



From "Backlot Canadiana"

ment in Hollywood for a multi-million dollar production studio, interviews with the man who was hired to go around Hollywood sets inserting Canadian references, and, of course, clips. Example: cowboys sitting around a campfire. One says, "That was an oriole, wasn't it?", Jimmy Stewart answers, "Yes — it was a CANADIAN oriole!"

It's almost too Canadian to believe. If you're interested in Canada's Film Making (and if you're not — why are you reading this magazine?) you owe it to yourself to see this marvelous little film. Contact: CBC, Box 500, Station A, Toronto M5W 1E6.

What colonialism?

—A.I.K.

Mini-Reviews

Good news for those of us who refuse to watch television: some of those admittedly interesting films we've been missing will now get theatrical distribution through the CBC/NFB agreement recently announced (see Issue 18 — Winnipeg Symposium). We won't have to start watching the tube, we can steadfastly stay in dark screening rooms watching bit coloured shadows on the screen! Details are still hard to come by, but being incorrigible optimists we've decided to start including little write-ups on some of our favourites. (Next issue, we hope to have reviews of the *Pacificanada* and *Atlanticanada* series...). Space limit-

ations abounding, we can only mention a few we would like to see in theatres:

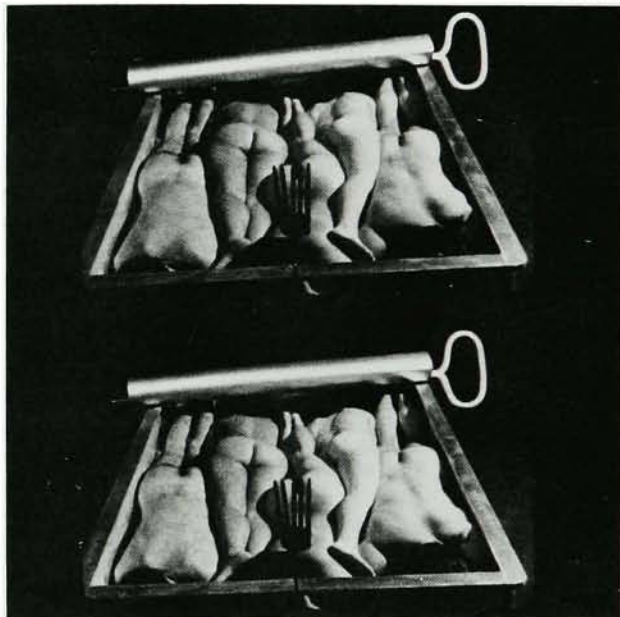
Shown on the *Of All People* series was Clay Borris' film about a deaf-mute couple and their family's attitudes towards this handicap — **One Hand Clapping**. This is a lovely and sensitive documentary in Borris' intimate style (see Issue 7 — Toronto Filmmakers Co-op) with very human insights into the world of the non-hearing. Happily, this film is already available through the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre, 406 Jarvis Street, Toronto M4Y 2G6.

Another documentary recently

aired was Len Gilday's *Yukon: A Portrait* which consists of several portraits of people living in the North — a family raising sled-dogs, an old boat captain, a man working a sanctuary for endangered species and a couple with their life savings invested in the risky business of gold-mining. Gilday's excellent camerawork coupled with approaching this subject through the eyes of Yukon's people make this a unique documentary very different from all the travelogues about Canada's Last Frontier. Write to CBC, Box 500, Station A, Toronto M5W 1E6 for information.

Premiering on *Sprockets* was Sorel Etrog's first film, *Spiral*. Etrog is better known to filmmakers for designing the coveted statuette bearing his name which will again be given this year at the Canadian Film Awards. This half-hour, black and white film set to music is reminiscent of the surrealist cinema of the 1930s and

"Spiral"



deals with the Absolutes — Life and Death. Being one of Canada's best-known sculptors, Etrog's visual sense is striking, provocative, and often very powerful. Available through the Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre.

Lots more next time. . .

Don't Look at the Camera

By Harry Watt, published by Elek Books Limited, Great Britain (1974) 194 pages.

Pioneers in any major field — artistic, scientific or whatever — tend for good reason to be regarded as adventurers. After all they *were* there before anyone else, taking that first giant step.

Don't Look at the Camera, a new book by a pioneer in the field of documentary film, does read at times like an adventure story. But the memoirs of Harry Watt, the Scottish-born filmmaker who during the 1930's and 40's worked for the now-famous British General Post Office (GPO) and Crown film units reveal more of the dedicated, occasionally devious professional moviemaker at work than of the romantic adventurer. There was the time when Watt and his camera crew were almost washed overboard from the deck of an ancient trawler when they were filming *North Sea*. And the time when he caught the essence of a British commando raid on a German-held beach in Norway in a dramatic closeup of a uniformed figure, struggling up the sand, gun in hand. Romantic adventures indeed, but in the book, tempered with truth: the old ship's decks were awash because he and his camera crew had deliberately crippled her by stowing sixty barrels of water in her bows; and the "soldier" fighting to establish a beachhead was Harry Watt himself, clutching a borrowed rifle!

Much of the "realism" of those early GPO documentaries was staged. Some of this is obvious in this age of hand-held cameras and high-speed film where action can more easily be followed. In those days, Watt recalls, shoulder equipment had to be hauled around in a truck and any cameraman who wore a shoulder strap for portability would run the risk of being crippled, so staging of scenes was necessary and the results on the screen were sometimes stiff and artificial by today's standards. But much of the work of the GPO unit is remarkably true-to-life. Many astute professionals and sharp-eyed film buffs, for example, are unaware that some of the interior shots in the railway car in Watt's *Night Mail* were actually filmed on a studio set. And that because of the cumbersome 1930's sound equipment, the "clickety-clack" of the train's wheels was made by a *toy* train.

Most of Watt's "actors" in the GPO films were non-professionals. They were usually well-rehearsed and often spoke their dialogue from scripts, but in those days they were an innovation — ordinary working people whose real-

life stories were elevated into drama (hopefully) by the filmmaker's art. One of his associates, director Alberto Cavalcanti, paid him his most lasting tribute: "Harry Watt", he said, "put the sweaty sock into documentary."

The index of **Don't Look at the Camera** reads like a Who's Who of the arts. In his early years in film, Watt was sent on location in Ireland to assist in the production of that favorite of film societies, *Man of Aran*. He was told, unflatteringly, that its now-famous director, Robert Flaherty, needed "a strong back" — and someone who could withstand the rigors of filming on the remote islands. So, garbed for the foulest weather and most meagre accommodation, he arrived to find Flaherty, his cast and crew housed in a very commonplace seaside holiday villa.

With little to do, Watt did not enjoy himself during the filming, although he had great respect for Flaherty's work. For one thing, Watt knew that he too had talent, which he felt he must develop. This led him to suggest a scene for the film, which he never quite forgave Flaherty for rejecting; it was a cattle drive down to the beach, a very dramatic — and cinematic — annual event on Aran. The animals, maddened by fear, were herded into the water and hauled aboard cattle steamers. It was the *reason* for Flaherty's decision not to use the sequence that bothered Watt most: the director did not want to show that the "isolated" islands were serviced by ships!

In later years with the GPO and the Crown film units, Watt worked on various projects with other notables. The writers included John Betjeman, and W.H. Auden, who wrote the poetic script for *Night Mail*. His music for that film was by a young composer remembered by Watt as a "shy, soft-spoken kid, with close-curling blond hair, and a pale and sensitive face" His name was Benjamin Britten and his fee was ten pounds.

Several of Harry Watt's associates then are familiar names now in Canada. One was "a lissom, bright kid from Glasgow Arts School" Norman McLaren. And another was John Grierson.

Much has been said about the founder of Canada's National Film Board in his later years in this country, but **Don't Look at the Camera** presents a rare view of Grierson when he was starting up The Empire Marketing Board Film Unit in England and hired Watt off the street in the early 1930's.

Watt remembers him as "one of the strongest, most compelling personalities that I have ever met," completely dedicated to documentary films. "And yet," Watt says, "I don't think he was a strong man. He had the quality of an evangelist, which made it difficult to question his theories and beliefs."

Watt admits to a vague discomfort in criticizing Grierson, like a school-boy writing about his headmaster, but he still records what he considers to be Grierson's failings, "The trouble with his leadership for simple film-makers like me was that he theorized too much," he says. "It's a well-known weakness of prophets, that when you dare to analyze their writings and sayings, you often find an awful lot of double-talk. Art is instinctive, and it also needs an instinctive ability to create it. This has nothing to do with intelligence. Grierson was tremendously intelligent, vibrant, virile, a world authority on cinema. But, to me, he was not basically a film-maker, but an instigator."

Watt throughout the book expresses admiration for Grierson's ability to cut through red tape and bureaucracy, and impose on others his view of documentaries as important tools or even weapons for social justice and reform. "His final and fitting memorial is the National Film Board of Canada," says Watt, "which he created and headed throughout the war, and which is the only active and important centre for the production of realist films left today."

Harry Watt also admired John Grierson's uncanny ability to spot and encourage talent, including Watt's own, and because of this, Watt created documentaries that may perhaps show their age today in some of their techniques, but were milestones in their time and have deservedly become part of film's permanent literature. But **Don't Look at the Camera** is not, because of this, yet another treatise on filmic art by an Old Master — far from it. At its weakest, it's a platform from which its author is only too glad to give you his opinions, although he does it entertainingly, just as he would if he were bending your ear over drinks following a day's shooting. And at its best it's a lively, honest, earthy account of a major period of documentary development. It's a book that — like his films — reveals the author's deep belief in the importance of his profession and its people, and his love and respect for Ordinary Mankind — sweaty socks and all.

— Doug MacDonald