

# SPEAKING CANDIDLY

## THE FIRST OF THE FEW

(Gaumont British)

**L**ESLIE HOWARD'S last film is, in one respect, anyway, a good one to remember him by, for it presents him as we had come to know him best—the "typical Englishman," detached and subdued; the gentle dreamer rather than the man of action, though when occasion demands it, he can come to grips with reality. As portrayed by Howard in *The First of the Few*, the aircraft designer R. J. Mitchell, was a man who lay on his back in the sun, watching the seagulls, and dreaming of an aeroplane that should be built "all in one piece like a bird," and who lived to make his dream come true in the form of the Spitfire. He did not live long enough to see his creation help turn the tide in the Battle of Britain, but it was for some such crisis as this that Mitchell designed it, and the film is a tribute to his foresight.

Just how much of the film's success with British audiences depends on its patriotic appeal, and on the fact that it is a tribute to Mitchell as well as Leslie Howard's last appearance, it would be impossible to say. If the film could be judged unemotionally, and solely on its merits as an example of screen biography, I believe that it would not compare, from a dramatic, artistic, or factual viewpoint, with, say the Van Heflin picture *Tennessee Johnson*, which is screening concurrently. Good acting is probably the strongest point of *The First of the Few*—and it does not all come from Howard. David Niven's performance is almost as notable: he plays Crisp, the happy-go-lucky young test-pilot, who encourages Mitchell, in the face of disappointments and official apathy, to pursue his vision of a plane that will revolutionise flying, and who flies the planes that materialise from the vision.

The story begins in 1933, runs through a series of Schneider Cup races, and reaches its climax in 1937 with Mitchell's death through "overwork" (actually cancer), after he has visited Germany and realised Britain's urgent need to be prepared against the Nazi threat. Almost inevitably, the tale is told in retrospect—an hour and three-quarters of reminiscing about Mitchell by the man who knew him best, while young Spitfire pilots take time off from the Battle of Britain (then at its height), and cluster round Crisp, now their Station Commander, to hear the facts about the inventor of their planes, who has already become almost a legendary figure. No one will begrudge those pilots their hour and three-quarters off from the job of shooting down Heinkels and Messerschmitts, but it would have been a good thing for the film itself if their Station Commander had cut his narrative shorter. And since the narrator is supposed to be giving the facts, it is a pity he did not stick to them.

**T**HIS is where you should perhaps stop reading if you are interested only in *The First of the Few* as entertainment. Since I hardly know the difference myself between an aileron

and a fuselage, it is where I might have stopped writing if my attention had not been drawn to a review of the film by P. G. Masefield in *The Aeroplane* for September 4, 1942. Masefield, who is a recognised technical expert, says:

"Judged solely as a film story of an aircraft designer who produces a single-seater fighter out of a racing seaplane in collaboration with a flirtatious test-pilot-cum-R.A.F. officer-cum-playboy, *The First of the Few* is undoubtedly first-rate entertainment. Judged as the story of R. J. Mitchell and the Spitfire's evolution, any resemblance to the truth is purely accidental, and the ardent picturegoer is left with an utterly wrong conception of both the design and the designer. Almost every conceivable mistake has been made, both unintentionally in detail and—presumably—purposely to emphasise the drama and to catch an amusing sidelight. We notice that a Mr. Sidney Cole was billed as Technical Adviser. If his technical advice was on the aircraft side, it was either ignored or ill-informed. . . . Regrettably we must label this effort 'The Worst of the New.'"

Masefield back up his statement with a long list of technical inaccuracies both in the design of planes and in the presentation of events in recent aviation history. I do not propose to record them here, though many of them must surely be recognised with annoyance by those in the audience who are seriously air-minded. But some of Masefield's charges deserve more detailed consideration. One is the "glaring misconception" conveyed by the film that the Spitfire was solely responsible for victory in the Battle of Britain in 1940. "From first to last there is no mention of the Hurricane, although there were many times more Hurricanes than Spitfires fighting in the summer and autumn of 1940, and to Sydney Camm rather than to the late R. J. Mitchell goes the honour of designing the fighter which saved Britain from defeat. The two cannot be separated in fact."

Another serious error to which Masefield draws attention is that Mitchell, dying of "overwork," is shown to be inspired by a newspaper headline—"German bombers wipe out Spanish town"—to finish designing the Spitfire instead of taking a holiday to save his life—whereas in actual fact the Spanish Civil War did not begin until after the prototype Spitfire was completed and had passed all its tests!

**A**LL this, you may say, is not really important to the average person. I think it is, but shall have to wait until next week to say why. Meanwhile, let us consider another new film in which historical fact takes a bad beating.

## THE PRIME MINISTER

(Warners British)

**T**O the average person, Disraeli and Arliss are almost synonymous terms. Therefore, in putting forward a new screen "life" of the Victorian statesman, Gielgud was competing against one of Film-dom's most revered figures in one of its most strongly held constituencies. But Gielgud does not merely fail to put Arliss out of office; it might almost be said that he loses his deposit.

It might have been thought that this new "life," being British-made with a distinguished British cast (Diana Wynyard, Fay Compton, Will Fyffe, and

Owen Nares, apart from Gielgud himself), would have avoided repeating the historical bloomers of its American produced predecessor. But if it does not actually repeat them, it makes others just as blooming. For instance, the screenplay puts the young Disraeli straight into Parliament, thanks to his having married a widow, Mrs. Mary Anne Wyndham Lewis, who has her late husband's seat of Maidstone "in her pocket"; it omits to mention that Disraeli unsuccessfully contested four elections before he got into the House, and that when he did, Mr. Wyndham Lewis was his fellow-Member for Maidstone!

Again, Gielgud is still "Mr. Disraeli" when he goes to the Congress of Berlin in 1878, and is raised to the peerage as a reward for bringing back "peace with honour": which quite ignores the fact that Disraeli became Earl of Beaconsfield in 1876.

And so on. Few of these factual inaccuracies are as bad as those in *The First of the Few*. But they are bad enough. And they are unnecessary. Nor does *The Prime Minister* compensate for them by being distinguished screen entertainment. The technique is "stagey" and so is the make-up (both of the play and of the players). The wordy and episodic sequences are mostly stuck together by newspaper clippings which indicate the passage of time. As Queen Victoria, Fay Compton is surprisingly bad. There are occasional dramatic highlights, and some attempt is made to underline Disraeli's policy of preserving the best elements in British Conservatism. But what little success the film achieves is in the romantic rather than the political field: as the love-life of an elder statesman, *The Prime Minister* does give Gielgud and Diana Wynyard the chance to enact some charming scenes of Victorian domestic bliss.

## THE FOREST RANGERS

(Paramount)

**H**ERE we have in Glorious Technicolor good old Fred MacMurray and Mademoiselles Paulette Goddard and Susan Hayward (I like her red hair, in fact I like this young person altogether), in the Wild Logging Country of Texas or somewhere where a marriage licence doesn't necessarily mean that you're going to keep your man if someone else thinks she has a prior and better right to him. That, according to Susan Hayward, is the philosophy of the timber country; and she sets out to try to prove to Paulette Goddard that her sudden marriage to Fred MacMurray (well, it was a bit sudden; she fell off her horse into his arms and about half-an-hour later they seemed to be married), won't stick in the heat and glare of the raging forest fires that the ranger has to fight. Well, that's the main idea; Susan Hayward trying to prove it to Paulette Goddard; but you know the Hays Office and the way they feel about wedding rings; so you probably can guess the result.

Jolly nice fires, jolly good work with the two-inch hoses, fine heroism and heroine-ism all the way through; my only complaint is that they've been lighting fires in the forest and fires in the heart in just this way (and putting them out in just this way, too), ever since I went to my first movie, and I really think it's time that Hollywood suppressed its incendiary tendencies and thought up a few new plots.

YES IT'S LOVELY,  
BUT I DAREN'T  
WASTE COUPONS  
ON WOOLLIES  
THAT WOULDN'T  
WASH!



WISE WORDS, JUDY!  
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