THE GENTLE GUNMAN (Ealing, 1952) Directed by Basil Dearden; produced by Michael Relph; Screenplay by Roger MacDougall from his own play; Camera, Gordon Dines; Music by John Greenwood; 86 mins.

With: John Mills (Terence Sullivan); Dirk Bogarde (Matt Sullivan); Elizabeth Sellars (Maurice Fagan); Barbara Hullen (Molly Fagan); Robert Beatty (Shinto); Eddie Byrne (Flyn); Joseph Tomelty (Dr. Eamonnigan); Gilbert Harding (Henry Truithorne); Liam Redmond (Tom Connelly); Michael Goldie (Murphy); Jack McGowan (McGuire); James Kenney (Johnny Fagan); Patrick Deonan (Sentry)

Although John Mills, in films since 1929, reached a peak of popularity and prestige in the mid-40's with films like "The Way to the Stars" and "Great Expectations", British producers seemed unable to maintain his interest in hand-teaching films to his particular talents. From the 50's on, his career continued to be prolific, but with the exception of the occasional film of the caliber of "Ibsen's Choice", the films tended to be well-crafted and satisfying but not particularly memorable. There were also so many of them that films like tonight's two, shunted into double-bill situations by lesser distributors in many countries, were virtually lost in the shuffle.

Basil Dearden - the leave-no-stones-unturned director at Ealing as Michael Curtiz was to Warners in Hollywood (though a much lesser director than Curtiz) - was prone to tackling "controversial" subjects and then being so scrupulously fair to both sides that there wasn't much left to be controversial about. Of course, the initial responsibility is the writer's, but Dearden seemed to have a way of neutralising written passion. In this particular case, the story of IRA guerilla warfare is further distanced by placing it into the past, in this instance a setting of World War Two. Other Ealing films of 1952 - especially "Secret Service" to some extent "His Excellency" - seemed to remove all of the ideology from politics. Thus, there is a general pro-pacifist stance. This means that the films don't have much that people want to say, and they have to succeed as thrillers or dramas. "The Gentle Gunman" is well-acted, well-paced, benefits from extensive location shooting, and is generally an absorbing and entertaining movie, but it could have been far more.

--- Ten Minute Intermission ---

THE VICIOUS CIRCLE (British Lion-Independent Film Distributors, 1957) Directed by Gerald Thomas; Produced by Peter Rogers; Screenplay by Francis Durbridge from his TV serial "The Brass Candlestick"; Camera, Otto Heller; US release in 1959 under the title "The Circle"; 84 mins.

With: John Mills (Dr. Lattimer); Neile Middleton (Laura James); Derek Farr (Ken Palmer); Wilfrid Hyde White (Robert Brady); Roland Culver (Insp. Dane); Howard Marion-Crawford (Joe Fisgig Kimber); Rene Ray (Mrs. Amber); Lionel Jeffries (Jeffery Windsor); Lisa Daniely (Frieda Velan) and Diana Lambert, David Williams, John Gordon.

With its incredibly convoluted plot-line, mixing murder mystery and espionage thriller, "The Vicious Circle" is perhaps representative of an introduction as one could want to the writing of Francis Durbridge. Although only three of his thirty-one books were published in the U.S., he is as well-known in Britain as he was in America. Wallace. He has also turned out in excess of thirty radio plays, some twenty television serials, and a number of screenplays, he created the private detective Paul Temple - a married, slightly more athletic Nick Charles parallel - and saw him come to life on radio, in novels, and in some quite good movie adaptations. None of his writing is particularly outstanding, but it is lively, though more and more dependent on twists and gimmicks, seems to anticipate what the public wants at least in the time that it is written, though it never seems to warrant revival. I don't know how many of his plays there are, but there seems to be a new Durbridge mystery in the London theatre every time I am there, though the current one is SO dependent on gimmicks and plot twists that the final denouement is anti-climactic. "The Vicious Circle" is so involved that one can't really guess the outcome, but type-casting alas does give much of the game away. Those who haven't spotted the identity of the mastermind villain after the first reel should be drummed out of the New York theatre. One can't help feeling that, they're the very people who'll enjoy it the most since they'll obviously love the gimmicks.

This was director Gerald Thomas' third picture; his initial efforts were interesting thrillers like this one; then, with producer Rogers, he concentrated on the "Carry On" comedies. We didn't exactly lose a Hitchcock or a Lang, but on the other hand we didn't gain a Lubitsch or a Clair, and it's a pity he didn't vary his output a little more, as he was certainly a better melodramatic than comic director. The Vicious Circle was given a "U" censor certificate in England - the equivalent of a "G" here. But it's not as tame as one might think, and certainly has its moments of thrills and suspense ... and it packs so many complications into its webs of intrigue that it's hard to realize that it all takes place in some 84 minutes. Mills, in a role somewhat like Cary Grant's in "North by North West" is on rather unfamiliar territory, but carries it off quite well.

--- William K. Everson

Program ends: 10:40 (No discussion tonight, but there'll be one next week)