

# Unexpected Gifts

**M**ADE FOR TV films about characters like the crew in "After Thomas" (a disabled child, a troubled family and a dog) tend to raise apprehensions—mainly the suspicion that globs of good feeling and bad writing loom just ahead. Most of those suspicions turn out to be well justified, but that's far from the case with the fact-based BBC-America film airing Monday, 9-11 p.m. EDT.

The Thomas of the title is the dog, an irresistible key character, though not the kind that inspired the old bit of actors' wisdom, which warns against work-



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After burning Atlanta—the film declares that, contrary to others' claims, a mere 30% of the city was torched—Sherman proceeded to travel 650 miles through the heart of enemy territory starting in mid-November 1864. His destination was Savannah, the last remaining center of the Confederacy's resources, which he reached with a loss of just 600 men out of an army of 60,000.

In the course of this journey, Sherman's men grew still closer to the general they called "Uncle Billy" than they had before. They had reason. Sherman relished living close to the men, chatting with them. Never, he wrote, had he had a more agreeable sensation than that which he had sitting, looking out at their camp at night. He wanted to avoid, at all costs, any unnecessary expenditure of lives—of his soldiers, that is. More to the point, the soldiers believed that he did. War, he told them, is more about moving troops than about fighting.

The film covers more than the march, compellingly stuffed as it is with particulars about the plundering that went under the guise of foraging for supplies, and about the freed blacks who tried to follow Sherman's army. It's a sharply wrought portrait of this iron-willed general who proclaimed, and believed, that "War is Cruelty. The Crueler it is, the sooner it will be over."

**A WORD ABOUT** the "Nature" special "Dogs That Changed the World," to air Sundays, April 22 and April 29, 8-9 p.m. EDT on PBS. Check local listings. Ambitious, as the "Nature" series invariably is, Part One covers the dog's evolution from wolf to man's best friend. Or—as witnesses to their importance, such as the Inuit, testify—the creature indispensable to man's survival. Part Two is concerned largely with misbegotten ventures in dog breeding that have changed the natural character, health and capacities of many breeds—and not for the better, as the film makes clear. On this, the dog experts are brisk, sharp-tongued and likely to make certain dog fanciers unhappy—among them owners of English bulldogs, a breed apparently now ruined. An engrossing two hours, beautifully filmed.

in all its chaos and stunted hopes. Not even the bond between two intelligent and loving parents, Nicola (Keeley Hawes) and Rob Graham (Ben Miles), is proof against the exhaustion and fear poisoning their lives.

### Fearsome Clarity

For Rob, existence with Kyle (Andrew Byrne) is no life at all—it's a holding action against the constant threat of emergency. It takes, after all, only a word whose sound he doesn't like to throw his unreachable child into violent tantrums. The same is true for Nicola, who nonetheless persists in hapless efforts to train Kyle to adapt to a normal world. The film's opening scene renders the reality she's up against with a fearsome clarity. Nicola has gone forth to buy six-year-old Kyle new shoes—an encounter that soon has him screaming and kicking with a ferocity that continues as Nicola wrestles him out of the store and down the streets. Matters don't improve when they get home, either. There's only one way to calm him—videotapes of the TV series "Thomas the Tank Engine," which his parents and grandparents keep handy on all occasions.

Still, the boy can't watch the "Thomas" series all day. At school he speaks to no one, plays with no one—nor, as we're regularly reminded, does he have any sense of the people he

ple—a good bit clearer.

As the family's daily hell continues unabated, Nicola's dauntless mother, Pat (Sheila Hancock), an optimist, suggests getting a dog. Enter the golden retriever puppy to be named Thomas, after Kyle's favorite train engine. Thomas may not steal scenes, exactly, but no one's eyes are going to wander from this creature once he hits the screen, first as a pup and then as a grown dog. All that follows from his entry on the scene testifies to the skill behind this production (director Simon Shore; writer, Lindsey Hill), which goes on to the end, extracting life and even suspense from the most predictable of circumstances.

In "After Thomas" nothing feels predictable, even given a theme as reliably sunny as a boy and his dog—no small tribute to this gem of a film.

**GEN. WILLIAM** Tecumseh Sherman's travels through Georgia are among the least obscure events in Civil War history, but the details of those travels and the character of the chief traveler himself have rarely been related, in any television chronicle, with as much spirit and intelligence as in "Sherman's March," to air Sunday, 9-11 p.m. EDT, on the History Channel. It's a docudrama that owes much to the flinty authority of William Oberst Jr., splendid in

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