



**Lord Jeff** is a 1938 family film directed by Sam Wood. It stars Freddie Bartholomew, Charles Coburn, and Mickey Rooney. Below is Kino Ken's review of that Zeus dvd.

9 of a possible 20 points = \*\*1/2 = a mediocre movie

Key: \*indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance  
(j) designates a juvenile performer

United States 1938 black-and-white 85 minutes  
live action feature dramedy Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (Loew's Inc.)  
Producers: Frank Davis and Sam Wood

**Points:**

- 1 **Direction:** Sam Wood
- 1 **Editing:** Frank Hull
- 1 **Cinematography:** John Seitz
- 1 **Lighting**
- 1 **Screenplay:** James Kevin McGuinness, Frank Davis, Walter Ferris, and Sam Wood, based on a story by Bradford Ropes, Val Burton, and Endre Bohém
- 1 **Music:** Edward Ward  
**Orchestrations:** Paul Marquardt and Leonid Raab
- 1 **Art Direction:** Cedric Gibbons, Urie McCleary, and Edwin Willis

**Wardrobe: Dolly Tree**

**Technical Advisors: Shorty English and Edward Stacey**

**1 Sound**

**Recording Direction: Douglas Shearer**

**1 Acting**

**0 Creativity**

**9 total points**

**Cast: Freddie Bartholomew (j) (Geoffrey Braemer), Mickey Rooney (j) (Terry O'Mulvaney), Charles Coburn\* (Captain Briggs), Herbert Muddin (Bosun "Crusty" Jelks), Terry Kilburn\* (j) (Albert Baker), Gale Sondergaard (Doris Clandon), Peter Lawford (Benny Potter), Walter Tetley (Tommy Thrums), Peter Ellis (j) (Ned Saunders), George Zucco (James "Jim" Hampstead), Matthew Boulton (Inspector Scott), John Burton (John Cartwright), Emma Dunn (Mrs. Briggs), Monty Woolley (Jeweler), Gilbert Emery (magistrate), Charles Irwin (Mr. Burke), Walter Kingsford (superintendent), David Thursby (milk cart driver), Norman Ainsely (assistant purser), Frank Baker (inspector), Wilson Benge (chauffeur), Lionel Braham (constable), Charles Coleman (hotel desk clerk), Alec Craig (gardener), Jack Deery (clerk), Johnny Douglas and Vernon Downing (lift boys), Rex Evans (hotel doorman), Helena Grant (woman magistrate), Ramsay Hill (jewelry clerk), Keith Hitchcock (transportation clerk), Tommy Hughes (page boy), Olaf Hytten (instructor), P. J. Kelly (bailiff), Richard Lancaster (party host), Doris Lloyd (party hostess), Dan Maxwell (postman), Vesey O'Davoren (Queen Mary steward), C. Montague Shaw (magistrate), Evan Thomas (Captain Wilson), Clare Verdera (maid), Eric Wilton (bosun's mate)**

**A well-intentioned but unremarkable production from Hollywood, *Lord Jeff* again teams juvenile actors Freddie Bartholomew and Mickey Rooney, apparently in hope lightning would strike twice. Both performers excelled in the 1938 film *Captains Courageous* where they interacted with the likes of Lionel Barrymore and Spencer Tracy. Memorable performances resulted. Here they are less imposing and, in the case of Rooney, trapped in a series of clichéd gestures and facial expressions. Bartholomew's acting is more acceptable but uninspired, significantly hampered by a screenplay awash in conventional bromides. The**

one juvenile rising above such hobbles is Terry Kilburn as Albert Baker, acting his age naturally and in the process unconsciously calling attention to artificial, exaggerated Irish mannerisms of Mickey Rooney and strait-jacketing emotional coolness displayed by Freddie Bartholomew. Of the adult cast, Charles Coburn effectively portrays kindly, fair disciplinarian Captain Briggs, offsetting broadly played comic relief from Bosun "Crusty" Jelks (Herbert Mundin).

A pair of society thieves (Gale Sondergaard and George Zucco) are putative villains, employing wigs, fake mustaches, and decoy Geoffrey Braemer (Freddie Bartholomew) to rob jewelers of expensive showcase stock. Braemer, a street urchin of apparently aristocratic and educated lineage, has been enticed by guarantees of food and clothing to serve as the duo's glibly talkative front man, or front boy, pretending interest in relatively inexpensive baubles as gifts for his non-existent titled mother. While adult colleague James Hampstead filches a much costlier sparkler. The ruse is for young Geoffrey, masquerading as *Lord* Geoffrey Braemer, to suddenly double over in pain, distracting the jewelry seller and giving a third member of the larcenous trio, posing as the boy's governess, opportunity to make off to the "chemist's" for medicine.

After a brief introduction to Geoffrey's obnoxiously overbearing character, the trio is shown operating their customary deception in a London jewelry shop. A diligent insurance investigator has been tracking them and uncovers the genuine identity of their junior partner. Geoffrey's taken into police custody, brought before a magistrate and, unwilling to peach on criminal associates, remanded to state custody. More specifically, he's sent to one of Dr. Barnardo's homes in London where a refusal to indicate a preference for any specific vocational training results in assignment to a naval training school run by Captain Briggs. There he wastes no time in being rebellious, devious, and disdainful, alienating everyone with whom he comes into contact except fellow new arrival at the institution Albert Baker (Terry Kilburn).

Seeing the orphan determined to play a hard case, the sagacious Captain delegates older honor student Terry O'Mulvaney (Mickey Rooney) to "show him the ropes." Geoffrey's first response is an attempted bribe that backfires, with Terry pocketing the cash and later depositing it in his mercantile marine school's Christmas Gift Fund. Geoffrey wreaks a kind of revenge by consistently matching or exceeding Terry's knowledge of naval lore.

Though Albert lionizes Geoffrey, perhaps because the latter's practiced snobbishness plainly indicates a true toff, "Lord Jeff" resists the youngster's friendly overtures. The Braemer lad doesn't expect to stick around for long. He impatiently awaits a letter from larcenous cronies. It fails to come, leaving him even sulkier than before. An attempt at running away to London in order to find out what's going on with non-communicative Doris and "Jim" gets foiled when blabbermouth Albert tips off Terry. Who for improbable reasons decides to compel Geoffrey's return to Russell-Cotes. After a prolonged battle, Terry achieves his objective but is caught reentering a school dormitory at 5 a.m. That lapse in proper marine behavior, once reported to the Captain, costs O'Mulvaney his chevrons and a potential upcoming sailor's berth on the *Queen Mary*, then the newest floating palace of the Cunard Line.

All prior reformation plans failing to change Geoffrey's attitude or behavior, classmates decide on giving him the silent treatment for getting Terry into trouble. Nonetheless, totally defying any shred of credibility, Bosun Jelks makes Mr. Moody the coxswain of Russell-Cotes's rowing team. Yeah, right. Surefire victory with that move.

This enables the "Lord" to freely domineer over peers in an even more authoritative manner, increasing their detestation of him. Nonetheless, he and his rowers win a competition against a rival eight, mainly due to their taking the buoy turn on the inside rather than the outside. Not-very-clever competitors conveniently permit this and predictably go on to lose the race.

Afterwards, Doris shows up at a Liberty party for the new rowing champs. When Geoffrey spurns her offer to rejoin old buddies, she passes that information along to her colleague-in-crime. He retaliates by sewing the same necklace lifted from a London jeweler months previously, apparently still too "hot" to fence, into the boy's coat pocket, Geoffrey having temporarily discarded that outerwear before moving to an adjacent room for snacks and a game of London Bridge.

If Geoffrey had problems before, now his chances of replacing Terry on the *Queen Mary* drop to dead zero. A housekeeper at Russell-Cotes discovers the necklace hidden in his coat. Suddenly becoming incredibly stupid, Geoffrey has no idea how it got there. Even more ridiculously, everyone at the academy believes him an innocent dupe. This sort of nonsense was apparently considered

clever scripting in 1938. Or, if not particularly brilliant at least adequate. It did meet with Code Standards for character reformation by the last reel.

The remainder of the film is predictable and shallow. Good prevails, crime doesn't pay. Terry and Geoffrey both get their ocean voyage rewards and Albert is promised his in a distant someday.

Sam Wood's direction of this movie is not one of his best efforts. Remaining faithful to an illogical, traditionally moralistic script, he signally fails to make the most of two potentially superlative juvenile actors, Bartholomew and Rooney, both of whom showed vastly greater talent in the previous year's *Captains Courageous* where a first-rate screenplay buttressed their dramatics. Here, neither their initial antagonism nor a later camaraderie is convincing. Saddled with a Class B budget, *Lord Jeff* has lighting, cinematography, editing, music, sound recording, scripting, and art direction mired in mediocrity.

Though a modest box-office success on first release and a latter-day television revival staple, *Lord Jeff* is only moderately entertaining for family audiences. Even one of its two acting assets, Terry Kilburn, would linger longer in memory for turns in *Goodbye, Mister Chips* the following year and as Tiny Tim in 1938's *A Christmas Carol*.

There are no bonus features on the Zeus dvd release.