Rural England in Wartime

During World War 2, films about - and filmed in - the English countryside formed an interesting undertow to the mainstream of production. Sailing Studios, in films like "Wind from the Dovecote," and "The Day Will Come," used the countryside almost nostalgically, to stress the country's vulnerability to attack and invasion. The various production companies working through the J. Arthur Rank empire, however, tended to take a more positive note with a group of light comedies and romantic dramas of which tonight's pair is typical. Not only did these films have a kind of soft-sell propagandist value in showing the traditions and values for which Britain was being fought, but they also had the economic advantage of being relatively inexpensive to shoot in easily-located, and demands on studio space were not excessive. Moreover, they were in a sense romantic too. They had contemporary references, as they had to, and usually some aspect of the war was a catalyst to the action. On the other hand, they were certainly not war films, and most of them, with a little plot reshuffling, could have taken place equally well in a peace-time milieu. Both of tonight's features were made for the Rank Organization, released 35 years ago in the Summer of 1944; one in July, the other in August.

THE GREEN GIRDLE ( Strand Films, 1942) Produced by Basil Wright; Directed by Ralph Keene; Camera, Jack Cardiff; Music, Richard Addinsell; narrated by Bruce Belfrage and Robert McDermott; in Technicolor; 10 mins.

Despite its title, this is neither a swashbuckler nor a exploitation movie, but a charming little documentary that seems an ideal introduction to "Tawny Pipit." A quiet song of praise to the parks and woodlands surrounding London, it too was a propagandist film in its way. Yet it can stand alone regardless of period and there is in fact nothing about it to give it a time slot until the closing line of narration, which stresses the therapeutic value of the countryside to wartime Londoners.

TAWNY PIPIT (Two Cities-General Film Distributors, 1944) (U.S. release, 1947) Written and directed by Bernard Miles and Charles Saunders; produced by Bernard Miles; Camera, Eric Cross; Music, Noel Newton-Wood; Art Director, Vetchinsky; 77 mins.

With: Rosamund John, Niall MacGinnis, Bernard Miles, Jean Gillie, George Carney, Ian Macnaughten, Christopher Steele, Breffni O'Rourke, Wylie Watson, John Salew, Marjorie Rhodes, Ernest Butcher, Grey Blake, Joan Sterndale-Bennett.

"Tawny Pipit" is from the same studio that made "Don't Take It To Heart," another rural comedy that followed it into release by a month, had many of the same players and crew, and used an affection for ghosts (rather than an affection for wild-life) as a basic plot element. "Tawny Pipit" is by far the better, and better-known, of the two, has the kind of plot that would eventually come to be regarded as a typical "Sailing" plot, and is often coupled in fond memory with the lovely Powell-Dresserburger film "I Know Where I'm Going." Filmmatically, there is no correlation and as a piece of superb and lyrical craftsmanship the Powell film is way out in front, but charm and a delight in the fresh air and the countryside are certainly common to both films.

"Tawny Pipit" might well have been a better picture under certain circumstances; it cries out for Technicolor (then in short supply) and it could also benefit from a better director. Bernard Miles was a good character actor who once or twice tried his hand at writing and directing. This was his first directorial feature; his best-known one was "Chance of a Lifetime," an interesting film about labor relations. Unfortunately he was never too subtle about "messages," and there are "hard-sell" elements (two, and oft-repeated standards) in "Tawny Pipit" that are a little grating. Occasionally Miles will underline a point already sufficiently made (especially when his peppery Colonel character is making that point), and the footage with the Russian lady sniper seems particularly um-British in its heavy-handed quality. It should be remembered though that England had been living for a long time under the threat of invasion, so that the propagandist point that English farm girls might have to be equally adept at picking off Germans was not entirely out of place. And at that, the sequence is far less objectionable than the tasteless and maudlin sequence in "Stage Door Canteen" where Sam Jaffe introduces the Russian lady sniper - next to Pearl Harbor and the bombing of Coventry, possibly the grimiest moment of World War Two.

No, with color and a more experienced director, "Tawny Pipit" might well have been a better film, but it might also have had more responsibilities in order to recoup its greater cost. That might have meant more of a story and perhaps stronger box-office names, robbing the film of the relaxed, easy-going charm that it now has. One would particularly regret losing Rosamund John from this particular English landscape, though the part of the French girl was cast in the right hands in almost overnight, with her next film, 1945's "The Way To The Stars." Jean Gillie, another charming open-air lass, trekked out to Hollywood. Monogram tried hard to turn her into a sexpot in "Decoy" and it didn't work. Unfortunately she died quite young, her full potential unrealised, but she did add a great deal of charm and beauty to so many British films between 1931 and 1945. "Tawny Pipit" is slight, never hilarious, and often serious, but it's a delightful film and in many ways a valuable mirror to its time.

- 10 minute intermission -

"A Canterbury Tale" is one of the most curious and most elusive of all British wartime films; we have been trying to obtain it even since these film series began more than ten years ago, and this has been the first available print.

It's a lovely, lyrical film, but also a very personal one - both to its makers, and also to audiences. Anyone who remembers wartime Britain, and especially wartime Canterbury, is bound to find it a much more moving film than somebody who does not. It is thus difficult to write objectively about a film that will mean different things to different people, although its overall charm and beauty is such that it needs no apology with any audience.

Its history is a very checkered one. On its initial presentation, the trade reviews were both perceptive and tremendously enthusiastic. Unfortunately, they represented the only unqualified enthusiasm the film received. It was cut out, that we have on all sides, by orthodox British film-making: Reed's "The Way Ahead", Lean's "This Happy Breed", Olivier's "Henry V" - and conventional box-office subjects like "Love Story" and "Madonna of the Seven Moons". Powell, an imaginative and often experimental film-maker, Britain's own Orson Welles in a sense, was not then universally popular with the lay and critical press. Moreover, his previous film had been the ultimate disaster ("The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp") and Powell was now regarded as a colonial outcast by some members of the very film critics who had praised his films to that point. Critics were primed to look for and find both anti-British and even "kinky" elements in Powell's films, it all boiled down to his films being "different", always a cardinal sin in British cinema, though it was that very difference that has kept them fresh and vital to this day. In any event, "A Canterbury Tale" was not well liked by most critics, and certainly not fully understood (though it is an emotional rather than an intellectual film, which is perhaps why it was misunderstood). After an initial run, it disappeared totally, never to reappear even in revival houses, until a years-later reissue.

After the war, in an attempt to salvage it somewhat, Powell sent out for it the US market. Raymond Massey and Kim Hunter, who had worked in his later "A Matter of Life and Death" ('Stairway to Heaven') were pressed into service to help out. The film was "updated", starting now in New York, and telling its story via flashback. Obviously, tampering with a masterpiece (even if a somewhat special kind of masterpiece) can not hope to improve it. However, this revamped US edition then became the standard version; when the film was reissued in England (again, not very successfully) it was the US negative that was used. It is this version that has been preserved. Happily however, the British Film Institute has just restored the original 124 minute version, and when the Museum of Modern Art does its major Michael Powell retrospective next year, this full version will finally be shown here.

In the meantime, one should emphasize that the re-shaping was done by Powell himself, who retained all of his favorite sequences. It is such a leisurely film that it physically an easy film to cut without apparent damage. Freda Jackson and Ray Petrie, in the original, have somehow disappeared in toto - and I must admit to not recalling just what they did in it, although all the sequences that I remember so fondly from 1944 are still here. Too, although the flashback framework removes the sense of urgency from the film, Powell gets out of it before the end of the film, so that the original climax is unimpaired.

Designed, at least partially, to cement Anglo-US friendship at a time when Britain was being exposed to Americans on a vast scale, the film creates some of its warmest moments via the exchange of ideas between the American sergeant and English villagers - particularly in a lovely vignette as An American and Briton discuss lumbering methods. John Sweet (the very antithesis of Bonar Colleano, usually type-cast in such roles) is most effective, if not a polished actor, as the American Sergeant. During his stay in England he also did an excellent job on stage in a fine production of "Our Town". The film's more serious purpose however was a "crusade against materialism", and a suggestion that the war might be a cleansing agent. Powell himself feels that Pressburger's conception as a writer was superb, but that he (Powell) let him down somewhat by not simplifying it filmically. Be that as it may, there's tremendous power and beauty in the film's many sequences when the various "movements" of the film, orchestrated like music, blend together. More used as a way to Powell/Pressburger tone today, the narrative ambiguities seem less important than they did then, the lack of drama or excitement in the pursuit of the apparent "villain" quite understandable. It's also hard to believe now that censorial eyebrows were so severely arched by the heroine's casual remark about a carnival holiday she had once enjoyed with the boy friend she had not yet married.

--- WM. K. Everson

Program ends 10:52 p.m.