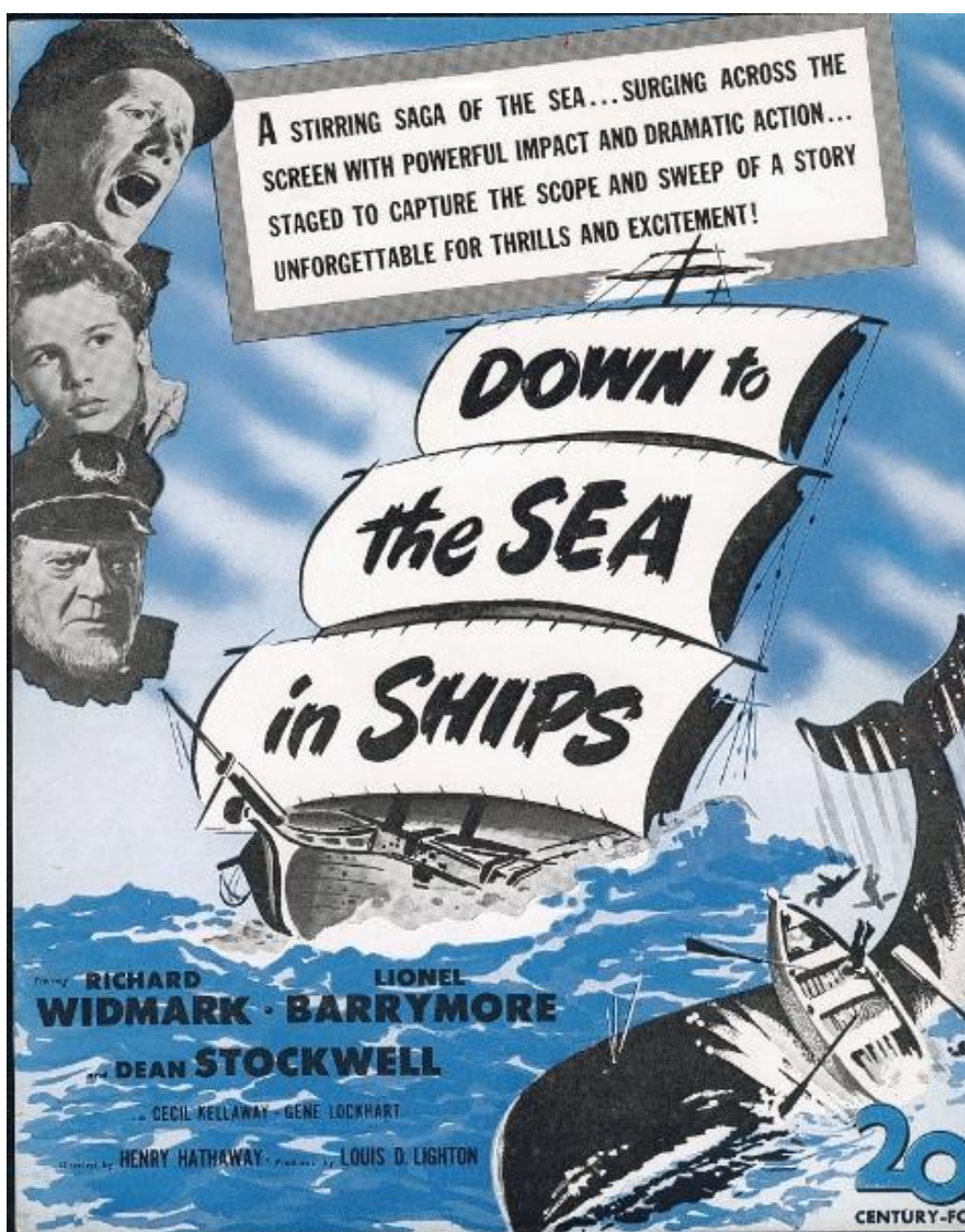


Down to the Sea in Ships

US : 1949 : dir. Henry Hathaway : 20th Century Fox : 120 min
 prod: Louis D Lighton : scr: John Lee Mahin & Sy Bartlett : dir.ph.: Joe MacDonald
Dean Stockwell
 Lionel Barrymore; Richard Widmark; Cecil Kellaway; Gene Lockhart; Berry Kroeger;
 John McIntire; Henry Morgan; Harry Davenport; Paul Harvey; Jay C Flippen; Fuzzy Knight;
 Arthur Hohl; Dorothy Adams

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω □ ∅ Z ∞	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
2419b	4	7	2	1,748	3 7 7 3 7	No	Sept 1997





The eternal triangle – seafaring style

Source: The Films of 20th Century Fox

Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide
1996 review:

"Young Stockwell fulfils his seafaring goal on crusty Barrymore's whaling ship, under guidance of sailor Widmark. Good atmospheric yarn. *** "

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review - identical to above

Halliwell's Film Guide review:

"An old whaling skipper wants his grandson to follow in his footsteps. Seagoing spectacle with strong characters; all concerned show Hollywood in its most professional form, but the film somehow fails to catch the imagination or live in the memory. Scr: John Lee Mahin & Sy Bartlett; dir.ph: Joe MacDonald; music: Alfred Newman * "

The Films of 20th Century Fox comment:

"A nineteenth-century whaling yarn about a grizzled old captain (Lionel Barrymore), his grandson (Dean Stockwell), who is eager to leave school and go to sea¹, and his first mate (Richard Widmark), who represents the new breed of seaman with his nautical education. The old man resents the new breed, but comes to respect him, even though he has to relieve him of his duties for rescuing his grandson and leaving the ship to do it. When the ship is damaged by contact with an iceberg, it is the old captain who saves the day and is fatally injured in the process. A fine sea saga, with a memorable performance from Barrymore and a good account of the whaling men out of New Bedford, Massachusetts. Screenplay by John Lee Mahin and Sy Bartlett, from a story by Sy Bartlett. Photographed by Joe MacDonald. Produced by Louis D Lighton "

¹ *Incorrect – he's eager not to leave the sea and go to school*

Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89
review:

"Life on the New England whaling boats seen through the eyes of a very young Dean Stockwell. *** "

Historical Boys' Clothing website comment:

"Movie about life on a New England whaling boat seen through the eyes of Dean Stockwell. Credible performance on his part."

[no listing in "The Critics' Film Guide", "The Good Film and Video Guide", "A Pictorial History of the Talkies", "Rating the Movies (1990)", "The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television", "The Time Out Film Guide", "TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995", "Variety Movie Guide 1993", "Video Movie Guide 1993" or "The Virgin Film Guide"]

Radio Times review:

"Director Henry Hathaway keeps this rousing whaling adventure firmly on course, with Lionel Barrymore his cantankerous self as a 19th-century Massachusetts seafarer whose grandson (Dean Stockwell) is torn between old family methods and the modern techniques of first mate Richard Widmark. Though not a topic to attract the more ecologically aware actors of today, there is plenty of passion in the exchanges between Widmark and Barrymore. The real highlight is the playing of such stalwarts as Cecil Kellaway and Gene Lockhart² *** "

"Veteran whaling boat skipper Bering Joy is determined to ensure that his grandson keeps up the family's seafaring tradition. But during a difficult voyage, the sea dog clashes with his first mate Dan Lunceford. *** "

20th Century Fox flyer synopsis:

"At the age of 80, Bering Joy (Lionel Barrymore) is the greatest whaling master in Bedford harbour. A gruff, strict disciplinarian, he commands respect and affection from his

² *at any rate, for critics who prefer to ignore children in films, as you clearly do*

crew. The shipping firm's directors think it's high time for Bering to retire but he absolutely refuses to consider it. They even bring in a young man, Dan Lunceford (Richard Widmark) to replace him but Bering won't relinquish command. Instead, he agrees to take on Lunceford, possessor of master's papers, as first mate.

When they leave port, Bering tells Dan that part of his duty will be to see that his young grandson Jed (Dean Stockwell) receives "his proper portion of book learning". Resenting this, Dan finds that Jed is an unwilling learner but gradually, by imparting human interest into his teaching technique, he wins the boy's confidence and affection.

The gruff Bering, seeing that Jed is improving in his studies and that he has formed a great attachment for Dan, jealously resents it. Slush (Cecil Kellaway) the ship's cook, notices this and warns Dan. Soon it is decided that Jed should be blooded at whaling and when a "school" is sighted, he goes out in one of the boats.

The boat in which he is a member of the crew does not return. There is a thick fog but it is a rule that the strict Bering will never break, never to send more than one boat out to search for a missing crew. As time goes on and there is no sign of the missing boat, Dan orders a second boat to be lowered.

He finds the crew clinging to wreckage but back on board ship Bering relieves Dan of his duty as first mate, since he had jeopardised the safety of the ship. Jed is grieved and angry beyond measure at his grandfather and, knowing that Dan will be put off at the next port of call, he asks permission to be placed ashore, too.

A few days later, Bering falls ill and sending for Dan, orders him to take command. Sailing through the water dotted with icebergs, the ship quails before a mighty storm. A thick fog makes matters worse and there is a rending crash as the bow hits the ice and the ship settles on an iceberg. At a great risk, Dan orders men to accompany him overboard and repair a gaping hole. In the course of this, one of the men is crushed to death and Dan himself is injured.

Just as Dan gives orders to abandon ship, Bering appears on deck. He will not leave the ship but personally goes overboard to assess the damage. The patch is put on and a great wave

takes the ship off the iceberg. With the ship safely afloat again, Jed goes to his dying grandfather to withdraw his request to be put ashore. And it is with a smile on his lips that Captain Bering Joy passes on."

There was apparently a 1922 silent film of the same name, also about whaling ships, with William Walcott, Clara Bow and Marguerite Courtot, but from what I can gather it was a romance, and otherwise unrelated to this story. There are resemblances in the narrative structure between "**DOWN TO THE SEA IN SHIPS**" and "**CAPTAINS COURAGEOUS**". Not only are they set on shipboard, with an entirely male cast (Lionel Barrymore playing the captain in both), but both concern a boy's developing love for a seaman, to the exclusion of his family, and both resolve the conflict that presents by means of a timely death. Manoel dies so that Harvey's affections may be reclaimed by his tycoon father; and here grandpa Joy dies so that Jed's passionate loyalty to Dan Lunceford does not amount to a betrayal of family tradition.

The Pride of Bedford returns to the port of New Bedford in 1887 with a record cargo of whale oil, but Captain Joy is an elderly man, and the insurers are worried as to his seaworthiness. For his part, he is worried that orphaned grandson-cum-cabin boy Jed is falling behind in his book-learning. The law requires that the boy pass his grade exams whether he attend school or not, and Jed seems likely to fail. Both of them are resolved that Jed should carry on the family tradition, but the captain realises he is unable to provide the necessary tuition himself during their year-long whaling trips. Jed does indeed fail his grade exam, but the principal overseeing the test owes a personal debt to Captain Joy, and doctors the results rather than disappoint the old man.

Then a solution presents itself in the shape of a shore-educated first mate, Lunceford (Widmark) whom the insurers foist on the disdainful Captain Joy. On board ship once more, the Captain immediately assigns Lunceford to tutor his grandson between duties. Lunceford is not well pleased, but Jed even less so. Seeing that the boy will not apply himself, Lunceford refuses to take him out on the longboats. Jed quickly buckles down to his studies, and grows to admire the younger man and his new understanding of nautical science, marine biology etc. The old Captain becomes jealous of the boy's affections, and resentful of the mate, so that when the all-seeing ship's cook points this out to Lunceford, he attempts to correct the situation by turning cold toward Jed, who can't understand what he's being punished for. Thus the scene is set for a man/boy/man emotional triangle amid the macho welter of whale butchery and treacherous seas.

Unlike Bartholomew in "**CAPTAINS COURAGEOUS**", however, Stockwell does not have a character transformation to undergo, his part is sorely underwritten, so that he merely tosses to and fro between a possessive curmudgeonly grandfather with traditional seafaring methods and an ambitious young man with a scientific grasp of his vocation. As a human drama this does not work so effectively, and while Widmark and Barrymore make their characters sympathetic, the third part of the triangle - no fault of Stockwell's - is weak.

Films like "**DOWN TO THE SEA IN SHIPS**" and "**MOBY DICK**" will seem faintly pornographic to a generation raised in veneration of the whale, as would any film blissfully extolling the thrills of elephant hunting. As a portrait of shipboard life, "**MOBY DICK**" is the superior of the two, and a better drama besides. However, "**DOWN TO THE SEA IN SHIPS**" and "**FREE WILLY**" would make for a provocative double bill.

Dean Stockwell, Hollywood's sulky cherub deluxe, was 13 now, the same year that he made "**THE SECRET GARDEN**" and "**STARS IN MY CROWN**". Like Roddy McDowall, he was favoured with a long adult career in film and television, though never attaining the status he'd enjoyed as a boy. Dubbed "Star of Tomorrow" by the Motion Picture Herald in 1949, he won a Gold Star Award for Best Juvenile Performance of 1947 in "**GENTLEMAN'S AGREEMENT**" and a Critics' Award for the same role. His best known films included "**ANCHORS AWEIGH**", "**THE BOY WITH GREEN HAIR**", "**THE HAPPY YEARS**" and of course "**KIM**".

See subject index under **GRANDPARENTS, HISTORY, ORPHANS / ADOPTION, SEAFARING** and **SPECIAL FRIENDSHIPS**.