

Tom Brown's Schooldays

(US = "Adventures at Rugby")

UK : 1951 : dir. Gordon Parry : Talisman / Renown : 96 min

prod: Brian Desmond Hurst : scr: Noel Langley : dir.ph.: C Pennington-Richards

[John Howard Davies](#); [John Charlesworth](#); [Glyn Dearman](#); [Neil North](#)

Robert Newton; John Forrest; James Hayter; Michael Hordern; Diana Wynyard;

Hermione Baddeley; Kathleen Byron; Francis de Wolff; Brian Worth; Michael Brennan;

Michael Ward; Glyn Dearman; Max Bygraves

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Kbytes	Ω	□	≠	Z	☺	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
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"Birching will continue to flourish, gentlemen!" (promises, promises..)

Source: Boys' and Girls' Cinema Clubs Annual

Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 2001 review:

"Well-acted film of Victorian England school life with exceptional British cast and good direction. Noel Langley scripted, from Thomas Hughes' novel. ***½"

Speelfilm Encyclopedie reshuffle of the above:

"Well-played new version about life at a Victorian school, with good directing and exceptionally good actors. . ***½"

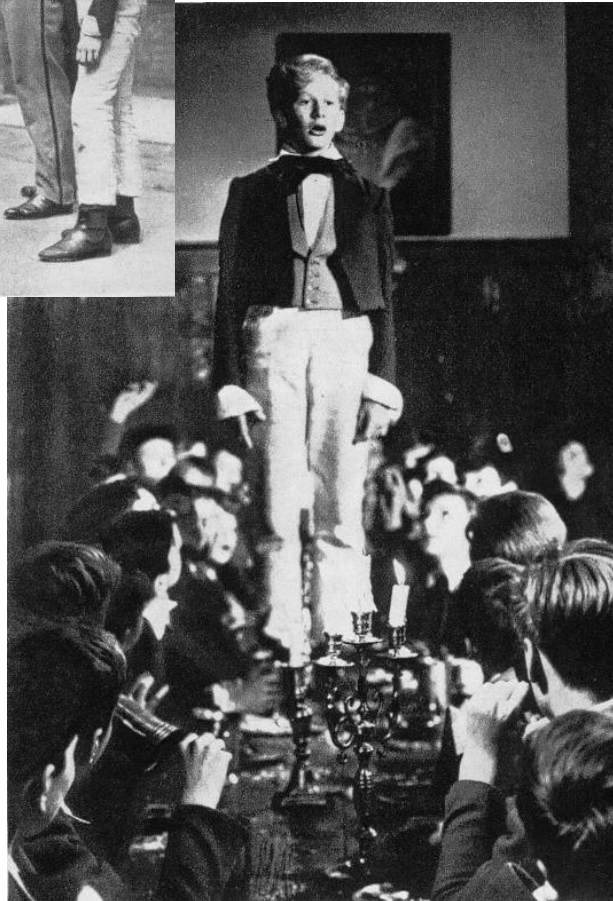


BEASTLY CUSTOMS AT RUGBY (1)

Above: Scragging the first conkers of term...

Right: Slave auctions in the supper hall..

Source: Collins Film Book for Young People



Halliwell's Film Guide review:

"Unexciting remake featuring one surprisingly strong performance¹."

"..An odd mixture of the brutal and the solemnly improving."

- Richard Mallett, **Punch**

The Good Film and Video Guide review:

"Thomas Hughes' 1857 novel is the best known of public school stories and had been filmed twice before, in Britain in 1917 and by RKO in Hollywood in 1940, with Freddie Bartholomew and Cedric Hardwicke. Hughes

admired Dr Arnold of Rugby and would probably have approved of Robert Newton's restrained performance in that role. He is shown to be anxious to outlaw bullying but there is still much of that —and fagging — on view. Apart from the fact that Tom (John Howard Davies) learns to box to teach a lesson to the bully Flashman (John Forrest) his adventures are mild, but quite well conveyed. John Charlesworth and Glyn Dearman are his chums; the grown-ups include Diana Wynyard, Hermione Baddeley, Michael Hordern, James Hayter, Kathleen Byron, Rachel Gurney, Amy Veness and Francis de Wolff. ** "

¹ he means Newton's

Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89
review:

“The adventures of a lad at an exclusive boys’ school. Well-done version of classic story. ***½ ”

The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television review:

“1951 version had Robert Newton as a less than satisfactory Arnold, John Howard Davies as a wispy Tom, but some solid support from James Hayter, Michael Hordern, Diana Wynyard. Gordon Parry directed from a just-competent Noel Langley script under Brian Desmond Hurst as producer. 7 ”

TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995 review:

“Less well paced than the 1940 Hollywood adaptation of Thomas Hughes’ school story, but more solidly acted, this British version was directed by Gordon Parry and proved an immense success at the box office. A young

Max Bygraves makes an early film appearance aboard a coach, and John Howard Davies, reunited with his "**OLIVER TWIST**" co-star Robert Newton (who plays the headmaster) is ideal as Tom Brown. *** ”

Variety Movie Guide 1993 review:

“England’s classic story of public school life is acted with great sincerity by a name cast, but script and direction go all out to emphasise the obvious emotional tear-jerker angles. Almost the entire script hinges on the popular angle of the new boy versus the bully. John Howard Davies makes Tom Brown a lovable and sympathetic youngster without a shade of priggishness. Robert Newton as the reforming headmaster, Dr Arnold, fills his role with commendable restraint. The plot, of course, is dominated by the schoolboys, and there is a standout performance by John Forrest as the sneering, bullying Flashman. Special facilities having been granted to film this in Rugby School, the authenticity of the background cannot be questioned.”



BEASTLY CUSTOMS AT RUGBY (2)

Above: Tossing parties in the junior dorm...

Right: Toasted buns in the 5th form study...

Source: Collins Film Book for
Young People



BEASTLY CUSTOMS AT RUGBY (3)

Left: Waylaying passing coaches was jolly fine sport...

Below: But would lead to quarrels over the spoils..

Source: Collins Film Book for Young People



Video Movie Guide 1993 review:

"Tom, played by John Howard Davies, brings a civilising influence to his peers in this engaging account of life in a Victorian England boys' school. Robert Newton, of course, is superb. An excellent cast, under good direction, makes this a particularly fine film. ***½ "

The Virgin Film Guide review:

"This is a saccharine screen version of the Thomas Hughes classic, emphasising the battles between new boy at school Davies and the brute he must contend with, Forrest. A new headmaster is also introduced, portrayed by Newton. He deals with problems in a manner the boys are not very accustomed to; that is, he treats his students as human beings instead of untrained animals. Davies is almost too likable in the lead role, while his counterpart is likewise almost too nasty, but this helps to play up the heavy dramatics. This film is a remake of **"TOM BROWN'S SCHOOL DAYS"**. ** "

[no listing in "The Critics' Film Guide", "Rating the Movies (1990)" or "The Time Out Film Guide"]

TV Quick review:

"The majestic Robert Newton dominates, as per usual, in this classic anthropological study of weird English child-raising methods. (It was the second film version). Caning, fagging etc much in evidence; also much running up and down Flanders-style rugby pitches in pneumonia-inducing weather. Do a lot of today's young scoundrels a sight of good, too..."

TV Times note:

"Screen adaptation of Thomas Hughes' classic novel about the trials of a Victorian schoolboy. *** "

Daily Mirror review:

"John Howard Davies stars as the new boy at Rugby School who falls foul of bully John Forrest. Whackings, beatings, ear-twistings and other public school delights abound - until

young Davies learns to box and gives the boulder a damn good thrashing. Splendid yarn, with a notable supporting cast.²”

Sunday Times notes:

“Classic remake of the Thomas Hughes tale, set in Rugby School, focusing on the battle between the new boy and the bully.”

“Classic remake of the Thomas Hughes tale set in a brutal public school. John Howard Davies, Robert Newton, James Hayter.”

“Thomas Hughes’s mid-Victorian Rugby schoolboy is played by John Howard Davies, so good as David Lean’s **"OLIVER TWIST"**, and perfect prey for the school bully Flashman (John Forest). Robert Newton plays the reforming headmaster, Dr Arnold...”

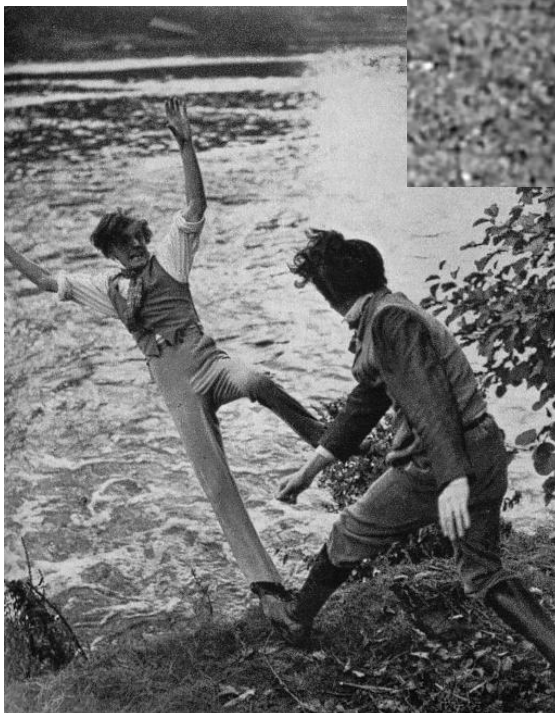
The Moving Picture Boy entry on John Howard Davies:

“John’s mother was an actress, and his father the screenwriter Jack Davies; acting went back four generations in the family. He was suitably delicate, at nine, for the job of playing **"OLIVER TWIST"**: not as heart-renderingly pretty as the 1960 **"OLIVER"**, Mark Lester, but a better actor.

His range, it’s true, was limited to expressions of wide-eyed wonder or fear, plus rather exaggerated enthusiasm and politeness, but this was the manner of the time and not his fault. Drenched and filthy in **"OLIVER TWIST"**, he looked the most pitiful (yet distinguished) of drowned rats; and if he was a disappointingly bland Tom Brown, he was at his best in **"THE ROCKING HORSE WINNER"**, with the horse-haunted mania

Swimming lessons at school were not for faint-hearted sorts of chaps. Many souls perished.

Source: Movieboys website (top) & Collins Film Book for Young People



² complete gibberish – the writer evidently had not seen the film

bursting satisfyingly through impeccable English charm.

Davies now abandoned acting. After public school and university education, he went into TV production with EMI and the BBC, where he became Head of Light Entertainment. There he produced or directed such classic series as "**Steptoe and Son**", "**Monty Python's Flying Circus**" and "**Fawlty Towers**", and so earned the gratitude of the whole English-speaking world."

The Moving Picture Boy entry on John Charlesworth:

"John William Charlesworth... came late to acting, but the slight, boyish appearance persisted throughout his teens. He had reddish hair, a light creamy voice and a level blue gaze of disturbing intensity. Besides work in radio, he gave several brilliant performances on the London stage, ranging from the anguished child of divorcing parents in "Background", and a stalwart Jim Hawkins opposite Donald Wolfitt's Long John Silver, to the licentious school prefect in "Quaint Honour".

His best screen role was as the hero's friend East in "**TOM BROWN'S SCHOOL-DAYS**", where he ran the gamut from cocky exuberance through staunch loyalty to manly grief. (He would in fact have been a superb Tom, but the role was predestined for the younger and more tremulous John Howard Davies, who had already starred in "**OLIVER TWIST**" and "**THE ROCKING HORSE WINNER**".)

Charlesworth showed his power in emotional scenes in "**SCROOGE**" and "**THE MAGIC BOX**", and he had an adventurous lead in the Children's Film Foundation's "**JOHN OF THE FAIR**". He appears only in the opening minutes of "**THE ORACLE**", as a worried office-boy.

He continued to be seen in the cinema, in "**YIELD TO THE NIGHT**" (56), "**A QUESTION OF ADULTERY**" (56), "**YANGTSE INCIDENT**" (57), "**BATTLE HELL**" (57), "**THE ADVENTURES OF HAL 5**" (58) and seven or eight more films. Tragically, having recently married, and while playing leading roles at Birmingham Repertory Theatre, John Charlesworth gassed himself in April 1960."

The Moving Picture Boy entry on Glyn Dearman:

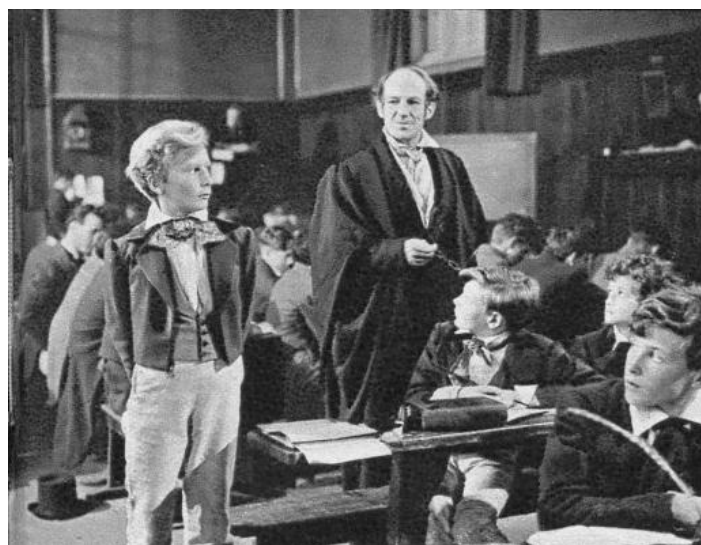
"Dearman, the charming Tiny Tim in "**SCROOGE**" and the pathetic Arthur in "**TOM BROWN'S SCHOOLDAYS**", later became an accomplished BBC radio drama producer."

All stills and captions on these pages are from a photo synopsis in
The Boys' and Girls' Cinema Clubs Annual

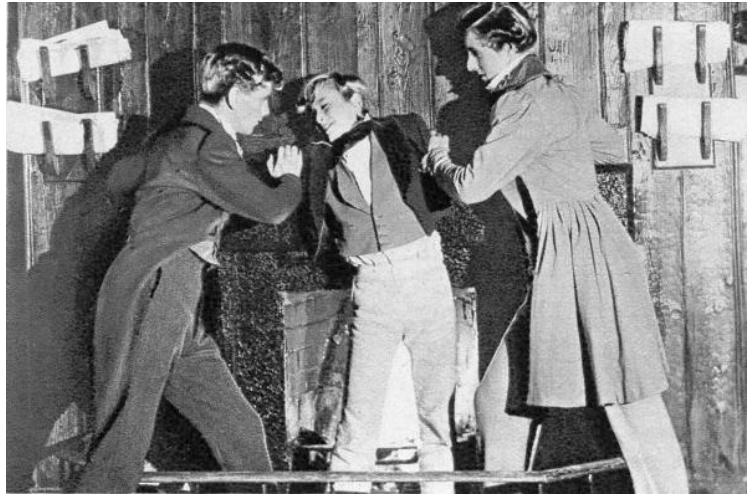


Plunged into the rough-and-tumble of public school life in the year 1834, young Tom Brown, away from his Berkshire village home for the first time, finds the going at Rugby School hard. As a new boy he has to sing a song at supper, but he gets through it despite a fusillade of crusts at his head - and something harder from Flashman, a fifth form bully.

Dr. Arnold, the saintly Headmaster of Rugby, is determined to stamp out bullying and to make far-reaching reforms in the school. Opposition to his policy is strong among some of the masters, and Tom's form-master takes the opportunity of assuring all the "slimy and spotted denizens of pond and stream" in the class that the birch will still be "usefully employed".



Tom is befriended by East, a junior like himself, but incurs the enmity of Flashman, who delights in ill-treating boys weaker than himself. Fifth-formers are not entitled to a fag, but Flashman constantly calls upon Tom to fag for him. Tom's staunch refusal to knuckle under to the bully infuriates Flashman, who "roasts" him by the fire until he faints.



Another pleasant diversion of Flashman and his cronies is tossing small boys in blankets, and Tom and as many of his friends as can be caught are subjected to this ordeal, which is carried out in no friendly or sportsmanlike spirit, but with a view to terrorising the juniors and establishing Flashman's authority over them. Again, Tom proves himself a tough nut to crack.

One day Tom receives an invitation to take tea with Dr. Arnold and his family, and there he meets the Doctor's children – and someone else – Arthur, a frail, fatherless boy, who is placed under Tom's wing and whom Tom promises to befriend and protect "as a sacred trust". This is not an easy promise for Tom to keep, as he very soon finds out.



Little Arthur, gentle and delicate, is out of place in the hurly-burly of a big public school, but Dr. Arnold has faith in Tom's courage, chivalry and loyalty, and believes that under his guidance Arthur will lose the fears and the feeling of insecurity with which he has been burdened since the death of his father. He is not blind to the fact that this will test Tom.



The road does not prove easy for Tom. Flashman at once swoops on little Arthur and announces that he will have him as his fag. To prevent this happening, Tom and East ask Big Brooke to make Arthur his fag, and so they outwit Flashman and save the little boy from a life of misery. But the menace of Flashman still looms large, and Tom and East agree that they must act.

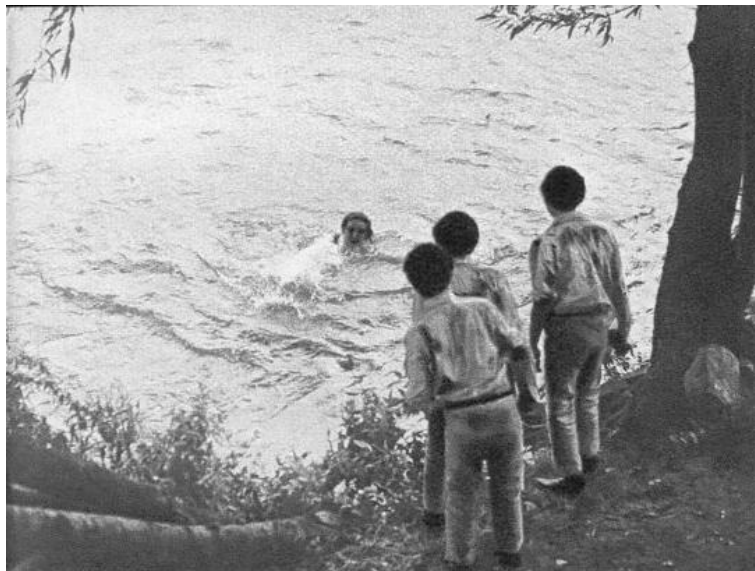
They go to Diggs for advice. Diggs, a senior boy with a reputation for shrewdness, tells them that the only way to rid themselves of Flashman's attentions is to fight him – and beat him. By a trick he gets Flashman alone, and Tom and East set about the bully and finally defeat him. Flashman goes away vowing vengeance on them, but the boys rejoice at their victory.





The day of the great paper chase comes. Juniors are barred, as the run is a long and arduous one, but Tom and East determine to run with the hounds. To their disgust, Arthur joins them. They know that Arthur will never stay the course and will only be a drag on them. Unknown to them they are running into a drama that is to have far-reaching effects.

They lose the scent and lose their way. Hearing voices by a river, they go forward – and then they see Flashman fighting furiously with a young farmer, Ned Taylor. Flashman gets the worst of the battle and is knocked into the river and carried towards a weir. Ned Taylor hurries off, but Tom and East plunge in to the rescue and swim to the screaming bully.

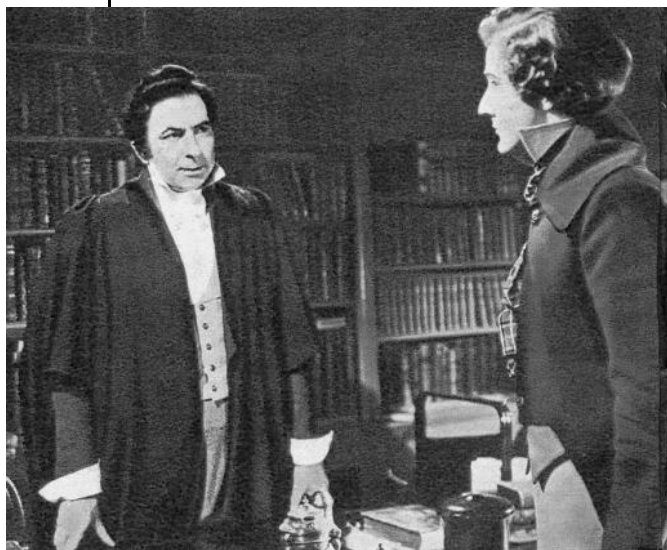


They succeed in dragging him to the bank, where Arthur, who cannot swim, lends a hand in getting him out. Arthur, however, slips and falls, and Tom and East again pluckily swim to the rescue, Flashman making off. On the very edge of the weir they save Arthur, and three very wet and bedraggled boys at last stumble back to the school, where their names are taken.



Reporting to Dr. Arnold for returning after lock-up time, Tom is severely rebuked for failing in his task of looking after Arthur. Neither he nor East tells the full story of what happened, and they are in deep disgrace. Arthur is put to bed and his mother sent for. Anxious hours for Tom and East follow, for Arthur's condition worsens and they fear he will not

Whilst Arthur is at death's door, Dr. Arnold seeks again to find out exactly what happened on the day of the paper-chase. He questions Flashman, who claims that he saved Arthur from the river after the little boy had been pushed in by Tom and East during some rough play. Flashman keeps silent about Ned Taylor, knowing well that Tom and East will not speak out.



Collins Film Book for Young People vol.4
story of the film:

"In 1834, when eleven-year-old Tom Brown (John Howard Davies) set off to Rugby School, the Public School system in England was a brutalising and demoralising one. His father did not approve of it, but he made an exception in the case of Rugby because its Headmaster, Dr. Arnold (Robert Newton) – whose example was afterwards to change the whole system – had already started making reforms there.

On the night of his arrival Tom had a considerable ordeal to face. After supper was finished in Hall, he had to stand on a table and "sing. himself in." By old tradition, if he failed to pass the test, there would have been painful penalties, but he acquitted himself well enough. Pelted with scraps of bread and harder missiles from Flashman's catapult, he got through "*The Lincolnshire Poacher*".

Life in those days for a new boy at a big school was a miserable one if the boy lacked spirit, but Tom had plenty of it and stayed the course well. Flashman, however, remained his

Dr. Arnold sends for Tom and East, and in their presence asks Flashman to repeat his story. This the bully does without hesitation, and the boys, though appalled at his deceit, do not expose it. Someone else does, though – Ned Taylor, who has been to the Doctor and told him the whole story and who comes out of the next room and confronts the horrified Flashman.



Expulsion of Flashman follows, and Rugby School is a happier place for his departure. Arthur recovers. Tom is thanked by Mrs Arthur and by Dr. Arnold, whose faith in the boy is restored, and the term ends in a whirlwind of good humour and jollity, with Tom Brown firmly established in popularity, East a firm friend, and little Arthur well and happy.

fire. This torture was too much even for a strong lad like Tom, and he finished the adventure in the sick-room. Doctor Arnold was determined to put a stop to the gross form of bullying that he knew still went on in the school, and he had a very shrewd notion that it had been Flashman who had "roasted" Tom. But Tom, true to schoolboy tradition, refused to sneak, and there was nothing that the Doctor could do about it.

Tom, in dour mood, told his friend East that there was only one thing for it if life wasn't to become unbearable: Flashman must be thrashed. The holidays were approaching, and he said that he was going to take boxing lessons. He advised East to do the same, and East said he would.

The result was that they both came back to school for the new term more than well equipped to look after themselves. They waited for Flashman to make himself obnoxious, and they hadn't long to wait. Doctor Arnold called Tom to him and placed under his protection a gentle, fatherless little boy called Arthur (Glyn Dearman). Flashman promptly began bullying the frail new boy, and Tom and East knew it was time to act. They got hold of Flashman in Hall and pitched into him furiously until he had to cry enough.

Flushed with this great victory, the pair became rather full of themselves, and one day, accompanied by Arthur, they tried to take part in a paper-chase for the senior boys only. They were told curtly to clear off when their presence in the field was discovered, and they set off across country back to the school. On their way, they came to a river, and on the bank they saw two figures fighting savagely: Flashman and Ned Taylor (Anthony Doonan), a young farmer in the district whom Flashman had offended.

Flashman was knocked into the river, and the racing current began carrying him swiftly towards Barby Weir, a millrace dreaded by everybody round about. Taylor callously ignored Flashman's panic-stricken cries for help and walked away, but Tom and East dived into the stream and brought the drowning man to the bank. Arthur, a non-swimmer, was waiting for them and tried to help them to bring Flashman to safety, with the result that he fell in himself. Flashman, safe on the bank, made off without a word of

thanks, leaving Arthur's two friends to save him.

Long after lock-up, Tom, East and Arthur struggled back to the school where they were told that Doctor Arnold wanted to see them. Loyally, each tried to take the blame for what had happened. Seeing Arthur in a pitiful condition after his soaking, the Headmaster sent him off to the sick-room. He kept Tom behind to tell him sternly that he had failed in his trust: and, as he seemed unable to look after Arthur as he had promised to do, Arthur would be removed from his care.

Arthur became seriously ill, and his friends spent miserable, anxious hours. Then one day Tom and East were again summoned to the Headmaster's study. They found Flashman, already with the Doctor. Doctor Arnold challenged him to give his version of what had happened at Barby Weir, and what he had to say left the other two younger boys aghast. He said that Tom and East had been having some horse-play with Arthur on the bank and had pushed him into the river; and he added modestly that if he, Flashman, had not been on the spot to perform a heroic rescue, Arthur would surely have drowned.

Silent and appalled, Tom and East could only stand gaping. But then Doctor Arnold brought in a new witness: Ned Taylor. Had Flashman but known it, Taylor, remorseful about his own part in the incident, had already told the Doctor the truth about what had happened at the Weir. He repeated what he had previously said; and thereupon the Headmaster, in a few terse, grim words, expelled Flashman from the school.

With Arthur recovered and again in his care, Tom's spirit rekindled, and from then on his schooldays were happy ones. He never rose to great heights in class, but at Rugby Football no boy was better. And Dr. Arnold looked on with satisfaction. Tom, so to speak, represented a successful experiment. The reformation of the school had already begun."



Source: *Collins Film Book for Young People*

"Boys have no feelings" opines one master to his colleagues, "no soul, no pity", and we're left in no doubt his sentiments are generally shared. "Birching will continue to flourish, gentlemen!" Michael Hordern emphatically assures Tom Brown and his classmates as the new term begins. But these are the cruel masters of course, jealous guardians of arcane public school tradition. The sins of the school are *their* sins, we gather, and no taint on the sainted person of Dr Arnold, their newly-arrived headmaster, whose reformist zeal has spread alarm among the arch-conservatives at Rugby, for whom any interference with school rituals is an attack on the very fabric of empire.

In fact the only ritual Dr Arnold seems at pains to stamp out is the "roasting" of younger boys by 5th formers. Fagging, the prefect system, gambling, brawling, obscure house initiation rites - none of these seem to concern the great reformer unduly. For all Arnold's benevolent airs, Tom is left to contend with the bullying Flashman on his own terms, and run the same gauntlet of indiscriminate meanness as generations of new boys before him. In fairness to Arnold, he does invite Tom to name his tormentor, but would doubtless have thought less of the boy had he done so. The same code of silence operates among public schoolboys as in the prison system or the *cosa nostra*.

In compacting the book down to 90-odd minutes the film gives out that Rugby in the 1830s was after all a grand old place, taken in the round, and Richard Addinsell's winsome score makes an appeal to our sense of nostalgia for things past and indelibly British. Public school, we feel sure, watching these scenes of cricket, house sing-songs and nude bathing in the river, was the perfect incubator for team spirit and manly fellowship. The horrors of school life are all encapsulated in the shape of Flashman, the Bad Egg. Dr Arnold, intoning the parable about the seed falling on stony ground, and glowering across the hall at Flashman, makes this lesson all too plain. The only cruelty at Rugby, we're asked to believe, is that meted out by a single bully. But while drawing this discreet veil over the endemic use of the birch might soothe contemporary sensibilities, it's anything but an accurate account of the book or the school's history.

"Whackings and beatings" do not then, as the *Daily Mirror* cheerfully suggests, "abound". In fact there's not a single one, presumably at the insistence of Rugby School itself when lending their facilities to this production. Indeed, the film turns out to be a glowing little

testimonial for them, and doubtless did their advance registrations no harm at all. One can imagine they were anxious to play down certain aspects of the school's record. In Hughes's book, the public flogging of Tom by Dr Arnold is one of the keypoints of the whole story, while the same treatment later meted out to Flashman is - if we can risk the word - its climax. Yet in this anodyne retelling of the story, Flashman is merely "sent down", and Tom gets a sorrowful ticking off. As so often with historical films, liberal education ideas of the 1950s are here transplanted onto an educationalist of the 1830s whom no-one today would call "liberal".

John Howard Davies (12), as the Virgin Film Guide hinted,...

** Neil North played the title rôle in "THE WINSLOW BOY" ('48) **