July 7 1921

Arillis and Colman

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

"THE IRON DUKE" (Gainsborough, 1934; rel: 1935) Directed by Victor Saville
Sceneplay: H.H. Harwood; Camera: Curt Courant; Music: Louis Levy; 8 reels

Arlis's first British film, after a prolific career in the silent and sound American film, "The Iron Duke" coasted along on his Hollywood prestige sufficiently to gain itself a Radio City Music Hall opening, and fair distribution throughout America. However, it was - and is - a rather stodgy production; extremely ham-handedly mounted, but lacking in pace, and a comedy-drama from his Hal Roach studio that Victor Saville, with his taste and ability to turn theatrical material into films with flair and style, would have been an ideal director to handle Arliss; but strangely, he seemed to fare best with lesser directors that he could control and guide absolutely. "The Iron Duke" is half-way between being a historical pageant and an Arliss vehicle, and while it is entertaining on both counts, it is not wholly successful on either. Despite the lengthy and aristocratic credits for technical advisers, the film's military and historic detail is somewhat suspect - the more so since Arliss' "House of Rothschild" of the same year made Rothschild the power behind the scenes in guiding the Napoleonic wars, while C. Aubrey Smith was a benign and grandfatherly Wellington. Here, the Rothschilds are squeezed out and Arliss takes over as Wellington, apparently with the destiny of all Europe in the palm of his hand. It is a highly romanticised treatment; Wellington was then in his 40's and probably closer in conception to Christopher Plummer's interpretation of the current "Waterloo". Moreover Wellington - like Montgomery in the last War - was respected but universally disliked by his men, and the witty, folkly cameraderie propagandised by Arliss is pure fiction. The battle scene, apart from suffering in comparison with the spectacle of "Waterloo", is also a little unimaginatively staged and, from its montage-like presentation, one suspects that more than a little of it is stock footage from "Balaclava". Nevertheless, given these limitations, "The Iron Duke" is a stately and quite enjoyable work in it's own theatrical way. Not the least interesting aspect is the work of Ellaline Terris as the Duchess of Wellington; a musical comedy star of the '90's, she was played by Dorothy Hyson in the musical biography of Leslie Stuart, "You Will Remember" (which we ran about a year ago) and died only last week, aged 101.

"CYNARA" (Sam Goldwyn-United Artists, 1932) Directed by King Vidor
Scenario by Frances Marion and Lynn Starling from the play by H.H. Harwood and Robert Gore Brown, and the novel "An Imperfect Lover" by Brown; Camera, Ray June; Musio, Alfred Newman; 7 reels
With Ronald Colman, Kay Francis, Phyllis Barry, Henry Stephenson, Vivian Tattersall, Florine McKinney, Clarissa Selwyn, Paul Porrazo, George Kirby, Donald Stewart, Wilson Prom, George Hurbert, Erville Alderson, Montague Shaw, Emily Fitzroy, Halliwell Hobbes, Charles Hall.

"Cynara" is both a good glossy Goldwyn and an ideal Colman vehicle; moreover it moves briskly and is well acted. Having covered those plus factors, one can't otherwise be too satisfied with it. Possibly the play (with Philip Merivale) made more sense, but everybody in the film behaves with dignified immobility throughout, and it is difficult to accord much sympathy even to the most deserving characters. Vidor borrows from himself (the idyllic lateral tracking shot of the boat in "Bolshevik") and also steals Disterie's beautiful out (tossed papers dissolving into flying pigeons) from "Her Majesty Love" which was later re- pillaged to great acclaim for its originality by Wyler in "Dodsworth". Vidor also, somewhat illegitimately, twice uses a rather menacing overhead shot of a stairway, as if establishing it for a dramatic highlight that never comes. The period is decidedly nondescript too; the clothes and décor are all strictly 1932, even for rather backward London; yet since a visit to the cinema produces a chapter of "Lupin's Life", presumably the period is much earlier. To be picturesque with that film as a criterion, it should be 1918 and wartime - which makes the flippant Englishman to Europe travelling a little eye-brow raising too. "Cynara" probably disappoints most because it is a simple and uncomplicated story, and could easily have gone in the direction of either Lean's "Brief Encounter" or King's silent "Stella Dallas"; as it is, it tries to be both an intelligent adaptation of a mildly notorious play, and at the same time a good popular soap-opera, probably coming closest to the latter. On those terms, and with the sensitive playing of Colman and Barry, and the effective scoring by Newman, it's considerably more than a misfire, but somewhat less than a success.

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