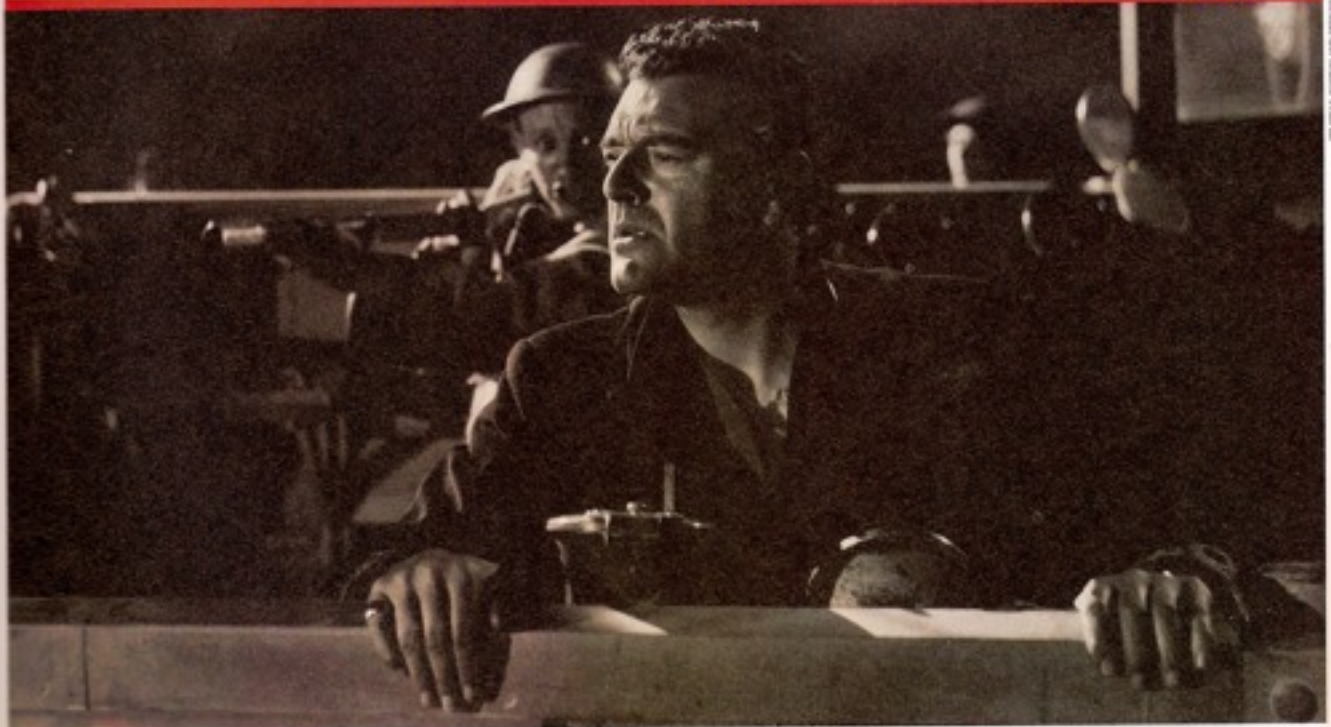


BY LEN DEIGHTON

SAND AND SEA

'Lawrence of Arabia' and 'The Cruel Sea' conjure up two versions of the British film industry: one devoted to international production, the other to modest indigenous films. Which road should we be pursuing?



● Asked to name the greatest film ever made, a large number of people will immediately nominate *Lawrence of Arabia* – that truly remarkable epic which brought plaudits from audiences who were using ‘epic’ as a term of abuse. It began as an idea in the mind of Sam Spiegel, whose *The Waterfront* had won eight Oscars and *The Bridge on the River Kwai* seven – as would eventually *Lawrence of Arabia*. It was Spiegel who obtained the rights, nursed the project through trials and tribulations, sought out the astounding array of talent that appeared in it, and, most difficult of all, obtained the money to make it.

The glamorous, enigmatic and controversial career of T. E. Lawrence was widely known and cinematic enough to have attracted the attention of many other film-makers. Here was Rudolph Valentino, updated, in colour and with a real desert to gallop through.

Curiously, the Lawrence legend began with a film. When the war ended he was unknown: the *Times History of the War* made no mention of him. It was a short piece of wartime documentary footage that started the ball rolling. When the *New York Globe* sponsored some lectures by Lowell Thomas, an American war correspondent who filmed the Arabian campaign, it was Lawrence who got most of the glory. Thomas took his film show to London and the whole of the British establishment threw its weight behind this romantic tribute to one of its countrymen. The prime minister (David Lloyd George), Rudyard Kipling, George Bernard Shaw, young Winston Churchill, an assortment of generals and royals, and the band of the Welsh Guards crowded into the plush setting of the Royal Opera House to join in the adulation.

Lies and poetry

A book of the film inevitably followed. Lawrence spent several years laboriously writing and then supervising the illustrations and production of a luxury edition relating his wartime experiences leading a revolt of desert Arabs against their Turkish rulers. Fewer than 200 copies were printed and they were sold for 30 guineas each – about 100 times the current cost of a novel. The *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* was not reliable history. Some said it was lies, some said it was poetry; in fact, it was a heady mixture of both.

Lawrence protested against the almost universal praise lavished on him by all sections of society, while always, as Lowell Thomas put it, “backing into the limelight”. The war had left him mentally unbalanced and determined upon self-abasement. As part of the degradation, he joined the ranks of the peacetime air force.

In 1926, having joined the RAF and the army under assumed names to get away from publicity (and written to the editor of the *Daily Express* to tell him about it), the erratic Lawrence accompanied his literary agent Raymond Savage to meet film producer Herbert Wilcox with the suggestion that his forthcoming book would make an “outstanding film”. Wilcox had never heard of Lawrence, but having had the desert adventures

described to him, he turned it down as “not good cinema and in spots rather sordid”.

Literary agents do not give up easily, however, and by 1934 Alexander Korda was taken with the idea of using *Revolt in the Desert* – an edited, less personal version of *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* produced by Lawrence to recoup his debts on the luxury title – as the basis for a film. To write the screenplay, he selected Basil Liddell-Hart, a friend and biographer of Lawrence. Asked what he thought of the idea of Leslie Howard starring in a film directed by Lewis Milestone, Lawrence said he approved. But at the same time he was telling his lawyers and trustees that he didn’t like the idea and hoped it would never come about. He was also naming actors who would be better able to portray him on the screen. The exasperated Savage suggested that Korda buy the film rights of Liddell-Hart’s biography and thus bypass Lawrence and his trustees (and Lawrence’s brother, Professor A. W. Lawrence, who was particularly difficult to satisfy). When Lawrence heard about this he changed his mind again and even offered to help Liddell-Hart with the screenplay.

While the negotiations continued, Lawrence was killed riding the powerful Brough motorcycle which he claimed was his one and only pleasure. The trustees, legally bound to maximise his estate on behalf of the charities to whom he had assigned his royalties, adopted a more commercial attitude. *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* became a ‘Book of the Month Club’ main selection and Korda was given the go-ahead. But cash shortages compelled Korda to sell and then buy back the project, which delayed the start to 1937 and beyond. In addition, British officialdom did not want the film made and knew how to go about preventing it. A “most confidential” memo reported that: “Mr K, in spite of his protestations about such things, looked forward to a knighthood, possibly in the forthcoming New Year list. If it could be made clear that no knighthood would be forthcoming unless it were understood that the film of *Revolt in the Desert* – or any other film made by him about Lawrence – were so adapted as to be entirely inoffensive to the Turks...” Sir Robert Vansittart, the Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office and Lawrence’s second cousin, found this way of resolving the problem somewhat alarming: “I deprecate any idea of buying him off with a knighthood – if this were done, he need only threaten to produce embarrassing pictures to obtain eventually, a dukedom.”

The British government was determined that no offence should be given to the Turks, and there seemed to be no way of making a film about Lawrence without doing so. At first Korda appeared undeterred. In that somewhat casual manner of British film-making at the time, his crew shooting *The Four Feathers* on location in Egypt and Sudan was asked to stay on and shoot some exteriors for a forthcoming film about Lawrence using John Clements (who was in *The Four Feathers*) as the hero. By this time Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and Universal had both registered the title ‘Lawrence of Arabia’, but to go ahead on such a project without legally assigned rights was to invite litigation. Then Paramount artfully jumped in ahead and bought everything Korda

had prepared. With the prospect of a European war that would make overseas filming virtually impossible, Korda probably found the choice between cash in hand and a battle with Whitehall mandarins an easy one to make. War came. Korda left for Hollywood, and Lawrence went back on the shelf.

In the 60s, my film production offices in Piccadilly were ones that Korda – or Sir Alexander Korda, as he later became – had once occupied. I got used to the way my visitors would look around expectantly and then relate some incident or conversation they’d had with Korda in this room. I began to collect Korda stories: I wish I could remember more of them. My favourite came from his equally famous nephew. Noticing the attention his uncle was given at the Savoy Hotel, despite the fact that he owed the management tens of thousands of pounds, Michael asked how that came about. “Always tip in cash,” explained Alexander Korda.

Cutting out the actors

When the Second World War ended, the Lawrence project was revived by the experienced producer Anatole de Grunwald, who persuaded Terence Rattigan to write a screenplay based on the Liddell-Hart biography. Pre-production got to the point of having Dirk Bogarde fitted with costumes and a blonde wig before the J. Arthur Rank accountants pointed out that the movie’s estimated cost of nearly three-quarters of a million pounds was far beyond their resources.

In 1959, to the astonishment of all those film-makers who had reeled away exhausted by negotiations with the Lawrence trustees, Sam Spiegel announced that he had bought the film rights to *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* – the poetic literary work of which Lawrence was so proud. Spiegel believed the script to be so vital to any film that he would spend months or even years preparing one. He was said to be the most persuasive man in the industry, and as he had recently scooped up armfuls of Oscars for *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, a project Korda had turned down, the film world all wanted to hear how he had ‘achieved the impossible’ in securing the rights from people who were notoriously reluctant to sell. Harry Saltzman told me that Spiegel simply said to Professor A. W. Lawrence – the literary executor who had appointed himself guardian of the legend – that he was so sure that this film would please the trustees, that should it fail to do so, they could withdraw his right to use the title. Harry laughed his infectious laugh as he related this and I joined in without understanding the joke. Seeing the perplexed look on my face, Harry said: “Can you imagine the title *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* above a marquee in Omaha?” Certainly Spiegel had no intention of calling his epic anything other than *Lawrence of Arabia*. When the film was finished, Professor Lawrence hated it and duly withdrew his permission to use the title *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. Had he visited any of the location sites during filming, he would have noticed that the ‘No Admission’ notices said you would need written entry permits from Horizon Pictures’ *Lawrence of Arabia* production office. The title had been abandoned from the start.

There are more anecdotes about *Lawrence of Arabia* than about any other film I know. Alec ▶

Men at war: Peter O'Toole (left) as T. E. Lawrence, a man caught between his own English culture and that of the Arabs, in David Lean's epic film *Lawrence of Arabia*, opposite top; Jack Hawkins, fighting the elements and his own pain in Charles Frend's *The Cruel Sea*, opposite bottom

◀ Guinness contributed some of the most telling ones. Guinness and director David Lean had never become close friends, despite the way Lean's *Great Expectations* in 1946 had given Guinness his first big chance. Arriving in Ceylon to begin his memorable role as Colonel Nicholson in *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, the actor had been greeted by Lean telling him that he had failed to get Charles Laughton (only because of medical insurance) and Noël Coward. Neither did Guinness relish Lean's ideas of how the British colonel should be played. The director wanted him to be someone who would be boring to meet. Guinness was horrified – Spiegel had persuaded him to take the part by telling him to bring out the humour of the Nicholson role. And now Guinness had been invited at Spiegel's insistence to play Emir Feisal, but Lean didn't want him in his film and the role of the Arab prince was beyond even the amazing skills of Guinness.

"Actors hate me," said Lean. Since the delicate exchanges of *Brief Encounter*, a barrier had arisen between him and his actors, something which made him reluctant to try to explore the emotions of his characters. No matter. Fine dialogue and subtle interactions between characters don't win big awards. And divine intervention, or perhaps that of Spiegel, ensured that Robert Bolt, whose reputation rested largely on *A Man for All Seasons*, now gave Lean a version of *Lawrence of Arabia* that used dialogue for little more than cryptic exchanges that could be used to weld together the stunning extravaganza of landscapes with which Lean was obsessed.

Lean had lost his respect for actors. His attitude was that if an actor could not do as the director wanted, he should be replaced by someone who could. It was not a paradox that he seemed to derive more pleasure from coaching members of the crew to take minor roles than he did from directing stars. Lean was essentially an editor – or a "cutter" as he preferred to call them. Trevor Howard's joke, that having finished shooting a sequence Lean couldn't wait to get into the editing room and start cutting the actors out of it, was not without a grain of truth, which is why the joke prevailed. But it was Lean's editing skills that enabled him to organise the film in his brain. What director other than Lean could have shot the film in the desert without seeing any daily rushes for months? What other director could have coped with the logistics at the location and directed the film while the scriptwriter was still drafting the end of the screenplay and the editor cutting the beginning?

Marlon Brando or Stanley Laurel?

Lawrence was revered at the time of the film's release, despite a critical biography by Richard Aldington and newspaper revelations of his sexual activities. These had shocked his countrymen more than had his own account of the appalling atrocities his Arab irregulars had committed on prisoners and Turkish wounded. This all produced an atmosphere which no doubt helped sell tickets. Winston Churchill's admiration for Lawrence was unstinting: he thought him one of the greatest men of the century. Lean's view was more prosaic. "I love nuts," said Lean. "Lawrence was a nut: a university don on a camel."

But making a biopic, even a biopic of a nut,

is a frustrating venture. The scriptwriter is deprived of so many important ingredients of story-telling. To depict a whole lifetime, he or she must begin with characters – such as parents and teachers – who will disappear from the story and never return. A filmed biography presents other problems. Even the finest make-up experts cannot make a young actor look old, still less can they make an older actor look young.

Some of the problems can be avoided by making a story from only one vital episode of a life, and this is what Lean did. He filmed only the high point of Lawrence's life, and used Freddie Young to shoot the desert in all its moods. Lean, like every other biopic-maker before and after him, clearly decided that history must be ruthlessly bent to his will. Subordinate characters were given invented lives, combined with the lives of others or eliminated altogether, sometimes by means of such comic-strip devices as sinking sands. His casting of Lawrence was as cavalier as his treatment of history, as any comparison of photographs of star and soldier reveals. The only Hollywood star who looked anything like Lawrence was Stan Laurel.

Meanwhile, Rattigan had taken the screenplay he had prepared for the abandoned *De Grunwald* film and used it as the basis for a play, *Ros* (one of Lawrence's assumed names). Spiegel persuaded Professor Lawrence to help him stop the stage-play by appealing to the powers of censorship that allowed the Lord Chamberlain to prevent deceased individuals from being portrayed on stage if their relatives objected. But Rattigan was as smart as Spiegel. He bought the film rights of the Liddell-Hart biography, to prevent anyone saying he was infringing on Spiegel's rights, and threatened to take his play to television, where the Lord Chamberlain's powers did not prevail. Then Herbert Wilcox, who had turned down the Lawrence story so many years earlier, armed himself with the *Ros* screen rights and those of the Liddell-Hart biography to start a film of his own. But as has often happened before and since, the money-men were frightened off by the threat of litigation and soon only the Spiegel film remained.

Ros opened in May 1960 and Guinness created a wonderful Lawrence on the stage of the Theatre Royal. The staging and scenery were simple and superb. I remember it vividly: Guinness, cocky and abrasive, had used a description provided by someone who had seen Lawrence frequently at his cottage at Cloud's Hill in Dorset – "I can see him right now as he was 30 years ago, walking like a duck, toes turned out, his arms stiff at his side, straight down the middle of the road in the dusk of a summer night." Lawrence's brother thought Guinness well suited to play the role and Liddell-Hart said he was "more capable" than any of the others. But Lean decided Guinness was too old, and Guinness was inclined to agree.

When Spiegel first revealed his planned film, Marlon Brando was to play Lawrence. "Will it be a speaking part?" asked some sardonic voice from the back of the room. The unknown questioner was not alone in finding it an unhappy choice. Weren't there any British actors? It was bad enough having Brando already cast in *Mutiny on the Bounty*. When Lawrence's brother joined the outcry, the idea of casting Brando was dropped.

There were other actors. "Finney worked four days, then quit," said Lean. "He told me he wasn't interested in becoming a star." Richard Burton was shortlisted. "He would have been marvellous," said Lean, and added, "Montgomery Clift used to ring me weekly in Madrid... begging to play Lawrence." Dirk Bogarde said that so many actors had been asked to play Lawrence he was thinking of forming a club for them.

The chances of Peter O'Toole, a little-known actor at the time, getting the part seemed slim. In a screen test for *Suddenly Last Summer* he had been asked to improvise a doctor's role, and had turned to the camera saying: "It's all right Mrs Spiegel, your son will never play the violin again" – a joke that caused Spiegel to become incandescent with rage, according to a biographer. Apart from being someone Spiegel said he would never work with, O'Toole was 11 inches too tall and far too handsome for the Lawrence part. But he worked hard, and remained with the production almost as long as Lean and the crew. It is probably the longest speaking part in the history of cinema. Perhaps in some mysterious way, O'Toole depicted the epic hero Lawrence wished to be. And the hero the moviegoer wanted him to be.

Pathetic and disturbed hero

Lawrence of Arabia had its world premiere in London before the Queen in December 1962. Like *Cleopatra* and *How the West Was Won*, it came on the heels of the epic *El Cid*. It was one of the very few films made in 70 mm Super Panavision (rather than enlarged from 35 mm), its superb optical definition an extra inducement for a public being asked to change to 'hard-ticket' shows (for which audiences booked seats for a scheduled performance) rather than continuous screenings. The completed film gave rise to more stories. When the edited version ran four hours, a further 20 minutes was cut from it and it was divided in half to provide an interval during which the audience could quench their thirst. At the premiere Tommy Steele (having grabbed a handful of sand from a fire bucket) came into the bar, pulled off a shoe, tipped the sand on to the carpet and shouted, "That damned stuff gets everywhere, doesn't it?"

Lawrence of Arabia set all manner of logistical records. Tankers endlessly trundled across 150 miles of empty desert bringing water, and everything else, to the isolated location at Jebel Tabeiq – perhaps the most remote spot ever used for a feature film. The large transport planes flew constantly. The property master, who usually had one assistant, needed 12. *Lawrence* is perhaps the finest biopic that will ever be made, but epics can never be great films. Large-scale production can never have the economy of means that gives the camera a chance to work its magic. The makers of silent films discovered that 50 people could step inside a sentry box which then blew to pieces – providing the camera was stopped and started at the right times. The finest films are impressionistic: fleeting brush strokes that suggest far more than is shown on the screen. An epic, on the other hand, is more akin to a meticulously painted pre-Raphaelite panorama. Making a film with umpteen million dollars worth of sets, costumes and hardware in exotic locations is more an exercise in photography and logistics than

Charles Frend's direction depicted the grey ocean as an enemy, and took care to keep shots of it minimal and threatening



Cry of pain and triumph: Charles Frend's 'The Cruel Sea'

film-making. Which is why it is Spiegel's film rather than Lean's.

Bolt was inspired in his decision to set aside all the writings about Lawrence in favour of the autobiographical *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. By taking only Lawrence's account of himself, Bolt was provided with enough contradictory, self-questioning behaviour to create an exotic hero. But there was nothing to suggest the pathetic and deeply disturbed personality that emerged from fuller accounts of Lawrence's life. Bolt's peerless craftsmanship enabled him to set an interesting character into a drastically simplified but easily understood historical background, without demanding too much of Lean and his actors. Lean's contribution was to know just how much story was needed to give continuity to the vast landscapes and violent action sequences he so enjoyed filming. Someone whose opinion I value, after seeing *A Man for All Seasons* on the London stage, said that Bolt could have produced a breathtaking masterpiece had he been assigned to write of Lawrence's deeply felt participation at the Peace Conference, where slippery British and French delegates conspired to cheat the Arabs of their promised land.

I agree. The true riches of a great film must come from its foundations – ideas, plot, dialogue and situation – rather than from blowing up real trains and real bridges. I can't think of *Lawrence* without comparing it with another film about men pitting themselves against the elements. Again the script came from a famous writer and was based on a junior officer's best-selling war memoir. But there the similarity ends.

Sexually restrained patriots

The Cruel Sea was shot a decade before the Lawrence film. Nicholas Monsarrat's best-selling autobiographical novel, of landlubbers called to man a small escort ship and fight a war against the U-boats in 1940, remains a British classic. And to write the script, the producer chose one of our finest authors, Eric Ambler.

Monsarrat's book is remarkable in not depending on the sort of psychopathic personalities that make *The Caine Mutiny* and *The Naked and the Dead* such compulsive reading. Neither were there any characters to compare with the legless RAF fighter pilot of *Reach for the Sky* or the US bomber group commander who suffers a nervous breakdown in *Twelve O'Clock High*. Like

Lawrence of Arabia, *The Cruel Sea* depicts men against the elements, but while Freddie Young's photography gave the desert a magical appeal that provided an insight into Lawrence's obsession with it, Charles Frend's direction depicted the grey ocean as an enemy, and took care to keep shots of it minimal and threatening.

Neither did *The Cruel Sea* follow the style that Noël Coward (aided by David Lean) created in his tributes to the senior service. While Lawrence had produced an overblown and unreliable history, Monsarrat had written a modest personal story: a cry of pain and triumph. Lawrence had an array of stars; the casting of *The Cruel Sea* took care to avoid actors who had created memorable servicemen's roles elsewhere. The film follows the book's somewhat shapeless plot: characters come and go and even the ship lasts only half way through the story. No sooner has the first officer, Stanley Baker, established himself as a thoroughly obnoxious character than he disappears and is never seen again. From now on the major characters share their cramped wardroom in a congenial atmosphere – and believe me, that is a plot situation that would give any writer a nervous breakdown.

The Royal Navy prided itself on being "the silent service" – brave, taciturn and understated compared with the anything-goes atmosphere of our lives today. And a truthful representation of the early 40s demanded sexually restrained patriots who never revealed their innermost feelings. So where is the conflict? Where is the confrontation? The appearance of the enemy is so fleeting that an extra sip of cocoa while viewing will deprive you of even that glimpse of the U-boat and the German seaman.

Those who believe that the principal task of the director is to prevent actors from overacting will not be disappointed by Charles Frend's tight grip on the filming. It can be seen when skipper Jack Hawkins sheds a solitary tear, having chosen to kill his own men struggling in the water rather than let an enemy submarine escape; no consolation comes from his first officer (Donald Sinden), who clearly believes that the men have been sacrificed because of the captain's miscalculation.

Sinden never slips into the clichéd "buddy" role that sends so many war films down the slippery sentimental slope. His romance with Virginia McKenna might be called tepid, but Denholm Elliott's unfaithful wife, played by Moira Lister, has a heart-wrenching effect on the plot. Elliott, the cuckolded husband, is armed with some of the best lines: "Something else? It's hardly becoming that when your first officer is suffering acute pain that you can be smiling at something else."

The Cruel Sea, book and film, stir the emotions in a way no epic ever could. While few moviegoers had ever met Lawrence of Arabia, they all knew some bank clerk or milkman who had gone off to man a warship equipped with no more than pluck, purpose and patriotism. The film's version of Lawrence – a sexually ambivalent sado-masochist cavorting in flamboyant embroidered robes in a shamelessly exaggerated version of his own achievements – does not produce for me the powerful drama that I find in the struggles of an amiable milkman-turned-radar-

operator as he drowns alone and lost in the oil-covered Atlantic.

In the light of the grim reality behind the story of *The Cruel Sea*, the model ships in the tiny water tank at Ealing are an acceptable backdrop, as are the flashing lights in the darkness that replace long convoys of merchantmen and escorts. The skill Ambler brings to keeping the action largely within the wardroom is masterly: the result has the sort of power that a superb stageplay gets from its unity of place. Although newsreel footage of burning tankers and sinking ships abounds in the archives, Ambler kept the use of such clips to a minimum. We seldom see any other ships, but we are always aware of their brooding off-screen presence.

Selling cold drinks

These two films demonstrate the dilemma that still faces the British film industry. *Lawrence of Arabia* was an international subject that could return a profit on the large investment only Hollywood is prepared to furnish. Its writer and director were British, but this was quite incidental to such a blockbuster. The flow of money into such mammoth productions brings an atmosphere in which the unit accountant's phone calls to the front office count for more than the opinions of the director. The publicity men want to see the rushes every day and ask the producer: "So what will it do in Japan?" To satisfy the accountants, the released version of *Lawrence of Arabia* was cut again, by 35 minutes, so it could be screened three times a day instead of two. And exhibitors appreciated the way showings of *Lawrence* always brought a dramatic increase in the sales of cold drinks.

Lean was similarly sliced up. In 1970, at a New York hotel after the opening of *Ryan's Daughter*, a gathering of film critics humiliated him. One of them started the attack by asking him how he came to produce this piece of shit. Other critics joined in to tell him he was "second rate" and "out of date". Devastated by this brutal treatment, Lean felt unable to make another film for 15 years. For much of the time he travelled the world making home movies of the landscape.

In the years that followed the making of *Lawrence of Arabia*, London rivalled Los Angeles as a European production base for American films. But costs spiralled in a climate where everyone talked in dollars and even devaluation of the pound sterling did little to help. Soon it was cheaper, as well as more convenient, for Americans to make their films in California. Certain sorts of films, requiring technical work, special effects and large sets, came to Britain, but year after year film-making shrivelled.

The Cruel Sea was a British production using a British book about a British subject with a script by a British writer. The actors were largely from the London stage. A modest production of this sort does not pay international salaries and does not have to incorporate elements familiar to American audiences, nor consider box-office receipts in Japan and Malaya, no more than do present-day film productions in France, Germany and Italy. Perhaps if Britain didn't share with Hollywood the English language, and its demand for worldwide 'product', we could still have a film industry.

