Howard Spring appeared to be one of the major new British novelists of the late 30s, attracting much the same literary attention and respect as John Steinbeck in the States. In a commercial sense, he seemed to be heading in the same direction as A.J. Cronin — a "serious" writer who could also turn out popular best-sellers. But his books were down-beat, long and not "easy" reads, so he never really did achieve Cronin's popularity. His two best works, "My Son My Son" and "Fame is the Spur" were both suppressed by the movies - one by Hollywood, one by Britain - but his later works were less successful, and did not attract movie versions.

I must apologise for the extreme length of tonight's program, and especially since both films adopt the cavelcade-through-the-decades approach, it's rather like sitting through an Edna Ferber double-bill ("Show Boat" and "Ice Palace" perhaps) without the songs and action to break up the years. But both films supplement one another so well, and inter-relate in so many ways (without being outstanding individually) that the best and most rewarding way to show them is in tandem. Since I am not on hand tonight, the screening will start without an introduction and we'll salvage a little time that way, but it will still be a long session.

MY SON MY SON (Edward Small Productions for United Artists, 1940)
Directed by Charles Vidor; Screenplay by Lenore Coffee from the novel by Howard Spring; Camera, Harry Stradling; Music, Edward Ward; 115 mins.
With Madeleine Carroll (Lydia Heywood); Brian Aherne (William Essex); Louis Hayward (C. J. Baynham); Maeve O'Riordan (Maeve O'Riordan); Henry Hull (Dermot O'Riordan); Josephine Hutchinson (Nellie Moscrop); Sophie Stewart (Shella O'Riordan); Bruce Lester (Rory O'Riordan); Scotty Beckett (Oliver as a child); Brenda Anderson (Maeve as a child); Teddy Woodrow (Roxy as a child); May Beatty (Annie); Stanley Logan (The Colonel); Lionel Belmore (Mr. Moscrop) and Howard Davies, Mary Gordon, Montague Shaw, Mary Field, David Clyde, Veesie O'Davoren, Pat Flaherty, Victor Kendall, Leland Hodgson, Audrey Manners, Sybil Harris, Connie Leon, Colin Kenny.

The titular quotation from the Bible does rather give the basic plot away (even if one is not a Biblical devotee), but otherwise "My Son My Son" makes an interesting parallel with "Fame is the Spur", and both start out in grimy Manchester slums. "My Son My Son" is at least partially autobiographical, while "Fame is the Spur" is a fictionalised and disguised biography (and study of) British statesman Ramsey MacDonald.

Of the two films, "My Son My Son" perhaps has the stronger narrative, and one can well envision it as a big Warner blockbuster of the period. Perhaps its weakest element is that, through no fault of its own, it is not a blockbuster. For an independent production, it's an unusually ambitious film, and presumably in this case a lot of it went on rights to the novel, freed on a sound cast. There's not too much left over for production values, and in the early portions of the film - where the film has to establish a period milieu - the sets do have a rather cramped and artificial look. As the characters become established however and the production picks up narrative steam, the backgrounds become less important and the story takes over.

Much of it, particularly in terms of plot coincidence, was a matter of convenience. The climax by the way, which presumably was not accidental, on the surface is rather artificial (which seemed to have been influenced by the climax of Dreiser's "An American Tragedy") but otherwise it's a rather respectable adaptation. Edward Ward's musical score is good, but the photography by Harry Stradling (who photographed last week's "South Riding") is not flattered by this rather grey and occasional dark TV print. The film is an occasional in TV release so old theatrical or non-theatrical release (not, as at the moment, in TV release) so old television prints are the only ones available. Dialogue director Stanley Logan (who also shot a couple of Kay Francis movies) stands out in a small part as the Colonel, and Henry Hull, that incredibly mannered and usually rather pompous actor, manages to be a little more subdued than usual. Lorraine Day, fresh from "I" westerns and still up to her neck in the Kildare movies, gives an excellent and very moving performance, and while the roles aren't similar, her playing of the young actress makes one realise how ideal she'd have been as Eve in "All About Eve" - had that been made earlier, or had she been younger later on.

-- TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION --

FAME IS THE SPUR (Two Cities-General Film Distributors, 1947; (US release, 1949)
Produced by John Boulting; Directed by Roy Boulting; Screenplay by Nigel Balchin from the novel by Howard Spring; Production Supervisor, F. del Guidice; Camera, Gunther Krampf; Music, John Woodbridge; 116 minutes.
(Cut to 98 mins. for US release; print tonight is of the full version)
With Michael Redgrave (Hamer Redshaw); Rosamund John (Ann Redshaw); Bernard Miles (Tom Hanaway); Carla Lamanna (Lady Lizzie); Sir Seymour Hicks (Lord Lostwithiel); Anthony Wager (Hamer as a child); Brian Weske (Arnold as a child); Gerald Fox (Tom as a child); David Tomlinson (Lord Liskard); Milton Rosner (magistrate).
Wylie Watson (Pendleton); Percy Walsh (owner of bookshop); Kenneth Griffith and Roddy Hughes (Welsh miners); and Charles Wood, Maurice Denham, Ronald Adam.

"Name is the Spur" covers more ground than "My Son My Son" and is a more "important" film, but in the long run seems a little less satisfying ... partly because in this case it is dealing with a man who is ultimately a failure rather than a success, although the reasons for that failure are never too clearly spelled out. This may be because both author Spring and the Boulting Brothers are at pains not to come right out and say that the film is really a study of British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald. In fact the dialogue carefully scatters casual references to him to make it seem that the Redgrave character is merely a member of MacDonald's cabinet. Redgrave is expert at playing potentially great men with fatal weaknesses, and thus is able to carry off a somewhat ill-defined role. (His wife's deathbed speech comes as close as anything to explaining him). It would be difficult to imagine a far more authoritative figure - Ralph Richardson, or earlier, George Arliss - making the role work, although certainly Olivier could pull it off.

British politics are singularly dull, mainly because its statesmen usually corrupt themselves (when they do) either for pleasure or at most for security, rarely for power or greed, so that one doesn't have the inbuilt dramatics of so many films on American politicians. But the Boultings make the most of the films limited opportunities for spectacle and action (and like its co-feature, it was not afforded a very generous budget) and in such sequences as the police clash with the miners, it really comes to life. One does get a sense of the times however, and the occasionally intercut newspaper footage of Chamberlain and other political figures helps the aura of authenticity, if not excitement. Rather curiously, the repeated technique of having dates retreat from closeup into the rear of the frame gives the film the impression of being told in flashback (which it is not) ... of delving back nostalgically into the past, instead of marching from the past into the present ... a rather curious failure, though not an inconsistent one, since it is the kind of mistake one feels that the lead character would make were he suddenly told to direct a film.

The score is again a very good one, and given budget restrictions it's a well-made though perhaps unavoidably dreb film. But Gunther Krampf's photography, the mood of which is set in the main titles with the rain pouring down on to the slum roof-tops, is first-class. (Sound quality is a little variable in the latter third, but our projectionist has been alerted to this.) And the cast, certainly, is full of good performances from both old-timers and newcomers, with Rosamund John giving her usual sensitive performance.

Program ends 11.30

-- William K. Everson --