"Wee Willie Winkie" (Twentieth Century Fox, 1937) Directed by John Ford. Based on the story by Rudyard Kipling; Associate Producer, Gene Markey; screenplay by Ernest Pascal and Julien Josephson; camera, Arthur Miller; art direction, William Darling and David Hall; Asst. Director, Ed O'Fearn; editor, Walter Thompson; music, Alfred Newman; Original length: 9 reels; this print, 8 reels.


Not seen in theatres in a great many years, though fairly familiar on TV, "Wee Willie Winkie" is somehow never regarded as part of Ford's "official" work, and is usually ignored or dismissed with an apologetic sneer by writers on Ford. There is apparently a kind of critical snobbism which prevents any Shirley Temple film from being taken seriously, although it seems to be o.k. for Ford to make a Will Rogers vehicle. Actually (and this may be partially Ford's doing, just as he was able to prevent his remake of "What Price Glory?" from turning into a musical as was originally announced) "Wee Willie Winkie" is far from being a typical Temple vehicle. She monopolises the action rather less than usual, and the whole advertising campaign of the film sold it as an action film, with far more stress on Kipling than on Temple. Actually, even if it were a Temple vehicle that would hardly be a disgrace -- most of them were pretty good -- but it turns out to be instead just a darn good film in which neither director or star seem to be at odds with each other. It's good Temple, better Ford, and even good Rudyard Kipling.

From "Lives of a Bengal Lancer" through "Gunga Din" and "Storm Over Bengal", British frontier rule in India was handled with almost the loving affection lavished on the 7th Cavalry and the Apaches. Rudyard Kipling tended to be a roster writer than A. E. W. Mason, and "Wee Willie Winkie" doesn't quite have the guts of the comparable British film, "The Drum" (likewise with a strong juvenile element) in which Raymond Massey was so superb with his endless prattle about "white British throats ready for the knife". But if "Wee Willie Winkie" doesn't have too much real menace, it still has a lot of invigorating action, slamed over in Ford's best western style, and a surprisingly sincere and convincing evocation of British military life. I say surprising because Ford, as an Irishman, loves to deflate the British, and here has ample opportunities of which he doesn't avail himself. Or perhaps with C. Aubrey Smith as the commander, Ford couldn't quite swing it. When Smith explains that there are thousands of savages up in those hills waiting to ravage India, and it's England's duty to see that they don't, and refers to his love for his queen, one isn't inclined to take it all so lightly. With some other player perhaps ... but not with Smith! Too, Ford resists his usual temptation to poke rather cruel fun at the enlisted man -- although he made up for this later in the films he made while a Naval officer.

If not a great Ford film, "Wee Willie Winkie" is certainly a very good one, and not just on its action and Temple highlights. The sequence of Victor McLaglen's death is a beautifully directed and acted episode, and possibly one of the most sensitive pieces of film Ford ever created. The love scene, intercut with the
military dance, is another fine sequence, and reminds one of the similar episode in "Fort Apache". And purely as a cunning piece of film-making, it all manages to look far more expensive than it must have been. All of the location work was done in Chatworth, in some cases just a stone's throw from the main highway, yet despite the lack of spectacular terrain, Arthur Miller's camerawork does suggest India, and the opening sequence of the train's arrival at the Indian town is worthy of comparison with Sternberg's opening to "Shanghai Express" in its instant evocation of locale and atmosphere.

Temple, though subdued this time, plays up as appealingly as ever. Reportedly there was a certain amount of embarrassment during shooting as Ford's crew, given as always to horse-play and colorful language, found themselves being constantly reprimanded by a suddenly angelic Mr. Ford when the wrong things happened to get said in front of his eight-year-old heroine. Incidentally, this print has been cut by over a reel, and while on principle this is reprehensible, I must admit that it has been extremely carefully cut, and primarily in the earlier portions. Constance Collier has been entirely, and some of the extended Temple-McCaglen exchanges. None of the important material has been tampered with at all, and the continuity remains smooth. Originally, all of the night scenes were tinted blue but this of course is a regular black-and-white print.

"THE LONG VOYAGE HOME" (United Artists, 1940) Directed by John Ford; produced by Walter Wanger; an Argosy production; based on four one-act plays by Eugene O'Neill; screenplay by Dudley Nichols; photographed by Gregg Toland; art direction, James Basevi; musical score, Richard Hageman; production assistant, Wingate Smith, B. F. McEveety, Lowell Farrell; special effects by R. T. Layton and R. O. Binger; editor, Sherman Todd. 10 reels.


Ford's films have always been split roughly into two camps -- the "fun" films, with the westerns, the comedies and the schmaltzy tearjerkers, and the "formal masterpieces". There are fewer of the latter, and not all of them hold up. "The Informer" for all its brilliance, seems a tricky and empty film, and "How Green Was My Valley" seems phony with each viewing. "The Grapes of Wrath" is a great film by any standards, but it is a film one respects rather than enjoys. On the whole, "The Long Voyage Home" seems to fare best of all the films that Ford made as deliberate "prestige" and "art" films. It source material (O'Neill), its brilliantly sustained mood, its lack of caricature despite the entire Ford manege of players, and its magnificent photography by Toland, all hold up beautifully.

Not a huge success when released -- despite rave reviews, it needed Louella Parsons' endorsement as "The greatest sea adventure since "Mutiny on the Bounty" to help sell it -- "The Long Voyage Home" fared particularly badly in England, where it was much too grim and pessimistic to appeal to audiences going through the depressing early phases of the war. It was later reissued, but drastically cut (in several varying versions) in an effort to sell it on the Wayne-Ford names, and on its negligible action content. The whole lyric opening was sheared off entirely, and scarcely a sequence didn't have its middle or end lopped off. All of the recent showings (not that there have been that many) at the MAA, or at the New Yorker, have been of this sadly incomplete version. This print has been carefully reconstructed from a number of prints, resulting in an occasionally disconcerting change of pictorial quality within sequences, but the main thing is that it is ALL there. A beautifully wrought production in every way, it is certainly one of the finest and most deeply-felt of all John Ford's films.

-- William K. Everson --