THE GREAT BARRIER (Gaumont-British, 1937) Directed by Milton Rosmer, with 2nd Unit Direction by Geoffrey Barkas; Produced by Gunther Stapenhurst; Screenplay by Ralph Spence, Milton Rosmer and Michael Barringer from the novel "The Great Divide" by Alan Sullivan; Camera, Glenn MacWilliams and Sepp Algeier; Edited by Charles Freid; Original US release title "Silent Barriers", later reissued as "Hell's Gateway"; 82 mins.

With Richard Arien (Hickey); Antoinette Cellier (Mary Moody); Lili Palmer (Lou); Barry Hackey (Steve); J. Farrell MacDonald (Rogers); Roy Emerson (Moody); Errol Morris (Gus); Jack McKay (Joe); Jack McKay (Sage); and Frank McCrorey; Harry Willett; Ernest Sefton; Arthur Lee; Gibber Emy; Jack Rockwell; Tom London; Slim Whittaker.

It is some 15 years since we last showed "The Great Barrier" and it has not surfaced in New York in the interim; its revival today, just a week or so after Canada's Independence Day, seems overdue and appropriate. It was one of the most successful of Gaumont's Hollywood-oriented films of the 30's. Several British films had tried to adapt local ("Dick Turpin", "Eorna doe") and colonial ("Rhodes of Africa") history to a Western format, hoping to tap the American action market, and "The Great Barrier" came off best of all. Of course its story of the building of the Canadian Pacific was largely shot in Canada (the intercutting with obvious studio sets and miniatures back in England is rather jarring at times) and was helped by the use of many familiar American faces in bit roles. Geoffrey Barkas, one of Britain's best 2nd unit directors (he worked on "King Solomon's Mines" the same year) probably had some unofficial help from American 2nd unit men, as the action sequences have a real Hollywood zip and efficiency to them, especially the excellently staged overland chase after the train. Milton Rosmer, an excellent character actor of the Arliss/Matheson Lang school, was a good director but of primarily theatrical material, and it's doubtful that he did much of the Canadian material. Since his leathery mountains and bad for heights, it seems likely that director or producer Stapenhurst should have signed him for both this film and his 1938 Matterhorn picture "The Challenge"!

The dialogue is crisp (one of the screenwriters, Spence, was from Hollywood) and the camerawork (one German and one American cinematographer) is superb. The triangular situation and subplot both seem cliched and contrived today, but they would have seemed less so then. If it's two-thirds Western, then it's one third German mountain film, and the German influence sometimes turns up in the oddest places - Lili Palmer, carried shoulder-high by the mob as she agitates them into destroying railroad property is, in a couple of specific shots, a direct echo of Brigitte Helm in "Metropolis". The film certainly has its share of cliches, but in 1937 it could look back only to John Ford's silent "The Iron Horse" and the Russian "Turshib" - DeMille's "Union Pacific" and all the increasingly more standardised railway epics (Western, Pacific) are well underway. We are incidentally are often aghast at the historical liberties taken in the film, though they are relatively mild compared with the hype that 20th Century Fex poured into "Western Union" to give that totally uneventful slice of pioneering some onscreen excitement. Incidentally, I must admit to being somewhat baffled by the engineering feasibility of the all-important mountain pass that is sought in the final reels. Since it is surrounded by cragmites, rapids and mere mountains it's desirability as a railroad route seems hard to understand, but perhaps I am being unrealistic. Actually, although finding the pass just in time provides a neatly dramatic climax, with the lynch mob prevented from carrying out its murderous intent (producer Stapenhurst reused this motif just as well, and just as unhistorically, for the climax of "The Challenge") the film doesn't tell us the whole story. The pass, found in the summer, turned out to be a death-trap in the winter, with avalanches constantly wrecking trains so that a new route had to be found. Still known as Rogers' Pass, it is still very dangerous in the winter, and most inconvenient in that its avalanches frequently prevent the trains from getting through to the heart of the CBR pass in Film Fest "The Iron Horse" and "The CBR still has to be filmed, but in the meantime this is an enjoyable version mixing German romanticism, Hollywood hoke, and British restraint rarely displayed in one of the most unexciting bar-room brawls ever! Incidentally, the film was the last starring "A"-budget vehicle for Richard Arien. It remained one of his favorite films understandably, and up to his death he claimed to receive fan mail from Britain regularly and in great numbers because of this film. (Presumably from older fans, since the last British reissue was in 1942.)

TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION


With: Fred MacMurray (Jim Hawkins); Jack Oakie (Wahoo Jones); Jean Parker (Amanda Bailey); Lloyd Nolan (Sam McGee); Edward Ellis (Major Bailey);
Between "Cimarron" (1931) and "Stagecoach" (1939) the big-scale western and the epic entered into a period of virtual banishment. The early talkies had been particularly successful, the feeling was that the Western was old-hat, and that the rapidly expanding market for the "B" westerns with Autry, Rogers, Boyd etc. made the bigger ones even more obsolete. Even the advent of Technicolor, while it bothered the outdoor movies ("Trail of the Lonesome Pine", "Ramona", "God's Country and the Woman") did nothing to revive interest in the genre. The major companies virtually abandoned them, with the exception of the very occasional star vehicle like Wallace Beery's "The Bad Man of Brimstone". Paramount however, was a major exception to the rule. Not only had they made so many silent westerns that they were able to do a quite classy "A" westerns built around stock footage from them ("The Texans" for example) but they also had Frank Lloyd, Cecil B. deMille and King Vidor under contract, directors noted for big-scale action films. DeMille offered "The Plainsman" and the much livelier "Union Pacific"; Lloyd came up with the very pedestrian "Wells Fargo", and Henry Hathaway, eddy enough, was given no western assignments at all. Vidor's "The Texas Rangers", made to celebrate the 100th anniversary of Texas' independence, was by far the best of the bunch and remains so.

It was criticised at the time for having a routine story, which perhaps it does, but Vidor was one of these directors who was never ashamed of the Western and loved the ingredients that had always made it so popular. "Wells Fargo" had been stifled by characters, costume, décor, drawing rooms and nappiness, only rescueable by the existence of stars "Texas Rangers" however, seems to be almost entirely shot out of doors. There is a fairly obvious studio-created rock ledge at one point, and occasional back projection, but most of it (unlike the DeMille films in particular) keeps resolutely out of doors. Most of it was filmed in New Mexico, quite near Santa Fe, although there is some Texas location work too. The sense of space is impressive indeed, and through camera angling, stirring music and a succession of heroic if traditional images, Vidor (himself a Texan) keeps it all looking BIG even if the story-line itself is routine. It came straight out of the "well-made" movies of the period - "North West Passage", and ten years ahead of his post-war "Duel in the Sun". There were no other westerns for him in that period, unless one cheat's geographically and includes "North West Passage". And the story-line, stereotyped as it may be, is still very largely a matter of incidents drawn from Texas Rangers records, some of which are still cited in the Rangers' promotional and institutional handbooks.

Unlike so many "A" westerns, "The Texas Rangers" is peopled by the "right" faces, many of them from "B" westerns (Fred Kohler, Hank Bell, Charles Middleton, George Hayes) and from silents (Neal Hart, Rhea Mitchell, James Mason). Even the Governor of New Mexico was pressed into service to play a ranger.

Curiously, the film is seldom shown now. The Museum of Modern Art used to run it quite regularly, but not any more, theatrical revivals have been nil, and TV exposure relatively sparse in recent years. Yet it is a film that holds up well, and is well-remembered (particularly for one specific scene which everybody who saw it in 1936 seems to identify with). If it has a flaw at all, it is that the big action set-piece - the Indian battle - occurs in the middle of the film, and while it keeps up a good pace, it doesn't build to an equally impressive climax - although the final showdown and pursuit between MacMurray and Nolan is an interesting combination of camera movements and shots that Vidor included in his climactic stalkings in "Hallelujah" (1929) and "Duel in the Sun". Its unmitting racism might raise a few eyebrows today; indians are moved down en masse, and when they come up with a particularly meat battle tactic, the Ranger captain growls, "One an Indian once - but not now. He lies down, and if he's alive, he gets killed (quite needlessly) rather guilty about all the indians he had massacred here and in "North West Passage", although it course then it was merely a plot cliche rather than a racial statement. The film was remade (rather poorly) in 1949 as "Streets of Laredo", and much footage from it turned up in later films ("Geronimo") and as background to the main titles in a modern western, "Texas Rangers Ride Again". ("The Texas Rangers" itself contains only one stock shot, from the silent "The Pony Express"). The stirring main title song was later used as the main title theme for many Hopalng Cassidy westerns and it's interesting that nobody gets star billing.