Robert Benchley's humor has always been best suited to the short. Too often in features he has been given stock "cute support" material which could have been handled by any hack of less talent and subtlety. And yet in his hands, even the platitude of material acquired a sparkle probably undeserved of by its creator. Benchley contributed interesting cameos to such early Metro talkies as "China Seas" and "Dancing Lady", and later, in the forties, was seen frequently (though not always to advantage) in top supporting roles in "The Major and the Minor" and similar films. Occasionally, as in "The Road to Utopia" (wherein he made welcome intrusions to narrate and explain the plot complications), he fared almost as well as in his one-reelers, which have come to be regarded as classics of American comedy. Benchley's character remained more or less constant through this entire series: the slightly pompous (yet not objectionably so) underling enjoying a brief moment of minor power; bungling, well-meaning, with a weak joke and an apologetic laugh to ward off every emergency. (One of Benchley's shorts, "How to Sleep", won an Academy Award in 1936). "HOW TO VOTE" is a very funny and very typical example of Benchley's "lecture" series, which also includes the hilarious "Sex Life of the Polygyn". In our film this evening, Benchley is seen at his best as a politician's deputy, over-eager and hopelessly confused as he becomes entangled in a web of slogans, facts, figures and miscellaneous propaganda.

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The "City Symphony" school of documentary making is an established tradition by now. Starting in Europe in the twenties, it has been represented by such films as Rutman's "Berlin", Cavalcanti's "Elan que las Huesas" and Suckendorff's "Rhythm of a City", generally regarded perhaps as the three leaders of this type of film. "THE WAVELEY STEPS" is one of several British contributions to the genre; a surprisingly little-known film, it is quite one of the best of its species and one of the few subjects that really merits that much-used (and abused) description "Poetic Documentary". We're happy to be able to present it this evening.

Like so many of the top directors, John Eldridge was first an editor (with Herbert Wilcox in 1936) and then it is not surprising that one of the most impressive features of this film is its beautifully smooth cutting. One sequence early in the film - some boys watching a train pass under a bridge - is a model of efficient, unobtrusive and genuinely creative cutting. It is over in a matter of seconds, with seemingly only a cut or two - yet close examination of the film reveals that this sequence is composed of eleven separate shots, each shot running for approximately 17 frames. Beautifully constructed and photographed, filmic in mood, "THE WAVELEY STEPS" is not without a certain amount of outside influence. There is much of Humphrey Jennings about it - the telling of the story primarily through people, the use of overlapping sound-tracks; and the opening sequence, with the travelling shots of the train exiting the last miles before streaming into the city, recalls the fine camerawork of Curt Courant in the opening sequence of "La Bete Humaine".

The city in question is Edinburgh; the time covered from 5 o'clock on a Sunday evening until the same time the following day. (It is perhaps worth noting that Edinburgh's Sundays are notoriously Victorian. Stores, cinemas, theatres, even restaurants, remain shuttered. The only diversions are the churches and the film societies, which is doubtless why Eldridge elected to start his story quite late in the day).

Before joining Green Park Productions in 1945, Eldridge had been with Strand Films for five years, "Our Country" being one of his more interesting directorial efforts. With Green Park, also for five years, he made, among others, the famous "Three Days to Sydney" and "North East Corner". Currently he is associated with Ealing Studios as a writer, the screenplay of "Pool of London" being one of his more interesting credits.

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"I COVER THE WATERFRONT" Directed by James Cruse for United Artists release

Release date (and date of N.Y. premiere at the Rivals: May 17th, 1933)

Script by Wells Root, from the book of the same name by Max Miller; Film Editor: Grant Whytock; Assistant Director: Vernon King; Photography: Ray June; Art Director: Albert D'Agostino; Additional Dialogue by Jack Jernin; Sound: Oscar Legerstram.

The Cast

Joe Miller................. BEN EYON
Julie Kirk ................ CLAUDETTE CURTIS
Ell Kirk .................. ERNEST TORNES
McCoy .................... Robert Cavanaugh
Ortega ........................... Maurice Black
John Phelps ............... FURRILL PRATT

Old Chris .................. Harry Beresford
Tony Silver .............. George Humbard
Mrs Silver ............... Renee Marsini
Mother Morgan .......... Claudia Cohen
Randall ................... William Luna
Sailor ...................... Al Mill

1933 was quite a year - and despite the presence of some massive musicals from Warners, it was primarily a year of melodrama in every conceivable shape and form. The horror cycle was at its peak, with both King Kong and the Invisible Man roaring across American screens. The gangster epic was still in full swing, though changes were taking place and greater stress was being placed on the efficiency of the law rather than the glories of the lawless. Cagney, as usual, was left unscathed, and Robinson, playing a comedy born-again in "Little Giant," was preparing to leave the mechanics (temporarily) for straight dramatics. Wallin's sociological melodrama "Wild Boys of the Road" and "Heroes for Sale," were joined by "I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang" and "Laughter in Hell" (one of several "chain-gang" follow-ups). Crime was apparently safe bonding as every studio, branching out into sophisticated deduction via William Powell's Philip Vance in "The Kennel Murder Case," and endless "programmers" at Warners, typical of which was Buster Keaton's "Hunting Criminals," a Grant-Lindsay vehicle.

Shirking the established groups of standardized gangster or detective thrillers, were many "off-beat" melodramas which, though dealing with some of the accepted motifs - bootlegging, gambling (e.g., an early Cary Grant vehicle, "Gambling Ship"), dope peddling, smuggling, etc., managed to avoid uniformity and yet retain the punch and pace so typical of the melodrama of that period.

"I COVER THE WATERFRONT" is one of the best examples of this latter category. Although it deals at some length with the struggling of slum dwellers and scorns the complete disregard of prohibition laws, it has an individuality which places it well outside any of the stock groups. Apart from a particularly well-staged shark-hunting sequence, there is little actual physical action - certainly none of the roaring car-chases or blinding gun-battles so typical of the period - and yet it has a tremendous vigor which is sustained quite admirably until the very last sequence. (Incidentally, the author of the original - Max Miller - enjoyed quite a vogue in 1933. His "Hell and High Water" was another top melodrama of the year.)

Finished just before the new Production Code regulations came into force, "I COVER THE WATERFRONT" has come quite startlingly into print, even a year later, would have been toned down completely, and today no longer exist (in American cinema) in any shape at all. The hard-boiled, pugilistic dialogue is frequently a delight. Although sex is a minor factor in the plot, the script makes no bones about allowing the hero and heroine to spend a night together long before matrimony is contemplated. (Today just the opposite is true; the sex element, exaggerated out of all true proportion, as in "Man on a Tightrope," is kept well to the fore, but somehow seems out of place and suggesting merely that.). The only obvious concession made in that prior to, and following, a particularly hearty bordello scene, the establishment is referred to as (a) a bordello house and (b) a speakeasy. Incidentally, it is worth noting that this film has been screened recently on television, but in a very much bashed and censored version. Our print is in fine condition and quite complete, save for the cutting of Torrence's name from the credits. (Torrence died shortly after completing the film, and presumably a later reissue cut his name in an effort to hide the film's age.)

Since this is our fourth James Cruse screening this year ("The Covered Wagon," "The Fighting Cossack" and "The Great Gabbo" preceded it) we refer you to previous notes for background material on the director. We understand that "Films in Review" is shortly publishing an index to his work, in addition. In reading however, we should note that "I COVER THE WATERFRONT" was generally acknowledged to be Cruse's best talkie, putting him back on top after a series of unsuccessful ventures for his own company. Cruse followed up with "Bill Rogers," "David Harum," another vast epic ("Sutter's Gold") for Universal, so costly and such an enormous boxoffice flop that it all but wrecked Lasser. Universal was saved, luckily, by unexpectedly large grosses from James Whale's "Show Boat." Cruse's last films, in the mid-thirties, were four minor but superbly made "B" melodramas for Republic.

Committee of the Film Society: Charles Turner (Hon. Chairman); Robert C. Youngson (Program Secretary); Bill Keely (Musical Bureau); Warren Rothenberger; Herman G. Weinberg; William R. Bowen (News Column).