A Relaxed Evening in Rural England

PAINTED BOATS (Ealing Studios, 1945) Directed by Charles Crichton; Associate Producer, Henry Cornelius; Script: Stephen Black and Micky McCleary; Narration: Louis MacMeece; Camera, Douglas Slocombe; Music: John Greenwood; Narrated by James McKenzie; 65 mins.

With: Jenny Laird (Mary Smith); Bill Blewitt (Pa Smith); May Hallatt (Ma Smith); Robert Griffith (Ted Stoner); Madoline Thomas (Mrs Stoner); Harry Fowler (Alf Stoner); Megs Jenkins (barmaid); Grace Arnold (Alf's sister).

Under Michael Balcon's new regime at Ealing (starting in 1939) new talent and experiment was encouraged, and editors and documentary were frequently promoted from within the ranks. Earlier the same year documentarian Harry Watt had been given a chance to direct his first narrative film, a zany musical comedy called "Fiddlers 3", and the Ealing release immediately prior to "Painted Boats" was a documentary-flavoured romance "Johnny Frenchfem" directed by former editor of "Painted Boats" the least important of the three but almost certainly the best, likewise utilised a director newly promoted from other ranks, Charles Chrichton. Clearly it could never have been a major success, and was made out of love and affection just because it seemed like a good idea at the time, and had Balcon's support.

A quite unofficial companion piece to Jean Vigo's "L'Atalante", it is a lovely, lyrical essay on British bargee life, not quite documentary, not quite narrative, but a pleasing combination of both. In Britain its commercial life was short, and in the U.S. it is understandably not known at all. Already very short, it was cut by a full 20 minutes, retitled "Girl of the Canal" in the hopes of making it sound more enticing, and sent out on a double bill with another British movie. The NY Times commented on the natural quality of non-professional star, Jenny Laird, thrust before the cameras, some of the players had been giving British films for some ten years! However, there's no denying that refreshing and impressive though she is, she does not have star quality. Indeed, most of the players in the film, while solidly professional, have that typical Ealing look: they become absorbed into the naturalistic framework, and one forgets that they are performers. Both Laird and May Hallatt (who plays her mother) had key roles in the Powell-Pressburger "Black Narcissus".

"Painted Boats" tells both the documentary history of bargee life in England, and also deals with its apparent renaissance during World War Two, when the waterways provided a valuable transportation service. The bargee's life was hard but also romantic. Obviously they loved their way of life and like many Britons in a very specific job, were reluctant to see it change or become modernised. Since they were gainfully employed, they were considered a notch or two higher up on the social ladder than gypsies - but not much, and of course their nomadic life often precluded good education for their children, who usually grew up to be bargees too. The film was made in a very optimistic frame-of-mind, when it seemed that wartime necessity had restored the bargee to prominence. But alas, in years since it has virtually become a vanished way of life, and the film is thus not only pleasing in itself, but a valuable historic record too. One would have thought that there would always be a place for the bargee in Britain, especially with the railways constantly going out of business, and canals quite useful for the carrying of freight. But perhaps the lack of speed is what really drives them in this modern age. Today the English canals are full of boats - but most of them are hired by tourists and holiday-makers. Canal-tripping is now big business over there, and one suspects that the old-time barges must feel about it much as old-time cowboys felt about dude ranches.

-- Ten Minute Intermission --

OWN BOB (U.S. title: "To the Victor") (Gainsborough, 1939) Directed by Robert Stevenson; screenplay by J.B. Williams from the novel "Bob, Son of Battle" by Alfred Ollivant; Associate Producer, Nit, 75 mins. Produced by Edward Black, With: Will Ryde (Adam McAdam); John Loder (David Moore); Margaret Lockwood (Jeanie McAdam); Moore Marriott (Sam); Graham Moffat (Tammis); Wilfred Walter (Twaites); Eliot Mason (Mrs Winthrop); A. Bromley Davenport (Magistrate); H.F. Maltby (Sgt. Munsgrave); Edmond Breon (Lord Meredale); Wally Patch, Alf Goddard (Bobbies).

Print courtesy of Saul Turell/Janus Films.

"Ow Bob" was a big popular success in Britain, partly because this kind of story is always popular there, but mainly because it was well done, with a maximum of authentic outdoor locales and a minimum of obvious studio "exterior" work (though one or two of the shots of vengeful shepherds searching for a killer dog among the odd studio rocks show a style that director Stevenson seems to have borrowed from "Frankenstein".). It was also very popular in the U.S., getting good distribution and a near perfect review from the NY Times which today doesn't seem entirely justified. It's a film that hasn't been seen here for well over 35 years and hasn't been on television at all. If it disappoints at all it is perhaps because it is just a trifle too simplistic. At 75 minutes (the original release length) there are signs that it was trimmed just a little too drastically in its final editing stages. It starts rather too abruptly, and
sometimes scenes don't reach their full potential merely because there isn't sufficient time to establish characters or motivation. One also needs a singular tolerance for sheep (who seem particularly stupid in this movie) and Will Pyfe, a fine actor who did however, on occasion, overdo his Scottish brogue. Here it's often virtually impossible to understand what he's saying, especially in a long conversation that he has with his dog. Luckily John Loder plays a neutral between the two warring factions, and his dialogue usually helps to clarify what is happening

A further problem is the print itself, technically known as an Answer Print. This is a print struck by a potential distributor from the old negative just to see what is there, and what needs correcting and re-timing for subsequent prints. In this case the decision was made not to re-release the film, so the rather flat answer print is all that there is. Sound isn't all that it might be, and the beautiful exteriors aren't always flattered by the greyish tone of the print. However, since we're lucky to have it at all, it's churlish to complain on that score, even though it would have more impact with a really fine print. But it's most enjoyable film, the last incidentally that Stevenson directed for Gainsborough before doing his trio of films for Ealing, and then leaving for the States. Except for his three early Jack Hulbert vehicles, unlikely to show up here in 16mm, it was the last of the "missing" Stevensons, and we've now shown all of this tasteful and under-rated director's British films.

Margaret Lockwood, on the threshold of becoming Britain's foremost female star ("Bank Holiday" and "The Lady Vanishes" immediately followed "Owd Bob") is by the way particularly appealing and attractive in this, her fifteenth film and her biggest to date. Incidentally, there had been a silent version in 1924, directed by Henry Edwards and starring J. Fisher White and Ralph Forbes, and a 1947 Hollywood remake, "Thunder in the Valley", in which Edmund Gwenn was an adequate substitute for Will Pyfe but in which Lou McAllister and Peggy Ann Garner feel far short of Loder and Lockwood. And since it was in Technicolor, the dog Black Wall was re-christened Red Wall!

EXTRA

We don't normally show new films in this series, especially pre-release ones, but we're making an exception this time and adding a remarkable new 30 minute documentary to the end of the program. Not only because it deserves to be known, but also because its theme - of an attempt to retain a vanishing way of life - offers a rather striking parallel to "Painted Boats".

The film is A COWHAND'S SONG, co-written, produced and directed by Gwenolyn Clancy and Nancy Kelly, and photographed by Clancy. Of itself it will provide all the basic information necessary, but a few words of advance information may help.

For years ranchers in the West have been grazing their cattle on Government range, for which leasing fees have been nominal. Now there are plans afoot for the Government to turn over much of such land to the individual states - who may sell it away privately, or raise the leasing fees. Not only will this cause financial hardship to ranchers, but more importantly, it may take away from them the way of life that they love - and which they have followed for longer than the history of the film brings this problem forward for consideration, but more importantly is a loving tribute to that way of life.

Gwendolyn Clancy and Nancy Kelly are Eastern girls who devoted approximately three years of their lives to the project. One to winning over the suspicious ranchers and becoming working cowgirls themselves. (You'll note that the film's narrator, shown saddling up at the beginning, is surly and uncooperative at first - and is won over VERY slowly!) Another year was devoted to making the film, and a third to editing it and putting it in shape - with help from San Francisco film-makers who admired the film's aims and pitched in to give it added professional polish. Much of the girls' love of the West comes, admittedly, from Western movies. The John Ford influence, especially visually, is very apparent. But there's a use of Cine-Verite style too, so it's both traditional and modern. It's not the only film on this subject, one of paramount importance in the contemporary West, but it's by far the best of those that I've seen - and the only one not dominated by talking heads. (It's a measure of her integrity that director-photographer Gwen Clancy, a very attractive young lady, didn't work herself into the film as an extra; few film-makers would have resisted that temptation!) "A Cowhand's Song" certainly deserves to be widely seen, but it's of an awkward length for both theatrical and tv usage in these days when everybody talks in terms of full features or packages - and the individual short or featurette often has tough sledding. We think you'll find this film a very pleasant surprise.

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Program ends approx. 10,40
Followed by brief discussion period.

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-William K. Everson---