

My Life So Far

UK / US : 1999 : dir. Hugh Hudson : Miramax : 98 min
 prod: David Puttnam : scr: Simon Donald : dir.ph.:
[Robert Norman](#) [d]
 Colin Firth; Rosemary Harris; Irène Jacob; Malcolm McDowell; Mary Elisabeth Mastrantonio;
 Freddie Jones; Tcheky Karyo; Kelly MacDonald; Brendan Gleeson

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω	8	€	M	⚡	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
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Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 2001 review:

"Delightful memoir of growing up in an eccentric family, set in the Scottish Highlands during the 1920s and '30s. Firth is a dreamer/inventor, Mastrantonio his patient wife, McDowell his scheming man-about-town brother who has no patience for Firth's peccadilloes, and Jacob the alluring Frenchwoman who captures the imagination of every male in the household. Spirited, funny and handsomely made. Based on the book "Son of Adam" by Sir Denis Forman. *** "

Radio Times Guide to Films review:

"This offering from "CHARIOTS OF FIRE" director Hugh Hudson is a small, intimate portrait of one eccentric family in the Scottish highlands of the twenties. Seen from the perspective of the family's ten-year old son, the movie follows the traumatic events of one tumultuous year, as the boy's madcap inventor dad (Colin Firth) has a fling with a visiting uncle's French fiancée (Irène Jacob). Crammed with quirkily memorable characters, the film's subject matter may be too twee for some tastes, though others will appreciate its fine evocation of an era long gone. The fine

cast also includes Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio, Rosemary Harris and Malcolm McDowell. *** "

Cast:

Fraser Pettigrew[Robert Norman](#)
 Edward PettigrewColin Firth
 Gamma MacintoshRosemary Harris
 Heloise.....Irène Jacob
 Moira Pettigrew
Mary Elisabeth Mastrantonio
 Uncle MorrisMalcolm McDowell
 Gabriel ChenouxTcheky Karyo
 Elspeth PettigrewKelly MacDonald

Radio Times review:

"Period drama starring Colin Firth and Rosemary Harris, with Malcolm McDowell. The enigmatic and captivating Heloise throws a Scottish estate into turmoil. Contains sex scenes [*no it doesn't*]. *** "

Par for the course there. Nobody mentions the boy who plays the central role, and Maltin doesn't even mention the role. The maxim of critics is "children may be seen but not discussed".

The film announces, needlessly, that is "based on a true story", and since a footnote at the end tells us that the central figure, Robert Norman, grew up to become, among other things, "one of the founding fathers of British television", and an ardent lover of jazz, we can assume the subject matter is broadly autobiographical..

Hugh Hudson has form for his admiration of life in stately homes of the Edwardian era, not only in **"CHARIOTS OF FIRE"** but in **"GREYSTOKE: THE LEGEND OF TARZAN"**. Here once more we have the amiable gentlefolk living their cloistered, endearingly eccentric lives amid the opulence of unquestioned privilege. Fraser Pettigrew (Robert Norman) is ten, after a brief prologue as a toddler crawling round the parapets of his enormous family mansion. When the film ends he is being finally packed off to boarding school, but until that moment he has no schooling, no friends, and no hobbies or interests of any sort that do not derive directly from his father, his uncle, or one of the other adults about him. It is the kind of childhood portrait in which the first person, narrating throughout, is visible on screen almost continuously but has little or no inner life of his own; he is a roving camera to record the imperfections and tribulations of the adult world. This format – a willy-nilly sequence of vignettes and anecdotal episodes, in which the child is present more as witness than as agent – is one that's particularly favoured in continental cinema. For want of a better description, they are usually marked down as "slice-of-life" dramas, or "coming-of-age" tales. That's code for saying there is little in the way of a coherent narrative.

There must always be a pivot-point however, and here it is the passing away of Fraser's matriarchal "gamma" (Rosemary Harris) when it is far from clear whether she will leave her rolling estate to Fraser's father Edward, with his hare-brained schemes of harvesting sphagnum moss and marketing it as cosmetics and absorbent surgical tissues, or to Fraser's black-sheep uncle Morris (McDowell, who else?), who has plans to evict Fraser's family and turn the estate to more profitable use in growing commercial lumber. Uncle Morris arrives on the scene with a "child bride" (she's 24) in tow, the cellist Eloise. Fraser is greatly smitten with the charming Frenchwoman, but unfortunately so is his father, who makes a crude pass at her among the sphagnum moss, and this matter also comes to a head at grandmother's wake.

Chased away from Eloise's presence by his father, Fraser takes refuge in the forbidden attic, where in gesture of protest he sets about reading all the books tucked away far from the family eye. Sex sex and sex are the three main preoccupations of Simon Donald's script, which is heavily larded with dramatic irony, the boy chirpily discoursing on matters – prostitution, lesbianism, orgies, fellatio – he doesn't remotely comprehend but we (snigger snigger) do, and there are several "hilarious" visual puns on the boy masturbating (a fishing reel, a self-cranking torch under the blankets). Being an English film of course, these matters are so handled, **not** to express the boy's own emerging sexual awareness and interest, but his complete and utter ignorance thereof. The last words of Fraser's father to him as he speeds away to prep school are (regarding the mystery of fellatio): "Believe you me, Fraser, boarding school is **not** the place to start". And again, the narrator is quick to point out, he hadn't the least idea what his father was talking about. We can only trust his education improved at school.

So much for the film's respect for its own central character. We are constantly invited to chortle at the boy's gaucheness, his "innocence", while at the same time down-grading our fondness for his eccentric dad, because he exhibits precisely the opposite qualities, or for the roguish McDowell, ensnaring a bride half his age. And through it all, the female sex reigns supreme, in the matriarchal "gamma", in the spurned, deceived but ultimately forgiving mother, in the happy serving wenches of the family kitchen, and in the "irresistible" allure of Eloise, or of Fraser's elder sister Elspeth, or of the girl he is forced to dance with at a Halowe'en bout of "the Gay Gordons", prompting a fight with the girl's brother. The 1920s may have been a man's world, so goes the script, but we were all in thrall to "la femina". For good measure, a lesbian couple arrive and depart from the scene, as club-footed portents of the shape of things to come.

The acid test with all period dramas is how persuasively they turn the clock back, not only in the facile matter of costumes and machinery, but in social manners and language. This film, on a scale of 1 to 10, would perhaps rate a 5. The clothing and hairstyles, the bric-a-brac of domestic life, seem pretty much right. Where it fails, as nearly all do, is that the cast do not

speak or relate to one another remotely by the manners of the period in question. Fraser's mother and father are a 1990s mother and father (even if there is a brief, furtive, beating scene after the fight at the party, hidden from our view by nature of its primal horror), the French aviator who makes a forced landing on their estate, only to be immediately smitten by sister Elspeth, does not look or sound quite right. If the film set out to be, as "**THE GO-BETWEEN**" was, a study in period manners, then it was all the more important to get those manners right, and it simply doesn't.

The Great War rates a couple of passing mentions in the dialogue, and Freddie Jones burbles something briefly at a dinner party about unemployed workers, Fraser has a curiosity toward jazz, which his Beethoven-loving father despises, but these are the only tokens of fixing a precise point in our cultural history. These events may just as well have been in the 1880s, 1940s or 1960s, the more so since the entire film takes place in the centuries old setting of a baronial Scottish manor. This *imprecision* is a source of continual annoyance to myself, but the criticism is such a generic one it seems unfair to belabour this particular film with it. Perhaps all scripts these days are left purposely vague and timeless so as not to alienate a post-historical audience with a very short attention span.

But we don't see too much of boys in kilts these days, and there will be enough mileage in Fraser's various escapades to amuse most viewers – his announcing at dinner table that perhaps his mother ought to take up prostitution and help support the poor by servicing the guests at table, his appraisal of the prints of naked ladies he finds leaved in the pages of the books in the attic, his mutually-confusing birds-and-the-bees talk from father, teetotalling gamma getting tipsy on a sherry trifle. It's obviously an important film within this archive's terms of reference, but I can't honestly bring myself to recommend it. It's the kind of film that will erase almost completely from memory 48 hours after viewing it.

Robert Norman is OK on screen, better as the gleeful narrator. Colin Firth is miscast, too contemporary an actor for the father. Irène Jacob is pleasing as the siren Eloise, who develops a fondness for Fraser, and Rosemary Harris suitably dour as the

See subject index under **AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL TITLES, THE CHILD AS SPECTATOR ON THE ADULT WORLD, GRANDPARENTS** and **SEX & SEXUALITY**.