

The Cruel Sea (1953) Frend

P Michell, 2017

This is the first of two Ealing films being screened in 2017. Excellent example of the dramas that this studio could make in addition to its famous comedies.

Ealing produced arguably the most iconic British films between 1938-59. Below is a link to its history.

Synopsis:

At the start of World War II, Cmdr. Ericson is assigned to convoy escort HMS Compass Rose with inexperienced officers and men just out of training. The winter seas make life miserable enough, but the men must also harden themselves to rescuing survivors of U-Boat attacks, while seldom able to strike back. Traumatic events afloat and ashore create a warm bond between the skipper and his first officer. Atmospheric sea footage. *Written by Rod Crawford*

Charles Frend – director.

Only made three other movies after this. Then TV work including the 'Danger Man' (1964-7) which launched Patrick McGeehan's career and more importantly his later very quirky short TV series - 'The Prisoner' (1967/8). (Set in Portmeirion village in North Wales.)

Nicholas Monsarrat (book's author) Prolific Writer.

The Cruel Sea (1951), Monsarrat's first postwar novel, is widely regarded as his finest work. Based on his own wartime service, it followed the young naval officer Keith Lockhart through a series of postings in [corvettes](#) and [frigates](#). It was one of the first novels to depict life aboard the vital, but unglamorous, "small ships" of World War II—ships for which the sea was as much a threat as the Germans.

Controversy:

Monsarrat's book *The Story of Esther Costello* (1952), later made into a film of the [same name](#), while perceived as an uncomplimentary take on the life of [Helen Keller](#) and her teachers and assistants, is really an exposé of sleazy practices and exploitation of real causes in the fundraising racket, similar to criticisms of [televangelism](#). It caused a minor public outcry when it first appeared, and Keller's staff considered suing him, then tried to keep the book off the shelves.^[9] His final work, unfinished at the time of his death but published in its incomplete form, was a two-volume historical novel titled *The Master Mariner*. Based on the legend of the [Wandering Jew](#), it told the story of an [Elizabethan](#) English seaman who, as punishment for a terrible act of cowardice, is doomed to sail the world's seas until the end of time. His hero participates in critical moments in history; Monsarrat used him to illustrate the central role of seamen.

In his book *Decolonizing the Mind*, [Ngugi wa Thiong'o](#) refers to Monsarrat as one of the "geniuses of racism," along with [Rider Haggard](#).^[10] He condemns authors like Monsarrat for reinforcing negative ideas of Africans and being part of forcing

African children to associate their own languages with "low status, ...slow-footed intelligence and ability or downright stupidity, non-intelligibility and barbarism.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicholas_Monsarrat

Eric Ambler (screenplay)

Wrote a few books also (some 21 !) mostly post war espionage. His work served as an inspiration for later specialists including Len Dighton and John le Carre.

After Cruel Sea did lots of TV work, but then wrote 'Night to Remember' (1958), which many consider a good telling of the Titanic sinking.

Quote:

"International business may conduct its operation with scraps of paper, but the ink it uses is human blood ."

Alan Rawsthorne – composer.

Composed a number of films, though concentrated on classical composition.

Many consider this his best film work. For example - Note the music used for when Compass Rose sails out in the beginning.

Connection with Constant Lambert. (His wife Isabel had been married to Lambert. Useless trivia – Isabel was the stepmother to Kit Lambert – late manager of the rock group 'the Who'. He died in 1981.)

<http://www.musicweb-international.com/rawsth/>

Jack Hawkins

Successful actor including – Land of the Pharaohs (1955) (A much underrated film, USA – music by Bernard Herrman/ partly based on an ancient Egyptian story – Sinuhe the Egyptian), Bridge of River Kwai (1957), Ben Hur (1959), Lawrence of Arabia (1962),

In December 1965, Hawkins was diagnosed with [throat cancer](#). His entire larynx was removed in January 1966. Thereafter his performances were dubbed, often (with Hawkins's approval) by [Robert Rietti](#) or [Charles Gray](#). Hawkins continued to smoke after losing his voice. In private, he used a [mechanical larynx](#) to aid his speech

Quote:

"The fact that producers are still offering me work is a source of much gratitude to me", he said in 1969. "I flatter myself that when they cast me in a part it's me Jack Hawkins they want and not the person who was once Jack Hawkins... if you know what I mean. And I'm perfectly honest with anyone who hires me. I tell them exactly what they're letting themselves in for."

FYI - Hawkins produced the film adaptation of [Peter Barnes's](#) *The Ruling Class* (1972), with [Peter O'Toole](#) and [Alastair Sim](#)

Slight digression ...

'Land of the Pharaohs' has an interesting pedigree:

The Story of Sinuhe is considered one of the finest works of [Ancient Egyptian literature](#). It is a narrative set in the aftermath of the death of [Pharaoh Amenemhat I](#), founder of the [12th dynasty of Egypt](#), in the early 20th century BC. It is likely that it was composed only shortly after this date, albeit the earliest extant manuscript is from the reign of [Amenemhat III](#), c. 1800 BC. There is an ongoing debate among [Egyptologists](#) as to whether or not the tale is based on actual events involving an individual named Sinuhe, with the consensus being that it is most likely a work of fiction. Due to the universal nature of the themes explored in "Sinuhe", including divine providence and mercy, its anonymous author has been described as the "Egyptian [Shakespeare](#)" whose ideas have parallels in [biblical](#) texts. "Sinuhe" is considered to be a work written in verse and it may also have been performed. The great popularity of the work is witnessed by the numerous surviving fragments.

Then filmed by Hollywood, though the first commercial failure by Howard Hawks. The film was based on the successful retelling of the story by the Finnish writer Mika Waltari (1947)

Two asteroids commemorate this: Waltari: #4266 Mika Waltari and #4512 Sinuhe
Sources – Wikipedia.

Ealing Studios:

It's rare for a film studio to inspire affection. The giants of Hollywood - Warner Bros, Fox or Paramount, say - might be admired, but not loved. Ealing Studios was loved, and it still is, well over half a century since its heyday. Ealing gave us some the most enduring classics of British cinema history - the great comedies, among them *Passport to Pimlico* (1949), *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (1949) and *The Lavender Hill Mob* (1951); the chilling *Dead of Night* (1945); the epic tragedy *Scott of the Antarctic* (1948); the police 'procedural' drama *The Blue Lamp* (1950). But it also had a powerful sense of itself. Ealing and its films stood for decency, democracy, community, pluck and fair play: the best of British values.

Rest of informative BFI article here:

<http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/456030/index.html>

Links:

BFI summary of 1950s British films.

<http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/1147086/>

Trivia:

The most successful film at the UK box office in 1953, as well as a surprise hit in the US.

The film's huge success confirmed [Jack Hawkins](#) as an international star at the age of 42.

It was widely said at the time that if this film had been a Hollywood production both [Jack Hawkins](#) and [Donald Sinden](#) would have been nominated for Oscars.

[Donald Sinden](#) had lessons to make him talk in a higher-pitched manner, as the producers felt his real voice was too deep for the young character he played.

Young and upcoming Donald Sinden, Denholm Elliot and Virginia McKenna support this superb movie - it made Donald Sinden (famous).

Reviews:

Superb unsentimental rendering of North Atlantic Action in W.w.II

Author: [trpdean](#) from New York, New York

(abridged) Monserrat is a master at the depiction of men at war - from his extraordinary technical knowledge to his ability to convey the fatigue, the cross feelings living in close quarters, the bitterness, the moments of triumph or relief.

This film does Monserrat justice. This movie is the opposite of the "boys' own adventure" sorts of movies. There are no striking heroics - just the very real feeling of people performing onerous often dangerous duties as well as they're able - which is heroic itself. The movie does not skimp on the danger either - the shocking losses of ships in convoys that the corvette "protects", the extreme difficulty of finding and sinking U-boats, almost gives one the feeling, "what's the point of convoys?" (Imagine all surgeons operating with an average 3% survival rate - well, 3% recovery is better than none - but imagine the wear on the surgeons).

The film is gritty, and just has the feel of the 1940s in its bones. The sounds, the movement, the look of cities and harbors, the clothes - it's as if one's uncles' tales have all come to life.

Beautiful, thoughtful British film-making from the past.

Author: [H.J.](#) from Bozeman, Montana

If my ship were going down, and I had that one last moment to grab a treasured something, my copy of the book, THE CRUEL SEA by Nicholas Monsarrat might well be what I choose. (That is supposing I already had my life vest on.) This book has affected my life deeply since I first came across it as a teenager. It is why I joined the US Navy. (where I ironically ended up in the submarine service.) It formed an

invaluable step in teaching me what 'duty' meant, and 'honor.' It is therefore a bit more difficult for me to judge this motion picture than most. Were it horrid, I should still love it, I suppose. Fortunately it is not horrid. 'The Cruel Sea' is in fact first rate.

It is difficult to translate any full-length novel to the screen. There are too many 'moments in time' to get them all in. So the adaptation of a novel by a screenwriter becomes a process of selection. Eric Ambler did his usual excellent job in writing this script, and if he left out some of the better bits, he also got the best bits in. Charles Frened directs it well within the style of the early 1950's. The special effects are above average for the time and not unacceptable by today's standards, although they are not spectacular. The film editing is clean and crisp with little to complain about. The musical score is not intrusive, but not up to the rest of the effort. It would be ten years before the art of Movie Music caught up to the rest, and here the score is no worse any other film of 1953. It is however the acting that gives this movie the push to get it far above the rest.

Jack Hawkins is marvelous in his understated competence as Captain Ericson, and the actors who play his officers (including a very young and very British Denholm Elliot) all turn in workman-like performances. It is however the overall excellence of the entire cast that is impressive. One of the major strengths of British films from the end of the Second World War through the 1970's was the incredibly fine ensemble casting that provided first-rate acting even in the smallest parts. Walter Fitzgerald in his 30 second role as the air raid warden shows true compassion when he says, 'Yes, Mister Tallow, that was your house, wasn't it?'

All of the vivid, bloody color that made 'Platoon' and 'Saving Private Ryan' the two best combat films ever made are absent here. This was a different type of warfare, the blood, all of the color washed away by the cruel sea. The Battle of the North Atlantic was a very British battle. A five and a half year long stoic battle of endurance, of perseverance, of honor and duty. This is the side of the Second World War that most lived, but few have ever been able to put into words. 'The Cruel Sea' is much more than just a history lesson though. It is a very good movie, and it is a beautiful example of what British film could be in 1953. I highly recommend it.