

BOOK REVIEWS

Canadian Drum Theme: Someone Sung Our Song Wrong

by David Beard

Hollywood's Canada: the Americanization of Our National Image.

Pierre Berton. Published by McClelland and Stewart, Toronto 1975. Cloth Bound Price \$13.95.

There is no intent by the author or the publisher to present this book as a "movie book". It is, they state, "...a book about the Canadian Image". What Berton has to say about Hollywood is not entirely new, but how he says it and documents it makes it indisputable.

For those who are interested in books pertaining to the motion pictures this work is indispensable. It has considerable value as a reference work on films made in Hollywood about Canada. The facts are noted. They suggest innumerable leads. The researchers have put the material into comprehensible order and a new view of the Canadian as presented by Hollywood clearly emerges as never before. Berton has written a work that future researchers and scholars can build upon.

What I find tiresome, as a reader of books on film, is the familiar sound of the beating of the National Drum Theme. We have heard it all before. The writer, singer or preacher must jazz up the beat. Pierre Berton, alas, sounds like one of the old time evangelic order of summer-temperament-converters on his last hurrah. There is too much snake oil for me.

The book lacks a sense of humour. The anecdotes of intrigue are journalistically interesting, but they could have been fascinating if Berton had used a sense of fun and comic style rather than the fire and brimstone attack.

I couldn't help thinking throughout the book that it would have been one hell of a good read if those excellent pictures and that valuable background material had been put together by someone who said, "Come on, you're



According to Hollywood, this is what the Mackenzie River country looks like in August. Almost everything here is wrong, especially the presence of snow in a month when temperatures can exceed 90 degrees F. — and the totem pole which, besides being atrociously carved, belongs about 1000 miles to the southwest. The movie is **Back to God's Country**, starring Rock Hudson, made in 1953.

having me on about all this Back Woods, this Big Snow stuff and this Primitive Passions in the Untamed North bit. Did people actually believe all this?" I had hoped for a nostalgic look (but not a campy one). An affectionate tongue in cheek view of the past can entertain and at the same time inform.

The book is tiresome because it sounds like all the other National Drum Themes. And it's not! It's about the movies. Some very exciting ones, some dull ones and some so wrong and silly they should never be taken seriously. But Pierre Berton chooses to take them seriously - too seriously. They deserve attention because Hollywood in totality deserves attention.

What Hollywood was and what it presented is now being studied. One aspect of the study is Hollywood's affect on various groups of people, i.e. women, and the Negro, and on sexual identity and the national images. It is not surprising that Hollywood distorted everything it touched. It was truly a dream factory. But people reached for dreams and many of them lived by them. Like all dreams they faded and left nothing but a case of mistaken identity. Hollywood was not trying to create understanding between nations nor was it trying to educate. It was trying to make money — millions of dollars of it — and for a time it did.

I suppose it boils down to the fact that I just can't get excited at the distortions that Hollywood presented. I enjoyed the films and in most cases the lesser ones I simply forgot. When I came to Canada twenty odd years ago I didn't expect to meet Indians in the streets of any city. I wanted to, but I knew I wouldn't. I remember the one pet I wanted was a racoon or a skunk. I knew that Mounted Policemen didn't sing the Indian Love Call as they went to get their man (Was that a latent gay thread of symbolism we all missed?). I certainly had seen dozens of movies on Canada and not only those made by Hollywood, but I had also met people from Canada and had read books set in and about Canada. I was quite aware that Canada had an identity far different from America's.

Despite what I found dull about Berton's style there is still real value in the question he poses about Canada's National Identity. The book can cause us to think about ourselves as Canadians. It is opportune now that we are examining the national myths about ourselves. Some of these myths were created by Hollywood, some by politicians, by hockey players, by authors and a host of others. It is a time for exploding myths, but when we replace them, what will the new ones be? The *real* national image? Or just another distorted version, this time created by a home grown industry. □

David Beard owns and operates the Toronto bookstore Cine Books. He has taught, acted in and written about films and returns to Cinema Canada after a brief absence.