

Recent Re-Releases and Reprints: *Gunga Din* & *Memoir of the Bookies' Son*

Reviewed by Paul Devlin

Gunga Din (1939)

This classic and entertaining film based on the poem by Rudyard Kipling is now out on DVD from Warner Home Video. Anyone who grew up as a fan of *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* will immediately recognize *Gunga Din* as a close ancestor. "Help! The Kali Cult is threatening the authority of the British Raj!" Well, that is what gets the plot rolling in *Gunga Din*. In *Temple of Doom*, the Kali cult (while threatening the Raj) has kidnapped all the children of a village and is keeping them as slaves in a mine in which they are searching for magic stones. Indiana must save the children and the security of the Raj is incidental. The leader of the cult in *Temple of Doom*, Molarum, has his counterpart in *Gunga Din*: an ominous, menacing, bald-headed guru who, for some crazy reason, hates the cheeri-o-can-do Brits. The character *Gunga Din* is a loyal Indian water-carrier for the British army who wants nothing more than to be a British soldier. He commands empathy and is played with great skill. When he passes, the British commander quotes the famous line from the Kipling poem, "you're a better man than I am, *Gunga Din*."

The main focus of the story is are the lives of three British army buddies (Cary Grant, Victor McLaglen and Douglas Fairbanks, Jr.) who infiltrate the Kali Temple (the center of anti-colonial unrest) and hold down the fort while reinforcements come to the rescue. This cavalier trio has a pleasing on screen chemistry. (The roles are played with a strong dose of goofball humor unseen in the Indiana Jones films.) All three characters come from the bottom of British society. Fairbanks's character is the only one who seems to have any chance to move up in it – he is about to marry into a tea fortune. Of course, his buddies see this move into the tea trade (and marriage) as unmasculine. They sideline the wedding and convince Fairbanks to go on one last adventure to rid India of any home grown threats to Her Majesty's Government. It never occurs to any of the characters that the reason they are guarding India in the first place is because of the almost-feminine tea trade! This reminds me of what Gary Cooper's character goes through in *High Noon*. He cannot begin his married life and go into the humdrum domestic world of shopkeeping until he "shoots Frank Miller dead."

When Grant, McLaglen, and Fairbanks are at the top of the Kali Temple, outnumbered and surrounded and certain to meet an awful fate, a division of Scottish Highlanders arrives, who are first heard singing a (highly ironic) song from a far distance:

"Bonnie Charlie's now awa',
Safely o'er the friendly main;
Many a heart will break i' twa,
Should he no' come back again.

Will ye no come back again?
Will ye no come back again?
Better loved ye canna be,
Will ye no come back again?"

This song refers to Bonnie Prince Charlie, Charles Stewart Edward, Pretender to the Scottish throne who led a rebellion against the British in 1745. After a devastating defeat at the battle of Culloden he fled to the Continent. After this battle, according *Scotland: A Short History* (Oxford UP) the power of the Highlanders as an independent force was eliminated and they were folded into the British army. From that moment forward English hegemony over the isle of Britain was secured once and for all, never again to be threatened. Interestingly enough, this lament over the loss of an anti-colonial leader is what the Highlanders sing while they are marching to crush another anti-colonial leader (the Kali Cult guru). What is to be made of this? They are singing a song about the last moment in history when there was a chance to check English expansion at home while they further English power abroad – as if they don't really want to be doing it. Just as the Russians used the Cossacks to fight the Chechens and the Americans used the Buffalo Soldiers to fight the Native Americans, so the British used the Highlanders to fight the Indians (at least in the movie). Anyhow, *Gunga Din* is a fun movie and a classic, though a tad bit politically incorrect. It is, after all, a film about the violent overthrow of British rule at a time when Gandhi was trying to get the job done peacefully. But keep in mind this was 1939 and perhaps it was an attempt at stirring anti-Axis solidarity.

*M*emoir of the Bookies' Son by Sidney Offit

Mr. Offit's memoir of his childhood in Depression-era Baltimore was first published by St. Martin's in 1995 and has been reprinted by Beckham publishers of Silver Spring, Maryland. (Sidney Offit is a novelist who used to have his own talk show on Channel 5 in New York.) When looking at the first page under the cover you will see an astonishing list of blurbs from figures such as Kurt Vonnegut, Russell Baker, Cynthia Ozick, and Naomi Bliven, to name a few. The praising blurbs go on for three pages. "Can they be for real?", you may ask yourself. I will answer for you: yes, they are for real and not kidding. This book is any extraordinary gem relating the life of young Sidney and his family; his intellectual mother who translates Montaigne and his father, Buckley Offit, who is the biggest bookie in the United States: beyond the mob and (just barely) above the law. This tour around a vanished Baltimore is as colorful as you might imagine. Buckley Offit, who grew up in a Baltimore where John Dewey, C.S. Peirce and James Mark Baldwin were all at Johns Hopkins (where Sidney later attended) was a thoroughly pragmatic fellow who bet big, won big, took good care of his family, and got out when the getting was good. The book starts in 1992 when Buckley is in his 90s and Sidney, then in his 60s decides to humor him by asking him for tips on which horses to bet, which he bets on but not as much as he says he is

betting. As it turns out, the horses win! (And win and win and uh oh, this harmless feel-good task is starting to cost “a bundle”!) It then flashes back to the 30s then forward to 92 and back again. Offit is a gifted writer whose journey through memory is warm and evocative but also unflinching and funny. In this age of dime-a-dozen memoirs this is one in a million worth not just reading but re-reading, enjoying and learning from. It deserves all its blurbs and more.