

## REVIEW

Tom Radford's

**China Mission :  
The Chester  
Ronning Story**

In a small white house, in a small white town in Alberta, lives a great man. Here, Chester Ronning—statesman, missionary, schoolteacher, cowboy—is at home.

Ronning lives famously in the agricultural community of Camrose, in the shadow of China. His life's work done, he languishes quietly, like an old chesterfield in a hotel lobby, offering inspiration and comfort to anyone who happens by.

In 1980, the National Film Board's production studio in Edmonton released an hour-long documentary entitled *China Mission: The Chester Ronning Story*. The film introduced this outstanding Canadian to most ordinary Canadians.

*China Mission* was directed by Tom Radford who also acted as co-writer with the late, legendary Stanley Jackson. Radford's task was unenviable, considering the enormity and variety of Ronning's life experiences. *China Mission*, in order to succeed, had to take a century of tumultuous history and put it on two reels.

Chester Ronning was born in 1894, in the ancient walled city of Fancheng. He was the first non-Chinese to be born there. His parents, Lutheran missionaries, were quick to adopt the local culture. Young Chester grew up speaking Chinese as a first language, Norwegian as a second and English a poor third. He was fed from the breast of a Chinese milk-mother and in every way, except appearance, was your average kid on the block.

This was the boy who would be Canada's first Ambassador in Peking, High Commissioner to India and special U.S. negotiator in North Vietnam. He would also become a founder of the CCF (Commonwealth Cooperative Federation) and a prophetic voice on the side of Chou En Lai and Mao Tse Tung.

Ronning and his family were forced to flee China, in 1899, with the advent of the Boxer Rebellion. They returned in 1901 and stayed for six more years until Ronning's mother Hannah died of exhaustion.

Ronning returned to Canada where he became a homesteader in the Peace River country of northern Alberta. There he worked as a cowboy enroute to becoming a teacher.

In 1922, the lure of China proved too strong and the young teacher made his way back to his birthplace in Fancheng to continue his parents' work.

*China Mission* deals mostly with this period of Ronning's life. It tells the story of Ronning the teacher, the man of the people, the simple endearing spirit. His later political positions are almost totally ignored, and for good reason.

Ronning was never the most diplomatic of diplomats. He was against the U.S. bombing of North Vietnam and because of his "Chinese sympathies," he



was never completely trusted by the old guard in Ottawa.

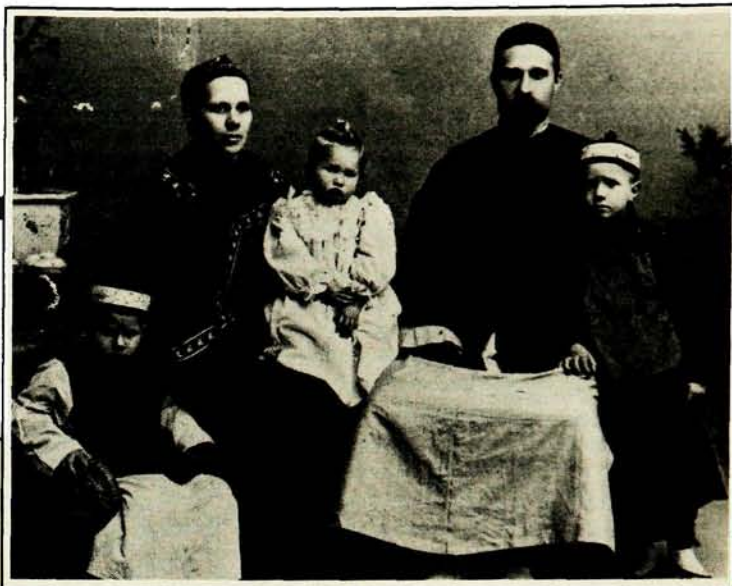
*China Mission's* greatest achievement is the way it exposes Ronning's grass roots. In scene after scene, we see a man who was loved by children and animals and suspected by politicians. What would you prefer? The fact that Ronning was a western teacher and not an eastern historian did nothing for his diplomatic career. It's also the reason why he remains mostly unknown in sophisticated video-wise areas like southern Atario.

The film, in style, is a fairly straightforward documentary. It combines contemporary footage with archival footage and stills, intercut with interviews. These elements are welded together by Cedric Smith's narration and Roger Deegan's music.

There's nothing flashy here, nothing gimmicky, just the story of a great man told in an excellent film.

*China Mission* is not so much about China as it is about one man's vision of it. Radford uses Ronning as a key to unlock some of the myriad mysteries which cocoon that awesome country. He never tries to tell the history of modern China in 58 minutes which is just as well. For this reason, Chester Ronning has never been totally happy with the film. He feels it focuses too much on him and not enough on the evolution of today's China. This is a criticism which I'm sure Radford can live with.

This project first surfaced six years ago when Radford was hot to make "The Chester Ronning Story." He soon found out that Ronning's daughter, Audrey Topping, a photo-journalist with the *New York Times*, had the same idea. Given the pecking order, Radford decided to take a back seat. Two years



● Chester stands next to his father. Years later Ronning remains a towering, inspirational man

population.

I have long maintained that Canadian features are like wayward orphans in search of an identity. In contrast, Canadian documentaries are as tough as pucks and this film is an appropriate example.

And so to politics. *China Mission* has never been shown on national television in this country! There are probably many reasons for this, but a few deserve some scrutiny.

Could it be that the traditional rivalry between the NFB and the CBC is depriving Canadians of experiencing this inspired piece of work? Or perhaps the CTV is too interested in American simulcasts to find the time to air a decent documentary. In any case, it's a national disgrace that this film has yet to be shown on television.

Chester Ronning is an old man. His story may not be slick, sexy or sensational, but it is truly educational. What a wonderful day it would be when our networks could differentiate between the truths of the teacher and the temptations of the titillator.

Tom Crighton ●

*In what must go down as one of the more infamous remarks made by buyers at the CBC to a producer, Tom Radford was told that, although the network was not at present interested in the film, it would be prepared to buy it for screening after Ronning's death.*

**CHINA MISSION: THE CHESTER**

**RONNING STORY** d. Tom Radford ed./sd. ed. Christopher Tate, c.f.e. p. Michael Scott exec. p. Lydia Semotuk, Michael Scott cam. Robert Reece, Ron Orleux, Harry Nuttall, Richard Westlien sd. Garrell Clark, Ann McGaw, Ed Smith, Lesley Topping mus. Roger Deegan narration Cedric Smith commentary Stanley Jackson, Tom Radford original story Audrey Topping story consult. Stanley Jackson, Vladimir Valenta, Tom Daly recc. Clive Perry, Wayne Finucan Productions still animation Svend Erik Eriksen, Tom Brydon asst. ed. Joseph Vizsmeg, Ray Harper, Colin Ross, Jonathan Leaning, Selwyn Jacob asst. cam. Chris Aikenhead, Gary Armstrong, Meme Westlien research Inger Smith stills consult. Doug Clark stills research Avrel Fisher post-p. superv. Christopher Tate, c.f.e. education consult. Mary Lyseng historical consult. Brian Evans titles Val Teodori unit admin. Charles Lough, Pat Hart col. 16mm running time 57 min. p.c. The National Film Board in co-operation with the Alberta Department of Education.