



The *49th Parallel* is a spring 2026 LVCA dvd donation to the Ligonier Valley Library of Ligonier, Pennsylvania. Below is Kino Ken's review of that Criterion Collection dvd release.

15 of a possible 20 points = ***1/2 = excellent film

Canada / Great Britain 1941 black-and-white 123 minutes

live action feature drama Producers: Michael Powell, George Brown, and Roland Gillett

Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance

Points:

- 2 Direction: Michael Powell* and Arthur Seabourne
- 1 Editing: David Lean and Hugh Stewart
- 2 Cinematography: Frederick Young*
 - Stills Photography: Osmond Borradaile, Fred Daniels, and Jack Hynes
- 0 Lighting
- 2 Screenplay and Original Story: Emeric Pressburger*
 - Continuity: Betty Curtis
 - Music Direction: Muir Mathieson
- 1 Music: Ralph Vaughan Williams
- 1 Art Direction: David Rawnsley, Frederick Pusey, and Sydney Streeter
 - Makeup: George Blackler

2 Sound

Sound Supervision: A. W. Watkins*

Sound Recordists: Walter Darling*, C. C. Stevens*, and Dex Harrison*

Prologue Narrator: Vincent Massey

2 Acting

2 Creativity

15 total points

Cast: Leslie Howard (Philip Armstrong Scott), Laurence Olivier (Johnnie the trapper), Raymond Massey* (Andy Brock), Anton Walbrook* (Peter), Eric Portman* (Lieutenant Hirth), Raymond Lovell* (Lieutenant Kuhnecke), Niall MacGinnis* (Vogel), Glynis Johns* (Anna), Finlay Currie (the factor), Richard George (Kommandant Bernsdorff), Peter Moore (Kranz), John Chandos* (Lohrmann), Basil Appleby (Jahner), Ley On (Eskimo), Charles Victor (Andreas), Frederick Piper (David), Tawera Moana (George the Indian), Eric Clavering (Art), Charles Rolfe (Bob), Theodore Salt and O.W. Fonger (U.S. Customs Officers), Robert Beatty (R.C.M.P. Mountie), Eric Berry (Nazi radio announcer), Gron Davies (submarine officer), Leslie Falardeau (seaplane aviator), Toni Gable (Hutterite woman), Jack Hynes (seaplane aviator), Stuart Latham (2nd Nazi radio announcer), Gerry Wilmot (Canadian radio announcer), Norman Luxton (man in fringed jacket on balcony at Banff Indian Day), Percy Parsons (hijacked Canadian motorist), others

The third collaboration between British director Michael Powell and Hungarian émigré screenwriter Emeric Pressburger, following 1939's *The Spy in Black* and 1940's *Contraband*, *49th Parallel* represented a decided change in scenery, with action set in Canada rather than Britain.

A group of German submarine crewmen, soon after their commander unadvisedly attacked and sank an Allied freighter, find themselves stranded along the shore of Hudson Bay when their own vessel is subsequently bombed and rendered inoperable. Led by their now senior officer, Lieutenant Hirth, they set out to invade enemy territory on their way to a rendezvous with a Japan-bound ship departing from Vancouver. Between their present location and distant goal stretch twelve hundred miles of hostile countryside.

After terrorizing a fur trading outpost's Eskimo visitors and company personnel, the murderous detachment of outsiders commandeers a seaplane, with engineer Lieutenant Kuhnecke manning its controls. Unfortunately for them, he displays considerably less than veteran mastery of piloting skills and ends up crashing them into a lake when their petrol supply unexpectedly runs out. Since an indigenous sharpshooter picks off one of their group while they struggle to take off into the air and their extemporaneous aviator fares little better with a fatal emergency landing, foreign adventurers swimming safely to land find their number quickly reduced to four. Food supplies perish with the plane, leaving them hungry, lost, and somewhat pessimistic about chances of reaching the Pacific coast alive.

Crossing eastern Manitoba, they chance upon a Hutterite community, which Hirth foolishly guesses is a vanguard of embedded fellow Nazis. After eating a satiating farm dinner, the lieutenant delivers a fervent speech extolling Germany and its all-conquering führer Adolf Hitler.

None of their hosts is favorably receptive. Spokesman Peter counters with an eloquent defense of democratic values.

Former baker Vogel finds much to admire in the Hutterite settlement. And increasingly little to treasure in Nazi ideology. After a lengthy talk with Peter, he resolves to turn himself in to the nearest internment center.

This constitutes treason in Hirth's eyes. So he indicts, tries and sentences Vogel accordingly. The penalty for such a crime being death, Hirth commands two remaining loyalists to execute their former comrade. Which they do, diminishing the invading group to three.

Leaving unsympathetic farmers behind, the trio march off doggedly westward, eventually arriving at the Banff Indian Days celebration. This is thanks to a stolen car whose unsuspecting owner is knocked unconscious after they help him change a flat tire. Then, presumably after ditching that "hot" piece of property, they proceed to use the owner's cash to buy themselves train tickets to Banff via the Canadian Pacific railroad.

An observant conductor notifies Mounties of their entry into the town. This leads to a public speech by one of those officers, informing celebrants a trio of homicidal fugitives from Germany are somewhere in the festive crowd, apt to be suspiciously tense and fearful of discovery. Indeed, sailor Kranz does panic.

He's quickly spotted by onlookers and arrested. Leaving just Hirth and cynical rifleman Lohrmann to flee upwards into foothills of the Canadian Rockies.

Will they succeed in evading a host of pursuers? Or will combined efforts of Mounties and locals end their killing spree?

The best way to find answers is to borrow this dvd from the Ligonier Valley Library once it finds its way into the Classic Cinema Collection there.

Though 49th *Parallel* boasts a number of heavyweight stars in its cast, the best performances come from Anton Walbrook as normally soft-spoken, peacemaker Hutterite elder Peter, up-and-coming Eric Portman in the role of steely Nazi zealot Hirth and Niall MacGinnis as ex-breadmaker Vogel.

Glynis Johns substitutes charmingly for Austrian Elisabeth Bergner, who was supposed to play the role of Hutterite teenager Anna. But, after filming exterior scenes in Canada, Bergner refused returning to Britain for interior shots. Instead, she moved further away from real tracking Nazis by flying off to Hollywood. Though an emergency stopgap, Johns proved delightfully ideal for Anna, combining beauty, high-pitched sweetness of speech, and a veneer of innocence.

John Chandos, a native of Scotland new to film, conveys more character and meaning through glances and gestures than established stars do by means of dialogue. He's fully credible as a menacingly callous gunman intent on survival at all costs, showing utter disrespect for other humans and art.

Less winning are Laurence Olivier as backwoods French-Canadian trapper Johnnie, who seems remarkably naïve for his age, and Lesley Howard, whose writer/art collector appears still imprisoned in the character of *Petrified Forest's* Alan Squier. Now relocated to Albertan wilderness and re-identified as Philip Armstrong Scott, he's the same dreamy intellectual facing down criminals in a gentlemanly manner.

Raymond Massey, as Andy Brock, absolutely dominates the screen in a role the native of Canada must have found exhilarating. As a Canadian G.I. on over-extended leave, he gets to administer a final coup to Hirth's longshot plan of turning himself over to authorities in currently neutral United States.

Blending a fictional story with documentary-style background footage and seemingly genuine radio broadcasts not only intensifies suspense but also feeds into the emotional impact of what would otherwise clearly be predictable propaganda. Pressburger's screenplay, sympathetically portraying the plight of

a humane German forced by economic necessity to enter the Nazi navy, was vigorously denounced by Prime Minister Churchill. Yet the British Ministry of Information resisted backtracking on its funding of the Powell-Pressburger drama. Patently indicating a belief not all citizens of Germany were proponents of Hitlerism. This controversial script would succeed in capturing an Oscar™ in 1943 for Best Original Story, an award recognizing its successful blend of intelligent rhetoric and fervid defense of democracy on humanitarian and historical grounds.

No less a technician than David Lean channeled a meanderingly unfocussed plot, one alternating pastoral romance with urgent newsreel scenes and episodes of despicable violence against civilians, into a persuasively interlocked running narrative. Frequently it brings to the forefront minority individuals, the very non-Aryans most severely threatened by Nazism and those least often visible on Anglo-American or Canadian motion picture screens. Lean at this point had not yet promoted to a director's chair and was still available for editing tasks.

Music furnished by Ralph Vaughan Williams represent that renowned composer's initial foray into film scoring. Alas, the seventy-year-old master took the popular route of merely reinforcing onscreen action. Rather than the more intriguing one of counterpointing music against it. This reduced the score's effectiveness to pleasant sonics falling considerably short of maximum dramatic impact. By the time of 1948's *Scott of the Antarctic*, Vaughan Williams had learned the power of film music to create atmosphere rather than only bolster it, with consequently much superior results.

David Rawnsley, Frederick Pusey and Sydney Streeter are seldom cited as titans of art direction. Yet their achievements in designing a full-scale submarine and the messy, almost claustrophobic interior of a Hudson Bay trading post's living quarters must be acknowledged as major contributions to *49th Parallel*'s attempts at photo-realism.

Lighting leaves much to be desired. All too often it provides grainy backgrounds. Though these incline towards genuine documentary style, they simultaneously point sharply to budgetary restrictions and second-rate film stock.

Sound effects and dialogue recording are technically adroit. However, the overemphatic Quebecois accent of Laurence Olivier and Scottish brogue of Finlay Currie prove more annoying than conducive efficient communication.

Michael Powell's direction of acting veterans, newcomers to film, and non-professional extras is quite commendable here, allowing for significant cameos by stars and "nobodies" alike.

Holding up notably despite age and obvious patriotic trumpeting, *49th Parallel* makes a winning introduction to the work of The Archers (Powell and Pressburger). Its themes are fully relevant in 2026. Just as they were in 1941. Making the film essential viewing, even for modern audiences.

Due to some graphic – yet quite defensible – violence, *49th Parallel* furnishes rewarding viewing only for older teen and adult audiences.

This Criterion dvd release includes a highly detailed audio commentary by film historian Bruce Eder, particularly strong in offering insight into production details, and a step-by-step description of the entire process of making the picture as recollected through excerpts from dictated audiotapes for director Michael Powell's autobiography. A three-minute theatrical trailer and a fifty-one minute 1981 BBC documentary on the partnership of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, titled *A Pretty British Affair*, are also part of the Criterion package. As is Charles Barr's essay "The War Effort" (which undercuts its impact by treating this 1941 film as a relatively minor product of The Archers) while nonetheless giving readers an abundance of anecdotal insights about this trailblazing British-Canadian joint cinematic effort. Portions of Michael Powell's speech at the world premiere of *49th Parallel* in beleaguered London on October 8, 1941, in which the varied contributions of cast and crew receive due recognition, constitutes another attractive special feature.

Finally, there's even a lesser piece of motion picture semi-documentary propaganda represented. This relative throwaway from the Powell-Pressburger team is 1944's *The Volunteer*. Supposedly telling the tale of how schlemiel dresser for actor Ralph Richardson becomes a decorated war hero, it's actually a promo encouraging enlistment in the Fleet Air Arm of the British Royal Navy. Crammed full of slapstick, strong on snippets of casual conversation by sailors untrained in the fine art of clear enunciation, the picture tracks from an English theatrical dressing room to training activities aboard an aircraft carrier. These are followed by a jaunt into the casbah of Algiers before winding up outside the

gates of Buckingham Palace in London. Ralph Richardson plays straight man to clowning Laurence Olivier while Pat McGrath gets plenty of screen time as Fred Davey, an improbably incompetent toadying functionary who nonetheless wins the attentions of gorgeous shopgirl Anna Neagle and emerges as an unlikely expert aviation mechanic. Below are relevant credits and a summary evaluation of that forty-four minute mini-feature. Its content is suitable for family viewing.

The Volunteer

Great Britain 1944 black-and-white 44 minutes live action comedy with occasional dribblets of gravity Ministry of Information / The Archers

Producers: Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger

7 of a possible 20 points = ** = under-accomplished propaganda movie

Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance

(j) designates a juvenile performer

Points:

1 Direction: Michael Powell

0 Editing: Michael Chorlton and John Seabourne, Sr.

1 Cinematography: Frederick Ford

Stills Photography: Fred Daniels

1 Lighting

1 Screenplay: Emeric Pressburger

1 Music: Allan Gray

1 Production Design: Alfred Junge

0 Sound: Desmond Drew

0 Acting

1 Creativity

7 total points

Cast: Ralph Richardson (Ralph Richardson), Pat McGrath (Fred Davey),

Anna Neagle (Anna Neagle, shopgirl), Laurence Olivier

(Laurence Olivier impersonating a fish), Michael Powell

(photographer outside Buckingham Palace), Herbert Wilcox (Herbert Wilcox),

Tommy Woodrooffe (Tommy Woodrooffe, narrator of documentary seen on

aircraft carrier), Anthony Asquith (Anthony Asquith, propaganda film director),

Charles de Gaulle (Charles de Gaulle), Alfred Junge (man in photograph),

Joan Richardson (j) (Joan), Ian Wilson, others