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William Comes to Town

(aka: "William at the Circus")

UK : 1948 : dir. Val Guest : A R Shipman & David Coplan

: 90 min

prod: John R Sloan : scr: Val Guest : dir.ph.: Bert Mason

William Graham; Brian Roper; James Crabbe; Brian Weske; David Paige; David Hannaford

Garry Marsh; Jane Welsh; A E Matthews; Hugh Cross; Muriel Aked; Kathleen Stuart;

Michael Medwin; Michael Balfour; Jon Pertwee; Peter Butterworth; John Powe;

Norman Pierce; Mary Vallance; Ivan Craig; John Martell; Marquis the chimp; Jumble the dog

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	KBytes	Ω	□	≠	Z	☼	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
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Sources:

Left: Hollywood-London Film Parade

Above: Boys' and Girls' Cinema Clubs Annual 1949

Halliwell's Filmgoer's Companion general note:

"The argumentative small boy created in over thirty novels by Richmal Crompton had several British film incarnations, none very satisfactory, in the thirties and forties.¹"

¹ There were only two Williams, in three films, but Halliwell doesn't list a single one of them in his guide.

TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995 review:

"He's back! Richmal Crompton's ragged rascal springs to tousled life again in the third and last of his three screen adventures. The supporting cast has Brian Roper as an excellent Ginger, and Marquis the chimpanzee, who steals every scene he's in. **"



Above: Training for the circus

Right: Robert, as usual, spoils the fun...

Below: Breakfast wasn't Mr Brown's favourite meal...



Above and following pages – stills and captions taken from *Collins Film Book 1947*, which also supplied a photo-synopsis of the earlier William Graham film **"JUST WILLIAMS' LUCK"**. Left to right in the centre still: William, elder brother Robert, Outlaws Henry (Brian Weske), Douglas (James Crabbe) and Ginger (Brian Roper).

The Boys' and Girls' Cinema Clubs Annual
still caption:

"Just William: William Graham takes the banister express down the loop line to breakfast."

Collins Film Book story-of-the-film account:

"It was nearly Christmas, and, sad to say, this jolly season meant headaches for most of the inhabitants of the "Hollies", the suburban house where the Brown family lived. For William had become circus-minded. Mr Brown did not mind so much when his younger son tried to teach his dog Jumble to jump through an old bicycle tyre, but when he broke half the porridge plates practising juggling, then he did get annoyed!

Mr Brown's temper was therefore already badly frayed when he opened a rather large bill from his daughter Ethel's dressmaker. He said angrily that the family must economise. Mrs Brown, as usual, tried to smooth things over and said that things would soon get better; but that remark didn't calm Mr Brown at all. He began one of those long harangues that even the most easy-going fathers are capable of. He said the government was all wrong, and that most of the governments before the present one had been just as bad. These politicians didn't know anything. Here we were in the middle of a crisis, and all everybody wanted was more money and less work. Now if only he was in charge of the country he would know what to do...!

All through this long speech William didn't say a word, but he listened with all his ears, and he was most impressed. It was a scandal, he thought, that his father should have no scope for his talents and tremendous knowledge. Later that day there was a meeting of the Outlaws in the barn. William was in his most eloquent mood, and Ginger, Henry and Douglas sat gaping as he gave a slightly out-of-focus version of what Mr Brown had said at breakfast. Everybody was working less for more money, he said, so the Outlaws, too, were entitled to more pay (that is, pocket money) and shorter hours (that is, no afternoon school). His father, he added, was the only man who could save the country and give them the sort of

life they ought to have (a dream-world which included such wonderful things as monster humbugs and free seats for the circus). Before the end of the meeting William had drawn up a long list of the demands of the Outlaws, and the motion was passed unanimously that they should take the list to the Prime Minister and get the whole business put right by Act of Parliament.

Next day, making excuses to their families, the boys set off from Hadley to Westminster. They found their way to Downing Street all right, and were marching on Number 10 when a policeman on duty turned them away. Undaunted, they waited till they were out of sight of the policeman, and then they scaled a wall and got into the Prime Minister's house by the back way².

Inside, they bumped straight into an imposing but kindly elderly gentleman who asked them what they wanted. William thought this might be the Prime Minister, but it turned out to be the Minister for Economic Affairs. It was such a long title that they knew he must be somebody important, and William poured out his story about his father's wonderful ideas and lack of opportunity to put them into practice. The Government, he said, were awfully stupid not to listen to Mr Brown when he could help them out of all their difficulties. The Minister listened to everything they had to say, gravely and sympathetically, but he managed to persuade them that perhaps they had been rather over-optimistic, and the boys turned their backs on Westminster and set out for Hadley again.

But that was not the end of the affair. Little did they know that their conversation with the Minister for Economic Affairs had been overheard by a maid in the house, and they also did not know that the maid had a friend who was a newspaper reporter. She told her friend all about it, and the reporter wasted no time in getting to work. Next morning Mr Brown opened his newspaper; and there, staring at him, were the big headlines:
"MR. BROWN OF HADLEY KNOWS HOW TO SAVE THE COUNTRY!"

² *Evidently this was before the days of nanny-like injunctions: "don't try this at home, boys and girls!"..*

Scarcely able to believe his eyes, he read the facetious article underneath, describing William's visit to Downing Street, and all he had told the Minister for Economic Affairs

about his father's plan to save the nation. Helpless with rage, he sent William to his room. But by this time the house was besieged



Top: William plans to save the country

Above: The Browns hit publicity

Left: Fun Fairs are fun when...

Bottom: ..you aren't the Aunt Sally



by a noisy crowd of newspaper reporters and cameramen, determined to interview Mr Brown and take pictures of everybody. William's pretty sister Ethel rather enjoyed all the publicity, but Mr Brown didn't enjoy it a bit. This time William had really gone past the limit. Mr Brown knew he would be the laughing stock of all his friends for weeks to come. He reeled off a long list of punishments for William, and they included one which really hurt. The trip to the circus he had been promised by Mr Brown was now definitely OUT!.³

The dejected Outlaws met once again in the barn. At length they came to the conclusion that there was only one thing they could do to save the day: go and see the Minister for Economic Affairs again - the only person who had listened to them sympathetically - and get him to explain things to Mr Brown. They hitch-hiked to Town⁴ for their second visit to Downing Street; but their scheme had been overheard by Hubert Lane, William's unscrupulous enemy. He took his tale straight to Mr Brown, who promptly set off in pursuit of the Outlaws.

In Downing Street, they found their way blocked by the same constable who had stopped them before, but, in sending them away, he revealed that the Minister had gone to the circus. The boys dashed off to find him, followed not longer after by Mr Brown. They had no money to get into the circus, but they did get in - by way of the staff-entrance. The circus officials soon spotted them and chased them right through the fun fair and in and out of one booth after another. Hard on their heels came the perspiring Mr Brown. They were very nearly caught when William and Henry had to disguise themselves as Aunt Sallys (a very painful moment!), but they managed to avoid capture until at last they ran the Minister to earth on the switchback and poured out their troubles to him.

And it turned out that they had not misjudged the Minister. He proved a real trump, and with terrific aplomb he smoothed out everything and

smoothed down quite a number of angry grown-ups - even including Mr Brown.⁵

The Moving Picture Boy (surprisingly sketchy) entry on William Graham:

"The most important if not the most picturesque impersonator of **"WILLIAM"**, grubby hero of Richmal Crompton's popular series of children's books and England's answer to America's **"PENROD"**, was the curly-haired son of a blacksmith."

The Moving Picture Boy entry on Brian Weske:

"This fair, waifish boy, a favourite urchin of British films of the late Forties, was the son of the actor J Victor Weske. His first featured role was as "Limpy" in **"MEDAL FOR THE GENERAL"**, but he was better known later as "Henry" in the **"WILLIAM"** films. He had minor parts in films for another twenty years or so... "

Excerpt from **The Moving Picture Boy** entry on Brian Roper:

"This amiable, freckled redhead - "Ginger" in the **"WILLIAM"** films - had the sort of cosmopolitan career denied to most Doncaster boys. After acting in local dramatic shows, he toured Britain with a company organised by the National Association of Boys' Clubs, and at 14, in London, played the title role (created, oddly enough by Elisabeth Bergner) in Barrie's biblical play "The Boy David"... "

[no listing in "Halliwell's Film Guide", "Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 2001", "Speelfilm Encyclopedie", "The Critics' Film Guide", "The Good Film and Video Guide", "Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89", "Rating the Movies (1990)", "The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television", "The Time Out Film Guide", "Variety Movie Guide 1993", "Video Movie Guide 1993" or "The Virgin Film Guide"]

³ inaccurate - see below

⁴ no they didn't

⁵ Mum? What's "aplomb"? What's "unanimously"? What's "harangue"?



*Top: Fleas are all right
INSIDE their circus*

*Centre: It took a real
Cabinet minister...*

Bottom: ...to get William out of this scrape



The prosaic title "**WILLIAM COMES TO TOWN**" was presumably ditched for the more exciting "**WILLIAM AT THE CIRCUS**" for re-release. William Graham's second outing as Richmal Crompton's hazard zone is marginally more fun than "**JUST WILLIAM'S LUCK**", but it too suffers from the strange tendency, whenever the action starts, to revert to silent cinema, with the most excruciating *coo-wot-larks!* musical accompaniment. No doubt the producers hoped the roars of the audience would render anything else inaudible. Watching it in silence is a bit weird. In this film the climactic fairground chase, William's death-defying climb of the big dipper, and the circus show finale are all performed without even spot sound effects. William, his father and the "Minister for Economonic Affairs" are all shown corpsed with laughter at the dreary antics of the clowns, but all we can *hear* is tiresome Keystone Cops music (in background shots, the real audience do not appear to share in the hilarity). The only shred of humour added to the film by Robert Farnon's truly ghastly score is a little vibrato signature tune every time Emily, the Browns' nervous maid, has one of her turns.

Conspicuous "product placement" (by which companies pay to have their wares or brand names featured prominently on screen) is often thought a recent marketing device, but "**WILLIAM COMES TO TOWN**" is little more than an extended promotional trailer for Bertram Mills' Circus and Billy Butlins' fairground rides, while for example the Jimmy Edwards school farce "**BOTTOMS UP!**" (60) was distributed along with detailed proposals for "exploiting" various toys and branded goods in the film. The process merely reached its apotheosis when the McDonalds burger chain produced "**MAC AND ME**" (88) as an extended commercial for its own inedible products. The allure and mystique of the circus was still presumably viable in the 1940s, and perhaps this film *did* set young audiences slaving to be taken for a sawdust hit. Today the circus is as passé as Butlins holidays, and children require more interactive amusement than watching clowns go through their schtick between the gymnasts and sequinned elephants.

The lengthy synopsis above makes no mention of all the slapstick business with Marquis the chimp (get it?). Mr Brown had declared in his opening fulminations that a monkey would make a better MP than some present incumbents, so when the Brown household is inundated with post from members of the public endorsing his views, among the gifts which arrive is a mysterious crate, which of course William opens before anyone else has seen it. The chest contains a chimp and the tart note "Make an MP out of this!". William determines to keep the ape, and hides it in his bedroom dressed in his Sunday best. A homeless orphan - he explains to his parents. The truth emerges that night, and it is this fiasco, not the press stories, which finally brings the wrath of pater familias upon our hero. Next morning - an incongruous bid at pathos here - William gets an off-screen slippering from his father, and is told he shall *In No Wise Go To The Circus*. Again, all the frantic running-about-the-house-after-the-chimp sequence is filmed without a sound, but drenched in Mickey Mouse music.

It's interesting to contrast the way adults interact with children in films of this vintage and the modern "good parenting" practices evinced by American television. Here *everybody* bosses the kids about imperiously - older brother and sister, or Emily the maid, barking orders at William just as much as his father (mother of course remains a beacon of warmth and understanding throughout - so no change there). When William acquires temporary custody of "Marky" the chimp, he instinctively sets to bossing the chimp about in the same tone of voice. Adult authority in those days was a hectoring, omnipresent tirade, not the negotiated truce which (on TV at any rate) prevails today. What's more, all the Outlaws live in permanent peril of a rapid overheating of the buttocks ("Ginger says if you rub beeswax in first it doesn't hurt so much" - "How many whacks did you get?", "Six and a bit!", "What was the bit for?", "Dad coughed and missed") while today's incarnations of William (though more properly set in the 1930s) are never so much as threatened with a hiding. Contemporary wisdom on that subject re-edits the past to suit itself, as television and cinema habitually do with ephemeral social trends (hairstyles, dress, attitudes to women).

Interesting also, as I write this on the day of Princess Diana's state funeral, to see how the British press are depicted in this 1948 film. How familiar it all looks - paparazzi besieging the Brown house, having published with impunity a private conversation with a Minister of State at number 10, badgering the older Brown children to pose for their cameras, hoisting the daughter's skirt to expose more thigh, supplying sex kittens to fawn over the son... It is all played for comedy, of course, but then in 1948 yellow journalism hadn't so conquered the planet that reporters could hound a hallowed national icon to her violent death, snap their shots of her dying moments, and 24 hours later sell commemorative special editions mourning her tragic loss. In 1948 it was perhaps still possible to laugh at the chimpanzee antics of these detestable people. In 1997 they are too dangerous and ubiquitous to be amusing. And there is sexual equality in the gutter now, to improve matters.

It's a close call whether William Graham or Dicky Lupino ten years earlier made the worse incarnation of *Just William*. Neither has at all the look of the familiar drawings in the William books (nor does the latest TV entrant, Oliver Rokison). Graham was too spindly, with his incongruous shock of golliwog hair, and Lupino too podgy by far. Much of the humour in the written character derives from his earnestness and mock sobriety, while the stress in the films is more on slapstick and dashing about. Needless to say, all three "**WILLIAM**" films look positively archaic now, but therein lies the only charm they can lay claim to. A wistful view of a comfortable middle class childhood in post-war Britain (sweet coupons are still in force, and admission to the circus at Olympia is 1/6d "including tax" - whatever tax *that* might have been, 25 years before Edward Heath enriched our lives with VAT.).

Holmstrom says that William Graham and Brian Weske were born in 1932, which would make them both 16, far too old for their parts. Brian Roper was 15, and afterwards went to America with high hopes, appearing in "**THE SECRET GARDEN**" (49) and "**THE MINIVER STORY**" (50), but a long-term career did not materialise. Nothing further is known of James Crabbe (Douglas) or David Paige (Hubert Lane). Graham was discovered as a dancer, and toured Variety theatres for fourteen months with impresario Carroll Levis. Levis learned a studio was casting for the William role, and suggested Graham...

*"I've since heard that almost simultaneously several hundred agents and a few hundred mothers had the same idea, but luck was on my side, and I got the role. I have now completed my second picture, "**WILLIAM COMES TO TOWN**", in which I manage to win entry into No.10 Downing Street, but believe me, crashing the Prime Minister's home is not nearly as difficult as crashing "the pictures". "*

[excerpt of a purportedly "from his own lips" account in *Hollywood-London Film Parade* 1949 - see Graham's biographical entry for the full text]

See also "**JUST WILLIAM'S LUCK**" (47) featuring largely the same cast, the original "**JUST WILLIAM**" (37) with Dicky Lupino and Roddy McDowall, numerous TV Williams, "**PECK'S BAD BOY WITH THE CIRCUS**" (38) starring Tommy Kelly, and several film generations of **PENROD**, the Booth Tarkington character on which William was based.

See subject index under **ANIMALS, CIRCUS / CLOWNS / FAIRGROUNDS, COMEDY, CORPORAL PUNISHMENT, FOLLOW THE LEADER / CHILDREN'S GANGS** and **RASCALS & SCALAWAGS**. Children become so rarely embroiled in national politics that such a heading would yield little, but see **THE CHILD AS POLITICAL SYMBOL** for some examples.