

The P.E.I. Centennial

Film Retrospective

About a year ago I was sitting in the Confederation Centre coffee shop in Charlottetown, lamenting the lack of booming film activity in my tiny home province of Prince Edward Island, when I was joined by Moncrieff Williamson, Director of the Centre's Art Gallery and Museum. Williamson, who had just published his book on Robert Harris, the great Confederation era portraitist, is a man whose commitment to all the arts, and to Prince Edward Island, runs deep. Robert Harris was a Prince Edward Islander, and Williamson takes no little pride in the fact.

I had long known 'Crieff' as one of a number of people on the Island who had maintained a deep interest in the cinema as art, and it was of comfort to me when we began talking and were very soon discussing film. But what inspired me most was his proposal that, 1973 being the province's hundredth birthday, why not have a festival of P.E.I. films? Well, why not, I said – but where to get the material! To be honest, the entire population of the province can be wrapped up in a city the size of Sudbury.

Perhaps that is why, when Williamson sought funding for the project from various sources, they couldn't quite see how a festival was possible. Williamson eventually had to appeal to the Canada Council, who luckily backed the project with a small grant. I was hired as Organizer and Director of Research, with Pat Stunden, Assistant Curator of the Gallery, as my assistant. In addition I was to provide lectures during the festival, and present a one-man show of my own work.

by

Rick Hancox

The thing one has to remember about P.E.I. is that above all it is an island society. There is an inevitable streak of independence in P.E. Islanders – a kind of naïve boldness borne of living successfully in relative isolation. For an artist the advantages are enormous: the isolation ignites him, the lack of commercial competition frees him, the absence of urban pressure keeps him going. At the same time, this phenomenon makes Islanders themselves artistic subjects. It is not so surprising, then, that a search has turned up a goodly number of films either made about Prince Edward Islanders or by Islanders themselves, of which about 45' will appear in the festival, to be called the P.E.I. Centennial Film Retrospective. It is set for Confederation Art Gallery and Museum, March 20-25, with admission free to the public.

Research has revealed some interesting patterns whereby the people of Prince Edward Island should gain valuable insight emerging from self-confrontation, through film, of anthropological facts – and, I might add – fictions. Surely we all know of the 'Cradle of Confederation', the 'Garden Province', the 'Garden of the Gulf', the home of Anne of Green Gables, the home of Stompin' Tom Connors' "Bud the Spud from the bright red mud", etc. Or if you like – Canada's Cozy Corner, **Holiday Island**, and **Seaside Holiday** – just some of the commercial titles booked for the festival. But it's not all holiday: those are the mere fringes of an albeit microcosm of Canadian society, but one with a humanity as rich as any other.

With a view to discovering and articulating that humanity, the Retrospective will show films in a chronological order within categories representing distinct perspectives, or modes of confrontation. One of them, of course, is how other filmmakers see Prince Edward Island. In this area the festival will present nine NFB films, Crawley films, a number of films televised on CBC, and two Hollywood features – **Anne of Green Gables** (starring none other than 'Anne Shirley'), and **Johnny Belinda** – both based on fictional P.E.I. characters.

A second area of confrontation bases itself on how Islanders see themselves through sponsored films from the provincial government. Jeremy Bisley, of the Island Information Service, is doing important work in this field making Super-8mm films of the people at work and showing them around the province.

Another important perspective is the role colleges and universities have played in the teaching of film on Prince Edward Island, starting with Sam Gupta's **Outside In**, which incidentally was the first film entirely sponsored by a Canadian University, and continuing through the work of George Semsel in the late 1960's at Prince of Wales College (now Holland College). The University of Prince Edward Island will be offering some exciting new student work with the help of Hilda Woolnough, who is coordinating the new university's first film courses.



Scene from one of Rick Hancox' films included in the Retrospective.

Finally, an impressive number of films by independent Island artists such as Kent Martin, Brian Pollard, Niall Burnett, Tom Gallant, Barry Burley, and others will give P.E.I. filmmakers needed exposure, and hopefully make Islanders conscious of a growing art form in their own province in which they can indeed participate.

A significant aspect of the festival – as important as the films themselves – will be the encouragement of public involvement through the presence of many of the filmmakers, who will introduce films if they wish and answer questions from the audience. Also, a panel of leading provincial educators, critics, and various film personalities will try to conclude just what has been seen during the festival, and discuss its relevance for the future.

As festivals go, the scope of the P.E.I. Centennial Film Retrospective is a drop in the bucket, but there may be some national value in the fact that it is the first time a Canadian province has sought a kind of total film identity through a truly comprehensive historical presentation. We in the land of red soil, potatoes, and lobsters – not to mention the world's record tuna – cordially invite all Canadians down east to 'Canada's Cozy Corner' to see what else it is we're about, and to join us in a film celebration of our Centennial Year ●

Richard Hancox was born in Toronto and grew up in Charlottetown. He graduated from the University of P.E.I. in 1970 and is currently doing graduate work in Cinema at Ohio University. One of his films shot on P.E.I., *Tall Dark Stranger*, won two awards for Canada at Oberhausen in 1971 and Grand Prize in the 2nd Canadian Student Film Festival. His films have won a number of other awards and been televised in five countries. During summers he heads the Motion Picture Department at Manitou-wabing Camp of Fine Arts in Parry Sound, Ontario.