Tuesday next, January 23rd: Clarence Brown's SHOULDERING FIRES (1924) with Pauline Frederick and Laura LaFlante (a complete and fully titled print, some two reels longer than the abbreviated version included in the MMA/Cinematheque cycle); plus an early Edison one-reel western, ACROSS THE GREAT DIVIDE with Fredric March and a Sennett of the 20's, BROKE IN CHINA, with Ben Turpin, Ruth Taylor and Andy Clyde.

January 16 1968
The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society
An evening of Victorian melodrama

"MARIA MARTEN - or THE MURDER IN THE RED BARN" (George King/Ambassador, 1935)
Directed by Milton Rosmer; produced by George King; scenario by Randal Free; Camera: George Strettom; 6 reels
With: Tod Slaughter, Sophie Stewart, Eric Portman, J.D. Williams, Clare Greet, Gerrard Tyrrell, Ann Trevor, Antonia Brugh, Dennis Hoey, Quentin McPhearsen, Stella Bho, Herbert Leonard.

Huffians are by now well familiar with the work of Tod Slaughter through such films as "Crimes at the Dark House" and "The Crimes of Staveno Hawk", and at least one more - "The Face at the Window" - is due for screening soon. An attempt this Summer to introduce Tod to the students of UCLA was singularly unsuccessful alas, due largely to the pairing of two of his lesser works, and some rather inaccurate program annotating. But at least it was nice to get doing quite elaborate coverage in the Hollywood press!

"Maria Marten" is one of Tod's best and most famous films, though in some ways not his most typical. For one thing, it is played much straighter than any of his other movies, due partially perhaps to the collaboration of actor/director Milton Rosmer, who was a better craftsman (and took his theatre more seriously) than George King, who normally directed the Slaughters. Not that "Maria Marten" is intended to be taken entirely seriously - but it doesn't go after laughs nor is it ever deliberate burlesque. It's wholehearted Victorian theatrical melodrama certainly -- and starting the film off by presenting it as a play within the film emphasizes this - but it merely tries to duplicate old-time theatricality, rather than exaggerating it for laughs. In this sense, it more resembles Tod's stage work in England, where plays like "Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde" and "The Chinese Restaurant" were played with all the steps out, and where laughter was tolerated and even expected, but never really courted. The sheer bravura performances and marvellous lines automatically produce some laughs for "Maria Marten" - even seen alone one can't help but revel in its evil and the sadly unremitting course of justice following crime -- but it is not a lampoon, and it is quite surprising how much of it still seems to work within its original framework.

Through the years "Maria Marten" has become so embellished as a barnstorming favorite that only in its basic facts does it resemble the actual murder and trial (in 1828). Until some of those uniquely British mass murders in recent years, it was for a long time the most notorious of all British murder cases, and it was a tragedy in more senses the one. The whole case had many of the aspects of Dreiser's "An American Tragedy" and the killer William Corder, was a far younger, more complex and in part sympathetic individual than the stock lecherous squire that Slaughter makes of him. One unique angle of the case was that the murdered girl's mother was a mystic whose dreams revealed details of the crime and helped to trap Corder. The many fascinating aspects of the case are too detailed to reprint here, but they were faithfully recorded by reporters and authors of the time, and most of these contemporary accounts were incorporated into a "last word" book on the subject, titled "The Murder in the Red Barn" and published in New York in 1948 by Pelegrini and Century. It's well worth the reading. Incidentally, the original book-length account of the case even outdid "In Cold Blood" in grim step-by-step authenticity, genuinely believing (in the 1940s one might have certainly been!) author J. Curtis of the London Times had the original manuscript bound in Corder's skin -- the body having been dissected for medical students after execution. Even Grand Gulag maestro Slaughter doesn't go this far, though he does have a nice melodramatic twist to his execution sequence.

"JAMAICA INN" (Mayflower/Paramount, 1939) Directed by Alfred Hitchcock
Produced by Eric P. Pommer; Screenplay by Sidney Gilliat and Joan Harrison; continuity by Alma Reville, additional dialogue by J.B. Priestley, from the novel by Daphne Du Maurier; Camera: Harry Searle, and Bernard Knowles; editor, Robert Hamer; Special effects by Harry Watt; settings, Tom Mooreham; 9 reels.

With: Charles Laughton, Maureen O'Hara, Robert Newton, Leslie Banks, Emlyn Williams, Marie Ney, Wylie Watson, Morland Graham, Basil Radford, Edwin Greenwood, Mervyn Johns, Stephen Haggard, Horace Hodges, Hay Petrie, Frederick Piper;
Herbert Lomax, Clare Greet, Jeanne de Casalis, Bromley Davenport, Mabel Terry Lewis, George Curzon, Aubrey Mather, O.B., Clarence, Skelton Knaggs, Mary Jerrold, John Longden.

"Jamaica Inn" was never one of Hitchcock's own favorites (hence its exclusion from the MMA's Hitchcock cycle some years back) nor did it meet with unanimous critical approval on its initial release. Unfortunately it isn't one of those films that seems to have been totally unappreciated at the time, to bounce back fresher than ever a quarter of a century later. But it is quite a fascinating misfire, and since it must be some 15 years since it had a NY showing, a revival is quite certainly in order.

A thoroughly Germanic production, bearing the signature of Pomer far more than that of Hitchcock (whose final British film it was before taking off for Hollywood), it is, if nothing else, thoroughly fascinating visually. Apart from one or two brief seascapes, it is entirely studio-made -- and the moors, streets, rocky caves and cliffs all have the deliberately artificial and sombre look of the 1920 UFA period. The opening especially is reminiscent of so many German silents, and the sequence with the stagecoach is practically a direct steal from "Nosferatu". Parallels (many of them accidental) with several other films might be noted in passing; Lang's "Mmootleet", Arliss' "Dr. Syn", and even "Oliver Twist". Du Maurier seems to have based a lot of her structure on that Dickens work, and Leslie Banks is but a thinly disguised Bill Sykes. In fact many of the characters, and their inter-relationships, seem to borrow a great deal from earlier plays and literary works, right down to the stock figure of the loyal, sorrowing valet, the Mortimer of "Beau Brummel".

It's difficult to see just why "Jamaica Inn" fails. Certainly there's a plethora of talent behind the camera -- including four other directors (or directors-to-be) quite apart from Pomer, Joan Harrison (later a producer) and Laughton, who likewise directed later. The cast is well-nigh perfect, and in terms of production values it's an extremely handsome film. There may be some rough edges in some of the action scenes, but that hardly matters since it is a melodrama rather than a swashbuckler. Maureen O'Hara, playing at pirates for the first of many times, is a little inexperienced and sometimes reads lines badly, but looks so beautiful that one doesn't feel inclined to grumble.

When all is said and done, the basic weaknesses seem to be laid at the door of the two most important people concerned - director Hitchcock and star Laughton. That he is out of his normal element needn't necessarily have sent Hitchcock astray; after all, Lang made good westerns, and Whale made good comedies. What seems to have floored Hitchcock is the plot itself, and the multiplicity of characters; with so much going on, he has to give more attention than usual to steering the story, and he also has to try to direct the actors, instead of employing his usual method of ignoring them and directing the audience instead. Only in the sequence where Newton is rescued from hanging (where the audience is involved to the point of knowing the arrangement of the various rooms, and being able to anticipate the method of rescue before it is put into effect) is there any of the old Hitchcockian suspense. Other sequences that should be pregnant with tension seem surprisingly ordinary, and even the typically Hitchcockian interpolations of mild sex lack the piquancy of similar moments in, for example, "The 39 Steps". Laughton himself seems to have been given little help by Hitchcock -- or to have given none in return. His Squire should have been a complex character, somewhat of a 19th century Outman (in fact, Greenstreet would have been perfect in the role), flamboyant, cultured, ruthless, not entirely unsympathetic, and with subtle hints of madness. Laughton however chooses to play the role as though it needs no shadings or interpretations at all and what emerges is a rather humorless variation on Tod Slaughter's theatrical villainy. It's an extremely disappointing Laughton performance, especially coming after such superb performances in his other productions with Pomer, "Vessel of Wrath" and "St. Martin's Lane".

POST SCRIPT: Truffaut's excellent new book on Hitchcock rather curiously lists the 1929-30 "Harmony Heaven" as being a Hitchcock-directed work -- although in the basic text there is no reference to the film at all. This is one of the films we brought back from London, due for presentation at the Huff very soon. According to the print itself, and all other sources, it is directed by Thomas Bentley. Certainly there is nothing about it to suggest Hitchcock, and it would have been a spectacular letdown from his other films of that period if he had directed it. Nevertheless, it's a mystery worth checking into; if any Huffians have ideas or suggestions -- or better still, hard facts -- we'd be delighted to hear from them before our showdate on "Harmony Heaven" rolls around.