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"PILGRIMAGE" (Fox, 1933) Directed by John Ford

Scenario by Philip Klein and Barry Connors, with additional dialogue by Dudley Nichols, from the story "Gold Star Mother" by I.A.R. Wylie;

Camera, George Schneiderman; Assistant Director, Edward O'Fearn (Ford's brother); 9 reels

With Henrietta Crosman, Heather Angel, Norman Foster, Marion Nixon, Maurice Murphy, Lucille LaVerne, Charlie Grapewin, Robert Warwick, Francis Ford, Betty Blythe, Hedda Hopper, Louise Carter, Jay Ward, Frances Rich, Adele Watson, William Lawrence, Frank Moran, Jack Pennick, Si Jenks, Mary Gordon, Sarah Padden, Claude King.

I deliberately don't want to say too much about "Pilgrimage" since it is impossible to discuss it in depth without commenting on the story. Like Ford's earlier "Four Sons", it is based on an I.A.R. Wylie story, and would seem to be so full of trite coincidences and sentimental traps that even to outline the story would be to render it a disservice. Suffice to say that much of the plotting revolved around a kind of ritualised sentiment, which is perhaps second nature to Americans, and organised grief which is first-nature to the Irish (witness the tradition of wakes). Yet despite such a handicap, it works as one of the screen's most skilful tear-jerkers - and I use that phrase not in a derogatory but in a coldly descriptive sense.

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One of the joys of rediscovering a film like this is in not knowing too much about it and, given a story like this, seeing how adroitly Ford side-steps the traps and how, in at least two cases, by simplicity of camerawork gives a majesty and poetry to scenes that approached the maudlin. Only once does Ford seem to stumble a trifle, this in giving in rather too enthusiastically to light comedy relief at one stage. This comes fairly late in the day, at a point in the heavily emotional story when a hint of comedy is welcome. With American tourists on a spree in Paris, Ford has too logical an excuse to let himself go and, as in "Four Sons", doesn't exercise quite enough self-discipline. But having let off steam, Ford recovers himself quickly and the film soon regains its not lost but sidetracked momentum. Not only is the film an outstanding tour-de-force showcase for Henrietta Crosman (although in a lesser role, old Griffithian Lucille La Verne gives her some stiff competition) but it is visually one of the most beautiful and evocative of all Ford films. Almost all of it - a simple farmer's shack in the middle of a wheat-field, a brook in the forest, a railroad station, battlefield trenches and a highly stylised cemetery - is entirely studio constructed, creating the kind of romantic realism that recalls Murnau's "Sunrise". Again, as in "Judge Priest", there are many visual echoes of Griffith. The realisation, during a storm, of the son's death brings to mind the almost identical sequence in Griffith's "The Greatest Question", while the lovely little vignette with the flowers at the railway station is a direct parallel with the classic homecoming scene in "The Birth of a Nation". One of the biggest surprises of all though (less of a surprise perhaps when one recalls "Four Sons") is that Ford, still in his 30's and having built his reputation primarily on vigorous action material, should exhibit such an affinity with, and non-dondescending compassion for, problems of the aged.

Many of the Ford films for Fox between 1920 and 1934, so long considered lost, and largely due to the perseverance of Fox archivist Alex Gordon, have recently been re-discovered and preserved - just in time. One of the others, a late silent, "Hangman's House", will be screened later in this series, and still others will follow in later series. In the meantime "Pilgrimage" is a major rediscovery, and a frightening reminder of how inadequate so many of the film histories are, with fifteen years of Ford's most prolific years totally cut off from us - until now.

William K. Everson