The Three Godfathers (MGM, 1936) Directed by Richard Boleslawski; produced by Joseph L. Mankiewicz; screenplay by Edward E. Paramore, Jr., and Manuel Seff from the original story by Peter B. Kyne; Camera: Joseph Ruttenberg; Music: Dr. William Axt; 82 minutes.


"The Three Godfathers" is one of the most oft-filmed of all western perennials. It first reached the screen as a plagiarised and simplified vehicle for Broncho Billy Anderson, was first released officially in 1916 with Harry Carey as "The Three Men", then given a rest until 1929 when William Wyler did it as "Hell's Heroes", tonight's version was done in 1936 by MGM, and MGM also did the last version (to date), 1948's "Three Godfathers" with John Wayne and Harry Carey Jr., directed by Ford. (Ford's "Three Bad Men", and its sound remake, are not related - other than the fact that the original story may well have been partially inspired by Kyne's original story).

It was a strange film for MGM to make in 1936. The company made almost no Westerns in the thirties, and to make this one they'd have had to buy the rights from Universal. Boleslawski was very much of a "prestige" director ("Rasputin and the Empress", "The Painted Veil", "Les Misérables", "The Garden of Allah") and - from his point of view - this must have been the oddest film assigned to him in his brief but prolific six-year career. For a while, Chester Morris was MGM's own Cagney in residence - and in Morris' couple of westerns (one later for Republic) he eagerly transferred his big-city persona to the West, and was really no more at home than Cagney. "The Oklahoma Kid", Joseph Ruttenberg, a top cameraman on stylish studio-interior films like "Murphy", would, one would have thought, been passed over in favor of a man ideally suited for the job and on MGM's payroll - Clyde de Vinna. Yet, despite all of these incongruities, it works rather well. It deliberately plays down its already limited action content (the bank hold-up and chase, a long and major action sequence in Ford's later version, and here has little more than an extended montage) in order to concentrate on plot and character. It is perhaps a little too busy with incidental and characters in the first two reels, and perhaps a little too quiet for the concentration on desert space and only three players in the major action part of the film; but on the other hand, it is short and tight enough for this not to matter. It's only two thirds the length of Ford's 1948 version, which had a good deal more sentiment and pathos - and a happier ending. Oddly enough, with Ford's first sound western three years into the future, this does seem to have Fordian elements both in its camerawork (though the mystical style suggested by the opening shots is not maintained), in its excellent and selective use of close-ups, even in its use of "Red River Valley" as a theme at times. The location, though familiar from "H" westerns and serials ("Riders of Death Valley" etc.) is excellent, though one does at times recognise that angles are merely being shifted and that a limited area is being utilised to suggest a long track. However, the camerawork is excellent, and even the odd studio "exteriors" with backdrops are convincing. Boleslawski's presumed lack of familiarity with the genre does cause him to pull a few boners of the new born babies, however. Why do the men travel during the heat of day and rest at night, instead of the other way around? Why, in the last desperate struggle, does Morris have to lug his saddle bags along? And most of all, why and how does the new-born babe, with no water for washing and constantly and thoughtlessly exposed to the burning sun, manage to remain both spotlessly clean and totally unblistered throughout? (Heaven knows how it would have fared had Stroheim been directing!) The film is good enough for these criticisms to be annoying. Nevertheless, it's a fascinating film, a "formal" western that seems never to have been revived, and must have been a sad disappointment to the action audience at the Rialto where it opened! Lewis Stone's performance, incidentally, is really first-rate.

--- Ten Minute Intermission ---

Hell Below (MGM, 1932; released 1933) Directed by Jack Conway; Screenplay by Laird Doyle and Raymond Shrock, with additional dialogue by John Lee Mahin and John Mahin, from an original story "Pigboats" by Commander Edward Ellsberg; Camera, Harold Rosson; 105 minutes.


Continued overleaf
The long cycle of war films, reborn with "What Price Glory?" and "The Big Parade" in the twenties, and sustained by "Win 'em" and "Hell's Angels" - and, of course, "All Quiet on the Western Front" - really continued without much abatement through the thirties until the arrival of World War Two, although more and more the stress was to be on an aviation background. Surprisingly, some of the best of these thirties war films were made at MGM - a studio one more normally associated with glossy star vehicles and escapism - where masculine writers and directors like Fleming, Conway, Van Dyke, Garnett and Frank Wead held sway.

Conway was something of a second-string Raoul Walsh, even to - at times - duplicating his sadistic sense of humor. We used his "A Yank at Oxford" to open this season, and earlier (among others) had shown one of his very best films, the Gable-Ioy "Too Hot to Handle". Like a good company man, he tackled anything he was given, but was most at home with straightforward, uncomplicated action-adventure melodramas. It's rather sad that his last film should turn out to be the totally untypical Greer Garson trifle, "Julia Misbeaves!"

Robert Montgomery, a tremendously popular and important star in his day, whose power and versatility have been largely forgotten, was - by virtue of his elegance, comic poise and well-timed delivery - usually shunted into high-class soap opera or easy-going comedy. "Hell Below" seemed to be surrounded on all sides by films of that type, though his five top-level 1937 releases did also include "Night Flight". Montgomery himself favored stronger meat, and was occasionally able to persuade MGM to put him into sterner stuff - as witness "The Big House", "Night Must Fall" and "They Were Expendable" - a 1945 war movie with a role not dissimilar to the one he plays here. Rather inexplicably, one of Montgomery's favorite movies - and roles - is "The Earl of Chicago" - which for some reason is legally withheld here at the moment, but in which his rather one-dimensional performance has dated very badly.

"Hell Below", is vigorous, gutsy, masculine stuff - like "Hell's Angels", really not much more than some very long action sequences linked by a modicum of plot. And perhaps, in this case, by a little too much comedy - although some of Durante's material is very good, and a bout with a kangaroo, in which Durante really gets thrown around (and purportedly was injured in the process) is an amusing and unusual highlight.

As in most films of this type, fashions, hairdos, uniforms and general naval details seem resolutely those of 1932, rather than 1917. But there's a good deal of excellent and authentic Naval footage from the war, including a number of dramatically photographed ship sinkings, and all of this material is ingeniously intercut with well-staged new material, occasionally rather obvious miniatures, and back projection.

The cast is full of old friends like William von Brincken and Paul Porcasi, and for those who - like me - can't abide Sterling Holloway, his death scene under somewhat grisly circumstances must be one of the most welcome diversions since his feminine counterpart, Beryl Mercer, delighted us by suffocating in a closet in "The Devil's Lottery". Although there are some familiar plot twists, the film - mainly by virtue of its strong playing - manages to avoid being predictable, and even though playing a partially unsympathetic character, Badge Evans' loveliness and cool elegance has us rooting for her all the way.

William K. Everson

Program ends, app. 11.25

Due to the length of the program, there will unfortunately be no time for a discussion period afterwards tonight. However, in order to catch up on any queries, we'll open up about 20 minutes early next week (at 7.40) and this provide time for questions-and-answers before the basic introduction.