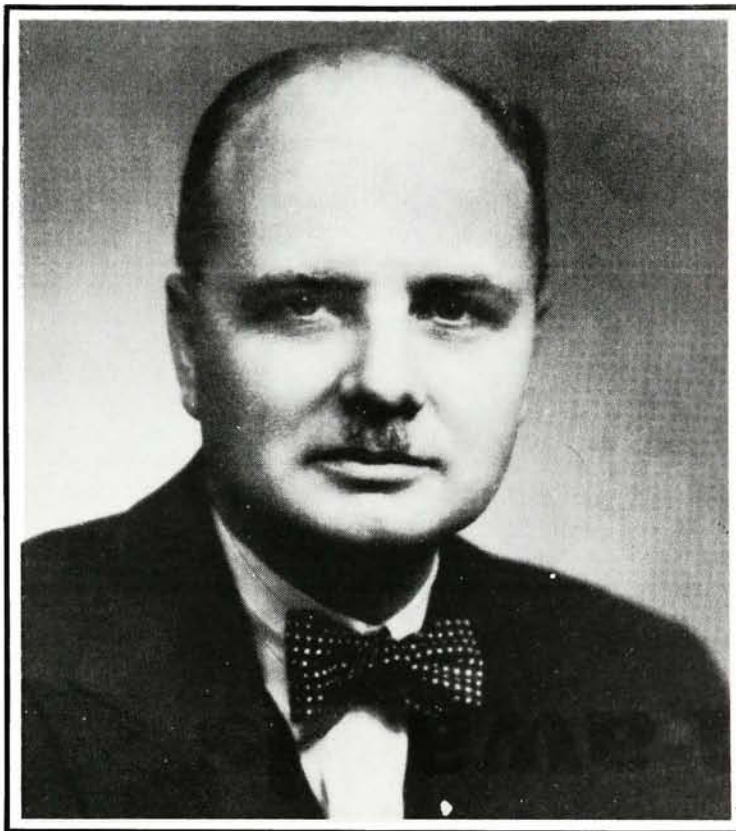

a view from the top



"The basic job was to restore public confidence in the Board," said Arthur Irwin of his term as film commissioner

Interview with Arthur Irwin, Government Film Commissioner, 1950-53.

When Arthur Irwin took over as head of the National Film Board in early 1950 the Board was in a state of crisis. It was under threat as harbouring "security risks" and under attack by the commercial film industry. When he left (to become High Commissioner to Australia) the Board had a new, and more effective Film Act, its operations had been consolidated and the move to new studios in Montreal was well underway. In the following edited transcript of an interview with Mr Irwin he describes how he approached his job and the changes he initiated.

*In the original interview, Mr. Irwin begins by describing how, when he was still Editor of *Maclean's*, he was persuaded to head the NFB by Robert Winters, Lester Pearson, Norman Robertson and, finally, prime Minister Louis St. Laurent. Ross McLean, the Commissioner, had already been advised that he would not be re-appointed; NFB staff morale was low and there was some resentment that an "outsider" knowing nothing of film should have been brought in.*

I should elaborate on what the basis of the employment was: in the first instance I had a firm commitment with the government that they were going to maintain the Film Board. In the second place, I would be responsible for the reorganization which was being planned from various directions. But the basic job, my initial job, was to restore public confidence in the Board.

I had to approach this against the broad background of the Board. The Board was suffering at the time from the deflation following on the war: it had gone up to a tremendous peak in the war, made a great reputation for itself and after the war the appropriations and the staff had been cut by about a third. It was under vicious attack by the private film industry who claimed that it was taking the bread out of their mouths and wanted to put it out of business. It was under political attack in the House, on the grounds of being wasteful and extravagant. It was even under attack by departments of government, its sponsors, who claimed that the Board didn't perform efficiently and was charging too much and was arrogant in ordering departments around. And then there was of course the

security business, which was very much in the public's mind.

The **Financial Post** had run an article in which they said that the Defence Department wouldn't give the Board any classified material for processing. Naturally, Brooke Claxton, the Defence Minister, was questioned in the House and he came out flatly and said that it was quite true, the Board was being surveyed for security purposes, and until it was cleared, the Defence Department was not able to give it any classified material. As matter of fact this was discussed in great detail when the government was negotiating with me and I had laid down certain specifications in relation to this, one of which was that I wouldn't accept the premise of guilt by association. I asked for the right to cross-examine the secret police. I said that there might be some security risks, but there would probably be some just plain damn fools, and possibly some incompetence. If any action was taken in relation to two or three, it had to be separated in time from any action taken in relation to one, and this was agreed together with the RCMP Inspector who was in charge of this kind of operation at the time. He had all his dossiers but he couldn't give me the papers because it would have exposed the names of his undercover agents. We had a police stenographer there, and he would read the dossier of an individual, leaving out the names of the undercover agent, and they were taken down and then subsequently I would be handed the report of what he told me of the dossier. . . . and then the next day when I'd had chance to get the copy I'd cross-examine him on it. About the end of the second day we had a blow-up. He got quite shirty and said, look, you make me feel as if I'm accused in the witness box and you're a prosecuting attorney. I'm not going to stand for this sort of thing. Now look, I said... you and I have got one objective in common, we're just trying to get at the facts of the situation. This is the way I'm approaching it and I think you can see the reasonableness of it, now let's get on with it. When it was all through, I took the whole list, the whole 36, and it was a very difficult business, one of the worst jobs I ever had to tackle in my life, I didn't like it at all. But at any rate, I decided there seemed to be three clear cases of people who could be real security risks – the rest, no... there were all kinds of people, there had been people who had been foolish, there was one fellow who'd got up and heckled Jimmy Gardner the Minister of Agriculture in Saskatchewan. This fellow was a prominent CCF'er, and of course in the minds of some people he was a communist. And there were radicals and people with unconventional views. This was a free country and they had a perfect right to these views. Finally, I took the whole 36 names to Norman Robertson (Clerk of the Privy Council), who was then the civilian head of security. I said, here they are Norman, take a look, see what you think. A couple of days later he came back and he'd picked the same three that I'd picked. I hadn't told him in advance. And then of course we had to go to the Minister, and he agreed and that was it. I think that process was concluded before the end of February and in March the Minister announced that three people had been discharged. That was tough for me. I had to bring these boys in, and all I said was I'm very sorry but as you know this had been declared a vulnerable agency, and I hadn't been able to satisfy myself that you're the kind of person that should be employed in that agency. I must say that to their credit they accepted this, but I was never really easy. I'm not sure this is the way to handle the security problems. Should these fellows have had a chance to defend them-

selves in public, should they have been charged in public? Or should it be handled in this way without any publicity at all? I'm not sure what was the right way; at any rate that's the way it was done.

And then there were other problems. The first thing, of course, was the general state of morale in the Board. The Board at the time felt that I was a Toronto businessman who know nothing about the film business, had never indicated any interest in the Film Board. Why would I be there? The real reason in their minds was that I was going to scupper the damned outfit. I was known as the hatchet man. They kept referring to me as the businessman from Toronto, as if I had never had anything to do with any creative process. But, at any rate, obviously this had to be dealt with and the first thing I did was I deliberately toured the whole works to look at the physical set-up, and to meet as many people as I could, let them see me, that I didn't have horns growing. The Board was then scattered in ten buildings in and around Ottawa, with the main production being done in a ramshackle old mill on John Street on the Ottawa. Some of the things I saw absolutely shocked me: the state of the organization, the legal basis and so on was in some cases non-existent. John Street was a terrible fire trap, the fire marshall and the police people who were responsible for the job had told the government over and over again that if it was a private operation they'd have had it padlocked. At that time the Board had 137 tons of accumulated film going away back to 1914, about 2/3 of which was on old nitrate stock, which as you know is not only inflammable but when it decomposes, as it does, it's explosive. John Street was loaded with it. This terrified the living daylights out of me and the first thing I did was to order an immediate and continuing inspection of all the vaults, cleaned out the cutting rooms as much as I could and had continuous inspection of the cutting rooms and the vaults and everything. To my real shock the first inspection revealed two cans of this old film decomposed and ready to blow, sitting right there in John Street. I remember also going down in February to Middle Street which was a store and inspection place and they had a little space heater in the front end of the lower floor, and that's all the heat there was in the building. It was a great big long thing, and in the back, up in the top end of the second floor were girls with gloves on, their winter coats on trying to inspect film. I went back down and said what the hell is this all about? Well, they said, we've been trying for three years to get them to heat that building and they say that they can't afford it and won't afford it. So I called Public Works and I said I'd been down there and I asked them about this and they gave me the same story. So I said, well, look, I've seen that today – this is Monday, if you don't have those space heaters to heat that building in by Saturday, on Monday next I'm calling in the press to inspect the premises so that they can see how the Government of Canada treats its employees. The heaters were in by Friday.

I was very fortunate because before my appointment was announced, the Minister had appointed Walter Gordon to do a survey of the organization of the Board. They had started in November and brought in their report I think it was in March, and made a series of recommendations in regard to the structure, staffing, financing and accounting. And they also included recommendations that the Board be put in one building in Ottawa, with modern equipment, etc. This was a tremendous advantage to me. As a matter of fact I talked to Walter



Arthur Irwin (r.) and his wife visited the NFB's new building (under construction, l.) and are greeted by Film Commissioner Dr. A. W. Trueman



They were, well, they were active, they had their unit, and so on, but they didn't really feel at home in the Board. The Board was really an Anglo Board. The French filmmakers were making some very good films but their strength was not what I thought it ought to be in relation to the Board as a whole. I was fortunate enough to be able to persuade Gratien Gélinas, who was then the principle figure in the French Canadian theatrical world in Quebec, to go on the new board of governors. I was also looking for someone in the Board itself on the French side who might, you know, be pushed up towards the top, and one day Len Chatwin introduced me to a laddie named Pierre Juneau and I had a chat with him and got the notion that here was a prospect. So when Jim Beveridge left the Board he was made Secretary and he, as you know, became head of the whole French side of the Board.

The New Film Act

The next big issue was a new film act, a firm legal basis for the whole operation. At first we thought of amending the old act and then that obviously became impossible so we rewrote a new act. I worked with a chap called Dave Mundell in the Justice Department on this for quite a long period of time and there were discussions all over the place, almost everybody got into the act. I mean the act of writing the Act and it did a number of things. It really was based on the Woods-Gordon report in terms of structure and it firmly nailed down the fact that the Government was going to stay in the film business. It took the Ministers of the Crown off the Board in order to get the political element out of it (there had been two on the eight-member Board up until that time) and the Board itself would have a majority of people from outside the government service. The film commissioner was to be both Chairman of the Board and its Chief Executive Officer. Having the majority outside meant it was very difficult for political pressures from the Government to be exercised.

The Board was given the right to formulate policy, subject to the approval of the Minister of course, and was authorized to perform all functions pertaining to the production and distribution of films which had been in doubt before. It was

Gordon before the report was brought down and we had discussed some of the matters that he had covered in his report. I knew what was going on, and so one of the first things for them to do was try and get the new structure set up and staff it, and this was very difficult, frankly. When it came to Director of Production, at that time there wasn't one. The Board was divided up into I think five film units and there seemed to be two leading candidates: Jim Beveridge and Don Mulholland. Now Jim had seniority; he had been chairman of the Producers' Committee and he was a respected leader in that group and was obviously and certainly a candidate. Don, on the other hand, was on the theatrical side – I think at that time he was in charge of **The Eye Witness** series and perhaps the Newsreels, and they were two very different types. Jim was gentle, tentative, and awfully attractive fellow, given to generalities rather than specifics. Don, on the other hand, was a bit sardonic, a bit aloof – some people even thought he was cynical, but a very practical man with an organizing type of mind. I finally came to the conclusion that Don was the man. And of course when I announced this there was another blow-up. The Grierson phalanx of which Jim was the figure-head, just rose up in wrath – now it was Irwin and Mulholland who were going to destroy the National Film Board but Jim took it very well. I suggested that he take over the London Office – give him another situation of some prestige, and he accepted that very graciously, and there was no problem with Jim himself. But it was not easy for Don. He had to establish himself as the administrative head of a group which had been his peer group and this is always very, very difficult.

Another thing that bothered me very much at the time was the status of the French speaking filmmakers in the Board.

authorized to do its own accounting on a business basis. It was given a decent working capital appropriation which was permanent. It was given the right to retain revenue that it received. In my mind this was very important because I was one of those who believed that monetary incentive was a factor in doing a job of any kind, and if the boys knew that a good job got wide distribution, and the Board was getting some return, which would enable them to do more work, it was better than having the money drained off to the general revenue fund. In fact there was more money for the Board to operate, and also the filmmakers had some measure of ascertaining how successful they were in the tough commercial world apart from the non-theatrical distribution, which of course was very highly developed. We also got the right to hire our own staff, either on a permanent basis or on a term contract basis. Prior to that they had to rehire the whole staff every three months and actually there was one girl who did nothing but write reports to Treasury rehiring everybody on the Film Board every three months. Of course this was all swept away in the new Act. Then there were also provisions made for staff pensions.

The Move to Montreal

Then, my next question was the building. Here was an outfit with ten extraordinarily varied buildings, both on John Street and Bank Street, and it was impossible to operate efficiently. You had seven operating businesses with Accounting here, Administration there, Production over here, Distribution over there, separated in some cases by miles – it made no sense. So it was perfectly obvious that if you're going to run the Board you had to have a decent centralized establishment from which you could operate, and this was accepted by the Massey Commission which was sitting at the time. It was also recommended by the Woods-Gordon report. In other words the Government had all kinds of support for a decision to provide a new building, which was their intention, but the question was – *Where?* Up until that time apparently nobody had asked this question: Where should the Film Board be? They just assumed it would just be in Ottawa. As a matter of fact there was a great set of plans for the building of a great monumental building down in Tunney's Pasture, but it never came to anything in any way. I began to ask myself where this operation should be, where in the country. Slowly I came to the conclusion that it shouldn't be in Ottawa at all, that it should be some place else. Ottawa at that time was a relatively small town. It was a Civil Service town, the society was stereotyped, conservative, conventional. The Board depended for its success on the effectiveness with which the creative people operated, and as you know, creative people are anything but conventional. They tend to be radical, they tend to be unconventional in their behaviour, even their clothes – plump women came to work in purple slacks – for God's sake, purple slacks in a Government office in 1950. The result was that the Board at that time was a bit of a pariah; it didn't behave properly, it was irregular, there were sex irregularities, and all kinds of things, but this was quite normal in a creative group. So it seemed to me that the obvious thing was to get it somewhere where it wouldn't be so bloody conspicuous. The tension between the majority environment and the little minority of these creative people, who felt they were despised and rejected and not understood, had developed into, if I may say so (although some of the boys who were there at the time might resent the term), almost a state of collective paranoia. They

reacted against the criticisms of themselves and they reacted against the establishment, and they even reacted against the government of which they were part. So, it seemed to me the thing to do was to get them out in some place where they wouldn't be exposed to this kind of environment, but that was only one factor. The other factor was that if the establishment stayed in Ottawa it seemed to me that it would become a bureaucracy and go dead, it would go stagnant, just become part of the civil service bureaucracy. For its own sake it should be in a metropolitan city where there is a congregation of creative people of all kinds with whom they'd have to compete. Also, it should be in or near a pool of creative talent, on which you could draw on a contract basis and not have to have an enormous permanent staff. There are two reasons for this: one is to get a constant stream of new blood and new ideas coming into the institution and the other is to build up a great bureaucratic establishment or to try to minimize that at least. Looking at that kind of proposition there were obviously only two places in the country that seemed to offer terms of this nature – one was Toronto and the other Montreal. And had it been an English speaking country the thought of going to Toronto would I think overwhelm me: it was a publishing centre, it was a musical centre, one of the main centres of the CBC was there. But this was a bi-cultural and bilingual country and it was perfectly obvious that if the Board was going to operate in that framework, it had to be on the line of cultural contact between the two cultures in the country, and in a metropolitan centre which offered the other requirements, so there was only one place to go and that was Montreal, and that's the way I argued myself into this position.

Then the question was how to persuade the Government and everybody else to do this including the Board of Governors. The first thing I did was I drafted quite a long, detailed, memorandum, arguing the pros and the cons (and there were obviously some disadvantages in moving out of Ottawa – the dislocation of staff, the probable reaction from the staff). I took that up with the Board of Governors and with the Minister (Robert Winters) at the same time and they accepted the validity of the case. Then I went to work on the mandarins, the key senior civil servants in Ottawa, people like Bob Bryce, External Affairs Under-Secretary and Norman Robertson, and argued it out with them, usually over lunch, and they all bought it. When this preliminary work had been done, the Minister took a submission to Cabinet, which I wrote, and it was just accepted. It seemed so obvious that very few people at that level questioned it. Incidentally, the Government at the time, had a notion that some functions of the Government should be decentralized and this was a factor in the final decision.

At this point in the original interview Mr. Irwin discusses at some length the technical design of the NFB's building in Montreal.

When the Montreal move was announced to the staff of the Board, again the roof blew off. They were pretty badly shattered. Their families were in Ottawa, it meant moving their families, a new school system, and some of them didn't like the big city. Some of them, frankly, didn't want to leave their nice little safe cocoon, even though it was a hostile cocoon, in Ottawa, and go out into the great big world. Anyway there was a whole gamut of reasons for the reaction but the staff generally were very strongly against the move. There was only one of the senior officials in the Board who thought the idea

made any sense at all – the rest were all opposed and I had to try and persuade them and argue with them. I remember arguing with Don Mulholand, who was then the Director of Production. This was very early in the game and I didn't really know him very well at that time, and we argued and argued, and he was absolutely opposed. I think he thought I was nuts. But finally he came to me one day and said "Look," he said, "I'm opposed to this – I think you're wrong, but if it's policy, if it's your policy and it's government policy and you want it, and you think this is the right thing to do, I'll go with you." From that time on he pitched in and made an enormous contribution to the development of the plans. After I left he was exposed to enormous pressure from the producers who wanted to stop the move, and he submitted a brief to Mr. Trueman, the Film Commissioner who succeeded me, and the producers put in another brief.

There was also a tremendous reaction from the Ottawa community – the community which had derided and despised this Film Board crowd in their midst. Suddenly, the despised pariah became their dearest cultural jewel; the city would be deprived of the cultural centre which was of enormous value to it. The Chamber of Commerce passed resolutions and the City Council discussed it and offered the Government a free site in Ottawa of 27 acres if only the Film Board would stay there. Charlotte Whitton, who was the Mayor, really went to town. She attacked me and she attacked everybody associated with the move – the Government, all the way up the line, and she finally likened the move of the Film Board staff to Montreal to an Expulsion of the Acadians and the Expulsion of the Japanese from the West Coast during the War. I mean, her feeling was just that strong. After I left, the staff went to the Minister, the new Minister, who was Walter Harris (Winters had then gone to Public Works) and it went up to Cabinet again and finally to Mr. St. Laurent himself. He just said, "No. We've made a decision and that's it." From then on there was no question about it.

The Image of the Board

The next stage in terms of public relations and restoring public confidence, was a special all-party committee of the House of Commons and this was in the early spring of 1952. There were twenty-six members on the committee including quite a number of the Board's enemies and we were a bit fearful of what might happen. We spent an awful lot of time on preliminary research preparing for this. The staff was absolutely magnificent. We were trying to assemble data to answer every conceivable question that any member of that committee might ask – to do it in advance, and we worked nights. There was no elevator after five o'clock, and the staff climbed up and down those bloody stairs until they were hungry and tired and exhausted, but they stuck it out, and when we got to the committee we were able to practically answer any question. I read a statement initially and we had also come with a scheme for inviting the whole committee down to the Production facilities on John Street to show them what we were talking about. This worked like a charm. We filmed them as they entered the building, we filmed them as they looked at the various processes and at the end of a film screening we showed them a picture of their looking at the building. This just about bowled them over. They were tremendously impressed and when it came to their final report they gave the Board an unqualified endorsement. Actually they were specific about two

things. They reported that they felt that the Board was playing a vital role in the development of a national consensus in Canada and in projecting the image of Canada abroad, and they commended the Board for having produced a picture called **Royal Journey**, which they said was an important Canadian historical document and a convincing portrait of Canada and its people. That put an end to the criticism of the Board in the House. That year the estimates were passed in fourteen minutes and the following year it was even faster. In other words, there was absolutely no opposition to the Board at all.

The Films

During the tumultuous period which we have been talking about, film production went on, it increased, and I think it can be said with reason that to some extent even quality increased. I don't want to bore you with a lot of figures, but in the three years the Board increased theatrical production films by 87 percent; it more than doubled Canadian theatrical production; it more than tripled the world wide distribution of newsreel content; it increased non-theatrical distribution in Canada by 42 percent and non-theatrical distribution abroad by I think it was 76 percent. And this was all done despite a decrease in the number of staff of 7 percent and an increase of only 17 percent in the gross expenditures. I think that the quality of the films at the peak was very, very high indeed – the average was high. We did produce some relatively poor films, but they were rare. I think this is indicated by what happened in terms of national and international awards. Prior to this period there had been thirteen awards in the previous year and in the last year I was there, there were thirty-three. Included in that were the top British, French, and American awards, in their classes, for the year. There was **Royal Journey**, which was a film on the visit of Princess Elizabeth and Prince Philip to Canada in 1951 – that won the British Film Academy Award for the best documentary of the year. There was **Romance of Transportation in Canada** which took a Cannes Festival Award for the best animated short of the year. And there was Norman McLaren's **Neighbours** which won a Hollywood Oscar. I think that's a record, which indicates that the quality level of what the Board's output was at that time very, very high. I don't know whether that three-strike business has been matched.

*At this point, Irwin describes the production of **Royal Journey**, especially the decision to use the new Eastmancolor stock and to release it in five reels instead of two.*

Twenty-eight days from the end of shooting **Royal Journey** we had the test print. Twelve days later it opened in seventeen first-run theatres in the principle cities from coast to coast in Canada and in two months it had been seen by two million Canadians. Before the end of the run in Canada it had played in twelve hundred and forty-nine theatres and broke all records for attendance of any film produced in Canada up to that time. United Artists took it for the United States, General Films took it for the U.K., Rank took it for the rest of the world outside the western hemisphere; and before it ran its course it had played theatrically or non-theatrically in some forty countries. I personally believe that in terms of the original job of restoring public confidence in the Film Board, that **Royal Journey** possibly contributed more than any other single factor. I can still feel, even after a lapse of twenty three years the sense of pride I felt, and still feel for that matter, at having been associated with the men and women who made it. □