

Filming Mary Renault

Between 1956 and 1981 Mary (née Challans) Renault published eight classical novels set in the ancient Greek world. These established her reputation as a leader in the writing of ancient historical fiction and nearly forty years after her death in 1983 writers of imaginative fiction (including Canada's Margaret Atwood) claim her as their inspiration. Her novels are still the benchmark against which works set in ancient Greece are to be measured.

In this presentation I propose to deal with the question of why there has been no filmed version of any of these classical novels, either on the movie screen or as a television mini-series. Several of her novels *were* adapted as radio dramas, either on the BBC or South African Broadcasting Corporation – in 1947 she and her partner had relocated themselves from post-war England to the warmer climate of South Africa. Some of her novels were read on the BBC radio show 'A Book at Bedtime', but nothing on the visual media. Her transitional novel, *The Charioteer* (1954), has in the last decade has also received attention on radio. The absence of filmed versions was not for lack of trying. I shall discuss the three attempts to make a major film of *The King Must Die* (published in 1958) in the 1960s and early 1970s. A first draft of a script by Norman Corwin shows what the film-makers at Twentieth-Century Fox were planning to do with Mary Renault's novel, and her letters from the period reflect disquiet at the changes they might make and especially her concern over the banality of the script.

In 1969 her other major success appeared, *Fire from Heaven*, an account of the life of the young Alexander ending with his accession to throne of Macedon in 336. In 1975 *Variety* announced a proposed project to film *Fire from Heaven* with a large budget and film locations in Greece and Iran, but problems arose, especially competition from a proposed NBC mini-

series. By the mid-1980s there were still half-hearted attempts to resume the project, but nothing ever came to pass. Mary Renault's letters reflect even greater concern with the script of this version. In the late 1970s there were plans to film *The Persian Boy*, the second book in the so-called 'Alexander-Trilogy', but Renault at one point hoped that the planned project would come to naught; her concerns were focussed on the lack of attention to authenticity and the publicised search for an 'unknown actor' to play Bagoas. Between 1990 and 2010 there were as many as eight attempts to make a movie or television mini-series about Alexander, of which only two were ever realised. Of these only a projected 10-part mini-series for HBO, announced in 2002, was to be based on the two Alexander-novels by Renault. We have a sketch of the breakdown of episodes and a summary of the main characters. That of Bagoas closely follows the character as depicted in *The Persian Boy*. Later the same year the project was reported as abandoned. One film that did appear was Oliver Stone's *Alexander* (2004), which does show a knowledge of Renault's *Fire from Heaven* and an influence from time to time. But it certainly cannot be described as a filmed version of her novels.

I shall offer several explanations of why none of her classical novels was ever turned from the written text to a visual medium: (1) the author's objections to the concept and details of the project, (2) the uncertain nature of making movies, (3) competition from other proposed filmings, (4) a loss of interest in making major films about the ancient world.