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| **Feature Article** | | | |
| ***[click on photo]***  ***by  Rob Waring***              **"**  Through the lens of a **sensational case**, the film reveals much about society and the issues of the day, and highlights how public perception both **influenced** and was influenced by the legal battle.    **"**                    **"**  In another sense, **public absorption** in the case of the Winslow boy was a form of **mass distraction** from concerns about the world's troubles.    **"** |  |  | ***The Winslow Boy,*** Trial of the Century*?*  by Robert L. Waring       The *Winslow Boy*, a richly textured film based on a fifty-year-old play, tells the true story of a high profile lawsuit in England, a *cause celebre* that captivated public attention in the waning years of the British Empire just after the turn of the century. Reflecting the gentility of the social conventions followed by its aristocratic characters, much of the film's intrigue lies just below the surface. With rich Edwardian costumes and witty dialogue, *The Winslow Boy* resembles a Merchant Ivory film more than a courtroom drama. It's also quite a departure for director David Mamet, whose previous films include *The Spanish Prisoner* (writer/director) and *Wag the Dog* (writer).     Through the lens of a sensational case, the film reveals much about society and the issues of the day, and highlights how public perception both influenced and was influenced by the legal battle. As with many high profile trials, the passage of time has faded the importance of the fate of the litigants and their legal issues. In a hundred years, the O.J. Simpson case will likely be valued far more for what it revealed about the racial difference in *perception* of the fairness of the criminal justice system than as a courtroom drama. In fact, in *The Winslow Boy*, there are no scenes of the trial. It's simply not that important. The characters' efforts in getting the case to a court and its effects on their lives are the essence of the story.     The plot centers on the fourteen-year-old son of an upper class family (Winslow) who is expelled from the Royal Naval Academy for allegedly stealing five schillings from another cadet. The proceedings which resulted in his expulsion were conducted without the knowledge of the boy's parents and afforded him no legal representation. The family begins an obsessive quest for judicial review, with the boy's father and older sister ready to sacrifice the family's assets and her marriage prospects if necessary. The sister, a suffragist, takes on his cause with the same zeal she devotes to her voting rights work. One of their first tasks is to secure representation by an experienced barrister, a King's Counsel. (Today, they are called Queen's Counsel, reflecting the gender of the reigning monarch.) He is a rather young looking, conservative member of the House of Lords. He eventually shares the family's passion for its cause and becomes their champion.     A subplot is the barrister's rejection of the suffragist ideology espoused by the daughter. Their debates on the subject provide a metaphorical tension between the old ways of the recently passed nineteenth century and change promised by the newly entered twentieth. The romantic tension between them provides no small contribution to the appeal of the story.     The film provides many glimpses of public fascination with the case. There are newspaper headlines in "War Declared" size type, and political cartoons, buttons, posters, and even umbrellas proclaiming allegiance with one side or the other. As snippets in the film show, some citizens worried about England's place in the world following the decline of the Empire. Thus, some viewed the Winslow boy's claim as an assault on British institutions and an indirect threat to peerage and the monarchy. Others viewed the claim as an overdue call for a re-examination of the fairness of British society and its traditions. The uneasy juxtaposition of nineteenth and twentieth century sensibilities is best illustrated by the cigarette-smoking suffragists who crowd the women's spectator galleries overlooking the House of Lords, while peers debate the Winslow case in the sanctity of their males-only club.     Many critics of the day warned that the entire affair was drawing national attention away from more important affairs of state. Looming in the background, phrased with contemporary irony as "trouble in the Balkans," was the growing inevitability of what would later be called "The Great War," a conflict that would cut down a generation of British men. The foreboding gloom of the Great War also cast a sort of reverse shadow on the machinations surrounding the expulsion of the Winslow boy from the Naval Academy. His expulsion could have the effect of saving him from annihilation in combat. (In fact, George Archer-Shee, the real-life "Winslow boy," died in World War I.) This future knowledge the audience has, but the characters do not, provides a tragic overtone to the family's quest for justice at any cost.     In another sense, public absorption in the case of the Winslow boy was a form of mass distraction from concerns about the world's troubles. It gave people a chance to forget that the old world they knew was crumbling around them, and that cataclysmic events of unimaginable terror were about to overtake them. Thus, the case foreshadowed Court TV and similar programming four score years later: a forum where people can attempt to either grasp or avoid the overwhelming scope of society's ills by watching the fate of a single person played out before them. You be the judge.  *Posted February 21, 2000*  **Would you like to comment on this article? 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