

Edinburgh International Film Festival – Quiet Heroes of World War II



For me, the best films are still the story tellers. I can appreciate a beautifully shot, masterfully crafted cinematic experience, but I only truly love the films which tell a story that captures my imagination and draws a genuine emotional response. Castles in the Sky is one of those films.

This is a true story simply told, and is based on the experiences of visionary Scottish Engineer, Robert Watson-Watt. It tells the story of how a maverick inventor, working in the Meteorological Office, became the unlikely saviour of the Air Ministry, and ultimately, of Great Britain.

Director Gillies MacKinnon lets the characters tell the story, so there are no epic set pieces or whizzy special effects. Instead the director skilfully intersperses the film with real-life footage and contemporary news reels to give the context of the tension, secrecy and uncertainty in the build up to World War II.

Eddie Izzard gives an impressive performance as Watson-Watt, subtly underplaying the inventor's madcap tendencies, giving a pretty credible Scottish accent to boot. Izzard brings to life the enthusiasm and passion of the great engineer, while portraying his softer side with a wholly convincing performance of a man torn between his passion for his work and his country, and his love for his wife and home life.

Watson-Watt tells The Ministry that the death ray he was asked to build could not be achieved, but that he could go one better. Instead of destroying aircraft, he could make the

invisible visible, so that the now visible aircraft could be destroyed by more conventional means than fanciful 'Death Rays'. So despite being 'not quite the right sort' he becomes a key figure in developing the newly emerging science of radar, and turning it into a useful defence for an island nation at war. His visionary approach, coupled with his practical nature convince the Ministry to fund and staff his research.

Watson -Watt, when assembling his team, eschews the Oxford dons and stuffed shirts favoured by the Ministry, instead involving his canny welsh mates from the Meteorological Office to build his crack team. "We need free thinkers, rule breakers, men without ties" he rages to the meddling Ministry man who doubts the wisdom of this approach. And, of course, Watson-Watt is right. The story depicts the trials and tribulations of the search for a workable, practical system, battling against lack of funds, equipment and a watertight roof. The canny lads resort to 'any means necessary' and carry out a heist to get the equipment they need. This, and other moments of levity, including impromptu cricket games and drunken sing-songs that fail to impress The Ministry, bring a lightness to the film against the backdrop of growing fear as war looms ever closer. The tension builds as our anti-heroes attempt to demonstrate a working prototype to convince the Ministry to carry on funding their research. The supporting cast do a sterling job of portraying the highs and lows, joys and frustrations of their vital work, and the stresses it puts on relationships; both personal and professional.

Spoiler alert (but only if you are really bad at history) – our canny crew pull off the impossible task and develop the first ground-based early detection radar system just in time for the outbreak of war. This early warning system proved vital for the RAF and provided the edge they needed to win the Battle of Britain despite being outnumbered three to one.

This quietly compelling film brings home the idea that our

freedom is due to the quiet heroism of so many men and women who put their lives on hold to use their ingenuity and quiet resilience for the war effort. Deftly shot, crisply scripted and subtly acted, this film is undoubtedly one of the highlights of 2014 Edinburgh International Film Festival.

Elaine Downs