

how it happened here: An Introduction

by David Robinson

Every viewing of *It Happened Here*, I find, requires the same adjustment. You always prepare yourself to make allowances, to be indulgent because, after all, it is only an amateur film, made on half a shoestring – schoolboys' pocket-money virtually – with the barest of technical resources and volunteer personnel who came and went as the shooting stretched on. Yet within the first few minutes, practically within the first few shots, you find that allowances and indulgences are quite misplaced, because what you are seeing is simply a good film at any level and by any standards. As sheer professional filmcraft it is admirable. The staging of the war and the war period have a conviction which eludes more glossy and expensive 'historical' productions. The narrative structure is loose and casual, which makes it all the more remarkable that the film has a dramatic drive which carries through from the first shot to the last.

The credit titles are backed with martial music. Then, over an animated map of the British Isles, the voice of John Snagge sketches in the 'historical' background which is the premise of the film:

'The German invasion of England took place in July 1940 after the British retreat from Dunkirk. Strongly resisted at first, the German army took many months to restore order. But the resistance movement, lacking outside support, was finally crushed. For three years it lay dormant. Collaboration increased as the population became adjusted to the tedium of occupation... Then, in 1944, the resistance movement reappeared ...'

The heroine, Pauline Murray, is one of the population trying to adjust to the circumstances of occupation. She is a district nurse, living in a rural area which the Germans are evacuating in order to root out partisans. A handful of evacuees is left behind. In a skirmish between Germans and partisans, all of them but Pauline are killed. This incident convinces her that the only way to restore life to normal is to support the forces of law and order, whatever they may be. She makes her way to a ruined London and volunteers her services as a nurse. Despite her protestations that she will not do anything political, she discovers that the only way she is permitted to work, the only way of supporting 'law and order' is to join the Immediate Action Organisation. In a London occupied by German troops, she sees the Organisation at work- its strong-arm methods, its violence, its oppression and racism. She discovers, too, its unpopularity with the civilian population through small, veiled insults against her person and her uniform.

The first serious conflict within herself comes when she learns that some pre-war friends, a Hampstead doctor and his wife, are sheltering a wounded partisan. She tries (despite their shock at seeing her uniform) to help them. When they are arrested she falls under suspicion and is posted off to a remote country nursing home.

Here the atmosphere is altogether different: an Edwardian mansion in a summer countryside seemingly untouched by war and occupation. Russian and Polish workers and their families who have contracted tuberculosis are received tenderly and cheerfully by the staff. The children are given toys; they are all put to bed in a bright sunlit ward. Pauline's duty on her first evening is to give them their injections.

She wakes late next morning and hurries on duty to the ward. It is empty. Only then does she understand what sort of injections she gave them.

At last she resists. She is arrested. But the partisans and the Americans are advancing and she and her escort fall into their hands. Pauline, now classed as a collaborator, is asked to nurse wounded partisan. The last view we have of this war-torn England that never, mercifully, was, is of a group of partisans who have rounded up a large mass of English collaborators. They shoot them.

The cohesion of all this narrative is especially remarkable when one recalls the lengthy genesis of the film. Kevin Brownlow was 18 and working as a trainee cutter when he had the original idea. In May 1956 he began shooting, kicking off, with typical optimism, with the sequence of a Trafalgar Square rally. On his second day out the camera was stolen. Shortly afterwards he met his co-director, Andrew Mollo, who was then aged 16. The most remarkable instance of Brownlow's steely determination is the revelation of how at this point he junked every inch of material he had shot because it did not satisfy him, and began the whole thing over again.

After two years they were still grinding on, despite defections of crew and cast. After three years they approached the British Film Institute's Experimental Production Fund, and were refused help on the grounds that the film was not experimental and had nothing to teach other filmmakers. After four years they showed their material to Granada Television and were told it was 'crap'. After six years they were turned down by a prospective producer and by the NFFC. And only then did their first break come when Tony Richardson secured them finance to complete the picture on 35mm. In May 1964, eight years and twenty days after the first shots were made, *It Happened Here* was finished. And then (as Kevin Brownlow describes in his book, with remarkably resilient humour) the real trouble began. By this time he was 26; Andrew Mollo was 24.

One aspect of the whole thing that I find especially intriguing is the change that must have taken place in the boys during this time. People alter and develop a lot between 18 and 26, 16 and 24; how much was the maturing of two unusually lively and responsive adolescents reconciled with the patient compilation of a unified creative work like *It Happened Here*? The fact is, of course, that they grew up with the film and within the film, and the film grew with them. *It Happened Here* was their education in more respects than the purely technical one of learning the craft of filmmaking. Kevin Brownlow's account is disarmingly frank in its examination of their ideas and motives. As boys their attraction to the subject the war period, of which neither could have any but the haziest recollection - was naive and superficial: 'Neither of us had yet developed an understanding of National Socialism; we shared the general horror at their crimes, but were fascinated by the unexplained elements of the Nazi phenomenon. I have never

been able to analyse this. Both of us are inordinately squeamish. We cringe at the sight of a hospital uniform. Nazism should have repelled us with its constant reminders of brutality. But mysteries continued to cloud the era. And mystery is a powerful attraction.' Their early days were preoccupied with the pleasures of discovering relics and evidences of the era. Mollo was fascinated by the uniforms; Brownlow, one supposes, by the problems of period re-creation. (His earliest heroes, after all, were the Gance of *Napoleon* and the silent *J 'Accuse*, and Maurice Tourneur, the great 'atmosphere' director.)

Work on the film inevitably sharpened moral perception. The story developed as they went along (Brownlow's periodic nagging that they really ought to have a script is one of the comic leitmotifs of the book), and with the story a point of view. You detect, in the narrative of the making of the film the stages by which the ethical issues raised by Nazism and racism assumed precedence over the fascination of the purely physical staging. You perceive the difficulties of reconciling the monstrous programmes of British Nazism with the fact that some of the Nazis who helped with the film turned out to be quite amiable chaps in private life (Brownlow clearly found it very hard to suppress a kind of affection for Frank Bennett, who shows himself in the film as an extremist of the most alarmingly irrational kind). Perhaps it was the very fact that the ethical bases of the film were worked out like this, empirically, on the spot, as part of the real-life development of moral and political discernment in the filmmakers, that makes their picture, if not a specially profound examination of a human predicament, at least a soundly human one.

The different aspects of their progression show in the film. The neo-documentary reconstruction of an occupied Britain, which was their first idea, is done extraordinarily well. The costumes (washed-out pre-war tweeds and awful headscarves), the uniforms, the cars and buses (with *Picture Post* advertisements on the front), the bookstalls with Nazi-glorifying illustrated magazines, the streets, the typography on leaflets and posters, are all impeccably in period. The writing betrays a keen ear for the contrast between everyday speech and the phrases of official pronouncements: one recalls especially the news commentaries and the CO's passing out speech at the Fascist training school. There are admirable scenes: the opening sequence in which the grainy visuals and rough sound of the original 16mm shooting become a positive merit in conveying the half-heard,

half-seen confusion of the abandoned refugees; the heroine's arrival in a ruined, almost deserted London; the bravura 'occupation' sequence, in which German soldiers pose for snapshots in front of the Albert Memorial and on the steps of St Paul's and fraternise with girls on backstreet doorsteps while a military band marches through Regent's Park; uncannily convincing staged newsreels, one of which includes brilliant fake archive documents of the 1914 Christmas Truce on the Western Front. Their increasing interest in the ethical and social mysteries of Fascism led them to propose a heroine who becomes a Fascist not positively or with malicious intent, but simply through her inclinations to conformism.

When I first saw the film in 1964 I wrote of it: 'Politically, I suppose *It Happened Here* has remained the film of an 18-year-old. There is no question of where the filmmakers' sympathies lie; the intention of the film is fervently anti-Fascist. At times, though, one feels that the intention might be a good deal less clear to the unconverted than to those of us who begin with an inbuilt sympathy with the film's message. The main trouble lies in the central character who, both as a dramatic device and as a person, is too negative in conception. She becomes a Fascist out of conformism and convenience; and though this is, eventually, the most effective and the most dangerous manner of political recruitment, it is also undramatic enough, in the event, to make it difficult to argue a point from it. It is a good deal easier to make propaganda (and in the best sense this is the object of *It Happened Here*) out of a more positively motivated hero or villain.

The same sort of subtlety weakens the irony, which at one level Brownlow and Mollo do so well. The newsreel, lauding Fascist achievement and deploring the war brought about in 1939 by the Jewish warmongers, is a take-off of newsreel propaganda so cleverly handled that it might easily seem credible to an uncritical viewer. And again, when the National Socialist Party members are invited to voice their own arguments (a passage of cinema verite whose great curiosity almost makes one forgive its inappositeness in the context of the rest of the film), they do it with a sincerity and fervour that could obscure for the naively unprejudiced the malice and hysteria beneath. In a way the filmmakers themselves are seduced. They communicate their own delight in the uniform and military show, in the spectacle of an admirably staged Nazi torchlight funeral. This sort of thing is as insidious as dry rot; history has shown that. This admirably achieved,

admirably intentioned film could be hot stuff for an audience with the wrong preconditioning. It is an important factor: to an extent the success or failure of the propaganda is tied up with the success of the film.

Three years and several viewings later I am inclined to credit Brownlow and Mollo with rather more political sophistication than I did then, and to see more positive merits in the conception of their heroine. But events have confirmed that their statement was not sufficiently unequivocal in expression for the less discerning viewer to comprehend it. Shipman and King found the film 'most unpleasant'; Daniel Angel called it 'this Nazi picture'; Charles Cooper, like *The Jewish Chronicle*, found the film anti-Semitic. This book relates how United Artists finally exhibited the film only on the understanding that Brownlow and Mollo would agree to the omission of the entire 6-minute sequence in which a group of British Fascists express racist and other intolerant beliefs.

Even when one concedes a kind of idiot logic, as well as fervour, in the expression of the Fascist point of view, it is hard to credit that reasonable people could really be swayed by it: at least the filmmakers were at every point convinced that by giving both sides a fair hearing, Fascism would condemn itself out of its own mouth. The extent of their miscalculation is forcibly shown by the degree of opposition the film aroused. The number of people who genuinely believed it to be anti-Semitic cannot be discounted. The objections, though genuine, were never, it must be confessed, very solidly grounded or rationally argued. *The Jewish Chronicle*, for instance, which found the film totally objectionable at first viewing, regarded it as perfectly acceptable after the simple omission of the discussion sequence.

The excision of this sequence brings out a rather embarrassing conflict between one's sense of ethical propriety and of artistic correctness. On the one hand one must regard United Artists' decision to cut the film – and to persuade the film-makers into endorsement of the cut – as indefensible. The artist in any field, and the filmmaker (as being specially vulnerable) in particular, must be defended against censorship from whatever source. At the same time, from an aesthetic point of view, I do not deeply regret the loss of the passage. I am more convinced than I was in 1964 that it is an excrescence. It is interesting that this sequence

and another – the Nazi funeral – having in common that they are the most spectacular and the least essential sections of the film, were both made after the filmmakers had finally found a source of finance. God knows one would not wish anyone the privations of the first six years of *It Happened Here*; yet the film may owe not a little of its rigorous quality to the disciplines that poverty imposed.

This is only one of a heap of lessons and precepts and morals about the art and craft and industry of filmmaking that Brownlow's charming, optimistic, sometimes naive, always witty and singularly readable book enforces. The most substantial lesson they learned, of course, starting as wide-eyed Amateur Cine World readers, was about the realities of the commercial cinema, the nature of an art whose means are so costly that it must always, apparently, be controlled by the uncreative. As their concerns bring them more and more in touch with the professional cinema, the heroes and villains become more sharply defined. The uncreative aristocracy of the industry reliably hand out discouragement and disapproval (until, of course, the film makes its own success; and then they come back with their maddening 'Ah, but ifs' - 'If I'd been here then...'. 'If your new project was as commercial as *It Happened Here*...'). It is the creators who, equally reliably, help them on their way - Tony Richardson, whose role here is angelic; and Stanley Kubrick, who bothers to give them the reel-ends from *Strangelove*. The critics are a funny lot, capriciously handing out praise and damage, hopping about in shameless volte faces to keep abreast of success. But it was Gordon Maithouse, of Amateur Cine World, who lent them their first camera (the one that was pinched); and Derek Hill who gave them their first boosts.

I must finally record one peculiar - and on the face of it quite uncritical - personal relationship with the film. No matter how often I see it, I find myself, though I am not particularly emotional, on the point of tears - generally at the most improbable places, like the credit titles. I often have the same experience with the book. I am unreasonably moved by the cool silliness of Kevin Brownlow's decision that since he is earning £4.10S a week and has pocket money as well, it is time that he embarked on a personally financed film; or the impression of Andrew Mollo, as 16-year old co-director and military historian, perversely spelling 'up' with three p's when corrected for using two. They are not boy wonders, but people. The only other point I can recall in the cinema which

produces this absurd tearful effect upon me is (equally improbably) in Leni Riefenstahl's *Olympische Spiele*, towards the end of the marathon, where the little dark man (I think he was an American Indian called Brown) who has pistoned along, mile after mile, collapses at last and is swept up into a steward's arms, wrapped in a blanket, the hero reduced to a baby.

Here of course the situation is reversed - the babies became heroes - but the conditions are the same: the confrontation of individuals of ordinary frailty and a totally superhuman undertaking. The size of the undertaking, the magnitude of the effort involved in keeping it alive, through eight years during which discouragements and setbacks far outnumbered the strokes of luck (and when anyway the boys had at the same time to be thinking about serious ways of earning their living), had to be communicated to the film. I think it is the sense of triumph that makes me cry.

They had to be lunatics, of course, to do it. (I suppose I knew Kevin Brownlow was a lunatic the first time I set eyes on him, maybe eleven years before the appearance of *It Happened Here*. Somebody had dragged me to a house in Hampstead because, they said, it was something worth seeing. I was not convinced it was worth losing Sunday afternoon to visit a skinny little boy in big spectacles who had turned his bedroom into a toy Odeon with tabs and tickets and a single record turntable with which he deftly arranged incidental music to a 9.5mm projector. Until, that is, the actual film came on and proved to be the earliest restoration of Gance's Napoleon, then a lost film, which the child had painstakingly reassembled from reels in 9.5mm libraries.)

It is the majestic lunacy, though, of the true creator. The danger is that they could be cured of it, brought into a closer but less fruitful accord with reality with the help of people like the Granada man who called their material crap; the Germans who booed; the Jews who called it anti-Semitic; and the *Telegraph's* man who called it, ironically, 'a weak story'.

This piece was originally published as the introduction to *How It Happened Here* by Kevin Brownlow (Doubleday, 1968) and is reproduced here by kind permission of the author.