SECRET LIVES (Phoenix Films-Associated British Film Distributors, 1937) Directed by Edmund Greville; Produced by Hugh Perceval; Screenplay by Basil Mason from a novel by Paul de Sainte Colombe; Camera, Otto Heller; 80 mins.

U.S. release by Grand National in 1938 under the title "I Married a Spy". With: Brigitte Horney (Iren Schmidt); Neil Hamilton (Lieut. Pierre de Montmaison); Gyles Iman (Franz Abel); Charles Carson (Henri); Ivor Barnard (Saldhead); Raymond Lovell (Chief of German Secret Service); Frederick Lloyd (Chief of French Secret Service); Ben Field (Karl Schmidt); Ray Patrie (Robert) Leslie Perrins (Jul).

Phoenix Films, an unofficial subsidiary of Ealing Studios, made a courageous attempt to introduce 30's to bring real quality to British "B" movies, but alas their very initiative brought about their downfall. They gave their films real production values (especially photographic) and actually spent so much on production that they had little left over for boxoffice stars ... not that, in theory, they needed them. The results were films that were usually too long to fit into the standard "B" slot at home, and while they were good enough to play the "A" slot at the smaller independent halls, with their lightweight names they weren't much competition for the Hollywood product. In the U.S., most of them were trimmed down to typical "B" length, this one being short of 21 minutes for its American release. (Our print is of the full original version). After a handful of really good films, the best of them being "Brief Ecostasy", also directed by Greville, they folded. I don't suggest for a moment that "Secret Lives" is an important film, and to those who do not know the quality (or lack of it) of British "B" pictures of the early 30's it may be invisible. But I think the effort to do something different showed, and it is certainly worth bringing to your attention. Neil Hamilton, as the hero, appears only at the halfway mark, and it appears then that the film is going to shift into very formula patterns, but it doesn't. As a World War One espionage tale it doesn't offer many real thrills, but it's quite moving, and certainly manages to suggest far more of a budget than it could have had. (There was by the way quite a flurry of WWI spy films that year, with the best being a couple of movies directed by Alfred Hitchcock). Director Ed Greville was an interesting French director who made some rather good films in England; the French are rather fond of him today, regarding him as their own home-grown Edgar Ulmer, and a man who could be depended on to turn the most routine material into films that were both personal and stylish.

-- TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION --

SOUTH RIDING (Alexander Korda/London Films-United Artists, 1937) Directed by Victor Saville; Screenplay by Ian Dalrymple and Donald Bull from the novel by Winifred Holtby; Camera, Harry Stradling; Art Direction, Laurence Mearson; Musical Score, Richard Addinsell. 80 mins.

With Ralph Richardson (Robert Carne); Edna Best (Sarah Burton); Edmund Gwenn (Alfred Huggins); Ann Todd (Madge Carne); John Clements (Joe Astell); Glynnis Johns (Midge Carne); Milton Rosner (Smith); Marie Lohr (Mrs Beddows); Edward Lexy (Mr. Holly); Josephine Wilson (Mrs Holly); Joan Ellum (Lydia Holly); Gus McNaughton (Tadman); Lewis Casson (Lord Sedgemere); Herbert Lomas (gamekeeper); Ralph Truman (Doctor) and Jean Cadell, Peggy Novak, Josephine Wilson, Skelton Knaggs, Laura Smithson, Florence Gregson, Arthur Hambling, Felix Aylmer.

Certain films, in retrospect, quite transcend their filmic values to become invaluable if unwrulators mirrors to attitudes of their times, especially as one can find equally representative films from other countries. One of the several reasons why war on the fictional "South Riding" (based on the novel "South Riding" by Winifred Holtby) faced the threat head on and opposed it on humanitarian grounds, America's "Lost Horizon" was a rationalisation for escapism and an isolationist policy, and in Britain "South Riding" reflects a typical head-in-the-sand attitude, totally ignoring the possibility of war and suggesting that by concentrating on internal problems, the bigger external ones will somehow solve themselves and go away. It may have been this stance that made "South Riding" seem so inexplicably dated when it was reissued during the war years, whereas today its old values seem to have returned to it. In many ways, though it was one of his best, "South Riding" is not a typical Alexander Korda film. By utilisation of Hollywood and European stars and craftsmen, Korda tried to "internationalise" his films deliberately. Most of them were impressive, but rather cold and "not really English". In Victor Saville's tasteful hands, "South Riding" uses a certain amount of non-British talent (the Danish art director Mearson, Hollywood's Harry Stradling), but his film is wholly British.

More polite and less dynamic than Hollywood's probing of social problems, "South Riding" was a big popular success in England, not least because of a Hollywoodian production gloss then rare in British movies, but also because of the strong literary flavor behind its making. If Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath" (novel and film) is an uncompromising record of events, then "South Riding", by its very evasions, compromises and allegiance to class distinction, is an equally valid record of attitudes. Perhaps however I over-stress its social label, for it is a romance and a drama that it holds up best. Based on an extremely popular novel by Winifred Holtby, who died prior to its release, it was subtitled "An English landscape". But though land is important to the story,
if only in a symbolic sense, it actually displays little real feeling for the land - far less certainly than in such wartime films as "A Canterbury Tale" where the beauty of the land and the need to preserve and hold on to its traditional pride were not for the huge manor house and estate, so impractical in the 30's and representing a withdrawal from an old way of life, just as Tara did in "Gone With The Wind," the story itself could be told just as well in a London and slum milieu. There were stronger GWTW parallels in later British films, most notably in the 1947 "Blanche Fury." With a little more "Scoundrel," "South Riding" wouldn't be too far removed from "Blink." Surprisingly though, its most obvious part might not be cited by reviewers at the time, perhaps out of respect for the deceased author, and concern that such comments might be misconstrued as accusations of plagiarism. The whole interweaving of tormented aristocrat, insane mother, high-strung daughter and frustrated romance with a social service worker was a wholesome young teacher is of course a blatant borrowing from Bronte's "Jane Eyre." Since both Bronte and Holby private schools have disinherited it, it is not surprising that Holby should have lent itself to the novelist for inspiration, and in any case the Gothic tradition and characters of "Jane Eyre" have long been a major influence on writers and film-makers. Because of so much borrowing, the final outcome is never too much in doubt, although the film actually takes more from Bronte than the book did. In the novel the character deriving from Mr. Rochester does ultimately commit suicide. The film leads up to but averts the tragedy, to arrive at a satisfying (if improbable) climax in which political corruption is punished, social reform achieved, and a romantic alliance between squires and schoolteacher not only provides a personal happy ending but suggests a crumbling of class barriers generally.

The film is notable for its accuracy of period and geographic locales. One depression-affected family lives in an abandoned double-decker bus, a familiar sight during Britain's depression years. The film was slightly edited for the U.S. release, the only print currently available to us, and this was considered mainly of documentary slices of life in the British "Hosierville." One misses these, but presumably the intent was to take away some of the film's gloom to better emphasise its romantic and dramatic values. On another occasion, a couple out joyriding in a car pass a sign that advises that the road is "unsuitable" for traffic - a typical British understatement that means, in fact, that the road will soon disappear into a river, even in the 30's still a fairly common transportation "inconvenience" in Britain. It was Harry Stradling's expert photography in this film and the French "L'A Bressonne Heroique" that established him as a major cinematographer. The photography has an impressive Hollywood professionalism to it, yet manages to avoid the ultra-glossy of Stradling's later Sam Goldwyn period. A simple love scene in a hotel lobby, framed by palm fronds, is both romantic yet devoid of artificiality - a virtue of course that Stradling must share with director Saville, always one of Britain's best if least appreciated directors. Another major asset was the teaming of Richardson and Edna Best. This was Richardson's tenth film since his arrival in 1933, and in those years he had played both villains and heroes, but this was his first full-scale romantic and dramatic lead. And Best, despite good roles here and there, had hardly been used to much advantage; her immediately prior film had been Hitchcock's "The Man Who Knew Too Much" three years earlier. Both of these players were taken for granted as fixtures in British films, but no more. They thus seemed to rise naturally and were above out of their environment in "South Riding," familiar homes and streets but with no star images to cloud their faces. Both were without being strikingly handsome; both too had flawless diction, and delivered good dialogue beautifully. In their own unique way, they gravitated together as naturally as Bogart and Bacall. The whole cast however, represents an excellent example of ensemble-acting at its very best. Quite coincidentally, Ann Todd, who plays Richardson's insane wife, had earlier been his romantic lead in "The Return of Bulldog Drummond" and later would play his daughter in "Breaking the Sound Barrier." A word of reassurance: due to poor re-recording for the American release, the music in the main titles sounds excessively harsh. However, this flaw is limited to the credits and is fine in the rest of the film.

WE OF THE WEST RIDING (Green Park Productions, 1946) Directed by Ken Annakin
Produced by Ralph Keene; Camera, Peter Henssey; editor, Julian Wintle; 20 mins.

The "South Ridings" of Yorkshire are actually non-existent, and the film was photographed in the West Ridings. As a post-script to the feature, I thought it might be interesting to run this 9-years-later, post-war documentary both to compare fact and fiction, and to show the changes (?) that took place in the intervening years. This was director Annakin's second-from-last documentary before switching to major fiction features; editor Wintle also subsequently became a notable writer-producer in the regular commercial mainstream.

Program ends approx. 10.45.

A reminder: I am not on hand for these past two programs so next week, as tonight, program will start promptly at 7.30 without an introduction. New schedules available next week.