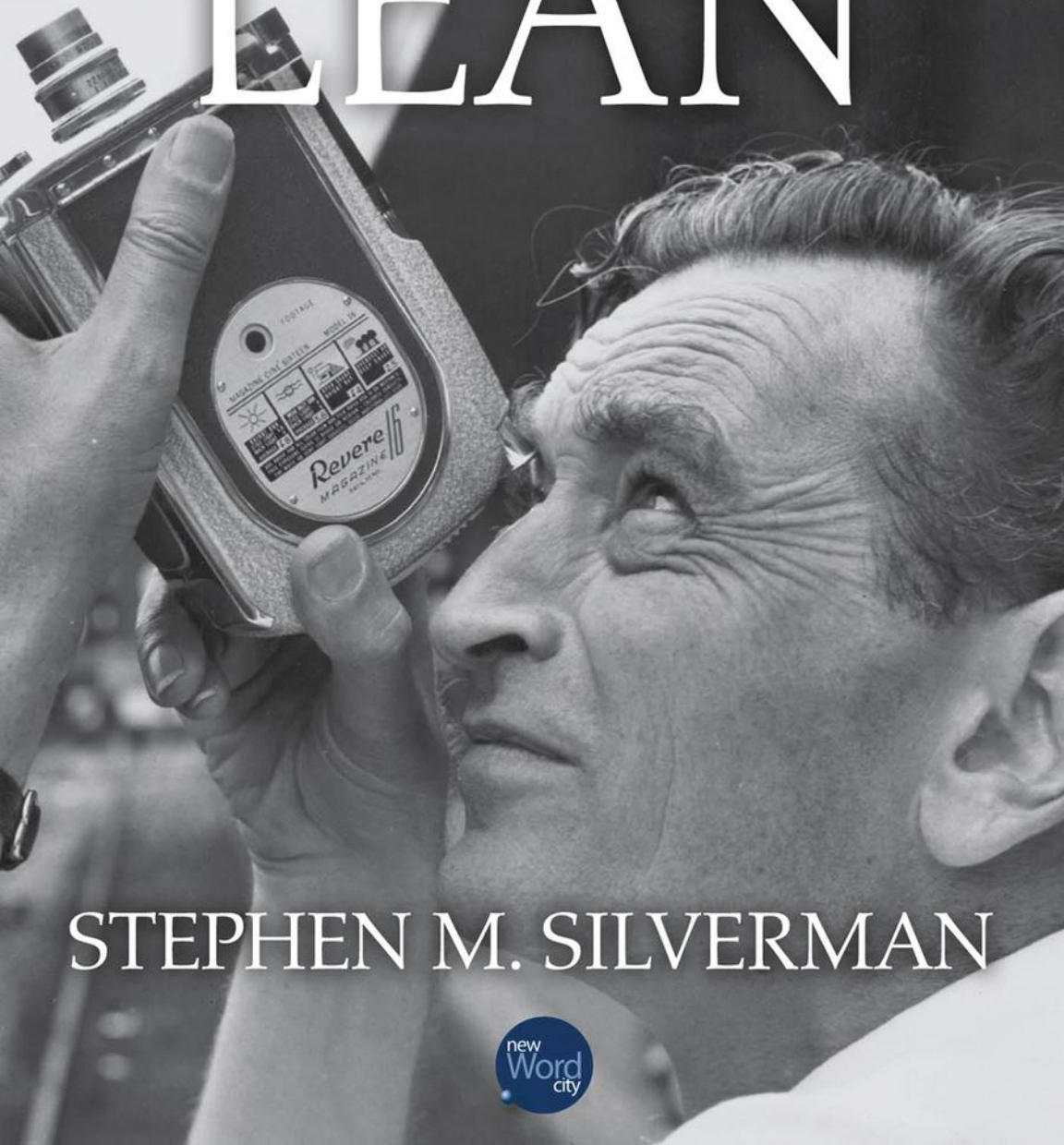


DAVID LEAN



STEPHEN M. SILVERMAN





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FOREWORD

Dame Peggy Ashcroft called Sir David Lean "the magical Mister Mistoffelees of the movies." The title was bestowed not only because of the illustrious roster of films he had created for more than forty years. No, she claimed, the matter was more personal.

David Lean had done the remarkable. He had persuaded her to go to India with him to make a movie - no small task at her time of life, she insisted, especially as she had finally returned to England after having just finished another project on the rugged subcontinent. The moment was now ripe, she felt, for her to stay home and tend her garden.

"But then," Ashcroft told the dinner guests, a note of disbelief lingering in her voice, "when David Lean calls and says he wants you for a film, especially at this time of one's life, I can assure you, you do not say 'No.'"

On this same occasion, Sir Richard Attenborough spoke reverentially of Lean's intimate epics, *The Bridge on the River Kwai* and *Lawrence of Arabia*, and Lean's romantic monuments, *Brief Encounter* and *Doctor Zhivago*. Citing, too, Lean's letter-perfect adaptations of Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* and *Oliver Twist*, Attenborough pronounced David Lean "the greatest director of narrative in the English language."

Attenborough, rarely one to shock, then jolted his listeners by singing the heretofore unfamiliar lyrics to the theme that was merely whistled in *The Bridge on the River Kwai*: "Hitler has only one right ball. Goering has two but they are small. Himmler has something sim'lar. But Goebbels has no balls at all."

The backdrop for such august carryings-on was an awards dinner at Sardi's restaurant in New York City, Sunday, January 27, 1985. Lean's sixteenth film in forty-two years, and his first in fourteen, *A Passage to India*, had premiered six weeks prior. A few days later, the meticulously crafted adaptation of the E. M. Forster novel about a mysterious incident in the Marabar Caves snapped up the awards for Best Picture of the Year, Best Director, and Best Actress (Peggy Ashcroft) from the New York Film Critics Circle, the group that was honoring Lean this night.

Director Michael Powell, who first employed Lean as a film editor in 1941, told out-of-school tales about Lean's "maddening perfectionism" and how, when Lean speaks, "he never quite looks at you. Instead, he turns to the side and forces you to look at that magnificent profile of his." Powell finished by doing his impersonation of the impenetrable "David Lean stare."

A Passage to India producers Lord John Brabourne and Richard Goodwin exposed Lean's trick of never answering the phone with an ordinary "Hello." Instead, he learns beforehand who is calling and jumps right to the point, thus getting the upper hand. Their first call to Lean was met by his asking at the outset, "What do you think happened in those caves?"

Ronald Neame, who four decades before had served as Lean's cinematographer, told how Lean sets up a scene to the exact specifications that exist in his head, and how nothing, "but nothing," can alter this vision. "Film is his life," said Neame. "If you were to tell him that his very best friend was dying, David would answer, 'I'm so sorry, but I have to get this next shot.'"

There was more. Lean's consternation with Sam Spiegel, his formidable producer on *The Bridge on the River Kwai* and *Lawrence of Arabia*. Lean's consternation with actors. With writers. With cameramen. With the weather.

And Lean's reaction to all of it? Who knew?

David Lean was nowhere to be seen.

He was on holiday in Africa, recuperating from the rigors of finishing *A Passage to India*.

That seemed only to add to his legend.

David Lean has alternately charmed and confounded interviewers for nearly half a century. "He has the kind of face that years ago was stamped on coins," reported *Time* correspondent Denise Worrell in 1984, on the occasion of that magazine's cover story on Lean. A few weeks earlier, Aljean Harmetz in *The New York Times* painted the same subject as follows: "He has a large, imperial face that would be the envy of a caricaturist,"

she wrote. "His handshake is hearty, his voice loud, and he tosses his head like a lion tossing his mane."

The look of Lean has long impressed. "David Lean, with his coal-black hair, lean face, straight, neat nose, and piercing eyes, is a strikingly good-looking fellow, something between a popular juvenile lead and Jane Eyre's portrait of Mr. Rochester," suggested the noted critic for *The Observer*, C. A. (Caroline) Lejeune. The year was 1947. "Seen in a crowd or at the studio by a stranger, he is immediately taken for an actor. Five minutes' fruitless attempt to make him talk about himself convinces you, without a shadow of a doubt, that he is not."

"Drawing Lean out was like pulling water from a very deep well," reported *Time's* Worrell. "Mr. Lean is willing to give no more than unsatisfactory half-answers," complained Harmetz. "Getting a personality piece about David Lean," said Lejeune, "is like drawing teeth, and the knowing investigator doesn't attempt it. He goes to Mr. Lean's partner, Ronald Neame. 'Ronnie' has no inhibitions about talking about his collaborator and their partnership."

"I used to have the most terrible time with Ronnie," Lean confides in 1988. "He was absolutely mad for publicity, and I wasn't the least bit interested. Used to get me into the worst trouble. I finally had to say to him, 'Look, Ronnie, do what you like, but leave me alone.'"

In 1947, Neame informed Lejeune what he repeated nearly verbatim about Lean at the 1985 Sardi's dinner: "His only passionate interest in life is films, because it's the one thing he knows backward."

I first met David Lean on December 10, 1984, in preparation for a series of newspaper articles about *A Passage to India*. The setting was his suite at the Bel-Air Hotel in southern California, a spacious, well-lived-in bungalow in which every square inch of free tabletop was covered with books. The seventy-six-year-old Lean, impeccably dressed in gray trousers, a white shirt buttoned to the top (no necktie), and a navy blue pullover, entered the room. There was no doubt as to who would be in

charge of the interview.

Lean's first - his only - words of greeting were, "You'll not get much out of me, I'm afraid."

Lean and I met again on February 18, 1987, thanks to the New York film publicist Renée Furst. She had arranged that I accompany Lean and his friend Sandra Cooke to the Mamaroneck editing studio of Bob Harris. At the time, Lean was inspecting Harris's work restoring *Lawrence of Arabia* to its full, original length. Comfortable in his surroundings, Lean told colorful stories about his favorite subject - making movies. This book grew out of that occasion and a subsequent visit, eighteen days later, to Lean's home in London's Docklands.

Since July 5, 1987, when he granted permission for this book, Lean and I have held ongoing, face-to-face conversations in London, Los Angeles, and the south of France. We have also shared lengthy discussions over the telephone, New York-London, and when he was on holiday, New York-Kenya. One early, concentrated session occurred on the site of our initial meeting, the Bel-Air Hotel, the weekend of May 6, 1988. The day before, Lean and Columbia Pictures' representatives had viewed the fully restored *Lawrence of Arabia* in the Samuel Goldwyn Theatre at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Lean, exhausted from the week spent overseeing the final edit but thrilled at the prospect of the film's being rereleased internationally, spoke all afternoon and evening into my tape-recorder, recalling the past and the people with whom he had worked. At one point, when told there was no need to clutch the instrument's tiny microphone so tightly, he replied, "Well, you see, it's sort of like an old friend."

David Lean has a most distinctive way of speaking. Robust. Dramatic. Unmistakably English. As his words are few, every one carries weight. So do his silences.

Perhaps the greatest insight into Lean comes from two suggestions he made for this book. The first, delivered gravely one night on the way to dinner, was, "You know, you really should speak to people who don't like me." The other, spoken after he had been told that the manuscript appeared to be taking shape, was, "Well, good. But it's not sweet, is it?"