



ESSENTIALLY BRITISH?: Exploring citizenship and 'Britishness' using film

CHRISTMAS UNDER FIRE (1941): Transcript

It is Christmas day. I am leaving London tonight and flying to NY. I am taking with me a film despatch - the story of Christmas in England in the year of the Blitz, 1940. Perhaps you'd like to see it.

It's not a very large Christmas tree, there is no demand in England for large Christmas trees this year. They wouldn't fit into the shelters or the basements or cellars with their low ceilings. This year England celebrates Christmas underground. It is the first Christmas since that first Christmas that the day will be celebrated underground, because the stable in Bethlehem was a shelter too.

The nation has made a resolve that, war or no war, the children of England will not be cheated out of the one day they look forward to all the year. So far as possible, this will be an old-fashioned Christmas in England, at least for the children.

It won't be quite the same of course. In England, as in the rest of the civilised world, Christmas has always been the day when the family come home. Now, sons and fathers are fighting in the air, on the sea, in country's far away. Others will have to remain at their posts in London or in other cities, driving ambulances, fighting fires, patrolling the streets. The war will not stop, even for Christmas Eve.

It will be a Christmas of contrasts. Holly and barbed wire, guns and tinsel. Napoleon once said contemptuously that England was a nation of shopkeepers. Today, to be called a shopkeeper is a badge of honour. They have had their windows blasted out, their goods ruined, their stocks reduced, their customers killed. But they never faltered. And now they search out the remains of last year's tinsel, they patch together last year's streamers, and bravely decorate their shattered shops.

The toys which children have asked for this year, aren't the toys they once wanted. A year ago, small forts modelled on the Maginot and Siegfried lines were popular. Now, these are gathering dust on the top shelves of the stores. The children for whose future this nation is fighting have new heroes now. They want model aeroplanes, that's only natural. For months they have watched aeroplanes fly over them daily and children in England are proud because they can tell a Spitfire from a Messerschmitt or a Wellington from a Heinkel. They want tin hats and they want to wear the same kinds of uniform that their brothers and fathers and sisters wear.

The pantomime has always been a feature of the Christmas season. This year, some of the theatres that feature the play have been bombed out of existence. But the pantomime is so much a part of this season that companies have organised to perform in small theatres, which are still untouched. And while the



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children rehearse below, the spotters above watch for German aircraft. This is not the most cheerful Christmas that ever came to England but everyone is determined to make it as cheerful as possible.

Christmas here this year won't perhaps be the Christmas children in America will be lucky enough to enjoy. England is fighting for her life and even the smallest child understands that. It will be a strange Christmas but in many ways it will be a very satisfactory one. England has much to be cheerful about. Her people, even the children, have shown in the past few months that they are equal to their destiny.

For the first time in history no bells ring in England to celebrate the birth of the saviour. No church bells are allowed to be rung in England. If they do it will mean that the invader has come.

We think of Christmas as a night of stars. We think of a brilliant moon giving light to a tired world. This year in England people pray for a dark and windswept night. On nights like these, the German bombers stay at home. A stormy night is an ally of England, a non-belligerent that demands no rules of cash and carry.

That first Christmas, the shepherds watched and guarded. Today, in England, even the shepherds are in some kind of uniform and they are still watching and guarding.

There is no reason for America to feel sorry for England this Christmas. England doesn't feel sorry for herself. Destiny gave her the torch of liberty to hold, and she has not dropped it. She has not allowed the stormy waves of terrorism that are sweeping over the world from Berlin, to let that bright light even flicker. She is thankful that when the test came she had the high courage to meet it and today England stands unbeaten, unconquered, unafraid.

On Christmas Eve, England does what England has done for a thousand years - she worships the Prince of Peace.