"THE VIKING" (Canada, 1930) Directed by George Melford; written and produced by Variok Frisell; scenario by Barnett Weston; Camera, Maurice Kellerman, Alfred Gandolfi and E.A. Penrod; original length, 6 reels, this version 4 reels;
With Charles Starrett, Louise Huntington, Captain Bob Barlett, Arthur Vinton

In early 1965 "Variety" carried a story about the rediscovery of the "only extant print" of this long-lost film in a Canadian fish canneray. This is not the same print, so another legend is caught! "The Viking not to be confused with the MGM film of the same title dealing with the original Norsemen, has its main claim to fame in that it was the first feature-length talkie Canada produced. But as with "The Jazz Singer", its value as a convenient milestone has obscured the fact that it is also good in its own right. And the loneliness was further taken away by a sensational following line before the entire crew of the ship featured in the film was shortly thereafter lost at sea when the ship blew up mysteriously. What gives the film its major interest and value is the beautiful and certainly thrilling footage of seal-hunting. There are one or two heart-rending shots of seals being massacred, and the film would be better if less honest without them. But some of the shots are truly staggering, especially the panoramic scenes of the hunters (few of whom can swim, a title tells us) breaching over the thin ice, for 100 fathoms into the ice, and the fierceless under their feet. These shots, blending the real with a kind of nightmare fairyland, are unforgettable. The climax is contrived melodrama perhaps, but contrived in the manner of "Igloo", "Trader Horn" and other big outdoor epics of the early sound era. The hazards are quite real, softened only by the knowledge that cameramen - and help - are close at hand. Presumably most of the credit for the film must go to producer Frisell and his cameraman, one of whom, E.A. Penrod, will be remembered for his writing "Hollywood in the Sea Ships". George Melford, Hollywood's work ranged from Valentino's silent "The Sheik" to early sound quickies like "East of Borneo", could have "directed" little of the film in the strictest sense of the word. This print, trimmed somewhat, turning a semi-fiction film into a documentary, is actually an improvement on the original, which took forever to get out of the fishing village, and spent too long on dull (and indly recorded) dramatics. Here we put scenes right away and enough of the dirty looks thrown at Charles Starrett are thus never explained, it hardly matters. Nor the minor realities as such do not emerge, and it is the crew as a body, and the wintry wastes, that become the protagonists. And they are quite enough.

"THE BARRETTES OF WIGPOLE STREET" (MGM, 1934) Dir: Sidney Franklin
Screenplay by Ernest Vajda, Claudine West and Donald Ogden Stewart
from the play by Rudolph Besier; Camera: William Daniels; 11 reels

Today, when films are full of split screens and zoom lenses but never seem to be about anything, "The Barrettes of Wimpole Street" with its very solid story but deliberate down-playing of filmic technique, does seem a trifle old-fashioned - but in the same satisfyingly non-dramatic way that Dickens too seems old-fashioned. The atmosphere is very much that of the stage rather than the screen, even to the use of a very sparse musical score limited mainly to an accompaniment of locale and time transitions. The choice is obviously deliberate, since when Franklin does, on rare occasions, decide to use the language of film - a mobile camera concentrated on Laughton, the cutting and subjective shots in the sequence of Elizabeth Barrett's attempt to walk upstairs - he uses them well. For the rest, it is a picture of taste, pictorial elegance and literate dialogue beautifully spoken. Although individual scenes seem slowly paced, it is now a slow film, and its eleven reels are gone much faster than for example, many zippy thrillers like "Modesty Blaise". The handsome faces and forthright readings of Shearer & March are a pleasure to behold of course, but it is Laughton who dominates the entire film, as indeed he should. With a marvellous theatrical build-up in the first reel, culminating in his first close-up and his first line ("I am most displeased!") he takes over the whole film, subtly suggesting the incestuous leanings that were more explicit but less successfully brought into the remake by John Gielgud, so much the pivotal figure of the whole film that one is constantly aware of his presence and unconscious of the fact that his role is actually limited to some five or six (talking!) appearances.

William K. Everson