

The Winslow Boy

UK : 1948 : dir. Anthony Asquith : British Lion / London : 117 min
 prod: Anatole de Grunwald : scr: Terence Rattigan & Anatole de Grunwald : dir.ph.:

[Neil North](#)
 Robert Donat; Cedric Hardwicke; Basil Radford; Margaret Leighton; Kathleen Harrison;
 Francis L Sullivan; Marie Lohr; Jack Watling; Walter Fitzgerald; Frank Lawton;
 Nicholas Hannen; Hugh Demriter; Evelyn Roberts; W A Kelly; Edward Lexy;
 Mona Washbourne; Wilfred Hyde-White; Ernest Thesiger; Cyril Richard; Stanley Holloway

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω 8 € M ☼	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
3566a	4.5	10	0	2,258	- 7 7 7 7	No	February 97



Here's an interesting fact Rattigan didn't know – women smoking in public was frowned upon until the tobacco industry employed a consultant psychologist to sell smoking to women by identifying the cigarette as a little "torch of liberty". Smoking equals emancipation. Get out of that one, modern anti-smoking PR types. Source: indeterminate

Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide
 1996 review:

"Superior courtroom melodrama from Terence Rattigan's play, headed by Donat as a barrister defending an innocent naval cadet (Neil North) accused of a school theft. Script by Rattigan and Anatole de Grunwald. ***1/2 "

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review – identical to above

Halliwell's Film Guide review:

"A naval cadet is expelled for stealing a postal order; his father spends all he has on proving his innocence. Highly enjoyable middle-class British entertainment based on an actual case; the

performances and period settings are alike excellent, though the film is a trifle overlong. *** ”

“Only a clod could see this film without excitement, laughter, and some slight moisture about the eyes”

– **Daily Telegraph**

The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television review:

“Terence Rattigan's theatrical treatment of the famous case in which a twelve-year old naval cadet was unjustly accused of theft, was opened out by him and producer Anatole de Grunwald into a less convincing screen treatment. Gone is the relationship of father and son, in its place a conventional court scene, with Robert Donat saving the day as his defending counsel. Anthony Asquith directed, in 1948, with his rather stuffy elegance. * ”

TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995 review:

“Terence Rattigan's stage success, based on a real-life cause célèbre, is the very stuff that drama, suspense and audience appeal are made of. After it proved equally effective as a radio play, the playwright himself helped translate the piece into a film, the screen version getting a boost from the powerful portrayal of Robert Donat, as the QC who defends a young naval cadet accused of a theft which, although minor, could ruin his career. The plot is brilliantly constructed, with a highly satisfying climax, and directed with a keen insight into English character by Anthony Asquith, who keeps tension on high throughout, especially in the climactic courtroom scenes. A highly superior cast includes fully-rounded characterisations from Margaret Leighton, Cedric Hardwicke; Frank Lawton; Basil Radford; Kathleen Harrison; Frances L Sullivan and Stanley Holloway¹. *** ”

Variety Movie Guide 1993 review:

“Terence Rattigan's story, based on an actual incident that occurred just before the First World War, is a simple story of a

¹ Let's not even trouble to mention the lad who plays the title character, eh?

13-year old naval cadet, expelled from school for the alleged theft of a dollar postal order. The boy's father is certain of his innocence and when he fails to have the case reopened, invokes the whole machinery of British democracy by arranging a full-scale parliamentary debate and subsequently bringing a successful action against the King.

It's more the father's conviction of his son's innocence, rather than the incident itself, which forms the background of this well-knit story, with sufficient emphasis on the emotional angles to make it a sure tearjerker. From its brisk opening the plot quickly develops the main theme, building up the fight for justice through a series of incidents which are highlighted by the interview between Robert Morton, MP and famous attorney, and the boy before he decides to accept the brief. A flawless cast portrays the principal characters to perfection, and minor roles have been painstakingly filled. ”

Video Movie Guide 1993 review:

“Robert Donat is superb as the proper English barrister defending a young naval cadet, wrongly accused of theft, against the overbearing pomp and indifferent might of the Crown. At stake in this tense Edwardian courtroom melodrama is the long-cherished and maintained democratic right to be regarded as innocent until proven guilty by a fair trial. Based on an actual 1912 case. **** ”

The Virgin Film Guide review – which lists it as made in 1950 at 97 minutes:

“In 1912 in London, Hardwicke is a retired bank official whose 14-year old son, North² is expelled from naval college when he is accused of stealing a five-shilling postal order from another cadet. Hardwicke is convinced of his son's innocence but he is prevented by British law and unconcerned bureaucrats from fighting for his son's honour. Stymied at every turn, he hires the most famous attorney in Britain, Donat. Donat makes an impassioned speech in the House of Commons that results in a Petition of Right that allows Hardwicke to sue the admiralty

² He's 13, and says so – twice

and make them prove in the courts that his son stole the postal order. The case is making headlines now and Hardwicke's family is facing the consequences: Hardwicke's daughter, suffragette Leighton, is left by her fiancé; son Watling is forced to leave Oxford; and various legal fees are bringing Hardwicke almost to bankruptcy. In a courtroom trial, Donat finally gets North to admit the truth about what he was doing when the postal order was stolen: smoking a cigarette in the locker room. The court finds in favour of North and Donat makes clear he intends to see a great deal more of Leighton.

The story may seem rather dry, but the performances of Hardwicke, as the father prepared to face ruin to restore his son's honour, and of Donat, as the brilliant lawyer who finally breaks through the boy's own personal code of honour to exonerate him, keep the movie an engrossing experience. Based on the true Archer-Shee case of 1912. ***1/2 "

[no listing in "The Critics' Film Guide", "The Good Film and Video Guide", "Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89", "Rating the Movies (1990)" or "The Time Out Film Guide"]

NFT bulletin – July 1981 – review:

"A continuation of the Anatole de Grunwald (producer) – Asquith - Rattigan collaboration, it might be argued that we see here Asquith's continued subjugation to the "photographed play". Even so, this story about the efforts of a famous KC to clear a boy accused of stealing a 5-shilling postal order still exerts its grip over an audience, helped by detailed period reconstruction (1912) and equally detailed performances by Robert Donat, Sir Cedric Hardwicke and Margaret Leighton. The counsel's ruthless questioning scene is justly famous. "

Radio Times review:

"A classic object lesson in how to transfer stage to screen. Terence Rattigan's tightly wound text is left largely untouched, but the scenes are broadened out to give the original play room to breathe. Robert Donat is wonderful as the impressive

barrister defending a naval cadet on a theft charge and all the play's insights into class and hypocrisy are sharpened by Anthony Asquith's assured direction. This is primarily a cinematic experience but the play is left unscarred. ***** "

Videocassette – Lumiere VHS LUM 2114 – sleeve notes:

" **"THE WINSLOW BOY"** is the story of a young cadet at the Royal Naval College Osborne, who is accused of the theft of a 5 shilling postal order and expelled. His father, Arthur Winslow, believes his son is innocent, and is determined to present the case in court. He engages Sir Robert Morton, KC, who after satisfying himself that the boy is not guilty accepts the case. In Arthur Winslow's unrelenting fight for justice, the case of "Winslow v the King" goes to the courts. The brilliant speech for the defense by Sir Robert Morton³ proves the boy's innocence – two years and one month after his expulsion from Osborne."

³ We do not hear Morton's "brilliant speech for the defense" – the case is concluded off-camera

The Sunday Times' note that in the original play greater emphasis is placed on the bond of trust between Winslow and son Ronnie is very illuminating. In the film all that remains of this is one short scene where father confronts his son and demands to be told the plain truth of the matter. Son firmly protests his innocence, and father does not question it from that moment on, though the boy's idle undergraduate brother Dickie, and even his mother, begin to resent the trouble he has brought on the family as legal costs and publicity mount. The boy himself, Neil North, takes a back seat throughout the film, his shame and public disgrace ignored in favour of a subplot about elder sister Catherine (Leighton), the most genteel of suffragettes, her abortive engagement to an army officer, and her deep suspicion of barrister Morton's political integrity, which culminates, needless to say, in the prospect of a romance.

That the boy's own feelings and trauma through this two-year long hiatus are considered of no importance, and that none of the critics above regard this as an oversight, says something about the general contempt in which boys of 13 were and still are held. "**THE WINSLOW BOY**" is about his father's conviction, his sister's loyalty, his barrister's cunning, but not about the disgraced naval cadet himself at all. It is as though Ronnie's good name and character are purely incidental to his father's, and to a high-flown constitutional question about the right of every subject to defend his integrity in court. Little has changed in other respects too since that case was heard in 1912 – the exorbitant costs of legal action; the best barristers in the country charging a king's ransom for their eloquence and theatrical cunning; a ravenous press caring less for personal liberty and democratic principle than seeing egg on high faces or discussing the fabric of the Winslows' curtains; the indifference of parliamentarians to the peril of an individual where "interests of state" are attached (a recent Westminster squabble over "public interest immunity certificates" illustrates that with devastating clarity).

Such latterday resonances do lend a small degree of interest, and Donat's characterisation of KC/MP Morton compensates something for the film relegating the wronged boy to the status of a legal principle. His ferocious interrogation of Ronnie before he accepts the brief is certainly the film's dramatic high point. Strangely, his closing statements at the trial proper, and the delivery of the verdict, are not seen, but reported back to the family by a babbling housemaid. In the play that was a necessary device, but it makes for a dramatic anticlimax on screen. As a portrait of the middle class British family in extremis, "**THE WINSLOW BOY**" now looks stale and theatrical, like a **Just William** story where all cannot be resolved with the aid of a slipper or an indulgent parental smile. Neil North himself, playing Ronnie from 13 to 16 without any discernible alteration, looks and sounds like an escapee from "**TOM BROWN'S SCHOOLDAYS**", a species of boy now utterly extinct. In fact, three years after this he appeared in the John Howard Davies remake of that very story.

With grand constitutional issues over-riding personal ones, the plot does leave certain loopholes. Under cross examination, Morton elicits from the principal of the naval college who expelled Ronnie that he too, at the age of 22, had been court-martialed for petty theft (and exonerated), but had the services of an "officer's friend" to defend him at the hearing. He judged the same consideration "not appropriate" to a 13-year old. And Morton also tricks Ronnie into confessing he'd been taking a furtive – strictly forbidden – cigarette during the crucial half hour when another boy's postal order was stolen from the lockers. But these astounding revelations do not explain something Ronnie has plainly been concealing throughout – why the friend whose money was stolen had been so assiduously practising his signature in Ronnie's presence; why Ronnie too had practised using the same signature; why the post office clerk should swear on oath Ronnie had cashed both postal orders; and why a handwriting expert should have insisted the writing on the forged P.O. was Ronnie's hand. The dialogue seems to imply Ronnie was concealing some scam between the two cadets, but this is never resolved, and there remains the obvious point (which the attorney general, as counsel for the Crown, appears to have overlooked) that if Ronnie was smoking in the locker room when his friend's locker was ransacked, this scarcely proves his innocence. How is it he didn't see the actual culprit?

Knowing that the story is founded on a real case makes it of historical interest to the archive even though the boy is so little in evidence, and it is unique in taking as a starting point one father's implacable belief in his son's integrity, and determination to vindicate that integrity even to the point of ruination. There is little love on show in so emotionally shrivelled a British film, but the case remains, in one sense, an act of fatherly love, and perhaps with a different treatment that aspect of the whole affair could be brought back onto the centre ground, where it belongs. Alas, the Nigel Hawthorne remake in 1998, though excellent by its own lights, compounded the oversight by making the suffragette daughter even more the central figure than she is here.

See the 1998 remake, and subject index under [BOARDING SCHOOL / PUBLIC SCHOOL](#) (by implication only), and **TRIALS / COURTROOMS**.