THE SILENT PASSENGER (Phoenix Films, 1935) Directed by Reginald Denham; produced by Hugh Perceval; Screenplay by Basil Mason from an original story by Dorothy L. Sayers; Camera, Jan Staiblich; Art Director, Ruth Holmes Paul; edited by Thorold Dickinson; released by Associated British Film Dist. 60 mins. With: John Loder (John Ryde); Betty Hadden (Lord Peter Wimsey); Mary Newland (Mollie Ryder); Austin Trevor (Insp. Parker); Donald Wolf (Henry Camberley); Leonard Peter (Maurice Windermere); Aubrey Mather (Bunter); Ralph Truman (Saunders) and Gordon McLeod, George de Warfaz, Robb Wilton, Vincent Holman, Ann Codrington, Dorice Forded, Annie Esmond.

Considering that lesser sleuthing lights as Thagor COLT have had three filmic outings, and even Frank Cruger's Simon Lash had one, it's rather odd that one of the most popular literary detectives of them all, Peter Wimsey, should have been so overlooked by the movies. Admittedly an elaborate tv series (with Ian Carmichael) a few years ago made up for the oversight to a degree, but otherwise the entire filmic career of Lord Peter is on view this evening.

Although it has its rough edges certainly, "The Silent Passenger" is an unusually adept British "B", made by Phoenix Films. They were an enterprising independent company that used Ealing Studios facilities, and tried hard to make British B movies and programmers with real class. We've played a number of their films in the past, the outstanding but little-known "Brief Evasion" being the best. Unfortunately they put too much care and money into films that just couldn't do what those costs from the market for which they were intended, and their production life was brief, though distinguished. Most British "B" movies of the 30's, especially the crime thrillers, were cheap, talkie, and notably lacking in the pace and expertise of their Hollywood equivalents, and "The Silent Passenger" is much above the average.

Dorothy L. Sayers, who wrote the story specially for the screen, was reputedly not happy with the results, nor with the substantial changes wrought in the material she supplied. Presumably the producers didn't feel that Peter Haddon, as Wimsey, could carry the film alone, and while he is important to the storyline, more emphasis is placed on the traditional hero of John Langley, the Wimsey character underwent a number of changes, or to be more exact, we find that years as Sayers fell in love with her creation and gradually turned him into an ideal. Peter Haddon is closer by far to her original concept than is Robert Montgomery in the co-feature. Haddon at this time was trying to establish himself in a number of quite elaborate comedy-thrillers, but he never quite caught on. (Most British reference books don't even acknowledge his existence). He changed his name to Archibald Batty and soon vanished in supporting comedy, character and "silly ass" stereotype roles.

"The Silent Passenger" has a tight little script, somewhat Hitchcockian though without Hitchcock's humor. It contains quite a few surprises, doesn't telegraph its story twists, and winds up with an excellent and really suspenseful chase sequence in some railroad sidings. This latter episode could be a good deal of its effectiveness to the excellent camera work, especially the edit of Thorold Dickinson who directed. Col. Hadden made his directorial debut less than two years later.

British cinema of the time with steam engines now having vanished from the British scene, there is a great resurgence of interest in movies like this over there, and this particular film, often coupled with the earlier "The Flying Scot" (can always be relied on to draw capacity attendance at the National Film Theatres throughout England). Donald Wolf, standard villain in so many British "B"s of the 30's despite his theatre prestige, is joined by that other reliable English heavy and smoothie Leslie Perrins (Britain's own Monroe D'May) although Perrins alas has little to do, since he plays the corpse of the title.

Incidentally, Reginald Denham (better known for his stage work, and as the author of "Ladies in Retirement") directed some 20 movies of this type in Britain in the 30's. Long in retirement in New York, we had expected to have him as our guest this evening. Sadly, he died just a few weeks ago.

— Ten Minute Intermission —
BUSHMAN'S HONEYMOON (U.S. title "Haunted Honeymoon") (MG-M, British, 1940)
Directed by Arthur B. Woods; Associate Producer, Harold Huth; Screenplay by
Angus MacPhail, Monotkon Hoffe and Harold Goldman from the novel by Dorothy
L. Sayers; Camera, Freddie A. Young; Art Director, Alfred Junge; 85 mins.
With Robert Montgomery (Lord Peter Wimsey); Constance Cummings (Harriet Vane);
Leslie Banks (Insp. Kirk); Seymour Hicks (Bunter); Robert Newton (Frank
Crutchley); Googie Withers (Folly); Frank Pettingell (Puffett); Joan Kemp-Welch
(Aggie Twitterton); Aubrey Mallalieu (Rev. Simon Goodacre); James Carney (Police
Constable Sellon); Roy Smerton (Nosca); Louise Hampton (Mrs Ruddle); Eilot
Mekaham (Simpson); Reginald Purcell (McBride)

When "Bushman's Honeymoon" opened at the Criticism (not being considered of
sufficient importance to rate MGM's key house, the Capitol) the NY Times
commented that the theatre should really have set up a nice roaring fire
aside and laid out carpet slippers. That seems to sum it up extremely well,
as it's a typical comfortable, cozy, enjoyable British mystery that really
sets out to intrigue, amuse and satisfy rather than to thrill. There's only
one murder in the film, not only is it not shown, but the body is never shown
either, nor does it subsequently vanish and reappear as in so many films of this
type. Indeed the only body shown in the film is that of a hapless stoat,
ruthlessly despatched by the local shotgun-toting vicar.

Detective fiction devotees always considered the novel on which this film was
based to be unquestionably the worst of all the Sayers/Wimsey books. She
subtitled it "A love story with detective interruptions" and to a degree that
might apply to the film too, though the comedy content (in the Thin Man
manner) is stronger than its romantic element. Divorced from comparison with
all her other novels however, it's a delightful little film on its own,
giving one exactly what one expects from this kind of story, and doing it well.

Mongomery, misscast or not, makes a fine team-mate for Constance Cummings, who
continues the cocktails-and-crime helpmate role that she had already done so
often, and so well, in films like "Remember Last Night?" and "Seven Sinners."

Not since Robert Barrat's infancy in "The Kennel Murder Case" has any murder
victim been set up with so many motives and suspects as is Roy Emerson here.
And without Ralph Morgan in the cast as the ultra-helpful friend, the identity
of the killer, while never too much in doubt, at least has its surprises along
the way. At least one of the supporting players leads us nicely up the garden
path towards the end.

Although lacking the production generosity of MGM's immediate pre-war British
cooproductions ("Goodbye Mr. Chips", "A Yank at Oxford", "The Citadel")
"Bushman's Honeymoon" is a slick and good-looking production, economical perhaps
but not cheap. It might have benefitted from a little more actual location
work - the climactic shots are so pleasing that one wishes the unit had been
able to work the other side a little more - but as a compensation there is the
intriguing art direction by Alfred Junge (before he reached his peak with
"Stairway to Heaven" and "Black Narcissus")

The thatched cottages and little
country villages may look like sets, but they're stylistically consistent and
really interestingly designed. He also works wonders with perspective in

Incidently, "Bushman's Honeymoon" represented, tragically, the last film of
director Arthur Woods, who was killed in the war. After a long career in "B"
movies he had finally, at the end of the 30's, begun to hit his stride in what
he did best - mystery thrillers. He co-directed "Q Planes, directed the
excellent "The Norsemaid Who Disappeared", and was well on his way to becoming
a logical successor to Hitchcock, then in Hollywood. His best film: They
Drive By Night" (with echoes of many of the Whale - and one or two of Driller). Here we
showed it here several years ago, and it's about to be shown at the Museum of
Modern Art. If you haven't seen it, it's highly recommended. "Bushman's Honeymoon"
perhaps isn't quite as good a film, but it was a more important one for him, and
moreover has little moments (the cat's sudden flight from the celler) which
show his ability to liven up a fairly placid narrative with highlights of real
tension.

Not too well received by the critics, who seemed to resent an American playing
Lord Peter (I refer to the British critics of course!) the film was certainly a
popular success in Britain, and by a fluke enjoyed an exceptionally long London
second run. MGM ran "Gone With the Wind" throughout the war at their 2nd-string
Leicester Square theatre, the Ritz. British law required the playing of a
certain percentage of British films in every theatre, and there was no getting
around that - and GWTW, with no time for shorts or a second feature, created
problems. Therefore "Bushman's Honeymoon" was shown once every night, after
the last regular show or "GWTW" - much to the annoyance of the night-cleaners, who
expected to be able to get on with their job while the film was being given its
"for the record" showing, only to find that quite substantial audiences often
stayed around to see it!

-- Wm. K. Eveson

Program ends approx. 10:05.