
Right through the 30's, from the British studios but more spectacularly from Hollywood, the adventurous cause of British colonialism in India and Africa, seen largely through Kiplinesque eyes, provided Gary Cooper, Errol Flynn, Cary Grant and Douglas Fairbanks Jr. with colorful modern swashbuckling vehicles that kept boxoffice busy and audiences happy. On the one hand we had evil Khan Haye-end Hassey preattling about "those white British chretians ready for the knife" (in The Drummer); on the other, we were somewhat comforted and reassured by dear old Sir C Aubrey Smith telling us (in "Woe Willie Winkie") 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!"

Through the years, most of these films - "The Four Feathers", "Oonga Din", "The Charge of the Light Brigade", "Lives of a Bengal Lancer" - have been fairly constantly available, first through theatrical rerelease, and then via television. "Sanders of the River" however has been conspicuous by its total absence from the screen, hardly over the last twenty years - and that as such as anything else prompted its revival in this series. It's not hard to see why the film has come to be regarded as something of a hot potato. Robeson's Communist leanings haven't helped of course. And with the African political climate what it now is, to say nothing of touchy racial problems in this country, the film - with its friendly but decidedly condescending wise-father-obedient infant attitude towards the African Negro - might well become as unwitting a tool for racism as Griffith's "The Birth of a Nation" had likewise unwittingly become. Certainly the film would never be made in quite this fashion today; in fact a recent British remake with Richard Todd - "Coast of Skeletons" - is almost unrecognisable.

Like all of the Korda films of the middle and late thirties, it is expertly made, with excellent production values and fine photography - much of it by Perinal, Cocteau's favorite cameraman. It dates hardly at all in a technical sense; even the back-projection, sparingly used, is far more convincing than most such of its period. Like so many British films of this type, it never quite makes the most of its action sequences - but it should be remembered that we were less rated by thrill and sensation in the thirties, and demanded less from our novels - and our movies. Even "Lives of a Bengal Lancer" is decidedly tame in the action department, the big climactic charge being handled in a single brief long shot, without the excitement building use of inserted closeups or stunt horse falls. The big thrill in action spectacles came much later in the thirties via "The Charge of the Light Brigade" and "Oonga Din". Still, "Sanders of the River" holds up at a good clip, and the characterization is solid. Well. The location work in Africa is so obviously staged with the footage shot in England that, the few studio scenes apart, it is often difficult to tell which is England and which not. The shots of the river boat steaming into the African community at the end, for example, were taken just a few miles outside London. On the whole, "Sanders" is one of the best of the several British-made African adventures of the 30's. "Rhodes of Africa" was a big but extremely stodgy film. "King Solomon's Mines" was fine stuff with a rousing climax, though marred by too many obvious studio "exteriors"; however, this film has now joined the legion of the lost, and memory of it on my last viewing of it, some 25 years ago, may be unreliable. "Sanders" is unquestionably the most jingoistic of the batch; it also has some of the best authentic documentary footage since "Trader Horn" standouts being the lovely shots of the canoes skimming along the river, and the beautifully photographed sequence of the serial flights and the various small animal stampedes that it causes. Many of these shots may be familiar to you through their use as stock footage in cheap B" pictures like "Drums of the Congo", "Most Dangerous Game" and "Fire Over England" - is an ideal choice as Sanders, while Robeson is in fine physical and vocal form as Bosambo. U.S. trade reviews, back in 1935, liked the film but found its merchandising a problem. They suggested that it was less commercial than "Emperor Jones", but suggested overcoming this by "plugging Robeson strong, selling the idea that here you have him in the primitive. Go Congo and jungle in your lobby, with spears, war drum and savage figure". Be assured however, that you can safari through our lobby in perfect safety! Wallace's writing career is so scattered and complex that I'll hold over comment on that for my introductory remarks prior to the screening.