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"If You Have No Men, You Have No War!": A Critical Overview of Edgar Selwyn's Men Must Fight (1933)

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Despite the increasing interest in scholarship concerning the cinema's portrayal of World War One, Edgar Selwyn's *Men Must Fight* (1933) remains oddly overlooked. Never released on legitimate video or DVD, and with few stars memorable to today's audiences, this film has been unfairly neglected by scholars of both the cinema and the First World War in popular culture. It is certainly one of the most unusual movies of its era and subject matter. Adding elements of futurism to war themes influenced by the Great War, Selwyn's movie is one of the few works in either of the above genres to attempt to tell its story from a female perspective.

The film is based on a Broadway play of the same name by S.K. Lauren and Reginald Lawrence. The play ran for only 35 performances in New York, but toured major cities around the United States¹. Lauren and Lawrence constructed their work around a hypothetical conflict between the United States and Uruguay in the year 1940, with the family of Edwin Seward, the current Secretary of State, torn apart by differing beliefs of patriotism vs. pacifism² (Atkinson 13).

The play sparked the interest of MGM, perhaps due to the success of Universal's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (Lewis Milestone, 1930) three years earlier and the rash of other WWI films it inspired. There certainly was not much of the traditional MGM fare in the movie's downbeat fatalism and sci-fi overtones. The most likely explanation is that it was produced as a vehicle for contract star Diana Wynyard, a British expatriate mostly forgotten by contemporary audiences. The thespian received critical raves for her role as the matriarch of the aristocratic Marryot family while on loan to Fox in Frank Lloyd's *Cavalcade*, later to win the Academy Award for Best Picture of the 1932-1933 season. There are major similarities in Wynyard's roles and performances in both films, as both characters spend a great deal of time suffering in worry for their children. In his

¹ "Men Must Fight" Internet Broadway Database. <http://www.ibdb.com/production.php?id=11646>

² Atkinson, Brooks. "War and Peace in a Drama That Is on the Side of Pacifism." New York Times. 15 Oct. 1932. Proquest Historical Newspapers. Accessed January 8th, 2014 <http://search.proquest.com/docview/99792467/142D499ECF21DC24258/1?accountid=39473>

review of *Men Must Fight*, *Washington Post* critic W.A. Whitney would comment that "...Diana Wynyard here portrays a fairly legible carbon copy of Jane Marryot."³

The late twenties and early thirties were the period in which film audiences, both in Hollywood and Europe, finally began to come to terms with the major conflict that had ended a decade before. Until the release of *All Quiet* in the early sound era, most Hollywood films concerning the First World War avoided politics and focused on either adventure, *ala* William Wellman's *Wings* (Paramount, 1927) or the personal stories of single individuals, as in King Vidor's *The Big Parade* (MGM, 1925) and Frank Borzage's *7th Heaven* (Fox, 1927). No Hollywood film had yet directly addressed the war both as a personal experience while simultaneously placing that experience in a larger political and philosophical context.

The success of *All Quiet* changed the way popular cinema portrayed war trauma and also emblemized the view held by many at the time of its release- that the war was a harrowing and bloody experience caused by culturally conservative and out of touch politicians. Milestone's film was explicitly pacifistic and anti-war. Like *The Big Parade*, it followed the narrative of an individual soldier, but ended tragically with the death of its protagonist. *All Quiet* also lacked a villainous character to stand in as evil personified, as was common in many of the adventure war films. The lack of a harsh, monocled antagonist meant the causes of this war were far off politicians and out of touch intellectuals, not single individuals within a foreign army.

Many more films followed in this vein, both in Hollywood and around the world, such as Raymond Bernard's *Wooden Crosses* (1932) in France and G.W. Pabst's *Westfront 1918* (1930) in Germany. Milestone and his producer, Carl Laemmle, Jr., had proven that the public was willing to see films that placed war in a political context.

Men Must Fight almost certainly would not exist had it not been for *All Quiet*. In fact, Selwyn's work can in some ways be seen as a companion to the earlier

³ Whitney, W.A. "Loew's Fox." *The Washington Post*. 1 Apr. 1933, pg. 4. ProQuest Historical Newspapers. Web. January 15th, 2014
https://secure.pqarchiver.com/washingtonpost_historical/doc/150443075.html?FMT=AI&FMTS=ABS:AI&date=Apr+1%2C+1933&author=&desc=LOEW%27S+FOX

film. Whereas Milestone was interested in showing both the cause of the war and its effects on an everyman character, Selwyn's picture is concerned with the potential causes of a future war and the ethical dilemma of the average soldier. *All Quiet* shows the consequences of the choice to fight; *Men Must Fight* questions the ethics and agency of the young soldiers making that choice.

MGM selected Selwyn, a former actor and sometime screenwriter to direct their adaptation of the play.⁴ Like Wynyard, Selwyn is barely remembered by cineastes. He was chosen for *Men Must Fight* possibly due to his previous experience with the somewhat similarly themed *War Nurse* (1930). The cast would be filled with reliable MGM players, with the exception of Ruth Selwyn, the director's wife, in the key role as Peggy, the principal love interest. Lewis Stone, a stalwart MGM character actor who often played tough but dignified older men and would later be best known as Mickey Rooney's father in the studio's Andy Hardy films, was chosen to play opposite Wynyard as the now renamed Ned Seward. Phillips Holmes, an up-and-coming young actor who never made it into the full stardom his good looks and charisma would seem to assure him, would essay the young male lead of Bob Seward.

The film begins with a prologue, not found in the play, set in 1918. Laura (Wynyard) is a nurse who has fallen in love with Geoff Akins (Robert Young), a flyer who is about to go up on his first mission. Unfortunately, Geoff is killed and Laura is heartbroken. She is also troubled by the fact that she is pregnant with Geoff's child and knows the social consequences of having a baby out of wedlock. Her friend Ned Seward (Stone) convinces her to marry him, promising to take care of her while assuring that no one will know that the child is not his.



⁴ Hopwood, Jon C. "Edgar Selwyn." IMDB.com. Internet Movie Database. Accessed December 4th, 2010. http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0783629/bio?ref_=nm_ov_bio_sm

The film then moves forward to the year 1940 and finds Geoff and Laura's child, Bob (Holmes) returning by ship from Europe with his new fiancée, Peggy Chase (Ruth Selwyn). By this time many, if not all, European and Asian countries have banded together to form a giant superpower named Eurasia. The film skirts on many of the details but Eurasia does include at least Italy and Great Britain.⁵

In the twenty years after the end of WWI, Laura has become an outspoken leader of a new pacifist movement. Ned is now Secretary of State and uses his influence to advance their (seemingly) shared pacifist ideals. In fact, United States and Eurasia are about to sign a treaty that will "end war forever."

Laura's pacifist beliefs are controversial, however. Peggy and her mother (future gossip columnist Hedda Hopper) both call themselves traditionalists and find her ideals unpatriotic and offensive. This briefly causes a friction between the two families, but Bob and Peggy resolve not to talk of politics.

Things take a disastrous turn when the American ambassador to Eurasia is assassinated (an obvious parallel to the origins of the First World War in the assassination



of Archduke Franz Ferdinand) and it suddenly appears that the world is moving toward another global conflict. Suddenly, Ned abandons Laura's pacifist demands and insists that the country must ready itself for war. Laura prepares to speak out, but Ned orders her to stop, declaring that he cannot support her beliefs and that he must "remain

true to what is just, and right, and manly." Ned also argues that Laura is only against the war due to her fear of losing her son, an odd argument as he is obviously worried about the same thing.

⁵ The decision to change the opposing country from Uruguay to a United Europe and Asia was a major alteration from the play that serves to make the fictional World War II eerily similar to the real one.

As the country moves closer and closer to war, the families are torn further and further apart. Laura prepares to speak at a pacifist rally that will be aired nationally on television. Bob refuses to enlist, agreeing with his mother's anti-war beliefs and stating the principle that war will only end when men refuse to fight them, even though this costs him his relationship with Peggy.

Laura's rally ends in a riot started by male pro-war forces that are calmed only by an improvised speech by Ned, who proclaims that Americans should have the right of free speech until the formal declaration of hostilities.

Ned arranges a commission for his son in the "Chemical Division," a research post off the front lines where he will develop new forms of biological warfare. Bob refuses despite Ned's pronouncement that "Any talk of peace now is not only cowardice, it's treachery." When Bob still refuses to enlist (oddly, there is no draft) Ned tells him of his real lineage and declares that he is no longer his father. (The treatment of Bob's biological father was another major change from the play. In the theatrical production, the audience did not know of Bob's heritage until the third act, when he himself discovered it. In the film, it is acknowledged at the very beginning.⁶)

The war begins with disastrous losses for the American side. Bob is torn; he genuinely believes that the war is "a dirty rotten business" but he feels compelled to join, both for the loss of Peggy and the fact that if he does not go, someone will in his place. He is also genuinely moved by the fact that his biological father was a brave fighter, and that his country is in a state of crisis.

In the end, Bob enlists, but goes into the Air Corps and not the safe position his father desired. Early reports indicate that he is mostly likely going to his doom, something that both Ned and Laura know. Before he leaves, Ned states that he feels that Bob is his son again.



⁶ Atkinson, Brooks. "War and Peace in a Drama That Is on the Side of Pacifism." *New York Times*. 15 Oct. 1932. Proquest Historical Newspapers. Accessed January 8th, 2014

The picture ends as Laura, Peggy, and Bob's grandmother (May Robson) watch his squadron fly over the city from the window. The grandmother states that if only women ruled the world, there would be no war, but this will never happen. Peggy swears that she will never allow her son to fight, just as Laura had twenty-two years earlier.

Although other American films, such as John Ford's *Four Sons* (Fox, 1928) focused on the effect of war on mothers and women in general, *Men Must Fight* was among the first to question the societal impact of traditional masculine and feminine behaviors and attitudes on warfare. For the time, it is astonishingly liberal in its concerns and attitudes, even considering the progressive New Deal era in which it was made.

It is even more shocking that this picture was made at MGM and not rival Warner Brothers, a studio that was traditionally associated with making films concerning social issues. One must wonder who MGM, known for glamour and whitewashed slices of typical Americana, thought would be an audience for the film. The picture is far from a typical war or sci-fi genre piece and the mores of the day must have caused to the studio to believe that men would not be interested in the movie's concerns of motherhood and gender issues and women would presumably not be fans of the war scenes. The film's frank discussion political and social issues, along with its fatalistic ending, also serve to distinguish it from typical MGM glitz.

Like many films of its era, *Men Must Fight* criticizes war in general, sharing the pacifist value that all countries are equally at fault while rejecting the standard argument of a "just war." As Laura repeatedly states in the film, government cannot be relied on to stop war itself, it must be stopped by the soldiers-the common folk-refusing to fight it.⁷

The film goes much further than nearly all the other early sound depictions of WWI, even *All Quiet*, in its concern for the sociological reasons why individual soldiers might fight. Milestone's film argued that men joined essentially due to naiveté. The very young soldiers of that picture were strongly encouraged to join by elite intellectuals who

⁷ The picture somewhat undermines its argument by concerning itself with an aristocratic family.

did not, and indeed, could not, understand what they were in for. In contrast, Selwyn's film explicitly associates war, and by extension all violence, with masculinity.

The director, along with playwright and screenwriter C. Gardner Sullivan, were acutely aware of the fact that men are often socialized to solve conflicts violently. Bob relates a story about how his mother chastised him for hitting a schoolmate who called him a sissy. Laura calls upon the mothers of the world to teach their sons the same thing, while presumably being well aware of the fact that this lesson is stronger when coming from a male figure.

In this regard, Laura gets no help from Ned. In fact, it could be argued that a flaw of the film is that he turns so quickly from peace activist to warmonger. His conversion occurs off screen and seems unmotivated, so much so that one must wonder if he was really committed to peace to begin with. After the war seems imminent, Ned's entire *modus operandi* alters and he seems persistent, almost fanatical, in his association of war with masculinity.

Bob shares the cultural association but it is much more ambivalent about it. He knows that the war is "a dirty rotten business" and in no way agrees with the conflict's political aims. The film is ambiguous in its portrayal of why Bob finally enlists. He may be joining simply because of the calculation that if he does not go, someone will in his place (though this does not make complete logical sense in the absence of a draft). Bob may also be motivated by the legacy of his biological father, perhaps because he sees the hypocrisy of his adopted one. Selwyn clearly calls Ned out on disowning his son for not joining while pulling strings for him to serve in a safe desk job away from the front lines.



Bob may also make his choice due to his fiancé's refusal to accept his pacifism. Peggy does not offer a rational, intellectual opposition to Laura and Bob's philosophy.

Rather, she is simply identified as a "traditionalist" by her mother and angrily refuses to accept Bob's position.

Although it could be argued that the traditionalist argument is based mostly on emotion, Peggy's character is so underwritten (and so amateurishly played Ruth Selwyn, whose casting can apparently only be explained by nepotism), that her relationship with Bob appears implausible and constitutes a major flaw in the film. Peggy does, however, provide a way for the movie to indicate that women, too, directly contribute to the psychological tendencies for men to prove their masculinity by committing acts of violence.

This makes Peggy's conversion in the final scene ironic- she was willing to leave her fiancé because of his refusal to fight, but when he does go, she swears, just as Laura did years ago, that she will do everything within her power to make sure that any future son she will have shall never face death in the same way.

The most likely reason for Bob's enlistment, however, is simply that the societal expectations placed on men are too strong for him to overcome. When trying to explain his decision to his mother, he tells her that, though he disagrees with the war, he must join. One of his statements sums up his attitude: "There are certain things a man must do."

Bob's final choice underlines the film's central thesis: that war may be unstoppable not for political reasons, but for social ones. Men will continuously feel the need to assert their masculinity through acts of aggression, and since men will always be in power, there will be no end to war. At the end of the film, the women wishfully muse that if only females had power in the world, war would be banned, but this is decried by Bob's grandmother (the picture's ultimate voice of wisdom) never to happen.

Although *Men Must Fight* is astonishingly unique even for a pre-code, New Deal era film in the fact that it explicitly concerns itself with issues related to feminism, there are a number of elements in it that seem illogical or that undermine its argument, particularly for contemporary viewers.

The first is the continual association between femininity (particularly motherhood) and nonviolence. Selwyn does not seem to admit the possibility that women themselves may be violent or vengeful, even though Peggy is sometimes portrayed as petty. Though Laura is strong willed and sticks to her convictions, she does so only to save her son, and by extension, the sons of all mothers. Apparently, the only thing that women can do to stop war is to stop having children. During her climatic speech, she states "If you have no children, you have no men, and if you have no men, you have no war."

The second is the movie's inability to predict a world in which women will either serve in the military or hold major political positions. Grandmother Seward's prediction that women will never rule the world is treated by the movie as something of complete and absolute certainty.

The final issue that may undermine the movie's argument is Phillips Holmes' performance. Holmes comes off as somewhat effeminate in his opening scenes, a bit similar to David Manners in some of the early Universal horror films. As the film progresses, he becomes more and more assertive. He seems to connote strength and manliness (and least according to traditional views on those traits) the most at the end of the film when he makes the decision to enlist. The implication is that men really cannot be men if they do not fight, but is this performance intended as a subtle way of reinforcing traditional gender roles, or just an unintentional effect of poor (and to many modern audiences, dated) acting? The kind of character epitomized in Bob- the young, good natured aristocrat, was a trope of many 30s films and many of the actors associated with these roles, such as the aforementioned Manners, frequently gave performances not that dissimilar to Holmes in this film. It is easy to wonder how the film's themes might have a different if Selwyn had directed Holmes to give the character what might be interpreted as a traditionally "tougher" affect. It is possible that such a performance, with a Bob as a more traditionally masculine figure from the outset, may have made his final decision to enlist, which the film seems to see as a mistake, even more wrenching.

Despite its flaws and its lack of an iconic star or an auteur in the pantheon of the cinema greats, MGM and Selwyn produced an utterly atypical film for the period. A

discussion of genre is beyond the scope of this essay, but it might be argued that *Men Must Fight* is one of the first talking science fiction films as well. The picture's concerns of the ethics of the individual soldier and the cultural associations between masculinity and violence are still of concern to us today, and the movie's prediction of a Second World War in 1940, just one year after the start of the real one, is eerily prescient. Though it has been relegated to obscurity, Selwyn's film deserves a re-evaluation by film and cultural historians, as well as feminist and gender theorists.

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