



Caroline Lejeune

Also Known As:

C.A. L., C.A. Lejeune, Mrs. Edward Roffe Thompson

Lived:

1897 - 1973

Worked as:

film critic

Worked In:

United Kingdom: England

by Amy Sargeant

Caroline Lejeune, better known to readers of her reviews as C.A. Lejeune or even simply C.A. L., said that *The Mark of Zorro* (1920) determined her choice of career. As she wrote in her autobiography, *Thank You for Having Me*:

Suddenly, as I watched Fairbanks' harlequin poses and swirling trajectories across the screen, there sprang into my mind a wonderful idea. Why should I not turn my pleasure into profit, and earn my living by seeing films? The profession of film criticism had not yet come into being...An extra deterrent was the fact that women had very little standing yet as journalists (1964, 69-70).

She liked to remark that she and the cinema were almost of the same age.

C.P. Scott, then editor of the *Manchester Guardian*, was a family friend. He made the necessary introductions to the London editor of the newspaper and young Caroline left Manchester for the capital, chaperoned by her mother. Having previously provided anonymous pieces for the *Guardian's* Women's Page and in an article titled "The Undiscovered Aesthetic," giving "an impassioned plea for recognition by 'discriminating' persons of cinematography" (68), she was given her own column, "The Week on the Screen," in 1921. "To celebrate the event, I bought myself a packet of gold-tipped Aristons, and mother and I recklessly shared a nip of medicinal brandy," she recalled (A. Lejeune 1991, 27). But Caroline did not forget her early film-going experiences, and in a typically atmospheric piece in *Cinema* (1931) recalled queuing with a charwoman and a professor on a cobbled street, in the wind and rain, to see the great [Alla Nazimova](#).

Lejeune's early reviews are worth reading as much for her descriptions of the methods used to promote films as for her comments on the material seen. In March 1924, she noted:

[T]he film today is the least important part of a super-kinema programme... [there are] programme girls and commissionaires in fancy costumes, exhibits from the film, copies of songs or books from which the films have been adapted, souvenirs, photographs... [I have seen] a monkey...a hooded falcon...white roses...red roses... and a handkerchief stall—for the tears shed when watching...

In 1925 she married her fellow film journalist, Edward Roffe Thompson. In 1928, she moved to the *Observer* and her son, Anthony, was born (A. Lejeune 30).

Lejeune's tastes were catholic. Certainly she embraced the product of the Hollywood studios more readily than contemporary critics such as Winifred Bryher at *Close Up* and many of her colleagues at the Film Society. However, she shared their belief that there could be progress in film art and technique and their insistence on particular filmic properties as evaluative criteria. She foresaw the establishment of cinema museums in which the history of the medium could be displayed and its finest exemplars celebrated, and she welcomed the coming of television as a means of film distribution. Lejeune noted that the term "popular" was often employed derogatorily in film criticism, but was far from despising the popular herself, finding as much worth in *Photoplay* as *Close Up*. She appreciated the cinema culture of Paris, from the Grands Boulevards to flea pits on the outskirts. We learn from the recently published *C. A. Lejeune Film Reader* that she was an early champion of René Clair (46), a lifelong favorite, and of Jacques Feyder's *Thérèse Raquin* (1928), while bemoaning that Alexander Volkoff's *Kean* (1924) was unlikely to be exhibited in Britain despite the appearance in a cameo role of the British producer Kenelm Foss. Lejeune appreciated the talents of the pre-Revolutionary Russian star Ivan Mosjoukine while the Film Society positioned itself against émigré cinema in favor of the more advanced work of new Soviet directors (46).

Both Lejeune and Bryher recognised the dangers of "loose, romantic militarism" in war films and the propagandistic potential of the genre. In 1928, Lejeune published a pamphlet, *War Films and World Peace*, acknowledging the current popularity of war films with audiences, returning to this theme in 1931:

Even those of us who hold most steadfastly to the belief that fighting is futility and warfare the last evasion of the weak, have in us too much of our fathers to be proof altogether against the bugle calling, and the drum rolling, and the tramp of marching feet. We make the war film successful. The generosity and sympathy, the sentiment and tradition, of every man and woman in an audience may be counted upon to provide what the producer lacks. The biggest dunce in the industry can make a sensation out of a war film, and does. The war has never helped the cinema to find itself. It has only put easy money into the exhibitor's cash-box, and built up a

reputation for a number of quite undistinguished directors through an emotion borrowed at second hand (220).

Adopting a stance that has since become familiar, Lejeune decided that a British critic was ideally placed to value equally the work of Hollywood, usually dismissed as commercial, and that of Europe, conveniently designated as art, with the star system of the former distinguishing it from the use of actors by the latter. But Lejeune was able to identify exceptions, finding the German studios as methodical and systematic as their American counterparts.

As for British cinema, Lejeune's feelings were mixed. She regretted that Estelle Brody, the Canadian actress who appeared in a number of Maurice Elvey films, was less acknowledged than the star Ivor Novello. On various occasions she recommended the work of directors Elvey, Graham Cutts, and Walter Summers. But Lejeune cautioned against the over-hyping of British cinema in campaigns such as the British Film Weeks of 1924:

The injury which the British studios have drawn to themselves by praise of bad and inefficient workmanship is almost incalculable. In the name of patriotism they have misled the public over so many trivial British pictures that the few good ones have been sceptically received....To do our kinema justice I think that all, or most of its faults are negative ones. It has not the harsh technique of Italy, nor the crudeness of Russia, nor the insatiability of France nor the heaviness of Germany, nor the vulgarity of America. It simply has nothing, neither character nor courage, neither commercial success, skill nor artistic sense.

Lejeune recorded various triumphs of British cinema during the Second World War, mapping recurrent character types and themes, often producing reviews wittily composed as imaginary conversations.

In the 1930s, Graham Greene at the *Spectator* pilloried Lejeune's criticism even when they agreed over John Grierson and the work of the Empire Marketing Board. Paul Rotha referred to Lejeune's temporary and fashionable "documentary fetish" (1973, 108). But she worried about the absence of a story in her review of Robert Flaherty's *Man of Aran* (1934), complaining that in a crucial scene the audience saw "only the woman and the seaweed" (1991, 94). In 1956, Lindsay Anderson opened fire on Lejeune's *Observer* reviews as an instance of "the kind of philistinism which shrinks from art because art presents a challenge" (2000, 54).

Lejeune maintained that new films should be appraised relative to the merits of their predecessors. Increasingly, though, she felt herself ill-equipped to engage adequately with the films she was required to review and produced her last column for the *Observer* on Christmas Day, 1960.

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