

A CATHEDRAL TALE

This essay on the Powell & Pressburger film A Canterbury Tale (1944) was first published in the journal 'Theology' in Sept/Oct 2008. I am grateful to SPCK for permission to reproduce it on my website.

Patriotism is the most delicate of concepts: attachment to a country or place is a necessary part of human identity, but detachment is important as well if the quagmire of sentiment and the wasteland of boasting are to be skirted. Feelings too can be translated into deeds with ugly results: nationalism, the loud-mouthed offspring of patriotism, has inflicted immense cruelties on mankind in the 20th century. Governments like to foster 'love of country' and no art-form has been more attractive to them as the medium for doing so than films striving to manipulate the thoughts and emotions of audiences in the direction that governments want. Patriotic themes in the cinema are therefore particularly suspect – that they come not from the heart but from the government - especially so in the Second World War, before the growth of independent production and of home-grown movies on the internet could subvert the official government line.

When a strong religious ingredient is mixed into the patriotism, we stand on even more dangerous ground: sentiment can curdle into something bordering on the fanatic. It is the great achievement of *A Canterbury Tale*, made by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger¹ in 1944, to use the ingredients of patriotism and religion in order to distil an essence of a kind about why England was a country worth fighting for, and in doing so to convey a sense of personal conviction. At the time, it failed: "The story and the premise of the film failed to hold the audiences. The values we tried to discuss in the film were already 'old hat'." ² Yet over 60 years later, as history has moved on and the country has changed, it stands as a passionate articulation not only of English values, but of Anglican religion as well. Its 'obviousness' on its first appearance now springs an ambush on us.

Four characters are at the centre of the story: Alison, burdened with the knowledge that her fiancé, Geoffrey, is missing in action; Sergeant Bob Johnson, an American soldier from Oregon, 5000 miles from home, standing for the Anglo-American alliance; Sergeant Peter Gibbs, an aspiring church organist whose hopes have been disrupted by war so that he is now preparing to fight abroad; and, most complex of all, Thomas Colpepper JP, the local squire of Chillingbourne, a village near Canterbury³, and 'evangelist' for the virtues of English history, and visionary of the blessings, miracles even, that attend ordinary lives.

There is a fifth presence, constant throughout the film: Canterbury Cathedral. The film starts with an essential Englishism: the sight and sound of bells, from which the camera pans left to a view of the west towers of the Cathedral. The film ends with the same bells, the same pan left, then a middle-distance view of the Cathedral, and last of all a long-distance view of it, embedded in town and countryside, a view of 'this cathedraled isle'.

After the Cathedral, the film shows the written opening lines of Chaucer's 'Canterbury Tales', while the words are recited on the soundtrack, ending:

‘ . . . to Canterbury they wend,
The holy blissful martyr for to seek,
That them hath holpen when that they were weak.’

For each of the young characters, over the space of a few days, their journey will receive a blessing that changes their lives: Sergeant Johnson meets his buddy, Mickey Roczinsky, in Canterbury and learns that the sweetheart from whom he has not heard for several weeks is in Australia, that her letters have kept coming, but have not got through – Mickey brings a batch for him. For Sergeant Gibbs, his blessing is the opportunity to play the organ in Canterbury Cathedral for the big service before the battalion is sent abroad.

Alison’s blessing is in the nature of a miracle. She is played by Sheila Sim, an English rose (22 at the time the film was made), unglamorous in her farm clothes, which only served to emphasise her fresh-faced beauty when she is photographed in close-up. Hers is the central role in one of the film’s many sub-themes, namely the social upheaval brought by the war with the result that a lot of the work is being done by women (postman, bus driver, signalman etc., not to mention the Land Army). And it is Alison who carries the burden of the war as much as the men, for it is the memory of a perfect holiday with Geoffrey in 1940, during an archaeological dig on the old pilgrims’ road to Canterbury, that draws her from London, and that now must be lost with the thought that she will never see Geoffrey again. Complication is added by the fact that Geoffrey’s father frowned on any possibility of marriage between Geoffrey and Alison because Geoffrey would be marrying out of his class. The miracle turns out to be that Geoffrey has turned up in Gibraltar, and that his father is anxious to convey the news to Alison, resurrection and redemption rolled into one.

For Colpepper there is only disappointment because his zeal for history and the past is essentially private, and he emerges by the end of the film as the dispenser of blessings rather than the receiver of them. As Michael Powell remarked many years later, “He has tried to play God, and the part of God is a lonely one.”⁴ There is a touch of cruelty too for we sense that he is falling in love with Alison, who shares his interests with him, only for Geoffrey to reappear in her life and take her from him. Colpepper’s character is made strange, even odious, by his practice of putting glue in the hair of young girls arriving in Chillingbourne. He does this under the cover of night, and his motive is to deter the presence of young women from distracting the soldiers in the nearby barracks, thus allowing them to pass their leisure time coming to his lectures and learning the history of the village, about the pilgrims’ road, and about Canterbury and its Cathedral.⁵ The film therefore starts as a mere detective story: how are Alison, Bob Johnson and Peter Gibbs going to unmask the person who has put glue in Alison’s hair? And yet the ‘glueman’ turns out to be a kind of Supreme Being, whose deviousness seeks to preserve the order and courtesy of society, who makes confession to Alison and the two sergeants of why he had acted as the glueman, who explains how a pilgrimage to the Cathedral can bring blessings, and who talks with Alison on the Kentish Downs, under an English sky, of the possibility of miracles.

What is so striking 60 years on, in our secularised society, is the passionate assertion of a religious dimension to being English. It is a film in time of war, intended to boost morale, and the film is about what

is being defended: the continuity between past and present, the countryside as a key part of English identity, even of the class system as a means of ordering society but which is not closed to social changes, and above all of a people under God: all roads lead to the Cathedral. ⁶ *A Canterbury Tale* is made on the rebound from *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (1943), a subtle celebration of British values, so subtle that it had attracted the ire of the War Office, who thought it an attack on Englishness. When Sir James Grigg, the Minister of War, was sent a treatment in advance of production, he did not feel the War Office could support it. Brendan Bracken, Minister of Information, concurred: "It was not the sort of film which this ministry could properly support." Churchill was roped in who pronounced it a "foolish production" on the grounds that it was detrimental to the morale of the army. The matter was even discussed in the Cabinet. Fortunately, Bracken came to the view that in stopping the film, "the ministry is liable to be suspected of abusing its censorship powers" and production therefore went ahead. A showing of the finished film was arranged for Churchill who left the screening without saying a word about the film. When Grigg saw it, he concluded "that it was unlikely to attract much attention or to have any undesirable consequences on the discipline of the army". ⁷ There is therefore a superficial verdict to put on *A Canterbury Tale*, that Powell and Pressburger consciously strove to make it of unequivocal patriotic intent, in an attempt to 'unblot' their copybook. What they in fact achieved was an even more fervent argument for English values than they had done in *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*. Powell took to the idea because it had a personal dimension for him, having been brought up in Canterbury and the Kentish countryside, but he himself used to say that the film was the most "fully Emeric" of all those that they did together.⁸ For Pressburger, the Hungarian Jew who had arrived in Britain, the film was an opportunity to articulate those English values that were worth defending in time of war. Both could therefore create, and subscribe to, the idea of ending the film on a major chord: Alison, Colpepper, soldiers and townspeople are swept into the great service at Canterbury Cathedral, where, on the eve of the Normandy landings ⁹, all sing 'Onward Christian Soldiers', a moment of jingoism that is transcended by the sound of the bells and the sight of the Cathedral embedded in the landscape.

An old-fashioned quality to the camera work enhances the present-day appeal, because the contemporary cinema seeks other effects: the black-and-white clouds piled up over the Downs do not just romanticise the landscape so much as glorify it, in the manner of Blake's 'Jerusalem'¹⁰; the sparing use of close-ups allows for the main characters to take on moments of illumination, as if by grace; and, most starkly, when Colpepper tells the sceptical Gibbs that he too might be an instrument of blessing, and Gibbs demurs, a back-lighting effect as the train draws into the station produces a halo around his head. Even the Cathedral organist who lets Gibbs play the organ wears his gown like an angel with wings, a messenger of God who drops his sheet music and thus gives Gibbs a reason to ascend to the organ loft.

Chaucer is a potent cultural thread to the film, another signpost to the virtues of England, but Powell and Pressburger must surely have Shakespeare in mind as well, even unconsciously. The voice-over of the opening functions like one of Shakespeare's prologues¹¹; the background characters are humanised by touches of Shakespearean comedy; indeed, in the Shakespearean manner, all the characters

are given something that draws us to them. But besides Chaucer and Shakespeare, one thinks too of Mozart in 'The Magic Flute' using an alien story of freemasonry to make a work about the redeeming journey, just as Powell and Pressburger use an absurd detective story to fashion their own redeeming journey. The American John Ford comes to mind as well, the master of portraying community and complexity, and, in his middle period at any rate, of the fundamental communal value of religion.

The cardinal moment in the film, that displays Powell's and Pressburger's intensity at its strongest, is when Alison goes to look at the caravan she has held in store in Canterbury, the caravan in which she had a holiday with Geoffrey in 1940, the caravan which is the repository of her romantic dreams. When it is uncovered, the air is filled with dust, the sun hats are revealed as mouse-eaten, and moths fly out of Geoffrey's coat. Alison's dream is crumbling into nothing; we feel her having to face the reality that Geoffrey is lost for ever. Cut to Colpepper standing silhouetted in the garage doorway, harbinger of a blessing to come, for the garage owner then rushes in to tell Alison the news that Geoffrey is alive; cut to a close-up of Alison's face amazed at the news of this miracle, drawing us too into an emotion of amazement, of awareness that something is happening 'contrary to custom and experience'¹². Pan left to the Cathedral visible through the garage window, the House of God radiating the world.

Close-up too of the disappointment on Colpepper's face: come to offer Alison comfort at the time of despair, he finds that her miracle is his opportunity overturned. This is a tragic heart to the film's skin-deep innocence, and the point is cruelly rammed home: when at the end, Alison and Geoffrey's father walk into the Cathedral, they go past Colpepper standing with a lost expression at the side. Alison does not notice him, as if to say, like Henry V to Falstaff, 'I know thee not, old man.'

A final measure of Powell's and Pressburger's commitment to the film is their response to the fact that they were unable to film inside the Cathedral itself since the windows had been removed to prevent their destruction in air raids. Astounding as it seems as we watch the film now, they recreated the interior of the Cathedral in Denham studio, in particular to allow a view from the organ loft down the south aisle, and of the assembled congregation in the nave. This is illusionism of the highest order, and stands as a rhetorical analogy to the way great art can be fashioned from simple elements, and in the cinema's case, from the plywood and paste of a set, from the ordinary vernacular of speech, from the extraordinary landscapes that enrich every corner of this country, and from the presence of a building uplifted to the heavens above the surrounding roofs of the town.

As we have noted, the film was not a success when it first appeared. Although it is gratifying that the rise in the reputation of the Powell-Pressburger films has not overlooked the masterly qualities of *A Canterbury Tale*, that appreciation is largely confined to film aficionados, when I would want to argue that in the present, deprived as it is of a spiritual richness in the public sphere, we need to bring the virtues it celebrates into the centre of British culture, and to understand the way it expresses something enduring about England. It is no trivial thing that Pressburger responded to the idea of the cathedral as a national symbol, and to the other-worldly qualities that a building like Canterbury radiates, giving not just a glimpse of what religious faith might be, but linking that to qualities of pastoralism with its inherent innocence, an

awareness of history without irony or suspicion, and the resonance of an author like Chaucer 500 years on. As a newcomer to Britain, Pressburger may have been struck with a momentary giddiness, but brilliantly he manages to ground the film's patriotism in a process of long duration, of a filtering through time so that the result is a distillation, free of impurities. When in our own time money seems to be the measure of so many things, when individual feeling seems to take precedence over a sense of humility before God, and when institutions, including (perhaps especially) the church, seem to be the object of great distrust, these ideas take on as great an urgency as they did in the time of the Second World War. The fact that we live in an age of diverse faith and diverse identity makes it all the more imperative that we find a common articulation of what values we are living for, and an articulation of what it is that a cathedral like Canterbury can embody: universality¹³. It would be superficial and inadequate to say that because we are engaged in a war on terror, we need a film like *A Canterbury Tale*, but in a society as secularised as ours, as 'de-sacralised' as ours, at least in the public perception of our institutions, we do need stories that express divine immanence operating in our everyday communality. *A Canterbury Tale* springs no greater surprise than in its deft manifestations of the operation of grace that changes the lives of individuals, and weaves the different strands of those different lives into a communal whole, just as the greatest cathedral architecture takes the different elements of its construction – columns, windows, vaulting, towers, spires – and weaves them into an awesome harmony. All roads should lead to Canterbury Cathedral as to the gate of heaven.

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Notes

1 The partnership between Michael Powell (1905-90) and Emeric Pressburger (1902-88) was one of the most creative in the history of the cinema. It was highly unusual too since on a number of their films they shared equally the credit for the screenplay, direction and production.

Powell started in the British film industry in the 1920s, and continued to direct films into the 60s and 70s, although his career was petering out by then. Pressburger, born in Hungary, worked as a screenwriter in Berlin and Paris, and came to the UK in 1935. The two began working together in 1939, and continued to do so until 1957. Besides *A Canterbury Tale*, notable films from this period are *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (1943), *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946), *Black Narcissus* (1947), *The Red Shoes* (1948), *The Tales of Hoffman* (1951), and *The Battle of the River Plate* (1956).

The film is available on DVD in Carlton's Silver Collection.

2 From the first volume of Michael Powell's autobiography, *A Life in Movies* (London: Heinemann, 1986), p.451.

3 Chillingbourne is an amalgam of the names of Chilham and Sittingbourne, both within 10 miles of Canterbury.

4 Powell, *A Life in Movies*, p.488.

5 One of the reasons the film was disliked by critics at the time was that someone who poured glue over women's hair should be sympathetic. In Pressburger's original script, Colpepper slashed the girls' dresses with a knife; this was jettisoned as being too sadistic. See *Emeric Pressburger: the life and death of a screenwriter* by Kevin Macdonald (London: Faber & Faber, 1994), p. 236.

6 The Germans are never mentioned in the whole film. *A Canterbury Tale's* patriotism is defined solely in home-grown terms, which is a much greater challenge than defining it merely as different from the enemy's.

7 These delicious contortions came to light in Macdonald, *Emeric Pressburger*, pp. 220 sq.

8 Macdonald, *Emeric Pressburger*, p.234. In view of his Hungarian origins and time in Berlin and Paris, the Chief Constable of Kent refused to give Pressburger a 'temporary residence permit' to attend the location shooting in August 1943. This gives a special irony to Colpepper's assertion that the Kent constabulary is an 'excellent police force'.

9 D-Day is not mentioned, firstly because it had not happened when the film was in production during summer and autumn of 1943, and secondly because the details were secret. The film was premiered in mid-August, two months after D-Day.

10 The camerawork is by Erwin Hiller, described by Powell as "a bit loony" about clouds. "He detested a clear sky."

11 As a war film, *A Canterbury Tale* is rather overshadowed by Laurence Olivier's *Henry V*, which appeared in the autumn of 1944. This sets Shakespeare's Prologue ("O for a muse of fire that would ascend the brightest heaven of invention") in the Globe Theatre, then opens the action out, culminating in the great battle scenes filmed in the countryside. *A Canterbury Tale* starts with a vision of Chaucer's pilgrims on the pilgrims' road, then opens out the film by cutting (famously) from falconer and falcon to plane and infantryman, from the Middle Ages to the modern world.

12 It was the Enlightenment philosopher David Hume who argued that the Christian required "a continued miracle in his own person which . . . gives him a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience".

13 The Russian language is explicit on this point. The word *sobor* now used for 'cathedral' is linked to the abstract quality of *sobornost* or 'communality' – 'together-ness' as opposed to the pursuit of individualism. See the Wikipedia on these words.