

The future of documentary in a TV age



Gertrude Bailey in the 1966
The Things I Cannot Change

photos: NFB



Ken and Gertrude Bailey
in *My Children Are going To Be Something*

by Gary Evans

On March 27, two million viewers of *The Journal* saw a documentary of contemporary family watching themselves in a black-and-white documentary they had last viewed 18 years ago. On *The Journal*, *My Children Are Going To Be Something* showed the Baileys, sipping beer in their living room, and nudging each other in amusement in a family time-warp, reliving a life frozen in celluloid in the National Film Board's *The Things I Cannot Change*, the first film in the historic Challenge For Change series. The difference between the two NFB documentaries – and their respective means of delivery – raises the question of how much documentary film has changed.

Gary Evans teaches at Dawson College in Montreal and is the author of *John Grierson and the National Film Board: The Politics of Wartime Propaganda*.

The 1966 film used the then-innovative technique of direct cinema, where the camera acted as a neutral innocent eye, recording life as it unfolded, with no apparent manipulation of subject and minimal narration. The Baileys were then a family on the skids, a representative example of Canada's poverty-ridden underclass, perennially unemployed, victimized and ignored by a system whose institutions had seemingly failed them. Ken Bailey was himself a victim of violence and his own ignorance, ever suspicious of authority. Procreation was his manner of fighting back. Holding his tenth child and pointing to an empty fridge, he swore he would steal if necessary to feed the family. He also pointed to a framed prayer which he had adopted as his motto: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference." The '60s audience must have then wondered what would happen to this depressing, hard-luck bunch.

As they now appear in colour in their suburban Montreal apartment, one notes that the technique employed in both films by filmmaker Tanya Balantyne-Tree is virtually unchanged. So too are the personalities of the Baileys. Garrulous, patriarchal Ken Bailey is still proud, sentimental and at times infuriatingly arrogant and chauvinistic on-camera; the ever-subdued Gertrude Bailey remains unemotive and long-suffering, a classic case of a woman, like countless others, whose adult life has been dictated by events revolving around babysitting and housekeeping. Only six of the children appear now; the others having grown up and gone their separate ways. The new film has interviews with several of the boys, one a factory worker with a boring job, hoping to find work somewhere warm next winter; another unemployed with few prospects but trouble, restless at 'living off the fat of the land', thinking of leaving the city but teetering on the edge of anti-social behaviour. Another pays lip service to the

importance of education as he tries to finish his basic schooling at night and hopes to enter the electronics field. A daughter appears at her workplace, convinced she is going up in the world, having literally risen seven floors to become a receptionist. She is still too poor to afford Christmas presents. Another daughter, a waitress, was horribly maimed last year in a car crash and will be a cripple the rest of her life. The youngest daughter hopes to become a secretary.

The ending of the 1985 film plays with the title – asking if the Bailey children *have* become something – and concludes that another generation may pass before judgements about achievement are possible. Is this film just a new edition of *The Things I Cannot Change*? The surroundings are far more palatable than the pathetic slum of 1966. The apartment is filled with modern appliances, the symbols of middle-class life. The fridge and freezer are full. Ken Bailey, ever at ease in mugging before the camera (off-

camera he considers himself an actor), talks of how he found work in 1971. There is a quiet dignity to all of this, capped by a simple family Christmas which cannot fail to move the viewer.

Yet the film confirms the platitude that if things are always changing, some things never change at all. In half the time of the original piece, *The Journal* re-immortalized the Baileys, comforting some viewers to conclude that, in the end, Canada had not failed this family.

But wait – a few perceptive people may know that the prayer about 'the things I cannot change' is the motto of Alcoholics Anonymous. Was there something missing from the 1966 film we should have known about today? Is that the missing piece in the puzzle then and today? One senior NFB producer remembers showing the first film to a group of urban unemployed whose response was that they hated it because they twigged that the key issue lay unmentioned. This writer looked up Ken Bailey and asked him point-blank about alcohol. He flew into a rage. "That goddam motto!" he bellowed. "That has caused me more hurt over the years than anything else, even more than the \$500 they paid me to first come into my home. I am not an alcoholic and never have been. Like a good Irishman, I like to drink every once in a while, but I am not a drunk!" We then continued to talk for over an hour.

In that conversation with Ken Bailey, it dawned that the truth of both the 1966 and 1985 documentaries was only provisional. Ballantyne-Tree had chosen the family originally because as victims of poverty they seemed to have more spirit and determination to overcome their condition than any other families she had interviewed. And in a way the *Journal* piece proves she was right – if the Baileys are still far from affluence, the trappings of middle-class life, from the appliances to the suburban apartment, seem to attest to some measure of success. It may not be seen as upward mobility, but it is a kind of lateral *stasis*. Yet the nagging question of the children's quest for success – the centre of gravity of the '85 documentary – remains unanswered.

The difference between what a filmmaker knows and what the viewer does not raises a host of questions which have been with documentary for decades. The filmmaker plays a constant game of manipulation, for, in editing the event itself, great amounts of actuality material must be discarded. Sometimes the interviewee thinks that important moments are missing. Bailey stated that he feels victimized because a number of intimate details he told about his family on-camera were excised. NFB co-producer Michael Rubbo tried to explain to him that, had the filmmaker been searching for sensation, these details would have been included – probably to the detriment of the whole family. And in fact Ballantyne-Tree is preparing a 60-minute version from fifteen hours of footage. She will attempt to provide a more detailed portrait of the family today, intending to reveal, without narration, more subtle and complex facets about the subjects than were in the television version. She has not decided if the longer portrait will include the intimate details that could hurt the family, though she is discussing the pros and cons with colleagues.

Should she delete material which the family gave willingly? Unlike actors, politicians and media-types, they are unable to disguise real feelings or to

protect themselves before the camera. Should the Baileys be allowed to pillory themselves in the name of their self-defined status as 'movie actors' and film's claim to immortalize? The decision of choice and deletion at the Film Board usually occurs after the filmmaking team spends months studying and trying out the material.

The Journal piece was in three 10-minute segments, interrupted by two commercials. Television's ruthless criteria demand compression, simplification, omission and speedy production. These factors have become so integral to television documentary that the final edit of this film on the latest 'state of the art' equipment in Toronto took only one day. By conventional means at the NFB, it would have taken two weeks. The advantage of the former is speed and immediacy; the advantage of the latter is the ability to talk and think about the film at length. NFB co-producer Kirwan Cox confided that a CBC producer told

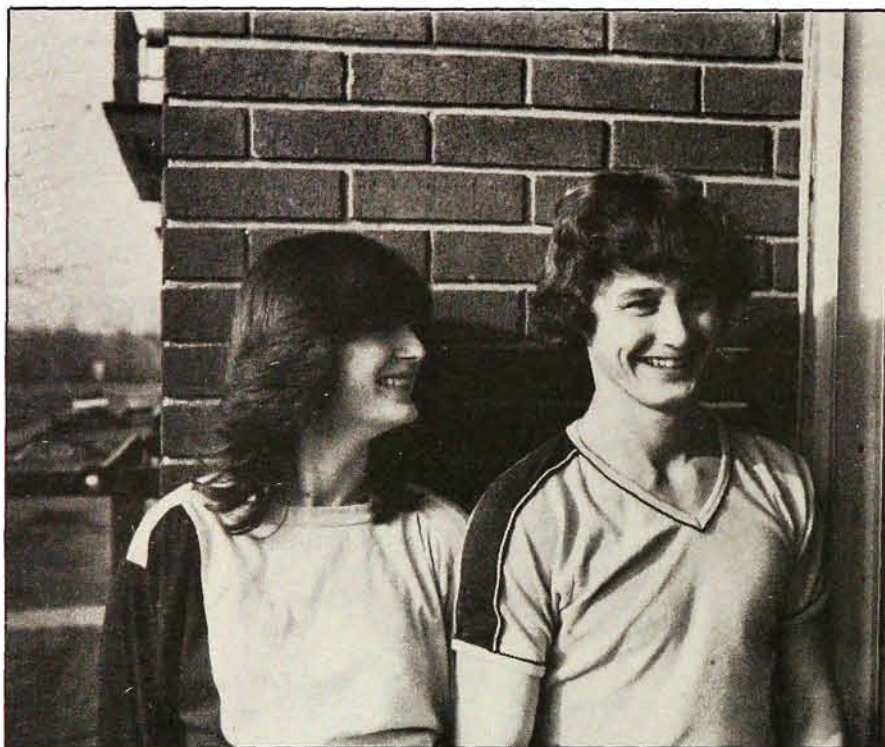
him that, with television, there is neither time to think nor reflect about what is being done.

In the television piece, viewers may conclude that the Bailey success story of modern apartment, kitchen appliances and steady work attests to the viability of the system. But did viewers pick up on the continued vulnerability and *naïveté* of the underclass, on cliché as a response to the surrounding world, on prevarications 'played' before the camera, on nuances of failed communication? Will the 60-minute version do any better? Did the filmmaker err in refusing to take a stand and let a narrator lead the audience through this journey? One might argue that after the disparate elements appear as a coherent narrative, what one is left with is, to recall the Platonic allegory of the cave, merely the shadow of truth rather than the truth itself.

With its interest in scoop and deadlines, television arguably flies in the

face of the old Griersonian dictum that documentary should reveal truth in the quiet light of ordinary humanism. Television documentary today is a compendium of spectacle, violence, disaster and drama. While seemingly 'free' television insists that certain formulae be followed, what is *not* required is forbidden, to put it in absolute terms. Instead of the expression of the complex patterns of the times and society, the rule of action, balance and simplicity usually presents the viewer with only two sides of an issue. The implication is that life is reducible to a series of Manichean choices. Having to make documentary films in this manner robs the craftsman of the essential ingredient of the profession – passion.

Yet, in the final analysis, *The Journal* continues to satisfy its self-created, voracious appetite for documentaries. At the risk of promoting national indigestion, it produces about 500 pieces a year. The Film Board, on the other hand, follows a critical path which seems so openended that documentary is less a matter of form and technique than of passion, politics and the unconventional.



In the office of the NFB's Director of Production, the walls are bare except for a bigger-than-life photo of the head of John Grierson. Peter Katadotis gazes at the Old Eminence and articulates his optimism about the changing face of documentary. Few other people in Canada have as much influence as he does to change the face of the medium. His analysis is deceptively simple. "Documentary should be political and personal," he declares, without time constraints, though he acknowledges that, with prime-time slots like *The Journal*, one must follow stringent conventions. Without wishing to abandon the television audience, he wants to push documentary to its furthest parameters. This suggests that NFB films should not necessarily fit into a television format, but should be crafted for a range of different audiences. The only criterion he believes in is that the film must reflect Canadian culture and the Canadian reality. He notes that the NFB's largest audience is still children in schools: three-quarters of the Board's annual exhibitions are in primary and secondary schools and libraries.

But, says Katadotis, "Filmmakers don't want to admit they make films for kids, because there's no status in admitting that. Within the craft, feature filmmakers have the highest status, documentary filmmakers have a low status and those who make children's films have the lowest." As NFB production plans for the balance of the '80s attest, Katadotis is trying to change this.

Today, he says, there is more activity at the Board now that there has been for years. Long before the much-publicized government cutbacks to cultural agencies, the Board was already undergoing painful internal restructuring. The \$14 million slice from the 1985 budget hurt, but in light of earlier contractions, it was something everyone could live with. One early decision was to order a moratorium on all feature films: fully 70 percent of productions planned will be 30 minutes or less. A very large percentage is going to reach young audiences which Katadotis believes are still seeing too much of the American product.

The kinds of films already in production reflect the diversity of the Board's

documentary tradition. This means that the NFB can insist that commercial saleability take a second place to cultural importance. (Critics of the Board most often reverse these priorities, thereby robbing themselves of any justifiable argument to dismantle the agency). The regional studios are very much alive. A film on child abuse, will be out soon from Vancouver, while the Toronto studio is finishing *Umpire*, a child's-eye view of a marriage break-up. The Prairie studio's four part series, *The Métis*, an all-Métis women team effort, will dignify that often forgotten minority, while Donald Brittain's film *Seaport*, is the little-known story of Hal Banks and his struggle with the Seafarers International Union. If the Canadian political economy might not at first glance seem exciting film fare, a major documentary series by political economist James Laxer will explain how to refocus definitions to understand contemporary patterns. As an illustration, he attacks neoconservative economic theory by showing that U.S. president Reagan's stance against the evils of a planned economy is only posturing when one scrutinizes the military component of the U.S. economy, which Laxer believes is the major segment of that country's *planned* economy.

John N. Smith experiments with '30s documentary technique as he constructs a film of unconventional length. His subject - urban black teenagers - is being written by nonprofessional black teens who then 'act' their real-life roles. And Film Board veteran Wolf Koenig is probing the frontier of bioethics as technology stretches mortality.

The women's Studio D continues to produce personal and political films for its natural constituency. (Katadotis refers to Studio D as the '80s equivalent of Challenge For Change.) Terri Nash and Bonnie Klein have documented the women's crusade for peace and nuclear disarmament in *Speaking Our Peace*. And Margaret Wescott's remarkable *Under The Veil* is a no-holds-barred document of the Church's patriarchal structure as a form of social control. The women's studio has no problem finding an audience and its films are often pre-booked by women's groups months before they are released.

Katadotis stresses how much energy at the Film Board goes into debate and decision to avoid 'formula' production. While the Board does not want to deny the television audience which is always there, it must strike a balance so that the 'other' audience can be reached. So the Film Board will continue to produce for the passive television community while seeking the active community in developmental channels of distribution. Such distribution, Katadotis believes, should not mean compromise - in recent years the Board made too many compromises.

He believes the Board too readily compromised its central mandate, which is to make films for Canadians and by Canadians. Nor does this rule out attracting audiences outside Canada. On the question of joint PBS-NFB productions, he is confident the new strategy is sound. "The films should be so good that the Americans will ask for them," he states. To harmonize the tug and pull of diverse audiences, the Board is putting its entire distribution network under one roof in Montreal. The market, he notes, is changing quickly and the Board is studying the possibility of entering the direct-mail home-cassette market.

Asked to comment on the Canadian public's long-standing prejudice against television documentaries, Katadotis points to the impressive record of documentaries like *The Nature of Things* (CBC). He notes too that a documentary on the whales of Newfoundland did better on CBC than the NFB co-produced *The Wars*, proving that good documentary can at least reach the same audience as a bad feature. The point remains that in documentary the viewer sees something he or she normally would not see. The unexpected is what we still look for. And at the Board, where deadlines are waived for time, thought and care, films are being made by artists who feel passion for what they do. Their personal experience and knowledge of the world are critical to their art.

The expression of strong personal opinion, is, according to Academy Award-winning NFB producer Adam Symansky, the salvation of documentary. But, he warns, it is also killing documentary because the marketplace dictates the style and television will not tolerate expression of personal opinion, except for that rare breed of documentary 'star' like Donald Brittain or Harry Rasky. Symansky points out that television only agreed to show Gwynne Dyer's last film in the *War* series because it had been preceded by six hours of 'balanced' material. Most television brass thought it was too personal and political. As for the now-overplayed docudrama, Symansky believes there are real developmental and structural problems with it and its future is in question.

If the NFB seems like a documentary filmmaker's paradise, realities do intrude. The average age of NFB filmmakers is 48; the youngest is 37. There has been no hiring of permanent employees since the early '70s. What work is there for the graduates of film schools? Or what happens to the 100-plus producers who were laid off at the CBC recently because of cutbacks? Like Moses gazing at the Promised Land, outsiders can dream of how things would be... if only they could get inside the Board.

Almost too good to be true, Telefilm Canada just stepped into the breach in March with a new policy and money to encourage documentary production from the private sector. A memorandum of understanding opens Telefilm's \$54 million annual broadcast fund to documentary.

The three provincial educational broadcasters licensed by the CRTC, Radio-Quebec, TV Ontario and Access Alberta, will be able to tap the fund up to 49 percent of the costs of production if the production meets the CRTC Canadian program point-criteria set out in April 1984. This does not exclude other broadcasters, public or private, pay-TV, or specialized service broadcasters. To illustrate, a \$300,000 project may be backed by Telefilm from \$100,000 \$148,000, matching what the broadcaster puts in.

While nearly 65 percent of Telefilm's \$54 million broadcast fund budget has been devoted to drama and the balance was taken up by variety and children's productions, the addition of the category has seemingly breathed new life into television documentary. It has also provided potential contract work to the hundred-plus ex-CBC producers who lost their livelihood due to cuts. Telefilm's only caveat is that it is not willing to consider documentaries that fit into public affairs or information programmes already produced by television networks, like *the fifth estate* or *The Journal*.

The director of Telefilm's broadcast fund is Peter Pearson, whose contribution to Canadian documentary and feature film in the '60s and '70s was significant and permanent. Since assuming his position at Telefilm in 1983 (*a position he has just resigned from - ed.*), he has worked for expansion of private-sector expression and production of Canadian film. The step to documentary is only part of that evolution, he notes, though it is not meant to compliment the Film Board or the public-affairs branch of the CBC.

Pearson has not carved out a specific percentage of Telefilm's budget for documentary. He emphasizes that Telefilm is willing to fund documentaries as the broadcasters demand them. Thus the fund is there to help realize productions that meet the standards which television imposes.

Asked if he thought that this policy would restrict innovation in documentary because of television's rigorous insistence on formula, Pearson admitted this was a problem. But he says Telefilm is not there to set standards or support films which have no guaranteed distribution. He did not, however, think that this ruled out the innovative aspect of documentary and to illustrate he pointed to the work of Holly Dale and Janis Cole

(*P4W, Hookers On Davie*), documentarians who produce material that is socially informative, sensitive and has audience appeal.

But Pearson wonders if the term documentary does not beg the question. "What does documentary mean? What is documentary?" Thinking of his own experience with the medium, having done documentaries on people from left to right politically, he points to a special problem that documentary filmmakers have: "Documentary under Canadian law is a very restricted form. The *persona* of a person belongs to himself." He implied that there is a limit to what the filmmaker can say, and commented on how difficult a medium it is to work in, thinking perhaps about his own mid-'70s nightmare and lawsuit over *The Tar Sands*, a CBC docudrama. He playfully suggested that anyone who has a definition of documentary should send it to Telefilm post haste.

The difficulty of defining the form lead us back to Ken Bailey who accuses the NFB of 'exploiting' him in *My Children Are Going To Be Something*. He believes that not only was his 'actor' status not acknowledged properly, but also that the NFB made him once again sign away world-rights to the film, which he believes may one day be sold commercially on video. He has sought political and legal advice about whether his rights have been infringed. One cannot help but think of the sad aftermath of hard feelings and lawsuits with Allan King's 1983 documentary *Who's In Charge?* What Bailey had signed, both in 1966 and 1985, was the standard universal waiver which all persons filmed by the NFB must sign, allowing their image to be used in a finished film. If Grierson's workingmen with their shirtsleeves rolled up, are now 'celebrities', Ballantyne-Tree's filmed picture still needs a thousand words of explanation.

So is the face of documentary really changing? Television's restrictions seem to indicate that the parameters of documentary in the '80s are shrinking, not expanding. Television remains virtually the only avenue for independents to get financing and distribution in Canada, yet the chances of seeing innovation and experimentation are decreasing proportionately as the amount of money available for production is increasing. The three non-commercial television networks now tapping into Telefilm's fund offer some hope. Still, the exception remains the National Film Board, where the Grierson tradition of political idealism, passion and experimentation continues - for the select group who has the privilege to be there. In all likelihood, the Film Board will remain the only serious barometer reflecting the changing face of documentary in contemporary Canada.

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