

# Sanders of the River

UK | 1935 | 98 minutes

## Credits

|                             |  |
|-----------------------------|--|
| <b>Director</b>             | Zoltan Korda                                 |
| <b>Screenplay</b>           | Lajos Biró/Jeffrey Dell                      |
| <b>Photography</b>          | Osmond Borradaile/Louis Page/Georges Périnal |
| <b>Music</b>                | Mischa Spoliansky                            |
| <b>Cast</b>                 |  |
| <b>Commissioner Sanders</b> | Leslie Banks                                 |
| <b>Bosambo</b>              | Paul Robeson                                 |
| <b>Lilongo</b>              | Nina Mae McKinney                            |
| <b>J. Ferguson</b>          | Martin Walker                                |

## In Brief

Although a source of much embarrassment (and biographical revisionism) to Paul Robeson in later years, by the standards of its day *Sanders of the River* perhaps isn't quite as obnoxiously racist as might be expected.

It's more patronising than openly racist and while hardly a role model, Robeson's convict-turned-king plays a more central role in the plot than Leslie Banks condescendingly paternalistic British commissioner.

But then, you don't expect subtlety from a story by King Kong creator Edgar Wallace, who many blamed for the collapse of peace talks during the Boer War because of his salacious invented newspaper stories of Boer atrocities.

British Commissioner Sanders rules the West African territories in the manner of a strict father, watching over his subjects with a combination of force and indulgence. When Sanders takes a period of leave, his kingdom falls into disarray, until order is restored with the help of the loyal chief Bosambo.

*Sanders of the River*, released in Britain on 8 April 1935, was the first of a series of colonial epics from Alexander Korda's London Films, which subsequently included *Elephant Boy* (1937), *The Drum* (1938) and *The Four Feathers* (1939). It was the first film to include all three Korda brothers, with Alex producing, Zoltan directing and art direction by youngest brother Vincent.

Despite the objections of Zoltan, who had wanted a more sensitive study of African culture and society, *Sanders* is an unwavering celebration of British colonial rule, dedicated to the "handful of white men whose everyday work is an unsung saga of courage and efficiency".

Whatever Zoltan's own views, *Sanders of the River* uncritically retains the patronising racism of Edgar Wallace's novel, depicting Africans as 'children' whose natural tendencies towards deceit and violence require moderation from their white British masters. In this light, it seems strange that Korda was able to attract the great African-American singer and political activist Paul Robeson for the role of Bosambo. Although Robeson subsequently disowned the film, and vowed never to work with Korda again, his dignified performance and powerful bass voice contributed much to the film, and gave it a popular hit song, 'The Canoe Song' (based on a real tribal song Zoltan had recorded on location).

Curiously, the film also featured - as an extra - the future President of Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta, who was apparently pleased with the film - enough at least to present Korda with an inscribed silver cigarette case as a token of thanks.

Nearly thirty years later the story was filmed again, this time by the London Films offshoot Big Ben Films, as *Death Drums Along the River* (1963).

- Mark Duguid

## Korda and Empire

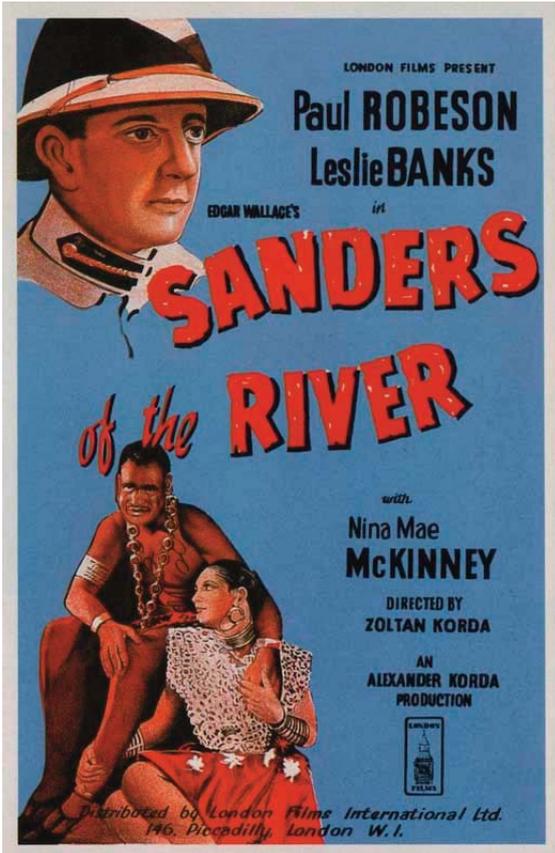
Four 1930s Alexander Korda films that championed the British Empire

London Films' *Sanders of the River* (d. Zoltan Korda, 1935) begins with a dedication to the civil service in Britain's colonies - "the handful of white men whose everyday work is an unsung saga of courage and efficiency". Set in what was then British Nigeria, *Sanders of the River* was the first in a series of British Empire movies from Alexander Korda's studio.

Korda's Empire ventures may have been driven by a conviction that the British territories represented a vast untapped market, but they also reflected a sincere pride in his adopted country. Despite a left-wing past in his native Hungary, including acting as an advisor to the shortlived Hungarian Communist government in 1918 (a relationship which led to his brief imprisonment after the government was overthrown by General Horthy's fascists), by 1935 Korda was a dyed-in-the-wool Tory.



# Sanders of the River



A committed Anglophile, he subscribed to the view of empire as a symbol of British efficiency, decency and fair-mindedness, as celebrated in the work of Rudyard Kipling, A.E.W. Mason and Edgar Wallace. The novels of these three prolific authors became the source for the loose Empire quartet - Sanders of the River, adapted from Wallace's novel; the Indian-set Elephant Boy (d. Robert Flaherty and Zoltan Korda, 1937), from Kipling's Toomai of the Elephants, and The Drum (d. Zoltan Korda, 1938), from A.E.W. Mason; and The Four Feathers (d. Zoltan Korda, 1939), set in the Sudan and also from a Mason novel.

The Empire films were rare in uniting all three Korda brothers - Alex, director Zoltan and designer Vincent - on the same project. The result was often tempestuous - family arguments, often fierce, were common among the Kordas - though never ultimately rancorous. Zoltan was attracted to the action-adventure stories, with their opportunities for spectacular battle scenes and taut suspense. Unlike Alex, however, Zoltan had never abandoned his left-wing views, and he was uncomfortable with the jingoism of the Empire films.

His trip to Africa in 1933, to gather material for Sanders of the River, had developed in Zoltan a deep fascination with African culture and society, which he hoped to present in a more complex and respectful way. He and Alex argued frequently during the production, but as producer, studio head and eldest brother, it was Alex's view that usually won out.

In the later films, however, the adventure began to take centre stage, and the pro-Empire message, though never absent, was less intrusive. All the same, the films' unrelenting pro-Empire flag waving and their assumptions of British superiority over 'primitive' or untrustworthy natives can grate today, as can the appearance of white actors 'blacked-up' as Indians or Africans, for example the Canadian Raymond Massey as the villainous Prince Guhl in The Drum (the practice of 'blacking-up' was

by no means rare in the 1930s, and survived into the 1980s, with notable examples including Ben Kingsley as Gandhi (d. Richard Attenborough, 1982) and Alec Guinness in A Passage to India (d. David Lean, 1984)).

Perhaps the greatest legacy of the Korda Empire films was the discovery of the young actor Sabu, who became a huge international star following his title role in Elephant Boy. He went on to star in The Drum, the fantasy adventure Thief of Bagdad (d. Michael Powell/Ludwig Berger/Tim Whelan, 1940) and as Mowgli in The Jungle Book (d. Zoltan Korda, 1942), later appearing in Powell and Pressburger's Black Narcissus (1947).

In 1952, Zoltan Korda was at last able to express a more sensitive view of the African experience in Cry, the Beloved Country, a liberal critique of apartheid South Africa adapted from a novel by Alan Paton.

- Mark Duguid

EDINBURGH  
FILM  
GUILD

Paul Robeson