

IT IS NO DOUBT because the British are traditionally so law-abiding that British crime exerts so peculiar a fascination. Law-breaking has little significance among the lawless. In an ordered and trusting society, however, crime is a shocking violation of the premises of life, and the restoration of rationality by solving the crime becomes a vital necessity. The movies have always enjoyed the idea of crime in a country where murderous impulse may lurk under perfect civility. Three current films supply an entertaining tour of evolving British styles in crime and detection.

*The Great Train Robbery* (United Artists) begins the tour in the early Victorian age. Directed by Michael Crichton and drawn from his own novel, the film is a charmer. Much of the charm comes from the period sense—the tranquil, ornate pleasures of balanced language and rich, comfortable decor. We are in a London of carriages, top hats, muttonchop whiskers, of elegant mansions but also of sinister alleys and squalid slums. And we are shown a lot of it: public hangings, fireworks at the Crystal Palace, dogs killing rats in a pit before excited gamblers.

The genre is the "caper" film, transferred to the age before telephones, automobiles, and electricity. The target is a train carrying a large consignment of gold bullion. The hero is a Victorian MacHeath, played by Sean Connery with immense suavity and aplomb. "Do you ever tell anyone the truth?" his girl asks him. "The truth?" he replies after a moment's consideration. "No." Imperturbably amoral, he urbanely strangles a pathetic crook who had first helped and then informed on him. But the author adores him, and so in the end do we.

The caper is one of those in which everything must fall improbably into place in order to succeed; and succeed it almost does. Alas, Sean Connery is caught and convicted. But do not despair: Michael Crichton has one last surprise up his sleeve. Donald Sutherland is fruitfully excellent as Connery's partner and Lesley-Anne Down decorative as the girl friend.

*Murder by Decree* (Avco Embassy) carries us forward 30 years to the high Victorian period. Bowlers have re-



Donald Sutherland and Sean Connery in *The Great Train Robbery*.

placed top hats; hansom cabs, carriages; beards have shrunk, and mustachios receded. London remains the same mixture of elegance and squalor, but the atmosphere has darkened. The spread of industry has changed things. The burning of soft coal produces pervading fog; there is talk of anarchism, anti-Semitism, masonic conspiracies; there are premonitions of class war. *The Great Train Robbery* is a sunny movie, filled with inconsequence and fun. *Murder by Decree* is a dark movie, taking place predominantly in fog and shadow, in slums and madhouses.

It is a Sherlock Holmes film, though the story never occurred to Conan Doyle. A group from the East End of London asks Holmes to track down Jack the Ripper. If the Ripper were murdering women in the West End, one of them says with Marxist fervor, the coppers would get him soon enough; but the toffs don't care what happens to working-class women in Whitechapel.

Holmes, played lucidly and thoughtfully by Christopher Plummer, takes up the challenge and eventually penetrates a cover-up that extends to Buckingham Palace. He is not, however, the Sherlock Holmes of our youth, the one who analyzed 140 dif-

ferent varieties of tobacco ash in his study and made brilliant deductions from fragmentary clues. The Holmes of *Murder by Decree* is less a man of ratiocination than of action. He is Philip Marlowe loose in Victorian London, darting down dark streets and engaging in hand-to-hand combat with the villains.

The fine actor James Mason is the best of Watsons; never has that familiar role received so subtle and humorous a rendition. And the reappearance of Donald Sutherland provides an eerie sense of continuity with *The Great Train Robbery*. One likes to think that Sean Connery's accomplice, retired on his stolen gold, has become in his later years the zonked-out psychic who tells Sherlock Holmes his visions of Jack the Ripper. The supporting cast of British character actors—John Gielgud, Anthony Quayle, David Hemmings, Frank Finlay—is splendid.

Yet the film is a disappointment. It lacks clarity. The exposition in the hands of Bob Clark, the director, is as murky as the lighting. *Murder by Decree* is not nearly so satisfying an extension of the Holmes canon as *The Seven Percent Solution* was a couple of years back. But it does offer at-



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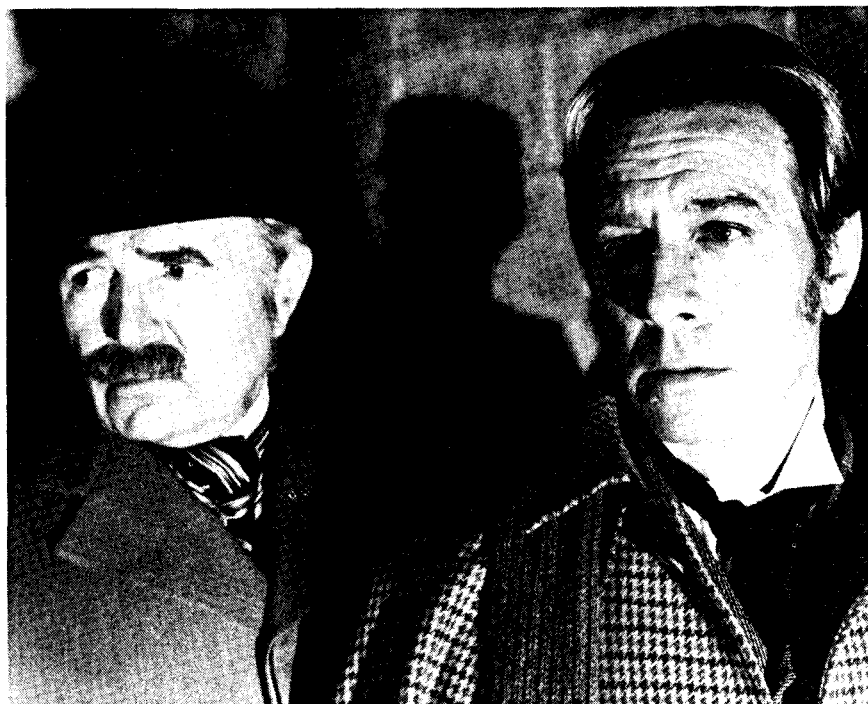
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mospheric pleasures, and John Hopkins's dialogue mostly rings true. I was sorry, however, to hear Dr. Watson say at one point, "You seem strangely disinterested, Holmes." It took the later 20th century thus to corrupt the word "disinterested." What a good Victorian like Watson would have said, of course, is, "You seem strangely unin-

It is the 1920s. We are less in London now than in Christiand—country houses and seaside spas. The film takes off from an actual incident. In December 1926 Colonel Archibald Christie told his wife of a dozen years, already a popular detective-story writer, that he wanted to divorce her and marry his secretary. Agatha Christie



James Mason as Watson and Christopher Plummer as Holmes in *Murder by Decree*.

terested, Holmes." He would have known that disinterested means impartial, not indifferent.

*Agatha* (First Artists-Warner Bros.) carries us forward another 40 years.



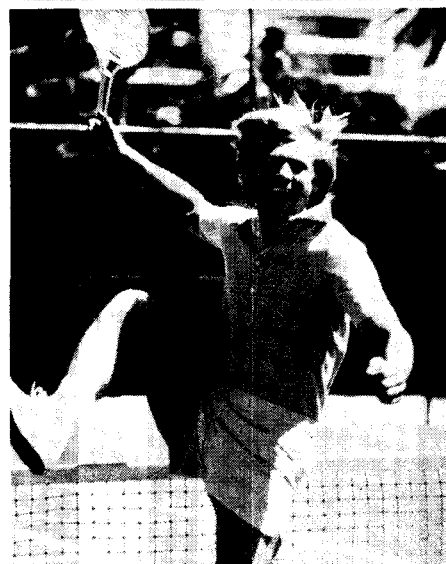
Redgrave as Agatha in *Christiand*.

then disappeared and was found some days later living in the resort town of Harrogate under the name of her husband's mistress. No one knows whether it was design, confusion, or amnesia. Kathleen Tynan's graceful screenplay offers a solution to the mystery in the best Agatha Christie style.

*Agatha*, like the other films, enjoys its period—cloche hats, tea dances, the Charleston. The plot is crafty; the narration is clear and fluid. But the movie acquires a quality of real loveliness from the exceptional performances by the two stars. Vanessa Redgrave's Agatha is a triumph. Her portrayal of an excruciatingly shy, tremulously intense, hopelessly vulnerable woman who finds inner strength and radiance through ordeal and anguish is one of this exquisite actress's finest. Dustin Hoffman, as the brisk American journalist who restores Agatha's sense of self-worth, conveys a marvelous sensitivity beneath an air of lacquered confidence.

*The Great Train Robbery* is an ingenious mechanical toy and *Murder by Decree* a confusing puzzle. *Agatha* touches the heart.

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# The Habit of Genius

by Mary Gordon

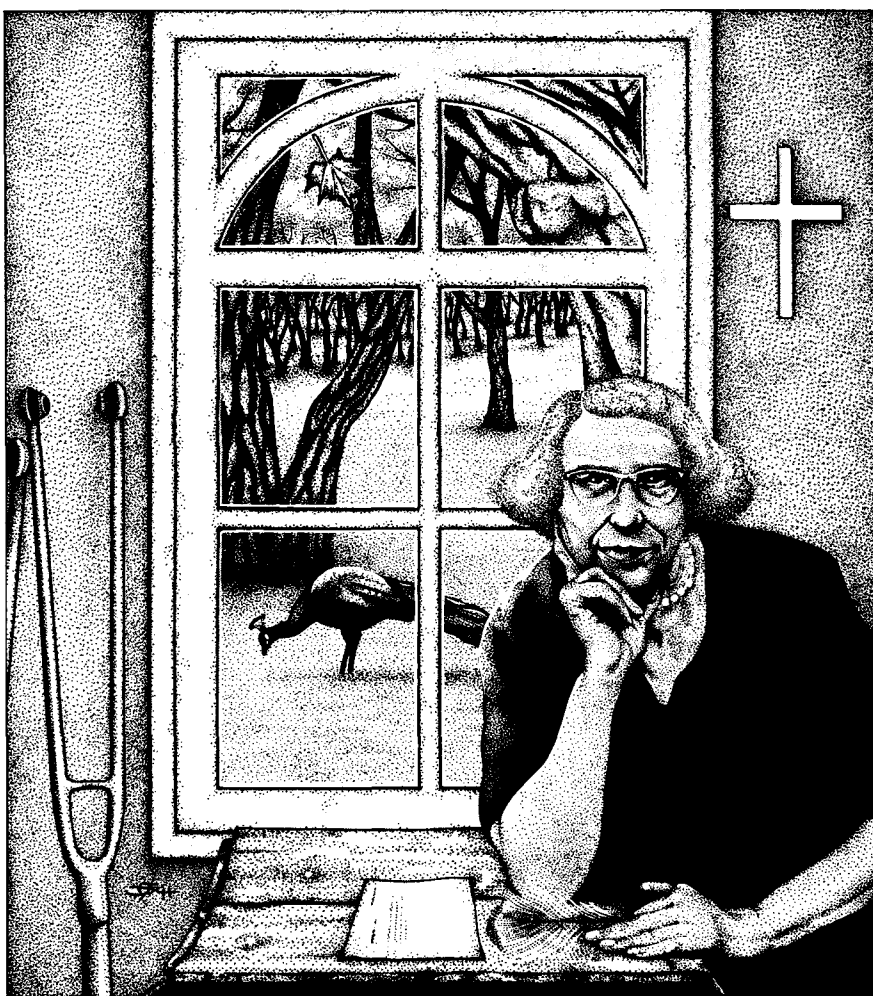
**Flannery O'Connor:**  
**The Habit of Being**  
*Selected and edited by*  
*Sally Fitzgerald*  
*Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 617 pp., \$15*

**A**FTER FLANNERY O'CONNOR's death, Katharine Anne Porter wrote to a mutual friend, "I am always astonished at Flannery's pictures, which show nothing of her grace. She was very slender with beautiful, smooth feet and ankles: she had a fine, clear, rosy skin and beautiful eyes."

O'Connor's face was a peculiar one for a writer, even allowing for the effects of the disease she contracted at 25. Not all writers are beauties, but usually there is something in the face to suggest distinction—a habit, if not of fashion, then of style. No face could appear less fashionable or stylish than Flannery O'Connor's; it is accepted rather than invented; it is a face from the provinces. In her early photographs, her expression is sour; a fearful, pure intelligence presents itself, unqualified by deep affections. There is no humor in the face here; she is sullen, judging; she is Mary Grace in "Revelation," she is Hulga in "Good Country People."

Later, after years of illness, she is oddly more attractive. Prematurely aged, she has grown graceful; the sourness is gone, the humor enters. Still, it does not seem a writer's face; rather that of an aunt more educated than the rest of the family, full of good sense and works of mercy, sharp-tongued but practical in a crisis. It is a face untouched by sexual experience or curiosity, which is why, perhaps, it seems not one of our own.

She was born in Milledgeville in Georgia, in 1925, attended the local women's college there, and went north for the first time at 22 to become part of the School for Writers at the State University of Iowa. At 25, when she was living with Sally and Robert Fitzgerald in Connecticut, she dis-



covered that she had *lupus erythematosus*, the disease that had killed her father. She knew she was dying, and she knew that her physical disintegration would take years. She returned to Milledgeville, where she lived on the family farm with her mother until her death 14 years later.

She seems to belong to another age, but then in what age could one place her? Certainly she is a kind of Puritan, but of a very particular variety. Her interest lay not in the damnation of her characters, but in their redemption.

She has the formality and the reasonableness of a neoclassicist, the social acuity of a Victorian. But the darkness of her conclusions about the world, a darkness illumined only by her belief in mystery and in mysterious salvation, personally expressed in a passionate, traditional Catholicism, creates both her appeal for modern readers and their problems with her.

Revered by a small world of critics and serious readers, she has never achieved even a remotely popular reputation. She is less well known than her