalf of a whole population, permitting them to judge for themselves whether they came out of it well or badly. Our family of directors, writers and performers contrived a common, popular aesthetic within whose polished, intensely organised styles the criteria of plainness and accessibility, of trust in the truths of feeling, domestic beauty, and in the reassuring factuality of *things*, came together in a noble declaration of unironic faith in some great romantic simples: love, 'solidarity', 'character', home.

Sixty or so subsequent years have corroded this innocence. Consumer capitalism and the absence of war have together worked to underfeed 'solidarity' until it has become so thin we can see through it, and placed the values of radical individualism (identity, fulfilment, self-discovery and so forth) at the centre of the board. But the war films of the 1950s will nonetheless be represented by me here, in the face of supreme unction on the part of all-knowing postmodernism, as themselves representing pretty faithfully the feelings of a full generation as its members looked back ten or fifteen years to a time in which they belonged to an inclusive and acknowledged narrative, a time during which this generation could be said to have had the chance to live well, as well as watching others die, on the whole, to the point and with credit.

I am offering a snatch of a history of the feelings, and an account of the representation of those feelings as being more or less faithful to the facts. I shall also suggest that the feelings in question may not only turn out to be longer-lived than the rhetoric of decline would permit under any heading other than that of nostalgia, but persist as part of a still animated version of English identity not altogether irrelevant to a medium-sized state in the European Union. I shall start with some signs of the times around 1944, beginning with an exemplary tale.

The English historian Edward Thompson, professionally known as E.P. Thompson, had a brother, Frank. Frank was a big, handsome young man, born in 1920, who won scholarships to Winchester and Oxford as a result not only of his quite amazing facility for learning foreign languages – at his death he spoke and read eleven – but of his luminous intelligence, his gifts as a poet, his striking high-mindedness and idealism, his strong sense of the comic. At Oxford in 1938, with Iris Murdoch as his sweetheart, he was, like all generous-hearted and public-spirited young men and women of his class, a communist because communism taught the righteousness of anger at all that capitalism, especially in fascist uniform, did so cruelly to the wretched of the earth.

In 1939 he quit his degree and joined up. His amazing command of

languages and his quiet courage took him by way of long-distance radio patrols to volunteer for parachute training and membership of the Special Operations Executive. He was assigned to Yugoslavia to liaise with the Bulgarian communist partisans then in operation against their own collaborationist-fascist government. In a series of desperate forays and retreats – so nearly starved to death that they ate raw snails – the partisans being gradually picked off by betrayal, by exhaustion, by bitter cold as well as in hand-to-hand fighting, Thompson and his men faithfully supported their depleted allies until they were all captured, Thompson and his sergeant of course in British Army uniform. It was 1 June 1944.

Five days later the terrible carnage re-enacted by Spielberg in *Saving Private Ryan* had its first performance on Omaha Beach. The fascist police chief in Sofia responsible for Frank Thompson knew that his government, dreading the arrival in Bulgaria of the Red Army, was soliciting for peace. Edward Thompson's view was always that the Allied authorities had left the Bulgarians to do what they liked with his brother; neither they nor the victorious Red Army wanted the help of idealistic young democrats in the way of the forthcoming European carve-up. For a little earlier, in his Christmas letter home in 1943, Frank Thompson had written to his family that

there is a spirit abroad in Europe which is finer and braver than anything that tired continent has known for centuries, and which cannot be withstood. You can, if you like, think of it in terms of politics, but it is broader and more generous than any dogma. It is the confident will of whole peoples, who have known the utmost humiliation and suffering, and have triumphed over it, to build their own life once and for all.'

This the voice of a member of one of the greatest English traditions: that well-educated, internationalist-minded, generous-hearted and courteous fraction of the non-exploitative bourgeoisie which is one recruiting ground for the best of dissenting English socialism. The two brothers were young officers in what Edward called 'a resolute and ingenious civilian army' and Frank, who fought through the campaign in the Western Desert as well as the Sicily landings, praised as 'the best ambassadors and gentlest conquerors the world has produced'.

On 10 June 1944, the repatriation officers having done nothing about him and after a ridiculous show trial, Frank Thompson was taken to a little grass-topped hill above the village of Litakovo and shot. In the last letter anyone ever received from him, he wrote:

I've been working hard, I hope to some purpose, and keeping brave company – some of the best in the world. Next to this comradeship, my greatest pleasure has been rediscovering things like violets, cowslips, and plum-blossom after three

lost springs [in the desert] . . . All this makes me more homesick than ever before, because England, when you've said all you like about Greece or Italy or the Lebanon, is the only place where they know how to organise spring.²

The last small scrap of evidence I want to produce by way of indicating something of the actualities of general and popular feeling in 1945 is also taken from Edward Thompson's scattered memoirs of war. While his brother was in Bulgaria, Edward, aged barely twenty, was a tank squadron commander in the unbelievably arduous advance of the Allied forces up and down the vertiginous hills and valleys of the spine of Italy, from Anzio to Monte Cassino, and north through the Apennines.

On 19 June 1944 at 6.30 p.m. his tank was trundling and squealing toward the outskirts of Perugia, second in a troop reduced by battle damage to two. He might have been in the first tank but for army protocol about the troop commander not risking himself in the lead. It was blazingly hot. When the front tank was directly hit, two of its men got out and ran to safe cover in the narrow street with its high-walled gardens; the other three were killed. Thompson broke protocol by running forward to the Sherman under rifle fire, to call down into the turret. He received no answer.

It was a tiny exploit in that formal operation, the liberation of Perugia, itself part of the larger victory in Italy and, ultimately, the victory in Europe. But Thompson's memoir goes beyond the leggy boy running through bullets to check on his men and later finding half of one burned to ashes in the driver's seat. It includes the letters sent to him when, in spite of the certainty of the troopers' deaths, the army had only posted them as 'missing' and their families were being put through the mutual strain of hope and anguish for impossibly long. Here are some extracts from the letters quoted by Thompson. They break one's heart. 'My brother was all I had in the world we had lived together the last ten years since losing our mother and I would like to know a few more details, if the spot where he is buried is marked or did an explosion make this impossible?' 'Please did one of his friends pick some wild flowers and place them on his grave?' (Thompson said that whenever he 'sent the least scrap of news, this was received with pitiful expressions of gratitude from the kin of these troopers. They seemed to be astonished to receive any attention from anyone on authority'.) 'Hope I am not taking too much of your time I am so sorry to trouble you.' 'Will you try and do me a kindness and see that his personal belongings are sent back to me and if you really could get a photo of his grave it would set my wife's mind at rest as she is greatly grieved.'³

Perhaps this glimpse into the lives of the two Thompson brothers (and the lives and deaths which touched theirs) will serve sufficiently to support

my claim about the framework of sentiments which made the war intelligible to those who fought it, as soldiers or civilians. These were the sentiments which served to give structure and value to the extraordinary films which, as it were, 'explained' the moral inheritance of war and peace to its children. The Thompson brothers were of much the same class as directors such as Anthony Asquith, Michael Powell and David Lean. Idealistic and honourable young men of that moment had to be on the political left; they shared a class education with at its centre those principles of national solidarity, hope for international fraternity and modest social emancipation and a strong public-spiritedness which found honest and piercing embodiments in their films.

Powell's and Pressburger's wonderful inauguration of a small cinematic epoch of war films is, of course, *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946). It anticipated the 1950s by four years, starting its action in May 1945, only a day or two before Germany surrendered. It opens with a young poet (David Niven), commanding a doomed Lancaster, frantically quoting Andrew Marvell and Walter Raleigh to the young American woman checking the bombers home from a coastline control tower. Niven jumps out into the night with no parachute rather than be burned to death, misses his guardian angel in the dark, hits the sea, survives to meet and fall in love with the American. He is then tried in heaven for his life with the defence that because he has fallen in love *after* the official moment of his death, heavenly bureaucracy is at fault and his death revocable.

His prosecutor, ally and friend of Paul Revere, keeps up his nation's old enmity against the English. The jury, appealed against as being all-American citizens, is promptly replaced by exactly the same people in their world-historical guises, all of them victims and judges of empire: Irish, Indian, Chinese and so on. God is, naturally, an Englishman, but more importantly he is the surgeon who repairs the lesions in the hero's brain, restoring him to poetry and to a long and happy marriage with the American. The vision of an all-powerful, just world order whose finally reconciled citizens are apotheosised in the benignity of a hospitable United States was simple, rousing and as the Marshall Plan opened its coffers the following year, plausible as well. Fifty years later that strong vein of feeling which Frank Thompson felt opening as a new spirit abroad in Europe retains its power. For all her faults, America, as Noam Chomsky surprisingly put it, remains 'the freest society the world has ever seen'. Michael Powell's vision of fair play as shared by Anglo-Americans, and domestic love and happiness as cherished by everybody, retains the right kind of big sentimentality, the kind politics now needs.

This noble film is an overture to the epoch. Thereafter, what one finds in the remarkable succession of honestly made, well-built and tightly told war films is not at all a threnody to empire or an aesthetics of decline, but rather a winning story about the necessity of duty, its visible fulfilment in modestly efficacious action, and the confirmation of its significance in the bonds of trust.

The classics of this tight articulation of form, feeling and meaning include in its heartening roll-call the following:

- 1945 *The Way to the Stars*
- 1946 *A Matter of Life and Death*
 The Captive Heart
- 1949 *The Small Back Room*
- 1950 *The Wooden Horse*
- 1952 *Angels One Five*
 Appointment in London
- 1954 *Carrington V.C.*
 The Colditz Story
 The Dam Busters
 The Sea Shall Not Have Them
- 1955 *Above Us the Waves*
- 1956 *Ill Met by Moonlight*
 Battle of the River Plate
- 1958 *Carve her Name with Pride*
 Ice Cold in Alex

The line was carried on in the 1960s by such workmanlike films as *The Battle of Britain* (1958) and comes to a sort of gentle finale with Richard Attenborough's careful and competent *A Bridge too Far* (1977) and John Boorman's endearing *Hope and Glory* (1987). *Henry V* (1944), you might say, was its holy book.

The 1960s and 1970s films are, of course, in colour and it is a commonplace, but a telling one, that the black-and-white film has its authority stiffened by the authenticity of black-and-white newsreel footage and of propaganda masterpieces like *Nine Men* (1943). However that may be, these films and many more like them gradually matched their ideal but not, I think, idealised narratives to the social map of England. That is to say, each social and combat group was provided with a story within which it could find an adequate reflection of its war. Gender, social class, region and division of labour together found a spot on the map, service by service, and within the services, to each according to his or her need: a film about bombers, a

film about fighters; a film about infantrymen, a film about trucks, a film about the civilian bomb disposal teams; a film about battleships, about E-Boats, about the Merchant Navy; a film about prisoners and resistance fighters.

In each case, there being a war on and this being England, the officer class got the best parts, but that class as vastly enlarged and therefore as having learned civility from itself – as Edward Thompson says – by way of the necessities of conscription. When the working class does appear, justice is done to that terrific self-confidence, the political settledness which, uniquely in the world, effected an honourable class compromise held in place by high mutual respect, until at last the treaty was dissolved by Mrs Thatcher's short, murderous and victorious class war.

The Cruel Sea (1952) stands as one eponymous masterpiece at the head of all these films. What is striking about the film is the deliberately prosaic nature of its epic poetry. As the two senior officers on the little ship, so unobtrusively played by Jack Hawkins and Donald Sinden, close in friendship and shared hardship, held apart by rank, say at the end, there were only two enemy vessels sunk. Five years are concentrated into less than two hours, but such are the demands of the form; that form must hold in the tension of art the large frame (or structure) of feeling within which the English told themselves, not untruthfully, the story of the war.

This is *not* the story, on the one hand, of inane, improbable and repetitious heroics, as in *Where Eagles Dare* (1969); nor is it the story of *Catch 22* (1970), where greed, lust, cowardice and ineptitude combine to dissolve virtue into chaos (as it is the *point* of farce to do); still less is it the vapid and preposterous hokum of *Pearl Harbor* (2000).

In form and feeling, *The Cruel Sea* looks at first blush like a remake of *In Which We Serve* (1942). Made, of course, as pretty well a piece of straight propaganda, Noël Coward's film is in any case based on the unmistakably heroic but redolently regal early wartime caveats of the Lord Louis Mountbatten and his ship HMS *Kelly*. One can therefore scrape off its surface a slight but sugary glutinousness permissible in the circumstances but quite absent in the successor film. Jack Hawkins aboard *Compass Rose* is given no domestic life at all; Donald Sinden takes up, in a series of mere glimpses, with the formidably intelligent as well as beautiful Virginia McKenna, but it is the tacit and taciturn friendship with his captain that counts. Friendship, for sure – Sinden turns down a command in order to stay as Hawkins's Number One – but friendship defined as the faithful discharge of mutual obligations to the crew, to the service and – though no one would ever put it like that – to the country and the necessity to defeat fascism.

Much more, however, is made of saving lives and losing them than of cutting down or up the enemy. *Compass Rose* rescues sailors (including Scandinavian merchantmen), their lungs clotted with machine oil; in pursuit of a U-boat which they fail to catch they run down their own shipwrecked comrades struggling in the water; when the second of the two ships in the story comes finally home in 1945 the last word of the film is the bare order: 'Shut down main engines'. Meiosis is its stylistic trope, and that seems to square with the record. The chance of a second marriage for the plump, wholesome and widowed sister of one petty officer with another of his mess-mates goes down without a comment and with the ship. The beautiful Wren isn't waiting on the quayside. One trivially unpleasant officer (Stanley Baker) malingers his way to a cowardly shore job; another, unimportantly courageous and drily ironic volunteer officer, previously a barrister (Denholm Elliot), is first cuckolded and then drowned. It is the surprisingly domestic story of duty confirmed by significant action and set off by an upright courtesy towards death. The action is held within a polyphony of the sentiments still active in English society and, it may be, still giving a bit of spine and substance to Englishness.

Another half-dozen films on my list, less good than *The Cruel Sea*, but never less than strongly made, cleanly edited, vividly told, would sit easily in its company. One could identify, without recourse to irony, Marxism or psychoanalysis, as their structural constants and, in doing so, I believe, map them on to that structure of feeling within which the English and, give or take a nationalist adjustment or two, the Scots, Welsh and Irish, accommodated their experience of the war behind them. That is the moral point of those films and this essay. They provide accommodation in the social memory for a whole vast, disfiguring and – human history being what it is – emancipatory tableau.

The war films of the 1950s together constitute the assented-to record of the emotions and moral judgments called upon to set in order those disorderly events. Absolutely true to the feelings of the 1950s, sufficiently true to the facts of 1939 to 1945, they now serve as an extraordinarily detailed as well as compact encyclopaedia of these facts and feelings.

One test of this would be to consider the remarkable success of Thames TV's famous twenty-six part of 1973, *The World at War*. Jeremy Isaacs and Phillip Whitehead, it will be recalled, were the two devoutly Labour-voting, Oxford-educated, unassertively English, extremely talented programme-makers of thirty-something who persuaded Thames to sink £3,000,000 and three years' research into a quite new kind of national-history-as-told-by-documentary-television. In spite of misgivings, Thames acquiesced, and

found to their amazement that they had a world-beater on their hands, saleable in every corner of television's geography, still on show well past the millennium's end.

The form of the thing was simple and immediate. The producers picked first-class journalists of their own political persuasion to write the script (Neal Ascherson, Stuart Hood among them), and paid for the golden voice of the king of national theatre, Laurence Olivier, to speak the words and for the brilliant young composer-arranger Carl Davis to set the words to background music (with an unforgettably haunting signature tune). They then intercut black-and-white news footage with talking heads shot in colour and in sequences of spontaneously poetic reminiscence.

The relevance of this twenty-four-hour masterpiece to the theme in hand is that Isaacs and his men completed and expanded the work of those great 1950s films. Together they matched significant event to its democratic representation. That is, each arm and combat force had its footage and its impromptu historians: fighter pilots from 1940; air-raid wardens from the Blitz; Chindits from Burma; truck drivers from the Western Desert; submariners and merchantmen from the Atlantic. Beside them, the directors placed the grand strategists and commanders whose fatal decisions enfolded the everyday lives in triumph or disaster. Finally the whole picture was turned back to front by doing exactly the same for and with the people and the leaders not only of non-Anglophone allies – French, Soviets, Greeks – but of the Axis powers: Hitler's adjutant and his secretary, Albert Speer the Führer's minister of production, Hirohito's chief negotiator after Nagasaki, and a throng of junior officers to match the laconic, poetic, British petty officers from the Malta convoys, American infantrymen from Iwo Jima, Jewish doctors from Duchan, widows from Dresden and Stalingrad.

The 1950s films, with remarkable grace and celerity, dramatised and taught the same lessons within the family frame of the English at war. In that wonderful meditation upon the meaning of history, *Little Gidding* (written, it should be remembered, during and under the London *Blitzkrieg*), T.S. Eliot spoke of the mutual opponents in the English Civil War as afterwards 'accepting the constitution of silence' and as being 'enfolded in a single symbol'. This is the necessary, not-always-accomplished restoration and reparation at the heart of narrative history. One might say that such reparation remains uneffected for the 1917 revolution and civil war in Russia – Pasternak's *Dr Zhivago* and Paustorsky's *Scenes of a Life* were the first flutterings of a doomed attempt at healing; it is similarly unachieved for the American war in Vietnam. These hideous moments were aberrations, and the art of narrative history can find them no commemorative accommodation.

From the vantage point not only of the victors but of human emancipation at large, the retelling of the defeat of fascism makes for stories with plot, point, moral grip and a powerful ending. Its constituents are to be found in the English war films of the 1950s. There we see narrative becoming history, biography turning into myth. It is important to add, at a time when much of a putting-down kind is levelled against present British society for its nostalgic attachment to myths of a self-bolstering kind, that by 'myth' I here intend no more and no less than stories common to the social memory which embody principles to live by and ideals to live for. If we look to two formative essays which defined early and simply a provident mythopoeia for the English at war, we shall find the moral outline of a national fable which shaped the great reforms of the 1945 Attlee government and survives today as a necessary recollection of a social order in which solidarity is more important than status, and where dutiful self-sacrifice is vindicated by future liberations and fulfilments.

George Orwell in his great essay *The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius* (1941) and William Connor, writing under his *Daily Mirror* professional name as 'Cassandra', in his parallel effort, *The English at War* (1941), alike emphasised that the country had discovered something about itself at war: that its army, navy and air force had best be as much civilian as military; that in the anti-fascist struggle the honours were (as Edward Thompson noted) evenly distributed between old-fashioned English Toryism and the different idealism of the left; that in any case the poisonous old snobberies and murderous old inequalities of the past *must* and would be transcended in the settlement of the peace; that the point of present privation and sacrifice would find commemoration in a just and happy society when the war was over and won.⁴

These noble lies and dignified desires were given ardent and classical expression in the films to hand. They remained a believable account of what people *felt* it had all been for, and they offered a feasible vision of a past surpassed but mythologised. In a small novella of a film, *The Sea Shall Not Have Them* (1954), virtually the whole action takes place in the company of four airmen in a dinghy in the North Sea. The film was made in honour, one can simply say, of the air-sea rescue boats and indeed, after a little straightforward suspense caused by bad weather and fog, the men are duly rescued from under the coastline guns of the enemy as they drift towards the Belgian shore. The substance of the film, however, is the little class struggle played out by the four men as, drenched, bitter cold, thirsty and wounded, they cling to hope of safety while at the same time bracing themselves to disappointment by keeping hope down.

Michael Redgrave, a wounded wing-commander carrying secret and urgent papers in a briefcase, discloses in irreproachably upper-class tones his own irreproachably working-class origins to Dirk Bogarde, a worthy enough sergeant-pilot bearing up only intermittently well under cold, fear and misery, but desperately keen to win a commission if and when he gets home. A sort of kindly class compromise is come to; promotion is worth aspiring for; scientific distinction (Redgrave) is rewarded by danger and paid for by disinterested courage; the rescue boat brings off its routine, precarious task with the usual grumblers and the bravery enjoined by discipline.

Many of the films follow that emotional shape and its factual isomorph. In *The Way to the Stars*, *Above Us the Waves*, *The Dam Busters*, *Angels One Five* and a dozen others, a fictional or real adventure picks its way from the hesitant beginnings and initiation of lost and gauche newcomers into the rites of the service and the mysteries of its technology until they can launch themselves with varying competence and uncertain temper into that concentration of action in which both character and efficacy coincide. The key actions are rarely epic: 'two U-boats in five years' in *The Cruel Sea*; the triviality of escape for three men from POW camp in *The Wooden Horse*; the utter anti-climax when the disgraced Captain Langsdorff (Peter Finch) scuttles the *Graf Spee* (and commits suicide) in *The Battle of the River Plate*. They are also rarely failures. Rather, they fix significance as the dramatic culmination of difficult and disciplined preparations during which human ardour may burst out but must be reconstrained, private love and longings will have their say but must be postponed and all intensities of utterance are compressed into understatement and excision. In the service of rendering the reassuring and blessed simplicity of such short passion plays, word and (black-and-white) image are superimposed upon one another with exceptional tautness and brevity. There are few long shots and, at least as now understood, even fewer close-ups. The frame of the shabby office, the cockpit, the seat of the truck, the ship's bridge, the railway compartment, silhouette the male and uniformed body and give it at once statuesque ease and domestic bulk. Thus and thus the heroes of a new Homeric order put on the lineaments of democracy.

Two films must serve finally to illustrate this high achievement. The two – *Ice Cold in Alex* and *The Small Back Room* – are mere indications of the line of my argument. Several others would serve, as would such almost-war films as *Whisky Galore* (1948) and *Passport to Pimlico* (1949), or such a robustly internationalist example as *The Captive Heart*, or the bitterly anti-war, even anti-British and little-known *Yesterday's Enemy* (1959).

Ice Cold in Alex comes towards the end of the 1950s and, it may be, at a

moment when, having faithfully recorded as a duty to the documentary record the everyday lives of wartime, the movie-makers could pause a little and open up the narrative frame fitting so tightly over the facts of history and observe the recalcitrant tumult of feelings shimmering at the edges where people learned a style. The film seems to me to sustain much more careful consideration than David Lean's celebrated *Bridge On the River Kwai* (1957), partly because Lean's indulgence of the picturesque fairly runs away with him into the lusciousness of Burmese travelogue, but mostly because the exigencies of co-production made for sentimental anti-war clichés and utter confusion as to the plot.

Ice Cold in Alex has an exemplarily taut line to its tale; history, passion and actuality are exactly matched to our period aesthetics of fact, fiction and photography. It starts with John Mills, an RASC captain (decidedly *not* an elite corps), his sergeant-major (Harry Andrews) and a couple of nurses being waved down for a lift at the ignominious retreat from Tobruk in 1941. The hitcher is a purported South African, in fact a German spy, played by Anthony Quayle, stripped to waist and ankle, bronzed like a Greek hero, huge-chested, rangy, his wireless set slung across one massive shoulder in his haversack.

The truck is shot up escaping; one nurse is wounded and dies slowly and tidily. Mills is on the gin but strikes an anxious, motherly chord in Sylvia Syms (nobly revealing the first bare bosoms in British cinema). They rumble Quayle's ruse but say nothing. Quayle tries to lose his radio in the quicksands of Umm al Samim and, in a thrilling sequence, has his life saved as the others winch him out on a line hauled in by the truck. Gradually, human sympathy and a subdued gallantry unite the quartet against the terrible desert and in allegiance to the indomitable wagon. In a wonderful scene, Quayle saves the irreplaceable suspension and axles by taking the weight of the vehicle for a tense minute on his terrific shoulders when it starts suddenly to settle on its jack.

The truck finally bowls into Alexandria and they all drink the iced beers they had promised themselves during the hundreds of miles under the implacable sun. The three Britishers break it to Quayle that they have seen through his disguise and – since he is in British uniform and liable to be shot as the spy he is – save his life by telling the Military Police he is prisoner wearing kit loaned for the epic journey across the sands.

Spies in 1958 were conventionally villains. But spies in fact must be as exceptionally brave, resourceful and intelligent as the character played by Quayle. The film finds, in the generous accommodation made between those at war, a quite new drama of reconciliation even at the moment at

which, in history, Rommel was at the gates of Alexandria. The emblems of this victory are a battered three-ton truck, a deep unspoken affection between officer and warrant officer, a nurse, a courageous enemy indispensable to their mutual survival, and four foaming beers in thickly frosted glasses. The RASC doesn't kill anybody; it brings up the supplies, and nurses are only women. Such winners are born losers. So it is a happy touch to contrive such a delicate and affecting moral only thirteen years after the gates of the death camps were opened.

The Small Back Room, adapted from a novel by Nigel Balchin, is a comparably stripped-down piece of work and, as befits its august writer-directors, makes its evaluations of war and the pity it distils in unexpected places. The film follows David Farrar as a civilian bomb-disposal specialist who has already had a foot blown off, taken to the whisky, as well he might, and been partially rehabilitated by the long-suffering Kathleen Byron. Powell and Pressburger note with a characteristic and laconic eye the active maintenance of status-competition and ineffable vanity (by, in an unexpected cameo, Jack Hawkins) even in the exigencies of war and rationing. They render, fondly and sardonically, the evasions, the self-servingness and severe purity of serious science in the research committees of Whitehall. Their bleakly understanding camera (the cameraman was Christopher Challis, a pupil of Humphrey Jennings) watches Farrar struggle against the seductions of the giant bottle of VAT 69 left deliberately visible in his grim flat.

The Germans have dropped little sprinklings of a trial anti-personnel mine with a carefully concealed second trigger. Farrar and Leslie Banks have to discover its mechanism. They question a victim on the point of death (with necessary brutality) for vital details. Banks is killed by the mine. Farrar hits the bottle and, hung over, is called out to defuse the next deadly delivery. This being the work of Powell and Pressburger, there is no promise that he will get away with it and, in any case, the character calls to our natural sympathy for his mutilation, but decidedly not to our liking.

In a fine sequence, reporting on his progress by walkie-talkie to a young engineer-colonel in a sandbagged redoubt, Farrar defuses the mine and falls back on the shingle. Torn by anxiety, the young colonel breaks cover and runs to his side. He runs well and all's well. He offers no praise, but as he bids goodbye and shakes Farrar's hand, he gazes at the civilian with profound admiration. Another smallish space in the frame of feelings built, taught and moralised by World War II is filled not with killing but with saving lives.

There is of course no shortage of death-dealing in the great films of this decade. But their scale, the very size and monochrome of their cameras, let

alone the moral vision of their makers, keep death personal and saving life preferable. They cut the field of action down to the size of domestic homes and private gardens. The cup of tea, so standard a joke in war films because so standard a succour in war, is eloquent of that customary decency and exchange. The pieties of a teacup will hardly do to enclose a world at war, but the war itself can hardly be comprehended and brought within a manageable frame of popular sentiment as contrived by those who did the fighting to show themselves and their children what it meant, without the aid of that mighty midget of a symbol.

These sentiments join, in a habitable structure, the key values of the polity: love, in a rather low-key, rinsed-out form, mostly caught in moments of kindness and domestic affection, most intensely acted as tenderness; trust, where trust is in others to be faithful to what is known to be shared (trust *in*, therefore, as well as trust *of*); solidarity, the canonical value of the working class, but also of patriotism and of regiment or ship or squadron, nonetheless the principal virtue to have grown out of opposition to that militant capitalism of which fascism was the most monstrous embodiment; lastly, innocence. 'Never such innocence again,' Larkin said of 1914, but Edward Thompson, writing angrily and many years after his brother's death, spoke of the foul lies perpetrated by Thatcher's state upon the best values and sentiments of the old left, and remarked of those young men and women and their bravery that 'they were too innocent by half ... too bloody innocent to live'. That innocence nonetheless survived beyond 1945, nor was it dissolved by the end of the Cold War, nor in the quiet, unheralded victory of the petit-bourgeoisie in the two-hundred-year class war of old England.

The dead go on before us, larger than in life they seemed, as Larkin also said, never more so than in these films. As we heed them, in our history books and in our cinemas, their energies flow again down the reopened channels of feeling and imagination. The ghosts walk, inspiring us with new possibilities. That is what ghost stories are *for*.

Notes

- 1 E.P. and T.J. Thompson (eds), *Frank Thompson, There is a Spirit in Europe* (Gollancz, 1947), p. 169.
- 2 Edward Thompson, *Writing by Candlelight* (Merlin Press, 1980), p. 132.
- 3 E.P. and T.J. Thompson, *Frank Thompson*, p. 43.
- 4 Edward Thompson, *The Heavy Dancers* (Merlin Press, 1985), p. 188.