

Sammy Going South

(US = "A Boy Ten Feet Tall")

UK : 1963 : dir. Alexander Mackendrick : British Lion / Seven Arts

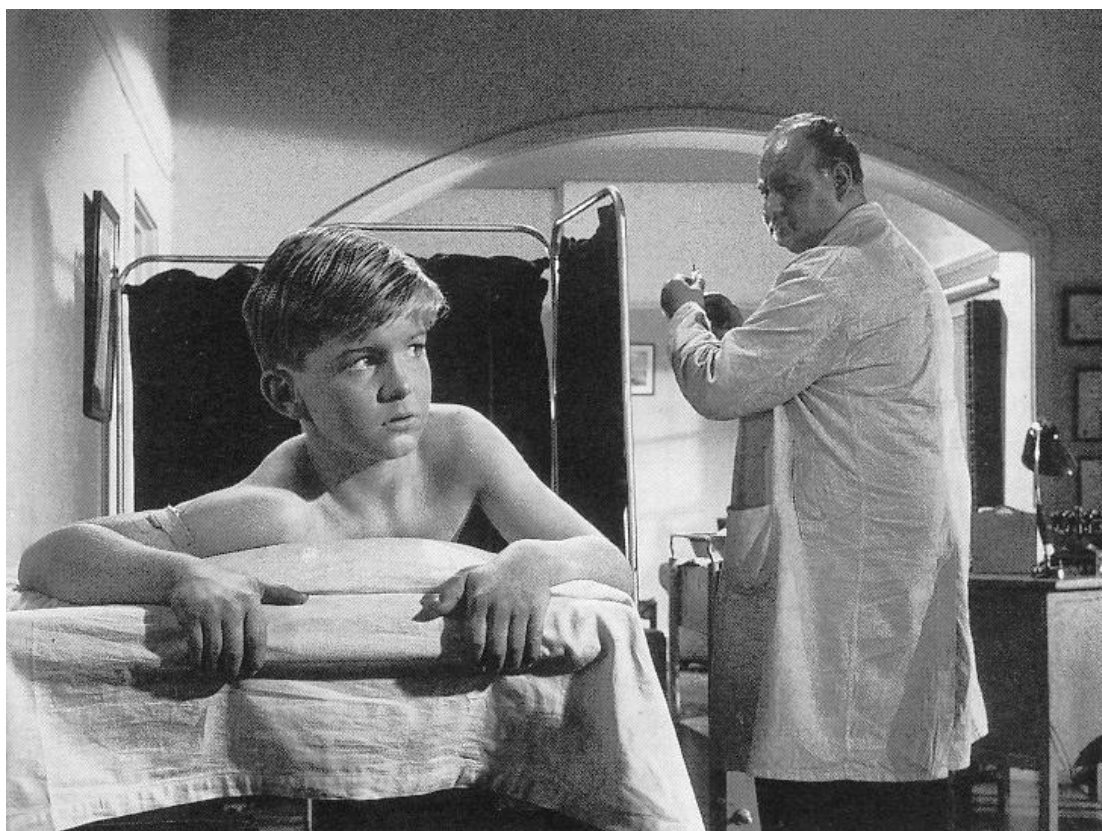
: 128 min

prod: Hal Mason : scr: Denis Cannan : dir.ph.: Erwin Hillier

[Fergus McClelland](#)

Edward G Robinson; Constance Cummings; Harry H Corbett; Paul Stassino; Zia Moyheddin;
Zena Walker; Orlando Martins; John Turner; Jack Gwillim; Patricia Donahue; Jared Allen;
Guy Deghy; Frederick Schiller; Swaleh; Tajiri; Faith Brown

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω □ ∅ Z ∞	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
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The doctor gives Sammy a few pointers on his way...

Source: The Moving Picture Boy

Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide review:

"Colourful, charming film about orphaned boy travelling through Africa alone to reach his Aunt, who lives in Durban. Cut to 88 minutes for American release, footage was restored for the TV print. *** "

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review - identical to above

Halliwell's Film Guide review:

"A 10-year old boy is orphaned in Port Said and hitch-hikes to his aunt in Durban. Disappointing family-fodder epic in which the mini-adventures follow each other too predictably."



Edward G Robinson, reeling under the name of "Cocky Wainwright", lends a human dimension to an otherwise bland travelogue. Source: Films & Filming May 63

Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89
review:

"Nice family entertainment, thanks to the exotic locale and a good human interest story of a young lad trying to cross Africa alone to reach his aunt. *** "

The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television review:

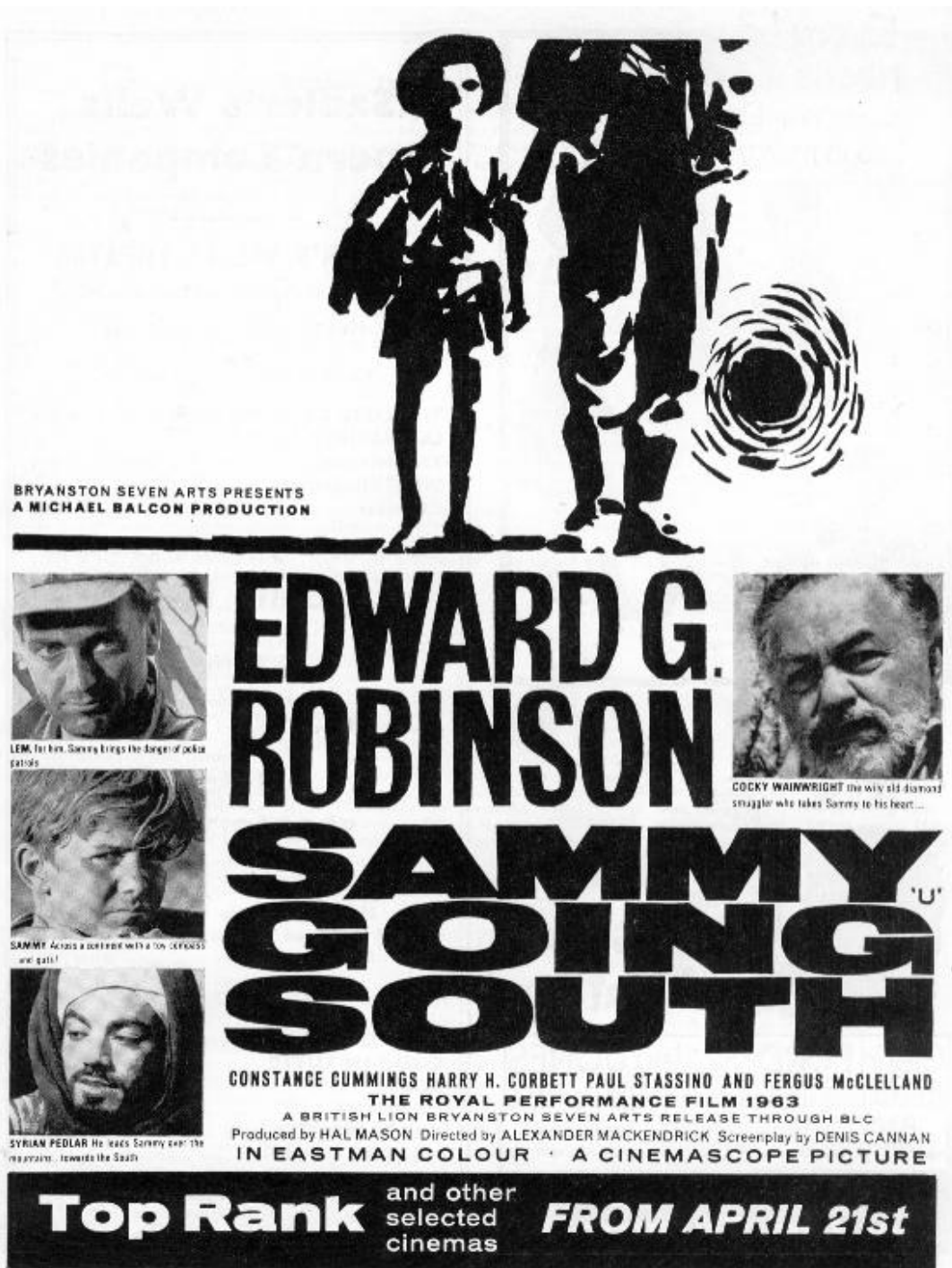
"A ten-year old boy making a 4,500-mile trek across Africa to his aunt in Durban could have been a sloppy sentimental yarn tricked out to bring tears to the eyes of impressionable viewers. That it avoids this kind of sob-stuff is director Sandy Mackendrick's most notable achievement in this unusual film. Edward G Robinson is marvellously grizzled as the wily old diamond smuggler who is Sammy's only friend; the other people he meets - a Syrian pedlar (Zia Mohyeddin in a too-long episode), a rich American (Constance Cummings), a tribal chief (Orlando Martins) are interesting too. But ultimately it is in the character of Sammy (Fergus McClelland) that Mackendrick excels; he is shown as a nasty little tyke, who uses everyone more than they use him.¹ ** "

¹ Completely untrue! This is what happens when you let people who essentially dislike small boys - or at least have no inkling what makes them tick - review a film in which a small boy is the central character.

The Time Out Film Guide review:

"While widely regarded as an example of Mackendrick's decline after the masterpiece that was "SWEET SMELL OF SUCCESS", this is certainly not the mere "family fodder" that disappointed Leslie Halliwell. Indeed, like "A HIGH WIND IN JAMAICA" and "MANDY", it is another of the director's dark, somewhat sour studies in child psychology: as the young McClelland, suddenly orphaned during an air-raid on Port Said, makes his long and lonely journey down through Africa in search of his aunt in Durban, he encounters all kind of danger and criminality with barely a blink of an eye.

If the pace is oddly flaccid in places and the photography sometimes verges on travelogue territory, there is no denying the vitality of the performances, Robinson being particularly affecting as the diamond mining outlaw who takes Sammy temporarily under his wing. Indeed, as in "HIGH WIND..", it is the adults, rather than Sammy, who finally suffer the most, and the film stands alongside "THE MAN IN THE WHITE SUIT", "WHISKY GALORE" and "THE LADYKILLERS" as a sceptical overturning of conventional ideas about innocence and experience."



Thus was it sold to the public

Source: Films & Filming May 63

TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995 review:

"In that it's a Michael Balcon production directed by Alexander Mackendrick, this colourful, absorbing and engaging picture is an Ealing film in all but name. You'll be gripped throughout to the adventures of 10-year old Sammy (Fergus McClelland) as he journeys down the length of Africa to find his only surviving relation. Edward G Robinson steals

the film as a rascally but friendly diamond smuggler. *** "

Variety Movie Guide 1993 review:

"Pic is based on an uneasy, incredible idea - from a novel by W.H.Canaway. A 10-year old youngster (Fergus McClelland) is orphaned when his parents are killed in an air raid during

the Suez crisis. In a blur he remembers that he has an Aunt Jane in Durban and that Durban is in the South. So he sets out, armed only with a toy compass. He meets a Syrian peddler who sees in the kid a chance of a reward from Aunt Jane. He meets a rich American tourist but escapes her greedy clutches.

Not until he meets up with a grizzled old diamond smuggler (Edward G Robinson) does the film flicker into some spark of human interest ². The old man and the moppet [*sic*] strike up a splendid friendship. Mackendrick's films usually strike an attitude and have intuition on points of views ³. Relationships between his key characters are usually more clearly defined and worked on than in this. With the exception of Robinson, looking like a slightly junior Ernest Hemingway, and Paul Stassino, as a glib crook of a guide, the others are cardboard."

Films & Filming - May 1963 - review:

"Adapted from W.H. Canaway's novel, "SAMMY" tells of a 4,500 mile trek made by a wandering ten-year old across Africa. Orphaned as the result of an air-raid during the Suez crisis, young Sammy Hartland (Fergus McClelland) heads into the desert determined to find his only remaining relative, an aunt living in Durban, South Africa. Helped (and hindered) by a Syrian pedlar (Zia Mohyeddin), a rich American (Constance Cummings), then a proud African chief (Orlando Martins), the boy eventually stumbles into the camp of a wily old diamond smuggler (Edward G Robinson). Sensing that the lad is in need of someone who will both respect his independence and stand firm with him as a friend, the old man encourages the boy in his belief that he is entirely self-sufficient. When the police, alerted by an agent of the rich American, raid the smuggler's camp, the old man has the boy taken to where he can easily board a Durban bound train. "That lad must finish his journey by himself," explains the old man to the boy's aunt. "He's got to do it all by himself. All the way... and when he gets there, you've got to be waiting for him."

As directed by Alexander Mackendrick, whose first picture this is in seven years, "SAMMY" is

² ie: for those same people totally uninterested in children and unable to empathise with them.

³ Is there a translator in the house?

often a serious film posing as a simple one. And one can imagine that in less capable hands the tale would have been quite differently told. Thankfully, in developing the central situation of the wandering child all alone in the world, Mackendrick has steered clear of the kind of synthetic sentimentality that might have well damned one's acceptance of it. Really, wee Sammy is no more than a little brute who uses everyone who crosses his path. The director's view is quite clear on this and we are asked to accept Sammy not as a romanticised figure, all cute tricks and grave wisdom, but as a sharp little cookie who deserves our respect as a person entirely in his own right. But although synthetic sentimentality is shunned in this key figure, there's nothing austere about Mackendrick's handling of the picture generally.



Admittedly the piece takes not a little while to get into its stride, and by far the best scenes come toward the end. But it might well be argued that the slow opening is important in relationship to the last scenes, and that we must first Sammy as an uncommunicative vagrant

before we can appreciate the extent of his blossoming out under the old man's guidance. A wonderfully grizzled performance by Edward G Robinson adds great value to these final scenes. Gruff in tone and leathery of appearance, his deeply-charged playing gives the film a warm-hearted centre which it is greatly in need of. Fergus McClelland's own performance as Sammy is not lightly to be dismissed either. How much of it came from the director working through him can only be guessed at⁴, but the result is exactly right. Dennis Cannan's script is a bit on the limp side and, along with some drawn-out scenes between the boy and the pedlar, is the film's biggest stumbling block. But perhaps, when all is said and done, the main virtue of the piece is that it's Sandy Mackendrick's first film in seven long years, since, in fact, the bitter but marvellous "SWEET SMELL OF SUCCESS". Whilst not wholly pleasing, "SAMMY" bears enough evidence that Mackendrick is still the best of British directors. One only hopes it won't be another seven years before he is at work again."

- John Cutts



⁴ Q.E.D.

The Moving Picture Boy entry on McClelland:

"Like Christian Bale in "EMPIRE OF THE SUN", young Fergus - son of the Irish actor Alan McClelland - was required in "SAMMY GOING SOUTH" to represent a middle-class British schoolboy brought face to face with war and the grim realities of life. Since Sammy's ordeal involves finding his way the length of Africa, from Port Said to Durban, it is less claustrophobic than imprisoned Jim's. Though a rather confected Odyssey, and no more Alexander Mackendrick's finest film than "EMPIRE.. " is Spielberg's, this softened version of W.H. Canaway's novel offered Fergus McClelland the chance to see spectacular landscapes and to meet an assortment of exotic animals, including Edward G Robinson as a grizzled hunter with a Hemingway beard and a sideline in smuggled diamonds.

As the pompously manly little Brit, Fergus was superb, rightly suspicious of the motives of most of his "helpers", and singing defiantly to himself when alone. On the strength of his performance he got work with the Royal Shakespeare Company, and played Jim Hawkins in the Mermaid Theatre's "Treasure Island" of Christmas 1963. He did a good deal of TV work, including several weeks in the hospital soap opera "Emergency Ward 10". After marginal roles in "PRESS FOR TIME" (66) and the musical "GOODBYE MR CHIPS" (69), Fergus abandoned the acting profession. He now supports himself, and his interest in music and ancient religions, by work in electronics, and has been writing a novel on an Old Testament subject."

[no listing in "The Critics' Film Guide", "The Good Film and Video Guide", "A Pictorial History of the Talkies", "Rating the Movies (1990)", "Video Movie Guide 1993" or "The Virgin Film Guide"]

Radio Times review:

"Coming between "MANDY" and "A HIGH WIND IN JAMAICA", this is the weakest of Alexander Mackendrick's bittersweet trio of films. The format is essentially that of a road movie but its episodic structure prevents the picture from picking up pace. However, Fergus McClelland is a likable lad, and his scenes with

wizened diamond smuggler Edward G Robinson are of a very high order. *** ”

“When his parents are killed during a bombing raid in Egypt, ten-year old Sammy Hartland begins a hazardous 5,000 mile journey to his aunt’s home in Durban, South Africa. Showing in widescreen format.”

What’s On TV review:

“It’s 1956 and with his parents killed in a bombing raid on Egypt, 10-year old Sammy decides to walk the several thousand miles to his aunt’s hotel in South Africa. A rattling adventure story, packed with well-staged incidents, authentic locations and colourful characters. *** ”

“Adventure. A young orphan sets off alone across Africa.”

Sunday Times note:

“An orphan sets off on a journey from Port Said in Egypt to South Africa.”

Daily Mirror note:

“A young orphan boy treks across Africa to reach his Aunt in Durban. ** ”

McClelland was 13, playing 10; his only other feature of note being **"THE PUMPKIN EATER"** in 64. The reviews are sometimes very revealing (as doubtless, are my own) about the writer's viewpoint on children, or at any rate on boys. The *Time Out* critic paints the film as a sardonic inversion of the childhood "innocence" myth (would that it were) and Sammy as a cold, indifferent creature bringing distress and ruin to the poor adults in his path. The *Sunday Times* critic goes one further, making him a callous exploiter of those who sincerely attempt to help him on his way. But the absolute give-away is when a reviewer attempts to hand any credit for the boy's performance to the director.

Selected for the 1963 Royal Film Performance it is, like the selection twelve years earlier - **"WHERE NO VULTURES FLY"**, a po-faced Boys' Own adventure hovering indecisively on the brink of post-colonialism, but not quite able to jettison the Ernest Hemingway view of Africa as an exotic place full of simple, dirty people and enchanting wildlife to shoot at.

It follows the book as closely as such movies ever do, and certainly conveys the scale of Sammy Hartland's epic journey in physical terms, if it has precious little to say about the journey he makes in psychological terms. As with the critics, screenwriter Denis Cannan was not overly interested in his central character, employing him as a vehicle to carry the film from one "interesting" adult to the next. It is Cannan's indifference, and not Sammy's, which is all too plainly visible in the film.

A little travelogue footage does no harm in an epic journey, and the cameraman achieves occasional striking panoramas, particularly at sundown, to convey the allure of Africa. What the film lacks in excitement quotient is compensated only by an appealing performance from Edward G, no doubt roped into this very British project (Harry H Corbett cast as his partner!) to enhance US sales (many British films of the period featured spurious American leads at the behest of American distributors). His warm relationship with the boy provides for a while the humanity so singularly absent in Sammy's other encounters, up to and including Aunt Jane in Durban. This is Robinson in philosophical mode, and he is the only adult in the film not to speak to the boy as a halfwit or inferior.

McClelland himself, reduced to playing a mere cipher, trudges doggedly on, eyeing adults with increasing wariness as he sees how quick they are to manipulate him. A blond, blue-eyed, ample-bottomed boy - the prep school's answer to Johnny Sheffield - he muses on death, dishonesty and family duty, picks African lice from his British hair, has a delightful chuckle, expresses hurt with a brave little soldier's dignity, but (not alone among boy actors) lacks the facility to weep on cue.

He is not left to his own devices long enough to show any real mettle, being shunted from the company of one set of adults to the next like so much poached ivory, which works against the dramatic impulse of the story: the boy's own resourcefulness, determination and staying power. When he encounters the lonely old diamond smuggler rejoicing under the handle of Cocky Wainwright, the film seems to heave a sigh of relief, allowing Sammy to relax happily back into a state of childlike dependency once more. Such a reassuring sight to parents everywhere. Which only makes it the more hilarious when Robinson blithely pays Harry Corbett £15,000 to be allowed to keep the boy. The qualities which carried the 10-year old of the book, largely under his own steam, 4,500 miles from Port Said to Durban, are understated to say the least of it, such independence unbecoming in one so young.

While **"SAMMY GOING SOUTH"** does disappoint - it resembles **"THE SPANISH GARDENER"** for its nervous antiseptic British sensibilities - I preferred it to **"A HIGH WIND IN JAMAICA"** (which was also devoid of any real affinity with its child cast, any genuine comprehension of them). Worth seeing for the Robinson/McClelland episode alone, (his more tentative friendship with the stern moslem Abu Lubaba on the riverboat is underdeveloped) while buxom quietly-spoken Fergus recalls the very kind of middle class English boy who was swiftly packed off to boarding school in those days to prevent them "going native". As a polite Boys' Own sort of adventure then, recommended.

For a more useful point of comparison than any other of Mackendrick's titles, see Nicolas Roeg's **"WALKABOUT"** (71), in which Jenny Agutter and Lucien John (sister and brother) must trek home across the Australian Outback after daddy blows his own head off. Because theirs is not a whistle stop tour of colourful characters encountered en route, the film is more compelling as a tale of their own endurance and stamina, and of a demure white girl's faltering sexual awakening.

See subject index under **AFRICA, DIRECTORS, EPIC JOURNEYS, HUNTING / SHOOTING / GUNS, ORPHANS / ADOPTION, RECOMMENDED TITLES, REFUGEES / EVACUEES** and **SPECIAL FRIENDSHIPS**.