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**Victory from Defeat:  
The War Office and  
the making of  
*Dunkirk* (Ealing Films, 1958)**

When the Ealing feature film *Dunkirk* was shown publicly for the first time at the Empire Leicester Square, London, on the evening of 20 March 1958 in the presence of HM the Queen, the critical reception was decidedly uncertain. There were, to be sure, some positive reviews in the British press. Ronald Maxwell of the *Sunday Dispatch*, for example, thought it “exceptional”, the *Guardian* critic wrote that it went “a long way towards recapturing the ‘Dunkirk’ atmosphere”, and Dilys Powell was enthusiastic enough to label *Dunkirk* “a triumph”.<sup>1</sup> But other reviewers were less than impressed. William Whitebait, for instance, writing for the *New Statesman*, asserted that “all the film has done is to look big and ring loud, and quite frankly . . . to bore us for two and a half hours.” Isobel Quigley essentially agreed. “The film is as sprawling as the Dunkirk beaches,” she wrote for the *Spectator*, “and altogether too confused and large . . . to be considered a success in a rounded and satisfactory sense.” Even *The Times* critic thought it “shapeless and confused”, and Campbell Dixon for the *Telegraph* admitted that while “sincere” *Dunkirk* was also “somewhat pedestrian”.<sup>2</sup>

There was no denying, however, that the picture, which producer Michael Balcon considered “perhaps the largest-scale film with which I have ever been connected”, had epic qualities despite various cost-saving measures.<sup>3</sup> Particularly impressive were the explosive battle sequences and the panoramic beach scenes in which thousands of battered soldiers are shown sprawling in the dunes or queuing to be picked up while enduring near-constant enemy bombing. Such qualities were largely the result of the cooperation of the War Office, which provided Ealing Productions (then a part of MGM) with period uniforms, equipment, vehicles, small arms, an artillery battery, range facilities, and for the beach scenes an entire infantry brigade. The scale of it all, in combination with a story centering on an event what was still popularly viewed as a highlight of the British wartime experience, allowed audiences to ignore

negative reviews. People flocked to see *Dunkirk* by the thousand, and it went on to become the third-highest British box-office earner of the year.<sup>4</sup>

Army participation, in short, which cost a mere £29,454 out of a budget of £400,000—7.4%—was central to the success of the film. Indeed, without this help it is hard to imagine producer Michael Balcon being able to muster the requisite number of bodies and equipment for the crucial Dunkirk beach scenes. On the face of it, however, it was not a project that ought to have appealed to the War Office.

The official policy, not surprisingly, was to support only film productions in which the army was portrayed in a positive light.<sup>5</sup> Thus far the fifties war films with which the War Office had been associated, such as *They Were Not Divided* (Two Cities, 1950) and *The Red Beret* (Warwick, 1953) were about the army bravely advancing to victory in the latter stages of the Second World War. *Dunkirk*, on the other hand, was set early in the war amidst an army very much on the defensive and finally on the verge of utter defeat. The evacuation of over 300,000 men of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) in the last days of May 1940 had achieved mythic status, but the active players in the ‘Miracle of Dunkirk’ were the navy and boat owners, the troops being largely relegated in people’s minds to the role of passive victim awaiting rescue. What was more, the book that producer Michael Balcon planned to use as the basis for the film was not one that had obvious appeal to the War Office.

This was *The Big Pick-Up*, a gritty, no-holds-barred novel by thriller writer Elleston Trevor about the trials and tribulations of a group of soldiers cut off from their units and drawn into the retreat and evacuation. When it was first published by Heinemann in January 1955, *The Big Pick-Up* had met with considerable acclaim. According to the *Times Literary Supplement* the author (who had served in the RAF during the war) “is marvelously faithful in evoking the way soldiers talk, and the dazed stoicism with which heroic actions are performed under bombing and shellfire”. The *Spectator* noted that “the whole panicky sweep of the retreat to Dunkirk moves with pace and authenticity”, while the *Scotsman* labeled it “an engrossing and inspiring story”. More than one book critic compared *The Big Pick-Up* favorably with classics about the First World War such as *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *Goodbye to All That*.<sup>6</sup> The first print run rapidly sold out, and the book thereafter went through multiple reprintings.<sup>7</sup>

Michael Balcon clearly saw considerable dramatic potential in this recounting of the retreat and evacuation from the worm’s-eye point of view of a few ordinary individuals caught up in great events, as did the chosen director, Leslie Norman.<sup>8</sup> From the War Office perspective, however, there were several potential problems with *The Big Pick-Up*. In overall terms, the author’s concentration on telling the story of lowly Sapper Corporal ‘Tubby’ Binns and his small party of odds and sods gave little sense that the BEF

had become anything other than a retreating rabble, bereft of serious direction: a view of things which went very much against the official military view of the events of May 1940.<sup>9</sup> More specifically, there were several episodes in the book that depicted soldiers of the British Army in a morally ambiguous light. There were episodes in which a British soldier is shown performing a mercy killing on a dying British officer, a private is seen to desert, and another is shown to be a natural coward. Towards the end of the novel a British officer is depicted driving a truck over refugees to force a path through them, and there is a scene in which drunken British soldiers are shown engaging in an orgy that becomes a gang rape.<sup>10</sup> It was all a far cry from the stiff-upper-lip heroism commonly present in war books converted into 1950s British war films.<sup>11</sup>

How, under such circumstances, did *Dunkirk* come to be made with the British Army contributing a cast of thousands? The aim of this article is to examine the process through which the *Dunkirk* project was shaped and came to fruition—in particular the way in which Ealing Productions and the War Office sought to promote their sometimes radically different interests without abandoning the film. This will in turn offer an explanation for the ongoing disputes concerning the message *Dunkirk* was meant to convey.

When Michael Balcon decided to use *The Big Pick-Up* as the basis for a film about Dunkirk, it was clear to both him and the screenwriter he first employed on the project, W. P. Lipscomb, that changes would have to be made. First, bearing in mind the sensibilities of the War Office—not to mention the British Board of Film Censors—the morally questionable episodes in the book would have to be eliminated.<sup>12</sup> Second, the plot of *The Big Pick-Up* would have to be simplified by further conflating or eliminating characters or episodes, and given more variety by adapting colorful incidents—such as the blowing up of a bridge just as the Germans arrive and the selflessness of RAMC doctors in tending to the wounded at Dunkirk without hope of escape—from *Keep the Memory Green*, a popular history of the campaign published in 1950.<sup>13</sup> Third, if the film was going to be called *Dunkirk*, there would have to be an additional, parallel plot focusing on an equally small number of civilians who as boat-owners eventually become involved in the evacuation from the beaches. Thus, interspersed with the story of Corporal ‘Tubby’ Binns (to be played by John Mills) and his party caught up in the retreat, was a second plotline involving two civilians with contrasting views of the war who both end up meeting Binns and his party on the beaches at Dunkirk during the climax of the film. Charles Foreman (to be played by Bernard Lee), a journalist apparently modeled on the authors of the 1940 anti-Chamberlain tract *Guilty Men*, fears that through sheer complacency Britain may lose the war.<sup>14</sup> John Holden (to be played by Richard Attenborough), a minor manufacturer making a comfortable liv-

ing from a contract for army buckles and willing to trade on the black market, is initially the antithesis of Foreman—who despises him and what he represents—but whose conscience eventually forces him to join with Foreman in captaining his boat as part of the Dunkirk rescue fleet.

While the script took shape negotiations proceeded apace in the first months of 1957 for the provision of military facilities with PR2(b), the section of the Directorate of Public Relations responsible for such matters. Balcon had outlined his intentions and needs at a meeting with Major-General Charles Shortt (Director of Public Relations) in January, and within weeks rough agreement had been reached on what could be supplied. Eastern Command was to provide troops and equipment for exterior shooting near Sheerness, Romney Marsh, and—for the beach scenes—Camber Sands on the East Sussex coast. Thus far PR2(b) was quite happy with what they knew about the production. “I am convinced,” wrote Major A. M. Forbes in a departmental minute, “that this Company are endeavoring to make a really first-class film of considerable value to the Army.”<sup>15</sup>

Balcon, meanwhile, had passed on the Lipscomb masterscene outline of 28 February to the War Office in early March 1957 while continuing to work on the script with Lipscomb and others. During the Second World War, when Ealing had made a number of films that required the participation of the armed forces, Balcon had often expressed his frustration with the slowness and suspicion with which the service ministries had responded to requests.<sup>16</sup> Having received only positive signals thus far from the Directorate of Public Relations, Balcon evidently decided to send off the masterscene script rather than waiting for the shooting script in order to expedite the bureaucratic process at the War Office and thereby get a formal green light in time for the scheduled start of shooting at the end of April 1957. This was to prove a major tactical error.

Normally the script would have been vetted only by PR2(b). But when he had first proposed making a film about Dunkirk, Balcon had spoken not only to the Director of Public Relations but also with Field Marshal Sir Gerald Templer, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS). As Templer had taken an interest in the project—he had served at BEF Headquarters as a senior intelligence officer in 1939–40—Balcon asked Shortt to pass a copy of this first draft script to the office of the CIGS. Unknown to the DPR, Templer personally gave instructions that the script “be read and commented on by a responsible officer who had been through the campaign in France in 1940.”<sup>17</sup> This turned out to be Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Earle. As an officer from a public school (Wellington) serving in one of the most socially elite regiments in the army (the Grenadier Guards), Earle was unlikely to appreciate the worm’s-eye view of the campaign that formed the core of *The Big Pick-Up*. His report, dated 25 April, was scathing. “Chaotic

as the situation was,” Earle wrote, “it was controlled throughout.” Formations and units by and large had held together, under organized command, right to the end. “The script portrays none of this”; instead, “[t]he story is woven, in a biased manner, round a rather ordinary group of 6 lost sappers.” All in all Lipscomb’s effort was “a travesty of a major campaign.”<sup>18</sup>

General Shortt was compelled to forward the report to Ealing, and on the 30th the CIGS himself, a man notorious for not mincing words, weighed in with a letter to Balcon underlining the fact that “I am in entire agreement with these comments.”

I do not believe that anyone seeing the film, with the script as it stands, would be in the least aware that the success of the British Army in maintaining cohesion in the last days of the withdrawal and in the evacuation over the beaches was mainly due to the way in which units and sub-units kept together under their officers and to the way in which command at this level functioned in the accepted way . . . it would be a grave injustice to the officers and men of the BEF and a disservice to the country if the emphasis in the script is not shifted.<sup>19</sup>

Balcon, though doubtless taken aback, was by this time aware that this version of the script was likely to prove problematic. In February he had engaged David Divine, a war correspondent who had also written a popular semi-official history of Dunkirk, to check the script for historical accuracy and make any necessary changes. Very much an establishment figure in sympathy with the traditions of the army—he was awarded an OBE in 1946 for his work as a war correspondent and writer of morale-boosting books on various campaigns and service branches in conjunction with the Ministry of Information<sup>20</sup>—Divine was as horrified as Earle by what he read. In his own book on Dunkirk, published at the end of the war, Divine had stressed above all the idea that the BEF had fallen back in good order, that the front held by the British had “never broken”, and that to the end “it [the BEF] retained its valor and its will to fight”.<sup>21</sup> As he explained in a lengthy and passionate memorandum dated 12 March, Divine objected strenuously to the way the script focused on “the improbable adventures of an unrepresentative and unlovable body of men” and left the impression “that the British Army retreated in small shabby parcels of men by slightly dubious methods, without coherence, without direction, without organization and without command”. Divine was particularly scornful of the fact that the group of soldiers was led by “a buffoon with a name and nickname [Corporal ‘Tubby’ Binns] fit only for a low comedy character in a cheap

farce". What was more, in the script (though not, interestingly, in the book) Binns initially lacks the will to be an NCO: "I never wanted the blasted stripes in the first place!" he comments on finding himself in charge of his party of lost souls. Binns, according to Divine, "shows no capacity for command which could possibly explain his success in bringing a group of men through the circumstances of the retreat". He did not like the civilian characters much either, and thought the whole thing false. "To sum up, my feeling is that any Army man who came through Dunkirk would be justified in resenting strongly the depiction of the behavior of the Army".<sup>22</sup>

With the initial shooting dates looming, Divine was told to go and rewrite parts of the script in the space of less than a month. Having discussed the relevant episodes with the former BEF Chief of Staff, Lieutenant-General (ret'd) Henry Pownall, and others, Divine inserted a number of command-level scenes explaining, for instance, the 25 May decision of Lord Gort, C-in-C of the BEF, to fall back unilaterally on Dunkirk.<sup>23</sup> He was also probably responsible, at least in part, for the narrative inserted near the end of the film in the form of a voiceover used to accompany footage of BEF troops landing in England. "Dunkirk was a great defeat and a great miracle. It proved, if it proved anything, that we were alone, but undivided. No longer were there fighting men and civilians. There were only people. A nation had been made whole": words that strongly echo the concluding passages of Divine's own book.<sup>24</sup>

Though Divine, whose name would appear alongside Lipscomb's in the screen credits, was far from happy about the fact that the commitment to *The Big Pick-Up* meant that "there was nothing whatever that I could do, despite every possible form of protest, about the basic story",<sup>25</sup> Balcon was confident that the new script would allay War Office concerns since the problems Divine had discovered so closely matched those of Colonel Earle. He enclosed the new shooting script with a letter to the CIGS dated 2 May, stressing that the version seen by Colonel Earle had been a rough draft. "Little or no attention was paid to accuracy in this version," Balcon explained, "since its purpose from our point of view was merely to help us in establishing the story line." The new script dealt with many of the concerns raised by the War Office, particularly those relating to the discipline and fighting spirit of the men of the BEF, and the need to show the overall shape of the campaign. Whatever their initial misgivings and problems, the party of soldiers are shown drawing strength from adversity, not least Corporal Binns as he begins to assert his authority as an NCO. As for the civilian side, Balcon stressed that the Foreman character in conversation with Binns on the beach "brings out clearly that whatever Charles may think of the war effort at home, he had a high regard for the performance and spirit of the B.E.F." (Binns: "I suppose they [at home] think we've made a

muck of it.” Foreman: “Somebody’s made a muck of it. But I don’t think it’s the army . . . No, you can’t blame the army. They had what we gave them . . .”) As he had with *Divine*, however, Balcon made it clear that *The Big Pick-Up* story would remain a central aspect of the plot.

We are criticized for showing a small group of rather dull characters in their progress to the coast. We see them not as dull characters, but as human beings typical of the men who were in France in 1940 and we feel that we can hardly be accused of bias if we choose to represent the B.E.F. by some of its humbler soldiers.

All those who were working on the film were patriots, and he and his associates had every confidence that they were not indulging in sensationalism, having rejected some of the more lurid stories that ex-soldiers had sent them when the production was first announced. “The point that we wish to bring out is that, despite some apparent confusion,” Balcon concluded, “the withdrawal to Dunkirk and the subsequent evacuation succeeded gloriously, and that, as Charles [Foreman] discovers on the beaches, the heart of the British Army is sound to the core.”<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps not entirely convinced, Templer instructed Colonel Earle to have a look at the shooting script. Skimming through it over a weekend, Earle found the story “far better than before”. “I am reasonably confident that the CIGS may be advised to give his support to the project”, he concluded, “provided that the purely military parts are altered to make them probable as opposed to most improbable.”<sup>27</sup>

Rather more important, perhaps, was the line being taken by the Directorate of Public Relations. Charles Shortt, an engineer by education and profession, had taken up his current position as DPR after retiring from the army in the mid-fifties, and had learned a thing or two about the dangers of taking too hard a line with film companies.<sup>28</sup> What he and members of PR2(b) were still acutely aware of was the way in which the Boulting Brothers had been able to turn the official refusal to lend assistance in the making of the satiric 1956 comedy, *Private’s Progress*, to great public advantage (“The film THEY didn’t want made”)<sup>29</sup>. Understandably ‘they’ were anxious to avoid another such public relations debacle, and were at pains to avoid further conflict with film companies—even if it meant arousing the ire of other retired brasshats.

When Lieutenant-General (ret'd) A. E. Percival, for example, complained to the War Office about the absence of an official denunciation of *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (Horizon, 1957), a film based on the novel by Pierre Boulle which he and other ex-POWs of the Japanese considered an

anti-British travesty, the Director of Public Relations explained his position. “If we had objected it would not have prevented the film being made,” General Shortt explained in a letter to Percival in early May, “and might well have given it undue publicity—as indeed happened in the case of a recent film made by the Boulting Brothers.”<sup>30</sup> The DPR was also willing to ignore the disapproval of Field Marshal (ret’d) Bernard Montgomery in lending assistance to Marksman Films in the making of *I Was Monty’s Double* (1958), recounting the true story of how lookalike M. E. Clifton-James was used as a stand-in for Montgomery in order to mislead the enemy.<sup>31</sup> This did not mean that any request for assistance from a film company was automatically accepted;<sup>32</sup> but it did mean that the Public Relations Directorate was keen to avoid antagonizing producers if at all possible. PR2(b) had seen the masterscene script along with the CIGS, but unlike the hawkish Templar did not want to force a confrontation. Instead Shortt, despite having been Military Assistant to the C-in-C of the BEF in 1940, sought to influence events more indirectly by getting in contact with the scriptwriter David Divine—and then only after the Earle report had forced his hand. (“I do wish that these matters could have been raised by the War Office when it first received the Lipscomb script”, Divine complained.<sup>33</sup>) With Earle lending his qualified support to the new version of the script the Director of Public Relations made every effort to smooth what he rightly presumed to be Balcon’s ruffled feathers. In a letter dated 6 May he indirectly blamed the CIGS for the problems and made it clear that all was now well. “I feel confident,” Shortt concluded, “that the film will be first-class and that it will reflect no disregard upon our pre-war Army and its Commanders.”<sup>34</sup>

The smooth course of three-day shoot at Camber Sands in the second week of May, involving the direction of far more troops than any other British film, aided the process of reconciliation.<sup>35</sup> For the filmmakers there was the thrill of suddenly having thousands of soldiers at their beck and call. “At one time I was standing up and talking to thirty-eight different sections of people,” Leslie Norman remembered, “directing them all on walkie-talkies.”<sup>36</sup> The producer, who was also present, “was enthusing like a school-boy”. For the soldiers themselves there was the lure of being in the pictures, which made up for the long hours and sometimes trying weather endured: “they were quite splendid . . .”, the brigade commander reported, “there was practically no beefing at all.”<sup>37</sup>

Further improving relations was the attitude of Brigadier Bernard Fergusson, commander of the 29<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade and the military representative on the spot during the exterior shooting. Though in some ways a typical establishment product—among other things he was an Old Etonian—there were facets to Fergusson’s career and character that made him well suited to this particular job. First, unlike a number of other senior



officers involved in the affair, he had not been in France in 1940, and had no axe to grind. Second, his wartime service with the Chindits left him with a more open mind than many of his peers concerning unorthodox military assignments. Third, Fergusson was also something of a literary figure, possessing the imagination necessary to see how *Dunkirk* could help rather than harm the image of the British Army.<sup>38</sup>

Fergusson was at pains to stress how well things were going in a informal report he submitted to the Director of Public Relations on 11 May. The film people, he indicated, had taken the comments on the script emanating from the War Office very seriously, and “had gone a long way to meet the criticisms made”, only keeping in supposedly inauthentic scenes when—as with the last-ditch action of an artillery troop—there was evidence that such events had actually transpired in 1940. “I do hope the C.I.G.S. won’t be cross,” he added, “or feel that they have treated these criticisms cavalierly, because they really haven’t.”<sup>39</sup> The brigadier did not go into detail in his report, but comparison of the shooting script and the finished product reveals the extent of the changes made.

In the shooting script, for example, in response to the concerns voiced by Corporal Binns on the beach at Dunkirk that people at home would “think we’ve made a muck of it”, the Charles Foreman character was supposed to reply: “Somebody’s made a muck of it. That’s a certainty. I’m a newspaper man. I saw some of the nonsense that was going on. We certainly have made a muck of it!” When the scene was actually shot, the response was changed and shortened to: “Somebody’s made a muck of it. But I don’t think it’s the army.”<sup>40</sup> The film people had even modified what Fergusson himself described as “a beastly piece of script” in which Foreman, in conversation with his wife, blames the services as well as the government for the parlous state of British defenses in 1940. The shooting script for the scene read:

Foreman: “You don’t see it. It’s the same everywhere. This debate in the House—where’s it got us? It’s not even going to shake Chamberlain. We’ve mishandled everything in this war so far! The Navy said we were safe against the U-boat, and look at that poor blighter tonight [a reference to a wounded merchant navy sailor encountered in a pub]. The Air Force does nothing. The Army can’t even hold a small port in Norway. They tell us nothing, they hoodwink us so that little squirts like Holden can sit back on their fat sub-contracts and make five times as much money as they could ever make in time of peace.”

The words actually filmed were as follows:

Foreman: "You don't see it any more than anyone else. Chamberlain's settled in as comfortably as ever. Patting us on the head and saying that everything's going to be all right. So that little squirts like Holden can sit back on their fat sub-contracts and make more money than they ever did in peacetime."

The deletion of uncomplimentary references to service performance during the first eight months of the war satisfied the War Office desire, as the brigadier explained to the DPR, to see the blame transferred "where it historically belongs: on the general political temperature of the nation as a whole." Fergusson was a happy man. "I do want to make the point", he went on to the DPR, "that I was deeply impressed with the manner in which they are really trying to make a really honest presentation".<sup>41</sup>

In the end, both parties got what they wanted. The provision of large numbers of troops and quantities of mothballed period equipment by the War Office was perhaps the key component in turning *Dunkirk* into an epic that cinemagoers lined up to see, thus making it a financial success for Ealing Films. In return for this support the army—even in retreat—was portrayed in a manner acceptable to the War Office. Troops of the BEF, though retiring, were always shown in a positive light, with various units and sub-units (such as the officers and men of a rearguard artillery battery and the doctors—including a Jew—of a field hospital) facing certain destruction or capture in order to give others a chance to live. When Binns' party apparently grows too exhausted to go on, he reminds them that they are soldiers and that "chucking it in" is unacceptable. *Dunkirk*, as hoped, did a positive "public relations job" for the British Army.<sup>42</sup>

At the same time, however, the compromises made contributed to the oddly uncertain thrust of the film. This in turn helps explain why the reviewers were so at odds with one another about *Dunkirk*.

Though Ealing had developed a reputation in its earlier films of the 1940s and 1950s for plots in which life's problems were resolved through consensus building,<sup>43</sup> *Dunkirk* certainly had the potential to be a radical departure from the common run of war features. As already noted, British war films by the mid-fifties often fore-grounded officers at the expense of Other Ranks, a phenomenon partly attributable to the dominance in that decade of middle-class values and partly to the fact that it was officers who tended to write up the war stories purchased by the studios. Ealing, at one level, tended to go against the heroic-officer grain. Balcon had already been responsible for acquiring the screen rights to Nicholas Monsarrat's *The Cruel*

*Sea*, an unflinching look at the horrors of the Battle of the Atlantic, and may have been attracted to the equally gritty portrayal of war in *The Big Pick-Up*, a book in which all the central characters—rather uniquely—were ordinary lower-class types in the ranks, commissioned officers only appearing incidentally. Screenwriter W. P. Lipscomb, as we have seen, was keen to develop a ‘Guilty Men’ spin to the plot, and there are indications that director Leslie Norman, as a self-described “council schoolboy who became a major in the war”, wanted to get away from the fifties concentration on well-bred commissioned heroes.<sup>44</sup> *Dunkirk* might, in short, have foreshadowed the more overtly anti-establishment war films that appeared around the turn of the decade, *Yesterday’s Enemy* (Hammer, 1959) and *The Long and the Short and the Tall* (Associated British, 1961). In conducting research for the film, Balcon and others had come across plenty of veterans with rather more jaundiced accounts of the retreat and Dunkirk experience: accounts of a kind that would form the basis of a number of later revisionist studies.<sup>45</sup> Yet as Balcon stated, Ealing had “deliberately rejected” such a course.<sup>46</sup>

The decision to play it safe was not surprising. If the film was to succeed, it had first of all to obtain a favorable rating from the British Board of Film Censors, preferably an unrestricted ‘U’ that would allow all in to see it. That inevitably meant cleaning up the novel, as had been the case with the script of *The Cruel Sea*, which had been, as *Dunkirk* would be, given a clean bill by the BBFC. Associated with this process were decisions about casting. By the mid-fifties various actors found themselves being typecast in the comparatively large number of war films being produced in Britain. (Jack Hawkins, to take the prime example, had become the ideal sensitive yet determined middle-class and middle-ranking army, navy, or air force officer.) One of the consequences was that the public had grown to associate certain actors with a certain uniformed persona. This was certainly true of John Mills, who had a long record of playing either stiff-upper-lip officers with a hint of nervousness or dedicated and trustworthy members of the lower-class rank and file. Mills was a box-office draw, but given that the public knew what to expect of him in uniform and casting ‘against type’ was a risky proposition, placing him in *Dunkirk* meant that Binns would be a rather more conventionally heroic figure in the film than in the book.<sup>47</sup> Casting ‘to type’ was in turn linked to the broader question of what would and would not catch on with the public. To stray too far from the patriotic, middle-class conventions of the 1950s war film genre in a big-budget project would be to take a major risk. As a leading British Board of Film Censors official commented in reference to the commercial failure of some of the grittier films of the subsequent decade, people “do not want to know the reality.”<sup>48</sup>

Yet as already noted, it was the need for army cooperation that led in several instances to further modification of an already heavily reworked script. From the War Office standpoint this was all to the good. Instead of a major plot-line involving almost exclusively Other Ranks on their own, there was now a script in which officers made the occasional commanding appearance. More significant, from the point of view of the overall thrust of the film, was the insistence on playing down the 'Guilty Men' line, especially with reference to the army.

The problem was that this left *Dunkirk* with conflicting messages. As we have seen, the 'Guilty Men' thesis was watered down significantly while efforts were made in the revised script to suggest that the BEF fought well, retired in good order, and was not responsible for the debacle. At the same time, however, there were still messages of indictment concerning Chamberlain, appeasement, and wartime complacency in both civil and military society. Quite apart from Foreman's remaining diatribes directed against the blindness of civilians and Chamberlainite complacency, director Leslie Norman made the opening moves of May 1940 appear naive and foolish on the part of the BEF. In scenes involving little or no spoken dialogue—and thereby escaping outside scrutiny—the audience is presented with animated diagrams showing the movements of the Anglo-French and German forces from the 10th onward, inter-cut with newsreel and other footage contrasting the swift and violent German onslaught shown with the BEF's peaceful and rather lackadaisical counter-advance into Belgium. This, plus rather ghoulish shots of Flanagan and Allen rehashing their 1939 music-hall hit "We're Gonna Hang Out the Washing on the Siegfried Line"<sup>49</sup> as things fall apart, reinforce the idea that army was doing the wrong thing and unwittingly heading for disaster. Scenes of enemy air attacks on the Dunkirk beaches, also involving little or no dialogue, show a battered and bruised BEF now unable to hit back and in urgent need of rescue. At the very end of the film there is a coda showing Binns and his pal Mike—who say nothing but whose expressions indicate 'same old army'—as part of a square-bashing squad being drilled by a shouting sergeant. Despite Holden's decision to join with Forman in taking his boat across the Channel to Dunkirk, the somewhat confused and contradictory messages makes the narrated conclusion—that Dunkirk had transformed the British war effort—seem either a leap of faith or simply untrue.

The general public could enjoy the spectacle of it all, but it is not surprising that the critics could not reach anything approaching a consensus. Modern observers have also read the film in radically different ways. Charles Barr, in his ground-breaking study of Ealing Studios, now in its third edition, has this to say about *Dunkirk*:

The film shows a dispirited, sluggish country blundering its way to disaster . . . the transformation we wait for obstinately refuses to come. Before and at Dunkirk, there's no sense of energies, anywhere, waiting to be channeled, simply of uniform sourness . . . The actual Dunkirk operation is characterized by bureaucracy and irritation . . . and the expected pay-off—the elation of success, of teamwork at last, is one that the film simply refuses, or finds itself unable, to deliver . . . it ends on a dully shot, perversely protracted, sequence of parade-ground drilling, as if to say: this is all there is to look forward to, a hard, humorless grind.<sup>50</sup>

James Chapman, on the other hand, in a follow-up article to his detailed and thoughtful monograph on wartime films, noting the way in which even in defeat the army comes off much better than Chamberlain in *Dunkirk*, suggests that “the film can be read as a reassertion of national self-esteem following the debacle of the Suez Crisis in 1956”.<sup>51</sup>

*Dunkirk*, in short, was and has remained something of an interpretative puzzle. In part this is merely a matter of subjective reactions by critics and other observers of different generations or backgrounds. Yet the lack of anything approaching a consensus can also be seen as a reflection of the film's somewhat schizophrenic nature: something which in turn owed a good deal to the struggle over the meaning of Dunkirk fought between the War Office and Ealing Films.

## Notes

1. Review summaries in Castell, David. *Richard Attenborough: A Pictorial Film Biography*. London: Bodley Head, 1984. 56; *Guardian* (Manchester edn), 22 March 1958: 3; see also *Films and Filming* May 1958: 25; *Daily Express*, 21 March 1958: 5.

2. Campbell Dixon, *Daily Telegraph*, 22 March 1958: 9; *The Times*, 21 March 1958: 10; Isobel Quigley, *Spectator*, 28 March 1958: 391; William Whitebate, *New Statesman*, 25 April 1958: 432.

3. Balcon, Michael. *Michael Balcon Presents . . . A Lifetime in Films*. London: Hutchinson, 1969. 188. The film came in at £400,000, under budget. Money was saved both by assistance from the War Office and the insertion of wartime newsreel and other old footage to represent attacking aircraft. Director Leslie Norman even used a few dozen feet of footage from another Ealing film, *The Cruel Sea* (1953), to represent a sinking ship at Dunkirk. It has been suggested that *Dunkirk* was made in black and white rather than color to heighten nostalgic association with wartime films. See Ramsden, John. “Refocusing ‘The People’s War’: British War Films of the 1950s”, *Journal of Contemporary History* 33 (1998): 37. It should be borne in mind, however, that color film was more expensive and the newsreel footage was in black and white. On the budget see Leslie Norman in McFarlane, Brian. *An Autobiography*

of *British Cinema: as told by the filmmakers and actors who made it*. London: Methuen, 1997. 441. Even the score was not particularly original, Malcolm Arnold having evidently recycled the theme tune he had written for *A Hill in Korea*, released in 1956.

4. *Kinematograph Weekly* 18 December 1958: 6. The top box-office earner was *The Bridge Over the River Kwai*.

5. On the War Office public relations apparatus policy toward requests for help from film companies see Public Record Office [hereafter PRO], WO 32/16022; DEFE 10/246.

6. John Metcalf, *Spectator*, 21 January 1955: 79; *Times Literary Supplement*, 21 Jan. 1955: 37; review extracts on dust jacket of Trevor, Elleston. *The Big Pick-Up*. London: Heinemann, 1971 edn.

7. See Trevor, Elleston. *The Big Pick-Up*. London: Heinemann, 1955 editions: iv [publishing history].

8. In the words of one of the main contributors, Ealing was “completely committed” to using *The Big Pick-Up* as the basis for the *Dunkirk* screenplay. PRO, WO 32/16917, Divine to Shortt, 29 April 1957. On Leslie Norman see McFarlane: 441.

9. Ellis, Major L. F. *The War in France and Flanders, 1939-1940*. London: HMSO, 1953.

10. See Trevor, 1955 edn: 131-32, 160-62, 183, 189, 196-200.

11. On the nature of 1950s British war films see Murphy, Robert. *British Cinema and the Second World War*. London: Continuum, 2000; Ramsden: 35-63; Chapman, James. “Our Finest Hour Revisited: The Second World War in British feature Films since 1945.” *Journal of Popular British Cinema* 1 (1998): 63-75; Pronay, Nicholas. “The British Post-bellum Cinema: a survey of the films relating to World War II made in Britain between 1945 and 1960.” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 8 (1988): 39-55; Medhurst, Andy. “1950s War Films.” *National Fictions: World War Two in British Films and Television*. Ed. Geoff Hurd. London: British Film Institute, 1984. 35-38.

12. In the end *Dunkirk* was given a ‘U’ rating. On the BBFC see Robertson, James C. *The Hidden Camera: British film censorship in action, 1913-1972*. London: Routledge, 1989.

13. Butler, Ewan and J. S. Bradford. *Keep the Memory Green: The First of Many, France 1939-40*. London: Hutchinson, 1950. 98,162.

14. Cato [Michael Foot, Peter Howard, Frank Owen]. *Guilty Men*. London: Gollancz, 1940.

15. PRO, WO 32/16917, Forbes Minute to DPR, at 11A, 1 Apr. 1957; see *ibid.*, encl. 13A, Butler to Forbes, 8 April 1957; Balcon to Forbes, 29 Jan. 1957.

16. See Barr, Charles. *Ealing Studios*. 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999. 184.

17. PRO, WO 32/16917, Templer to Balcon, 30 April 1957; see *ibid.*, Balcon to Forbes, 29 Jan. 1957.

18. Ibid., encl. 29A, Comments by Lt. Col. Earle on Film Script – “Dunkirk”, 25 April 1957.
19. Ibid., Templer to Balcon, 30 April 1957. On Templer’s short fuse see Cloake, John. *Templer, Tiger of Malaya: The Life of Field Marshal Sir Gerald Templer*. London: Harrap, 1985.
20. *Who Was Who*, vol. 8, 1981-1990. London: A. & C. Black, 1991. 204.
21. Divine, A. D. *Dunkirk*. London: Faber & Faber, 1945. 23-24.
22. WO 32/16917, 12 March 1957 memorandum enclosed with encl. 38A, Divine to Shortt, 29 April 1957.
23. See Divine, David. *The Nine Days of Dunkirk* London: Faber & Faber, 1959. 11, 54; PRO, WO 32/16917, Balcon to Shortt, 2 May 1957: 2; British Film Institute Library [hereafter BFI], S66 – “Dunkirk” final shooting script, scene 153.
24. See A. D. Divine: 243.
25. WO 32/16917, encl. 38A, Divine to Shortt, 29 April 1957.
26. Ibid., encl. 41C, Balcon to Shortt, 2 May 1957.
27. Ibid., encl. 32B, Earle to Sinclair, May 1957.
28. On Shortt see *Who Was Who*, vol. 8, 1981-1990. London: A. & C. Black, 1991. 691.
29. Boyd-Bowman, Susan. “War and Comedy.” *National Fictions: World War Two in British Films and Television*. Ed. Geoff Hurd. London: British Film Institute, 1984. 40.
30. PRO, WO 32/16027, encl. 18A, Shortt to Percival, 3 May 1957. On the controversy surrounding *The Bridge on the River Kwai* see Brownlow, Kevin. *David Lean: A Biography*. New York: St. Martin’s, 1996. 390.
31. See PRO, WO 32/16478.
32. The War Office, for instance, flatly refused on security grounds to support the making of a film about Eddie Chapman, who worked as a double-agent during the war. PRO, WO 32/16232; WO 32/17807.
33. PRO, WO 32/16917, encl. 38A, Divine to Shortt, 29 Apr. 1957.
34. Ibid., encl. 41D, Shortt to Balcon, 6 May 1957.
35. *O.H.M.S.* (Gaumont British, 1937) had also involved the shooting of a brigade, but this was at Aldershot during an official review rather than on location. Probably the next in line would be *A Bridge Too Far* (United Artists, 1978), in which Richard Attenborough directed the 1st Battalion of the Parachute Regiment.
36. McFarlane: 411.
37. PRO, WO 32/16917, encl. 44A, Fergusson to Shortt, 11 May 1957.

38. See Fergusson, Bernard. *The Trumpet in the Hall, 1930-1958*. London: Collins, 1970.
39. PRO, WO 32/16917, encl. 44A, Fergusson to Shortt, 11 May 1957.
40. BFI, S66 – “Dunkirk” Final Shooting Script: 13; PRO, WO 32/16917, encl. 44A, Fergusson to Shortt, 11 May 1957.
41. BFI, S66 – “Dunkirk” Final Shooting Script: 112; PRO, WO 32/16917, encl. 44A, Fergusson to Shortt, 11 May 1957. Fergusson’s enthusiasm for the project can be seen in the home-movie footage taken of him by John Mills during the filming of the beach scenes. See *Sir John Mills’ Moving Memories*. Directed and edited by Marcus Dillstone, produced by Jonathan Mills for Last Straw Productions in association with Glory Films, 2000.
42. See PRO, DEFE 10/405, PRC/P(57)18, 28 Oct. 1957.
43. See Barr: *passim*.
44. See McFarlane: 441. On the acquisition of *The Cruel Sea* see Balcon: 178; Monsarrat, Nicholas. *Life is a Four-Letter Word: Volume II, Breaking Out*. London: Hutchinson, 1969.
45. E.g. Harman, Nicholas. *Dunkirk: The Necessary Myth*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1980; Collier, Richard. *The Sands of Dunkirk*. London: Collins, 1961.
46. PRO, WO 32/16917, encl. 41C, Balcon to Shortt, 2 May 1957: 4.
47. By the mid-fifties Mills was one of Britain’s most popular stars (see *Kinematograph Weekly*, 13 December 1956, 6). He had played a soldier in *O.H.M.S.* (Gaumont British, 1937), a sailor in *Brown on Resolution* (Gaumont British, 1935), *In Which We Serve* (Two Cities, 1942), *This Happy Breed* (Two Cities, 1944), as well as *The Baby and the Battleship* (British Lion, 1956), and a naval officer in *We Dive at Dawn* (Gainsborough, 1943), *Morning Departure* (Jay Lewis, 1950), and *Above Us the Waves* (London Independent, 1955). Though at least one film historian sees Binns as being “edgy and troubled” (Murphy: 208), only in the film following *Dunkirk*, *Ice Cold in Alex* (Associated British, 1958), would Mills really be allowed to play a character who “cracks” under pressure (see Mills, John. *Up in the Clouds, Gentlemen Please*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980. 231; Chibnall, Steve. *J. Lee Thompson*. Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2000. 184 ff).
48. Trevelyan, John. *What the Censor Saw*. London: Michael Joseph, 1973. 156. Questioning the Dunkirk Myth in print around this time was also risky, as Richard Collier discovered after the publication of his *Sands of Dunkirk* (see n. 45) generated a good deal of public controversy. Collier, Richard. *The Past is a Foreign Country*. London: Allison and Busby, 1996. 202-08.
49. See *Underneath the Arches: Songs of Flanagan and Allen*. London: EMI, 1982. 24-25; Flanagan, Bud. *My Crazy Life*. London: Frederick Muller, 1961. 163.
50. Barr: 179; see also Murphy, Robert. “Fifties British War Films.” *Close Up*. 1.2 (1996/97): 1.
51. Chapman: 71.



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