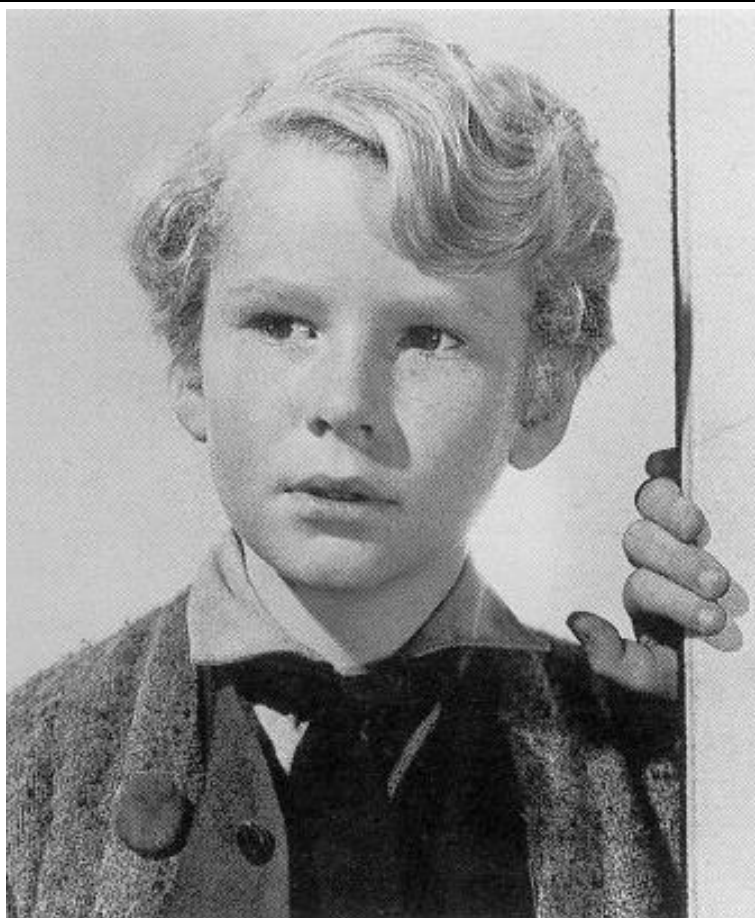


Moonfleet

US : 1955 : dir. Fritz Lang : M-G-M : 89 min
 prod: John Houseman : scr: Margaret Fitts & Jan Lustig : dir.ph.: Robert Planck
[Jon Whiteley](#); [Donna Corcoran](#)
 Stewart Granger; George Sanders; Joan Greenwood; Viveca Lindfors; Liliane Montevecchi;
 Melville Cooper; Sean McClory; John Hoyt; Alan Napier; Jack Elam; Ian Wolfe

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω □ ♀ Z ♀	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
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Whiteley as John Mohune – Stewart Granger's salvation and destruction in one pert, trusting package.
 Source: *The Moving Picture Boy*

Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 2001 review:

"Tepid 18th-century story of Britisher Granger becoming a buccaneer. Shot in Cinemascope. **½"

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review – identical to above

Halliwell's Film Guide review

"In Dorset in 1770 an orphan boy finds that his elegant guardian leads a gang of smugglers. Period gothic melodrama which nearly, but not quite, comes off; the script simply doesn't build to the right climax, and too many characters come to nothing. But there are splendid moments. Shot in Cinemascope. *"

The Good Film and Video Guide review:

“MGM disliked this film, perhaps because they expected the clichés of American cloak-and-dagger tales and got instead the conventions of British boys’ yarns – and more of them, in fact, than were in J. Meade Faulkner’s classic. It is still set in 18th-century Dorset and still has a small boy (Jon Whiteley) involved with smugglers. Lang handles the genre, which was new for him (and it is his last considerable film) with verve. The cast includes Stewart Granger as the boy’s guardian and idol, and Viveca Lindfors as his West Indian mistress; George Sanders is a milord and Joan Greenwood his flirtatious wife, with Melville Cooper, Jack Elam and Dan Seymour as members of the gang. *** ”

The M-G-M Story review:

“ **“MOONFLEET”** was the only Hollywood venture of England’s Joan Greenwood. She and the coolly Nordic Viveca Lindfors and the volcanically Latin Liliane Montevecchi kept Stewart Granger in a virile tizzy. The John Houseman production of J. Meade Faulkner’s adventure novel was lamely scripted by Jan Lustig and Margaret Fitts and directed by an off-form Fritz Lang. British ten-year old Jon Whiteley had a key role, along with George Sanders, Melville Cooper, Alan Napier, Donna Corcoran, Jack Elam, Sean McClory, John Hoyt, Ian Wolfe.”

Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89 review:

“A tale of smugglers and blackguards in 18th-century England. Granger plays the dashing adventurer Jeremy Fox, who’s always flirting with danger. Despite the good cast, the film is disappointing, but it should appeal to adventure fans.”

The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television review:

“Stewart Granger swashing many a buckle (or should it be buckling a swash?) on his pirate’s progress. George Sanders and Viveca Lindfors co-starring. Worth a look for the fact that it was made in 1955 by Fritz Lang. 3”

The Time Out Film Guide review:

“A young boy and a rakish smuggler search for a legendary lost diamond in a wonderfully stylised version of 18th-century Cornwall. The characters are linked and haunted by the memory of the boy’s dead mother, and their “romance” is a journey through a dark world of gallows and graveyards. Lang disliked working in CinemaScope, a ratio he described in *Le Mépris* as “only good for funerals and snakes”. He uses it brilliantly.”

TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995 review:

“One of director Fritz Lang’s last films, this is a stylish adaptation of J. Maude Faulkner’s classic story of 18th century smuggling and derring-do on and around the Dorset coast. Joan Greenwood is in fine, astringent form as the snooty Lady Ashwood, and young Jon Whiteley – the older of the two small boys from **“THE KIDNAPPERS”** – turns in a very real portrayal of the fatherless boy who forms an affectionate bond with a likeable rogue (Stewart Granger), the leader of an adventurous band of freebooters. The plot, in which man and boy chase after a fabulous lost diamond, is full of narrow escapes from revenue men, slashing sword duels and wild chases over fen and moor. And there’s one terrific fight between Granger and a halberd-swinging smuggler. Mark this one down as splendid entertainment. *** ”

Variety Movie Guide 1993 review:

“Costumed action, well-spiced with loose ladies and dashing rakehellies, is offered in **“MOON-FLEET”**. With mood and action the keynote of the John Houseman production, the direction by Fritz Lang plays both hard, developing considerable movement in several rugged action sequences without neglecting suspense. Period of the J. Maude Falkner novel is the 1750s.

Stewart Granger was a good choice for the dubious hero of the story, a high-living dandy who heads a gang of murderous smugglers headquartered in the English coastal village of Moonfleet. Yarn opens on a Macbeth note of cold, wild-swept moors [*sic*] and scary, dark shadows, establishing an eerie flavour for the kickoff.

Later, it reminds of *Treasure Island* a bit when Granger and a small boy go through some highly imaginative adventures.”

The Moving Picture Boy entry:

“In 1951 the six-year old Jon, son of a village schoolmaster, won a prize for verse-speaking at the Aberdeen Music Festival. A BBC van visited his school, and Jon repeated his recitation for the benefit of Scottish radio listeners. It was overheard by a talent scout, who reported back to studios in the south – and so Britain discovered one of its most unusual and likeable child actors.

Charming as his appearance was - a serious, square little face with watchful features beneath a tangle of blond hair – Jon’s most precious attribute was his beautifully old-world Aberdeenshire voice: melodious, quaintly measured, almost pedantic. No child’s voice quite like it had been heard in the cinema before, and it added a special quality to the parts he had to play, which were in general of the John Howard Davies type (delicate child thrown into tough or harrowing situations)...

The Whiteley manner was perfectly suited to "**THE KIDNAPPERS**", conversing with an even smaller Scot, Vincent Winter, over the ownership of an unidentified but hearty baby they had stumbled on. "Is it our babby now, Harry?" asks Winter. "It's mine," says Whiteley with sweet solemnity, "but you can have a loan of it while I've other business. You can feel it. Go on, feel it, if you crave to." (There is later a wonderful argument about a name for the baby. Winter favours "Rover".)

In Jon Whiteley’s other roles (a frightened runaway in "**HUNTED**", a puzzled orphan in "**MOONFLEET**", a supposed murderer in "**THE WEAPON**", and the affection-starved son of a diplomat in "**THE SPANISH GARDENER**") his sober charm was used with varying success. But he was always a pleasure to watch and listen to. Whiteley got a degree at Oxford, wrote books on Ingres and the Pre-Raphaelites, and became curator of an Oxford college art collection.”

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

Radio Times reviews:

“While a long way from being director Fritz Lang’s best film, this still makes for rousing entertainment. Set in Dorset in the 1770s, this fast-moving tale of smuggling provides Stewart Granger with a chance to add a touch of devilment to the expected romantic dash. George Sanders gives his usual performance of silky smooth malevolence, but too little is asked of Joan Greenwood and Viveca Lindfors¹. ***”

“Adventure yarn. Set in 18th-century England, Jon Whiteley arrives in the village of Moonfleet after his mum’s death looking for her lover, Jeremy Fox (Stewart Granger), who happens to moonlight as a smuggler.”

“Humdrum version of the classic rum-runners yarn, as Stewart Granger goes buccaneering down Cornwall way.”

“Laid-back Stewart Granger takes to buccaneering down Cornwall way in a humdrum version of the classic rum-runners yarn. Director Fritz Lang was not made for the beach.”

“Classic adventure set in mid-18th century Dorset. *** ”

“Historical adventure, first in today’s Saturday Matinée Stewart Granger double bill. Also starring Joan Greenwood. Following the death of his mother, John Mohune searches for the man she had loved only to discover that he is really the leader of a gang of smugglers. *** ”

The Sunday Times review:

“In mid 18th century Dorset, a boy becomes involved with smugglers after being adopted by their leader, who finds himself tempted to steal his ward’s birthright. Stars Stewart Granger, George Sanders and Joan Greenwood².”

¹ Both of whom have insignificant roles compared to Jon Whiteley’s, who is not even mentioned.

² So which of these plays the boy you spoke of?

To read some of the synopses above, one might think the Jon Whiteley character, John Mohune, was peripheral to this story and not the central figure of it. Of course, Granger's character, Jeremy Fox, dominates the screen in the same way that Long John Silver dominates "Treasure Island", but John Mohune, like Jim Hawkins, remains the locus of the story. Many reviewers have trouble coping with this concept – an adventure told from a boy's vantage point – and seem almost not to notice him in their determination to characterise it as an Errol Flynn style bodice-ripper, which it clearly isn't. Whiteley has more scenes, more dialogue (and spends more time with Granger) than the three named actresses put together, and it is for the boy's sake that Granger ultimately sacrifices himself, not for the gypsy dancer or the flirtatious wife of aristocrat Sanders, who offers Fox a partnership in a piracy venture.

John Mohune presents himself, unbidden and unwanted, at Jeremy Fox's door as the orphaned son of an old flame. By implication, Fox may be the boy's true father, although the story doesn't explore that avenue. Not without a certain indignation, Fox accepts the charge and makes plans to pack the boy off post-haste to a boarding school. But John refuses to be shaken off so easily, and though Granger is brusque and haughty with him, the libertine soon warms to the boy's forthright, plain-speaking manner.

John has heard tales of a notorious ancestor of his who is said to haunt the graveyard at Moonfleet and spirit away late-night stragglers, also of a fabulous diamond hidden somewhere in the vicinity by that same ancestor. One night, returning from church through the graveyard he stumbles into an open grave and finds himself in a crypt below the churchyard. There, inside the coffin of his ancestor, he finds an amulet containing a parchment. All around the crypt are signs that it's in use as a smugglers' lair, and John witnesses a confrontation between the smugglers and their captain, Jeremy Fox.

Later, realising the boy has discovered them, the smugglers resolve to silence him, but Fox rallies to his side (as Silver does to Jim Hawkins) and in due course the two of them set out to retrieve the diamond from its location given on the cryptic parchment. It lies halfway down a well in a castle presently garrisoned by the revenue militia. A large bounty on Fox's head has already decided him to leave the country and start afresh in the piracy business, and he plans to use the diamond as his collateral for the venture, leaving the boy behind. At the last moment he is pricked by conscience and, though mortally wounded by George Sanders, returns the diamond to its rightful heir, whose blind trust in him has weathered all.

The comparisons to "Treasure Island" are not idle ones – even to the closing shot of Fox/Silver taking his leave of John/Jim and sailing off alone. The boy heroes of both stories are very wooden characters, in the thick of the action throughout but essentially spectators on the machinations of adults. Jim Hawkins discovers Silver's perfidy from the apple barrel, John Mohune from his hiding place in the crypt. It's perhaps a fair reflection on the lowly status of boys in the 18th century that their individual personalities could not really find expression in the company of adults, but the result is that they seem passive, uninteresting cyphers, as distinct – for example – from the boy heroes of Mark Twain's stories, notably Tom Sawyer, whose escapades are principally among people his own age.

The reputation of Fritz Lang probably lends this film more attention than it strictly warrants. "**MOONFLEET**" is tepid as a swashbuckler, lame as a treasure hunt adventure. Other films – "**JAMAICA INN**" for one – have made better mileage of the wreckers/smugglers theme, and the gothic elements of the tale would have been better served by black & white than a colour CinemaScope production. As a Stewart Granger vehicle it works well enough, but if John Houseman and Lang were reaching for anything more, there's little evidence of it on screen.

Donna Corcoran, 11, has a small part as Grace, daughter of a local revenue inspector with his sights set on Fox. She's the first person John encounters on arrival at Moonfleet. Elder sister of Disney's Kevin Corcoran, Donna won a Critics Award for her role in "**MILLION DOLLAR MERMAID**" (52). Her debut was in "**ANGELS IN THE OUTFIELD**" (51), followed by "**DON'T BOTHER TO KNOCK**" (52), "**GYPSY COLT**" (54) and others.

Anyone charmed by Jon Whiteley's sterling performance in "**THE KIDNAPPERS**" may be disappointed by his subsequent film appearances, here and in "**THE SPANISH GARDENER**" particularly. The measured musical voice which first brought him to public notice later only made him sound like a child reciting his party piece, without feeling or engagement. He was prettier than John Howard Davies, had a certain poise and physical grace, but brought no emotion to his playing. Perhaps in truth he had no great fondness for acting. In any case he made just five films in as many years, though he was seen again at 22 in "**CAPETOWN AFFAIR**".

See subject index under **HISTORY, ORPHANS / ADOPTION, SPECIAL FRIENDSHIPS** and **TREASURE HUNTS**.