For years now (coincidentally, ever since the death of D.W. Griffith) Donald Crisp has been claiming to have directed the battle scenes of "The Birth of a Nation." In the December issue of "Films and Filming," this garrulous old bloward extends the legend a little further, and we find him graciously admitting that Griffith directed "the interior scenes" in the picture. By 1962, we may find that Griffith was Hitler's promising young assistant! Luckily, Crisp's senility (as a historian at least) gives him away elsewhere in his article. He refers to "Mutiny on the Bounty" as Laughton's first Hollywood film (although it was preceded by nine or ten others). He tells us that while "The Birth" was in work, Wallace Reid, Lillian Gish, Owen Moore, Mary Pickford and Mack Sennett were all with Biograph. ("The Birth of a Nation" was made in late 1914. Griffith and Miss Gish had left Biograph in 1913. Mary Pickford was with Famous Players; Mack Sennett was on his own at Keystone; Owen Moore was no longer with either Griffith or Biograph, and Wallace Reid had never been with Biograph, but was now working for Griffith at Reliance.)

Crisp's claims of having directed the battle scenes in "The Birth of a Nation" hardly bear refuting. One glance at all the great battle scenes Griffith did prior to "The Birth of a Nation" — and subsequent to it — all without Mr. Crisp's assistance — is conclusive testimony. But even more irrefutable proof is provided by Crisp's own pictures, which is why we have turned the spotlight on this unsung master this evening.

Crisp was not a bad director — he was just a routine, journeyman hack, no better or worse than Richard Thorpe, Christy Cabanne and a dozen others like them. Although nominally the director of them, one cannot really class "The Navigator" and "Don Q" as Crisp pictures — nobody directed Doug or Buster! To get the real measure of Crisp's capabilities, one has to look at films where he has nothing to help him but his talent — films like "Stand and Deliver" and "Process Parade" — no big names, no huge production values, no brilliant scenarios. It's significant that even among these programmers, the best Crisp pictures were those with the better stories and the bigger star names — as for example, the quite powerful "Vanity" (shown by this society some years ago) and tonight's pleasant trifle, "Young April." Usually we revive films to disclose merit in lesser works of unappreciated directors; tonight's more negative approach doesn't mean that we've suddenly turned sour — but if ever a filmic "legend" needed stifling before it became accepted as fact, this is it!

"YOUNG APRIL" (1925) Directed by Donald Crisp for Cecil B. DeMille Productions; supervised by William Sistrom; scenario by Douglas Doty; adapted by Doty and Jeannie Mackintosh from a novel by Egerton Castle; photographed by Reverell Marley; starring BESSIE LOVE, JOSEPH and RUDOLPH SCHILDKRAUT, with Bryan Washburn, Dot Farley, Alan Brooks, Clarence Geldert, Baily Belmont.

We haven't read Mr. Castle's original novel, but the screen version seems like a pretty obvious steal from "The Merry Widow," with a dash of "The Student Prince" and a smattering of Anthony Hope thrown in for good measure. It's sometimes silly, but often quite charming and exciting. Crisp is no Lubitsch, but he's helped here by some extremely able leading players. Bessie Love is vivacious and charming as always — what a misused little player she was — and the Schildkrauts, poppa and junior, have the time of their lives in colorful costumes and classic poses. Furthermore, despite
an obviously slim budget, it's a handsome and well-mounted production. Sets from bigger DeMille films are put to good use, and the photography is as polished and glossy as the mood demands. (Peverell Marley was being worked around the clock then - he'd shot five films in 1925, and six in 1926 -- including two DeMille specials, "The Volga Boatman" and "The Road to Yesterday"). The production zips along quickly, with frequent changes of locale and mood. But its main asset remains Bessie Love ... although we shouldn't overlook the valiant villainy of Bryant Washburn, even though it runs an inevitable second-best to Roy D'Arcy's in "The Merry Widow".

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"THE FIGHTING EAGLE" (1927) Produced and directed by Donald Crisp
for Cecil B. DeMille Productions; based on "The Exploits of Brigadier Gerard" by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle; photographed by Arthur G. Miller; scenario by Douglas Doty; supervised by G. Gardner Sullivan. Starring ROD LA ROCQUE, with Phyllis Haver, Sam de Grasse, Sally Rand, Max Barwyn.

A little like "Fan Fan Le Tulipe" with its tongue-in-cheek swashbuckling, "The Fighting Eagle" is an adaptation of a Conan Doyle novel that had also proven popular as a stage vehicle. Alas, it succeeds or fails by its star, and though Rod la Rocque tries hard, he just isn't up to it. What Barrymore couldn't have done with this role, and Alan Crosland directing! Crisp fails to make the most of much of the material -- the action is usually sketchily done, with a "let's get it over with before it costs too much" attitude -- and some scenes are downright ludicrous. The heroine's byplay with the document that she stuffs into a hat is an astoundingly badly directed scene.

Yet, it's an entertaining little frolic ... there's plenty happening, convincing locales and sets, and a particularly enjoyable performance from lively, pert little Phyllis Haver, who passed away so recently. Often she plays her scenes as though she were still in a Sennett lampoon -- and it pays off, even though one can't always believe what one title tells us, that "behind her rougish eyes and sunny smile lies the keenest mind in the Imperial Secret Service". Sam de Grasse is, as always, a joy as the arch villain.

Tailleurd, like Richelieu, was alternately presented as villain, patriot and more diplomat. With De Grasse in the role, there's never any doubt as to how his actions should be interpreted.

Oddly, when "The Fighting Eagle" was released, more than one critic considered it a "class picture", but too highbrow to be really popular. It's difficult to understand such a reaction today -- but then much film criticism from the 20's proves puzzling nowadays.

Direction? Influences from "The Birth of a Nation"? Well, towards the end of the film the hero is under sentence of death, he is visited by the heroine, and a moaning sentry does sigh after her! But that was from one of the interior scenes of "The Birth of a Nation" -- one of the odd shots supervised by Griffith himself -- so I suppose one can say that Crisp was paying homage to his old teacher. What a pity he didn't generate a little more excitement by borrowing from himself, and giving us some great chases and battle scenes!

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Wm. K. Everson

Next program; Thursday Dec. 29, Room 10-D - MICHAEL CURTIZ "MOUNTAIN JUSTICE" (1936); Sidney Olcott's "RAILROAD RAIDERS OF '62" (1912); "THE DOLL HOUSE MYSTERY" (Griffith-Chester & Sidney Franklin, 1915); and APRIL FOOL (1926) with Charlie Chase.