THE NEW SCHOOL  
Film Series Twelve  
Program 5:  October 29, 1971

"MR. COHEN TAKES A WALK"  
(Warner Brothers-British, 1936) 
Directed by William Beaudine; screenplay by Brook Williams from a story by Mary Roberts Rinehart; Camera, Basil Emmott; later retitled "FATHER TAKES A WALK"; 8 reels
With Paul Graetz, Violet Fairbrâcher, Chili Bouchier, Ralph Truman, Mickey Brantford, Barry Livesey, Sam Springton, Kenneth Villiers, Meriel Forbes, George Kerritt, Elliot Makeham.

All American companies, distributing in Britain, were required by law to produce a certain percentage of British films every year. Lost companies disposed of this obligation by making real cheesepies, not caring whether they were ever shown or not, but Warners, under the British supervision of Irving Asher, took their responsibilities seriously and did turn out some really good little films, as witness "The Church House" (screened here a couple of seasons back) and "They Drive By Night" (included in the current British cycle at the Museum of Modern Art). For the most part, they were thoroughly British films, designed primarily for home consumption. "Mr. Cohen Takes a Walk", though directed by an American, is such a film - and a delight. Unfortunately, it fared rather badly; of quality and length commensurate with top-of-the-bill presentation, it was light on star names and rather too specialised in theme. Such emphatically Jewish stories, even of such universal appeal as here, were never popular in England and were done far less frequently than in Hollywood. The Jewish-Irish "conflict" would seem to be a convention imported from the American stage and film too. Even in England, the film virtually disappeared after its initial run, and though released in this country, its showings were sparse in the extreme, and it is totally unknown here. Its plot bears more than a casual resemblance to at least three George Arliss vehicles, and admittedly the earlier portions are a bit protracted. The gentle charm and the pleasing rural scenery, once the walk gets under way, are so pleasing that it's a pity ir. Cohen's promenade didn't begin earlier. But that's a minor gibe, as is the rather overdone use of Jewish musical themes - although "Mother O' Mine" gets a look-in, and the end title even borrows from Berkeley's "Spin a Web of Dreams". It's a quiet and civilised little picture, with even the labor disputes that form part of the story being conducted on a note of genteelly decorum. The big store, incidentally, is Dentall's at Kingston-on-Thames - still looking much the same today, and presumably selected because of its very close proximity to the Teddington Studios, where the film was made. Paul Graetz, an excellent actor who played good character roles in many British films, but was wasted in bits ("G-Men" etc.) when Warners took him to Hollywood, here has his best and certainly biggest film role. Quite incidentally, Ralph Truman - at this stage in his career - was an exact double for Britain's chief movie impresario, J. Arthur Rank. Honestly but gently sentimental, the film supplements the Ford film rather nicely, and I hope will be a pleasant surprise to those of you to whom it must be a totally unknown quantity.

-- Ten Minute Intermission --

"FILDIRIAGID"  
(Fox, 1933)  
Directed by John Ford  
Scenario by Philip Klein and Barry Connors, with additional dialogue by Dudley Nichols, from the story "Gold Star" by I.A.R. Wylie; Camera, George Schneiderman; Assistant Director, Edward O'Farrell (Ford's brother); 8 reels

I deliberately don't want to say too much about "Pilgrimage" since it is impossible to discuss it in depth without commenting on the story. Like Ford's earlier "Four Sons", it is based on an I.A.R. Wylie story, and would seem to be so full of trite coincidences and sentimental traps that even to outline the story would be to render it a disservice. Suffice to say that much of the plotting revolved around a kind of ritualised sentiment which is perhaps second nature to Americans, and organised grief which is first-nature to the Irish (witness the tradition of wakes). Yet despite such a handicap, it works as one of the screen's most skillful tear-jerkers - and I use that phrase not in a derogatory but in a coldly descriptive sense.
One of the joys of rediscovering a film like this is in not knowing too much about it and, given a story like this, seeing how adroitly Ford sidesteps the traps and how, in at least two cases, by simplicity of camerawork gives a majesty and poetry to scenes that approached the maudlin. Only once does Ford seem to stumble a trifle, this in giving, in rather too enthusiastically to light comedy relief at one stage. This comes fairly late in the day, at a point in the heavy emotional story when a hint of comedy is welcome. With American tourists on a spree in Paris, Ford has too logical an excuse to let himself go and, as in "Four Sons", doesn't exercise quite enough self-discipline. But having let off steam, Ford recovers himself quickly and the film soon regains its not lost but sidetracked momentum. Not only is the film an outstanding tour-de-force showcase for Henrietta Crosman (although in a lesser role, old Griffithian Lucille La Verne gives her some stiff competition) but it is visually one of the most beautiful and evocative of all Ford films. Almost all of it—a simple farmer's shack in the middle of a wheat-field, a brook in the forest, a railroad station, battlefield trenches and a highly stylised cemetery—is entirely studio constructed, creating the kind of romantic realism that recalls Lummus' "Sunrise". Again, as in "Judge Priest", there are many visual echoes of Griffith. The realisation, during a storm, of the son's death brings to mind the almost identical sequence in Griffith's "The Greatest Question", while the lovely little vignette with the flowers at the railway station is a direct parallel with the classic homecoming scene in "The Birth of a Nation". One of the biggest surprises of all though (less of a surprise perhaps when one recalls "Four Sons") is that Ford, still in his 30's and having built his reputation primarily on vigorous action material, should exhibit such an affinity with, and non-dondescending compassion for, problems of the aged.

Many of the Ford films for Fox between 1920 and 1934, so long considered lost, and largely due to the perseverance of Fox archivist Alex Gordon, have recently been re-discovered and preserved—just in time. One of the others, a late silent, "Hangman's House", will be screened later in this series, and still others will follow in later series. In the meantime "Pilgrimage" is a major rediscovery, and a frightening reminder of how inadequate so many of the film histories are, with fifteen of Ford's most prolific years totally cut off from us—until now.

William K. Everson