"FIRE OVER ENGLAND" (Alexander Korda-London Films-United Artists, 1937)
Directed by William K. Howard; produced by Erich Pommer;
Screenplay by Clemence Dane and Sergei Nolbandov from the novel by A.E.W. Mason; Camera: James Wong Howe; Music: Richard
Adinsell; Art Direction, Lazar Neerson; Special Effects, Ned
Mann; Editor, John Denis.

With Lawrence Olivier, Alastair Sim, Patric Knowles, Wylie Watson, Flora Robson, Leslie Banks, Raymond Massey, Robert Newton, James Mason, Morton Selten, Tamara
Deani, Henry Oscar, Lawrence Hanray, Roy Russell, Howard Douglas, Cecil Mainwaring, Francis DeWolfe, Graham Cheshwright, George Thirwell, Conrey Grain, Herbert Lomas, Donald Calthrop, Charles Carson, Robert
Rendell, Lynn Harding, Ralph Truman, Amy Veness.

The novels and plays of British writer A.E.W. Mason provided movie material - though only spasmodically - from 1915 on. But he really
only gained a kind of "prestige" source for British films in the four years following 1937's "Fire Over England" when, in
rapid succession, "The Drum", "The Four Feathers" (the third and best of four movie adaptations to date), "At the Villa Rose" and "The
House of the Arrow" were filmed. (The last Hollywood filming of any
of his works was the 1935 "The Widow from Monte Carlo", based on a
play he had written in collaboration with Ian Hay).

Today Mason's novels are hard to find in this country, and harder
still to read. The epic sweep of the three swashbucklers and
adventure yarns filmed by Korda in the late 30's created a new
"image" for Mason which the books themselves are hard-pressed to
live up to. In any case, historical adventure stories form but a
small part of his overall output. "Fire Over England" as a novel has
decidedly stilted quality, its prose too carefully composed, too
smooth, yet still too modern for it to have acquired a "classic"
patina. It has the same obsession with extreme detail that marks
Raymond Chandler's thrillers, but with less reason. The film version
is what one can only term a "loose" adaptation: it covers the same
period of British history, has the same basic story-line, and the
same set of characters. Yet one is hard put to find even one sequence
in the book transposed in toto to the film. However, the screenplay
does creatively clear away much of the redundancy (in the novel, we
first meet the hero as a boy, and his motives always seem a trifle
too ambiguous) and hews to a straightforward swashbuckling story-
line. The dialogue all seems "right", yet it is richer, warmer and
quite different from Mason's, obviously nearer to the theatrical
traditions of screenwriter Dane's own "A Bill of Divorcement", though
with certain elements (the hero roasting potatoes, while the smoke
from the Inquisitional fire in which his father is being executed
blows lazily overhead) seem to suggest the intervention of producer
Pommer. An unofficial companion-piece to Eisenstein's "Alexander
Hnevsky" in that it was a semi-propagandist warning to Hitler to keep
"Hands Off" by stressing the failure of a previous invasion attempt,
"Fire Over England", though wholly filmed in England, was produced
with an impressive roster of international talent. Producer Erich
Pommer (who himself directed at times, and was responsible for
dozens of silent and sound classics in Germany, the USA and England)
was obviously far more than just a nominal producer here, and his
personal touch can be recognised throughout. William K. Howard, one
of the best (though most under-rated) American directors of the
20's and 30's) was here directing his last really major film. James Wong
Howe's lighting and camerawork throughout is superb. When the film
falters at all it is in the action department; after all this is
a swashbuckler, and the duels and sea battles do lack that Hollywood
knowhow and polish. (Later British swashbucklers like "Ivanhoe"
overcame this by the use of Hollywood 2nd unit directors like Yakima
Canutt, with his expert bands of stuntmen). But despite the occasion-
ally disappointing action content, "Fire Over England" is otherwise
a rousing adventure yarn, flawlessly cast and acted. Olivier's youth
and acting inexperience are happily just right for the character he
plays, Leigh is young and incredibly lovely, and a surprisingly
unhumbled James Mason makes a rather petulant minor villain. (One of
the film's drawbacks - as a swashbuckler - is that it has no real
villain, other than Philip of Spain, in the capable hands of that
latter-day Arliss; Raymond Massey). Acting honors on the whole are
quite easily stolen by the veterans - Flora Robson, Leslie Banks,
and most especially Morton Selten in a beautifully rounded perform-
ance. Preceding the film: excerpts from "The Sea Hawk" (Flynn) which
is even less related to its Sabating original than this is to Mason!

-UM, K.Everson-