BOOK REVIEWS


Reviewed by Stephen J. Whitfield, Brandeis University

“Madness! Madness!” This is the definitive verdict on the reckless heroics of a team of commandos that has blown up a bridge on the River Kwai. These final words are uttered by a British army doctor who, though in uniform, also cannot fathom the ethos of military discipline that risks death among prisoners for the sake of sticking to the rules of the Geneva Convention. David Lean’s great film pits the ideal of glory against the claims of common sense; and though *The Bridge on the River Kwai* was released in 1957, when the Cold War defined the contours of international relations, unimaginative patriotic passions are subjected to considerable scrutiny and skepticism. The politics of this movie therefore tilt unmistakably toward the left; and though novelist Pierre Boule was credited with writing the scenario, he did not know English. Two very gifted expatriates were in fact responsible for writing a film that won seven Oscars, including one for best screenplay (adapted). In the shadow of the blacklist, the ex-Communist Carl Foreman had moved to London, just as Michael Wilson, a more committed Marxist, had fled to Paris and Rome. Their fate testifies to the peculiarities of an era when not even the faint whiff of Communism was supposed to contaminate Hollywood, which feared the wrath of the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC), as well as the prospect of repudiation at the box office. But because talent was at a premium in Hollywood, which faced intense competition from television, even leftists who had refused to name names, or who had fled abroad to avoid getting served with subpoenas, might be enlisted in the relentless effort to attract the mass audience. Or, as one wag cracked, “Blacklist, smacklist! Just so long as everyone is working.”

How some of them contrived to secure employment across the Atlantic is the subject of Rebecca Prime’s vivid and informative monograph. Her idea for a book is inspired. Though Mexico served as a refuge for secretive scenarists who could peddle scripts across the border, Europe boasted of famous film industries rich enough to offer opportunities to directors as well. The beneficiaries included two directors (Joseph Losey in England and Jules Dassin in France and Greece) who managed to forge significant careers. Thanks to Losey’s finely calibrated explorations of the British class system (*The Servant*) and to Dassin’s international hits in genres like the crime thriller (*Rififi*) and comedy (*Never on Sunday*), the inference is plausible that they could scarcely
have done better had they remained locked within the studio system. Foreman and Wilson generally had to work anonymously, however; and the credit that they deserved for *The Bridge on the River Kwai* was granted only posthumously.

*Hollywood Exiles in Europe* is not merely an account of victimization. Foreman even went to Washington in 1956 to testify about his Communist past without invoking the Fifth Amendment or having to name names, and thus helped undermine the power that HUAC had earlier exercised to intimidate its witnesses. Wilson refused to cooperate with HUAC at all, but continued to get screenplays produced, especially in Rome. His leftism proved an advantage in Paris, where *Cahiers du Cinéma* hailed *Salt of the Earth* (1954), which Wilson wrote, as “far and away the best American film in the last ten years” (p. 73). Others worked in Madrid, where the right-wing government of Francisco Franco raised no objections, and where epics like *El Cid* and *The Fall of the Roman Empire* could be made more cheaply than elsewhere. Of course not everyone could adapt smoothly to working in countries that were not Anglophone, and sometimes legal barriers and union regulations impeded opportunities that the talent and experience of the expatriates might have enabled them to seize. They also had to live with continued financial uncertainty, with temporary and reduced living quarters, and with the fear that their social circles were honeycombed with informants. Marriages could not easily survive such conditions. Prime’s account therefore weighs the frustration and sadness that marred the lives of the expatriates against the noteworthy triumphs over the adversity that Cold War domestic fears unnecessarily inflicted.

Drawing heavily on the relevant archival collections, as well as government files and some interviews, Prime’s book is perhaps most resourceful in showing how the films made abroad helped reshape the character of Hollywood’s own offerings. Within a decade after the directors and scenarists had relocated in Europe, U.S. audiences were clamoring for more sophisticated cinematic fare, for images and ideas that would be aimed at adults. The innovations of European artistry came to the rescue. Losey, Dassin, and others found themselves able to influence filmmaking back home in ways that might not have been permitted had they been straitjacketed by the studio system that had ostracized them during the Red Scare. “They critically and materially facilitated the transatlantic economic and artistic exchange that had become a fundamental component of American and European film culture by the mid-1960s” (p. 180), Prime concludes.

Can the progressive politics of these filmmakers be detected in the work they did abroad? The evidence is slim, and Prime’s attempt to make a connection to the congeniality of film noir, with its contempt for authority, and for sunny-side-up official optimism, is unpersuasive. Certainly nothing that could be discerned as distinctly Communist propaganda had a chance of getting bootlegged into anything mainstream during the nearly two decades that Prime examines, if only because the U.S. market would presumably have been foreclosed. Nor were the passions of the expatriates so emphatic that politics would have interfered with the need for assignments. Loyalties to the USSR had anyway frayed by the mid-1950s, when even a General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party could denounce the crimes of Iosif Stalin. That god had
failed. What may have endured, however, from the detritus of past political convictions was a distancing from narrow nationalism, a cosmopolitanism that the experience of exile undoubtedly heightened. The workers of the world are not supposed to have a fatherland; and sometimes the filmmakers whose careers Prime so deftly traces did not have one either. Cinema is supposed to be an international language anyway. “I don’t belong to any country,” she quotes Losey as proclaiming, “and I feel at home everywhere” (p. 181).


*Reviewed by Charles F. Howlett, Molloy College*

World War I marked the birth of the “modern” American Peace Movement. The movement represented a marked departure from the conservative, elite-minded approach to world peace espoused by internationalists and arbitrationists, who filled the ranks of organizations such as the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and Edwin Ginn’s World Peace Foundation. The “modern” movement insisted that peace was more than the absence of war and that social, economic, and racial justice at home was an extension of that struggle for global harmony. Leading the way in this endeavor was the birth of a separate women’s peace movement, a movement that began during the war.

Eschewing the prewar male-dominated peace organizations in the United States, women such as Jane Addams, Julia Grace Wales, Alice Hamilton, and Emily Green Balch, among others, injected a dose of political feminism in the postwar peace crusade by establishing their own organization, the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF). The basis for creating this organization rested on four principles: (1) that peace efforts must be directly linked to institutional violence against women; (2) that condemning militarism and governmental oppression is an extension of the social and economic exploitation of women; (3) that a women’s peace movement was necessary for seeking the causes of sexual, physical, and psychological abuse of women; and (4) that recalling historical connections between white women’s work in the abolitionist crusade and the sexual degradation of female slaves increased people’s awareness of female independence and racial justice through the mechanism of peace work. This last aspect is what Melinda Plastas, who teaches in the Women and Gender Studies Program at Bates College, compellingly and elegantly brings to life.

Plastas seeks to examine the political dynamics of race and peace through the thoughts and actions of notable white and African American female members of the WILPF. Relying on feminist peace history scholarship such as Joyce Blackwell’s *No Peace without Freedom: Race and the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, 1915–1975* and Harriet Hyman Alonso’s path-breaking survey, *Peace as a Women’s Issue: A History of the U.S. Movement for World Peace and Women’s Rights*, Plastas's