THE FLYING SCOTSMAN (exempt) (British International Pictures, 1929; revised with music and limited dialogue in 1950) Directed by Castleton Knight; Screenplay by Victor Kendall and Garnett Weston from a story by Joe Grossman; with Ray Milland, Pauline Johnson, Moore Marriott, Alec Hurley

This melodramatic highlight from the climactic reel undoubtedly makes this film look a good deal better than it really is; this sequence apart, the film is mainly notable as an example of the earliest Ray Milland, and for the footage involving the Flying Scotsman - once the pride of Britain's locomotive fleet, and now reduced to sell all British goods. (It was in New York only last February.) Castleton Knight, who directed the adaptation, is rather dull Newreel man and documentarian, who optometrically pictured himself as a British Leni Riefenstahl. How inadequately he achieved that ambition can be seen by a quick look at his Technicolor Olympics feature.

SMOKE LIGHTNING (Fox, 1933) Directed by David Howard; Screenplay by Gordon Rigby and Sidney Mitchell from Zane Grey's "Canyon Walls"; Camera, Sidney Wagner With: George O'Brien, Nell O'Day, Douglas Dumbrille, Betsy King Ross 6 reels


For's George O'Brien westerns are a variable group, some, like "Mystery Ranch" and "Rainbow Trail" elaborate and a beautiful mixture of action, plot, scenes and outdoor locations, while others are only fairly good on market, and by 1933 their quality began to fall off. However, thanks to O'Brien's extra-quality, acting ability and athletic knowhow, they still remained very satisfying films, if not always very action-packed ones. "Smoke Lightning" is based very loosely on the Grey story, and seems to owe at least as much to "Canyon Kirby". Without looking cheap, it's an economical film, looking standing sets are used, and the outdoor locations are all very close to home, with none of the grandeur of the locales used only the prior year in "Mystery Ranch". It's carefully made, but not meticulously made, with O'Brien being just one bar in the window of George's publicity effort. The film is given a bit of a loss on the local market too, which wouldn't matter so much if there wasn't a little too much bartering comedy byplay. However, there are compensations; the villainy is formidable, and Douglas: Dumbrille trying to ingratiate himself with a child is a joy in itself. The action is all held for the last two reels, but it's worth waiting for, with George performing sundry stunts on horse and train clearly without a double. The print by the way is one prepared for the Spanish market (but before subtitles were added) and there are occasional inserts (letters, documents, etc.) in Spanish.

THE BLACK WATCH (Fox, 1929) Directed by John Ford; Scenario by John Stone, with dialogue by James E. McGuinness, from the 1916 novel by Salton Mundy; Camera, Joseph August; Dialogue Director, Lumaden Hare; Asst. Director, Edward O'Keefe; 10 reels


The 3-reel "Napoleon's Barber" apart, "The Black Watch" (later remade after a fashion as an early CinemaScope, "King of the Klondike") was Ford's first talkie. While he hadn't re-seen it when the Bogdenovich interview book was done, he was somewhat critical of it, blaming most of its shortcomings on Lumaden Hare, who dialogue-directed it, on the story, and on its fragmentary action throughout. It's reasonable, anyway, to suppose that a pugnacious director, Ford used him later on, so couldn't - at the time - have harbored too strong a grudge. In any case, Ford being as unreliable and cranky as he was, it's difficult to know if his complaints about Hare's re-shootings are true or justified. Admittedly, there is a stiffness to some scenes which is not typical of other and more relaxed early Ford talkies, especially "Salute" and "The Sands Beneath". On the other hand, these dialogue exchanges - given the florid manner in which Hare wrote his scenes - could be turned out by experienced directors in 1929, and if anything they are a little less exaggerating than the prolonged bagpipe meditations, even going on into the heat of battle! It's an interesting film as it's all studio-made, and a "Gunga Din" devoid of genuine exterior is stylistically fascinating if a bit cramped. The film is full of Ford images, Ford types and Ford situations, and some marvellously rich and fruity villainy from Roy D'Arcy and Walter Long. Loy is quite lovely and, though long, the film is continually interesting and a much more successful debut by a major silent director than those of Ford's contemporaries at Fox, Walsh, Howard and Borraje. Made from a non-original, print quality varies from reel to reel, and though acceptable for study purposes, is a tragic object lesson in the monumental disservice to film history currently being perpetrated by the laboratories that reluctantly undertake the current preservation work. (There appears to be a minor cut as Walter Long joyously announces a "Dance of the Virgins", but since the cut was made in Fox's 1929 preservation copy, presumably it was missing from the start.)