

Margaret Westcott's Behind The Veil: Nuns

Half-a-dozen years ago, Diane Létourneau directed an unpretentious documentary on a congregation of Catholic nuns in Sherbrooke, Qué. A Prisma production, *Les Servantes du Bon Dieu* scored a surprise hit at the Cannes Film Festival, and subsequently was hailed far and near for its wisdom, insight, and humanity. Above all, for accomplishing something extremely difficult in documentary filmmaking. By maintaining a clear critical attitude, and reflecting what might be termed an a-religious sensibility typical of Quebec today, Létourneau left no doubt as to the what we now call sexist attitudes and mores underlying the way of life of a group of religious women, whose specific *raison d'être* is to keep house and serve as handy-men (so to speak) for the priests of their diocese. On the other hand, however, she succeeded in never once talking down to her audience nor exploiting the subjects of her film. The women, in their humour, warmth, and generosity, emerged as genuinely sympathetic and admirable human beings: one vaguely understood why they did what they did, their religious motivation, and the richness that this brought to their lives.

The film worked beautifully, scoring clear and significant points from a feminist perspective (whether that was its avowed intention or not) precisely, one could claim, because it was so fair, disciplined, and profoundly respectful of the complexities of the human situation. Its very openness lent it amazing credibility.

One might be tempted to see *Behind the Veil*, the recent Studio D production of the NFB, directed by Margaret Westcott, as a sequel of sorts. That, however, is far from the case, for though its apparent subject matter is, once again, nuns, the film is a vastly different enterprise. For one thing, *Behind the Veil* tackles an immeasurably more ambitious topic — nothing less than the whole history of nuns in the Catholic Church in a two-hour analysis from the feminist vantage point. So nuns — but also the Catholic Church itself and the entire history of Europe, with, inevitably, matters philosophical and theological thrown in. An impossibly ambitious task for one documentary.

But the possibilities are remarkable, both in terms of contemporary relevance and in terms of eliciting debate and controversy. For there is the Catholic Church, accounting for at least half of the 1,200,000,000 Christians throughout the world. And too there, are the various often vastly differing congregations of nuns — professionals who have given their lives to that Church — who are essential to its survival, and who actually outnumber their male counterparts, the priests (and brothers) two to one. Put that in the context of the radical changes that swept through vast areas of the Catholic Church in the '60s and '70s (did any other world-institution evolve as much?), and in that other evolving social context, a few years later, the breakthrough in acceptance (at least partially) of feminist insights and the

consequent shifts in women's roles — and you have a very complex situation indeed, especially given the fact that the two evolutions never quite meshed. A divided Church is hesitant; and its official hierarchy is at times even hostile to the new role of women, even to the discussion of the possibility of ordaining women, etc.

From these perspectives at least, a documentary on nuns promises much. Heady stuff, to be sure, and guaranteed to elicit a response anything but uniform and serene, given the divergent convictions of many in the audience.

Like the majority of those I know who saw the film (most of them women who are not nuns), I came to *Behind the Veil* with a sense of enthusiasm. But, like most of them, sadly, I went gradually from sympathy to disenchantment and, finally, to frustration. *Behind the Veil* had succeeded in partially alienating even one prejudiced in favour of its general aims. Slowly, as I sat there, my mind began to boggle: was I being asked, in the name of a cause I consider worthy, to abandon all critical ability? There I was, torn between admiration for the women shown on the screen (and for their cause), and the dictates of my own mind, trained to demand a certain adherence to historical (and other) fairness and to logical analysis.

Behind the Veil possesses a certain unquestionable fascination; and some of its constitutive elements resonate with human beauty and power. Its major contribution comes from four or five nuns who are interviewed at length. Humble cinema, this — straightforward, with few cinematic embellishments, as none are needed. The camera merely serves as functional witness as, for a few moments, we observe two of the nuns at work in American urban sprawl. Far more time is spent with these two, and two other American nuns, in straight talking-head situations. An Irish nun — a delightful schol-

ar on women in Irish Church history completes the talking heads; and she just about steals the show. In spite of the extreme simplicity of the direct approach all of this is remarkable stuff. The women spell out personal convictions that are nothing short of radical; their honesty, intelligence, dedication, courage, and beauty fairly leap from the screen and from a sound-track rich in their splendidly articulated statements about their faith, problems, and attempts at coping with love/chastity and a lumberingly male-dominated Church.

But there are other nuns, too, as we are shown. These are in the province of Quebec; they are cloistered contemplatives in the old style; and we see them go through some of their liturgical functions, generally in inferior positions to prelates of one kind or another. At times, the documentary segments on real nuns is supplemented by similar, but more gothic shots of movie nuns taken (presumably) from old Quebec film. *Behind the Veil* feels no need to inform its viewers that these shots are staged.

Since this documentary delves into history, naturally many old photographs and paintings form a major visual component. By far the most striking of these is a long, lyrical re-creation of the times of St. Bridget of Kildare, around 500 AD. The camera moves slowly over enchanting pastel paintings — created especially for the film by Montreal artist Char Davies — of scenes of Bridget's world, her renowned monastery, the landscape of Kildare, Ireland, and other wondrous things.

Other people who appear in sketches and paintings do not fare so well, especially the bishops from the Latin South. Indeed, *Behind the Veil* could partially be described as a roguer's gallery of male clerical pigs, systematically represented as such.

Which leads to the commentary narra-

tion, which, one assumes, brings the filmmaker's understanding explicitly to the fore. The critic listens, stunned, wondering, "Is this for real?" I immediately thought of Donald Brittain, celebrated master of the Canadian documentary and the dry, perceptive, witty, often devastating commentary he is noted for, both in the writing and in the delivery. Well, writer/narrator Gloria Demers does a Brittain for us, consciously or unconsciously, except for the fact that Brittain she is not: deft wit is replaced by sledgehammer overstatement, symptomatic accuracy by sweeping half-truths — and all of it to a vaguely Brittainesque cadence. A point is being made, and there is surely something important underlying the words; but the tone verges on the reckless and the irresponsible.

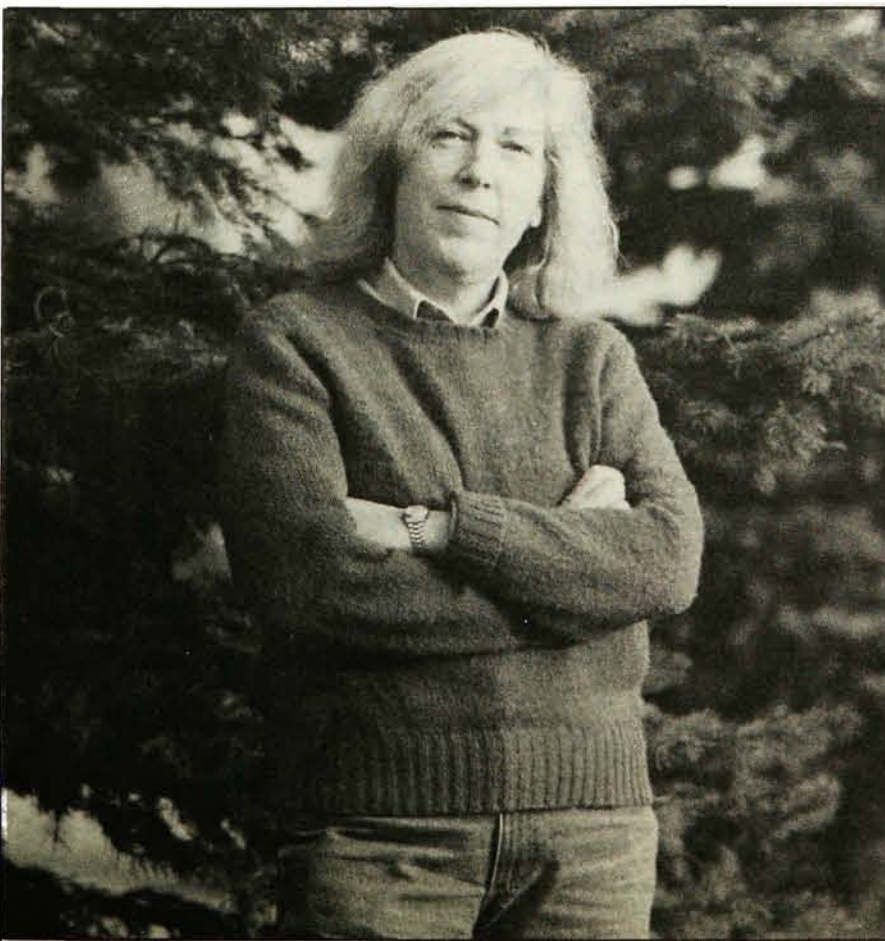
The mind goes on boggling at the facile one-liners that do away with historical complexity, nuance and centuries of research. The *partial* truth takes over, imposed by a pre-ordained one (the filmmakers', that is): forget any attempts at capturing anything like a complex reality. Nothing, no one is spared: Aristotle, Augustine, St. Thomas? The poor, dull chaps are delivered of their most assinine statements, out of context; and this proves their male chauvinist loudness. So much for the culture of Western civilization.

But back to Bridget, that marvelous human being, one of Ireland's fabled heroes. *Behind the Veil* builds on scraps of history and almost fifteen hundred years of legend without the slightest hesitation or acknowledgement that a lot of what is being put forward is rather uncertain. But never mind: Bridget is Ireland when Ireland was nothing if not a Celtic Utopia, truly "a little bit of heaven fallen from out the sky one day." Ireland of the Dark Ages was ruled by monasteries, and Bridget was the abbess of her monastery, ruling over both women and men. And Ireland was *happy*, because a woman ruled the Church... until, of course, those porcine Latin Bishops ran over the Celtic paradise, imposing male dominance there as elsewhere. So the thesis goes, and it is that simple.

The naïveté is overwhelming, scarcely exaggerated by my disreputable attempt at tongue-in-cheek: the film's demands on credulity are stretched beyond the limit. And yet, the point is a marvelous one, of extreme importance: the story of Bridget needs to be told, and the feminist perspective on history should be articulated. St. Bridget deserves treatment worthy of her achievements, subject to the same criteria and standards of research that are applied to any other major historical figure.

Behind the Veil uses the Bridget story to touch on another crucial question, this one more directly theological/anthropological: the Christian anthropomorphic attribution, through language use, of maleness to God. Bridget, we are told in the film, is the reincarnation, sort of, of Brigid, the Celtic pagan goddess of fertility. Through her (them), the Irish validated the female principle, counteracting the Latin/Roman Church's phallogocentric bias. Very interesting considerations these, and demanding exploration and nuanced articulation, instead of the one-liners and comic-book, fairytale treatment afforded by the film.

No wonder, then, that *Behind the Veil* risks losing all but the most militant of its sympathizers. As one experiences the film, one becomes ever more critical, tempted



• Don Brittain plus dogma: *Behind The Veil* director Margaret Westcott

to doubt every statement made by the narrator. Inevitably, certain other worrisome considerations begin the surface.

For example, what about the nuns? The film is Canadian, put out by that very bastion of Canadian cultural affirmation, the NFB. Now, nuns do exist in Canada (half of whose population is Roman Catholic). Why are there no Canadians among the women interviewed, but only Americans, and the one Irish scholar? There are some marvelously knowledgeable, "liberated", even media-well-known nuns in Canada, yet none was found for this film. Could it be, the by-now-antagonistic critic suspects, that no Canadian could be found who suited the demands of the pre-ordained thesis/idea of the filmmakers; or even that certain exemplary spokespersons from within this country were deliberately ignored?

Correction. There *are* Canadian nuns visible, the French-Canadian contemplatives from near Montreal. The images chosen of them are devastating, given the context created by the commentary. One feels these women have been abused, as we see "them" — is it "real" or is it one of the unidentified movie-clips? — prostrate themselves before bishops, etc., to illustrate the film's thesis of Church male domination. Here indeed (if I may digress) is a perfect example of one of the film's tactics: it scores a point, but the reality factor is not quite what it is made out to be. In this instance, what should be pointed out is that we are watching a centuries-old Catholic ritual, mostly discarded now, but which still exists in scattered enclaves, in which *both* females and males prostrate themselves as a sign of life consecration to Christ, represented here

by the Bishop; or in which nuns prostrate themselves before another woman, their Superior, representing Christ. None of this kind of nuanced explanation surfaces in *Behind the Veil*. The thesis must be served, and who cares about the reality, or the people whose trust has been abused?!

And even those contemporary nuns with the "radical views" who come across so winningly; are their views not being ever so subtly denatured? For, progressively, almost unnoticeably, what they say so intelligently begins to be confused with what the commentary says so blatantly and recklessly. One wonders, finally, if they, too, have not been used/abused; that the deepest meaning behind the "talking of the veil" for them — their religious motivation — has been lost, sacrificed to the needs of the idea of the film.

In other words, *Behind the Veil* is not really a film about nuns then and now, here and there; but a film that uses partial aspects of nuns' lives to make its own statement concerning male domination.

What ultimately comes across instead of reasoned exploration is an angry, at times petulant, almost personal, settling of accounts. It is as if the filmmakers were more interested in the intensity of their own feelings, and in the power to hit back that they now possess through the film. The danger of miscalculation, of course, is great: how will audiences react? Will they accept the inaccuracies and over-simplifications, will they indeed turn off their critical faculties, or will they experience frustration and alienation, even to the point of feeling insulted by the process?

Which leads to the saddest of ironies: the filmmakers have made it easy for those who are against its views to dismiss the

film with impunity.

Behind the Veil brings into clear focus the problem that is central to the practice of the media and the ethical imperatives that should govern that practice. On one side, there are those who will use the media at the expense of "reality": Eisenstein tried to do just that quite systematically, but he got away with it in the eyes of aesthetic film history because he was also a poet. The Nazis excelled at it. Every country has used film in that fashion, witness our own wartime NFB, or Frank Capra in the U.S. Add all those war movies to glorify "our" side (whichever, no matter), but at least *they* openly proclaimed themselves as fiction. Above all, include the whole advertising enterprise: partial truths often covering the big lie.

Others use the media very differently. Rossellini and Renoir had their own definite ideas, but these ideas tended to become more and more nuanced, emerging as they did from the complex reality their cameras captured. The human condition, its contradictions and messy lack of precision, comes first in their work: people have more value than the Idea. Canada's direct cinema is rich in this tradition. And Diane Létourneau's *Les Servantes du Bon Dieu* serves as a marvelous example of a film whose director respected, and, yes, loved the people (nuns) she studied. It is worth repeating that only made the critical attitude to the film that much more reliable and convincing.

Studio D is to be congratulated for tackling an important issue with the making of *Behind the Veil*. Certain considerations raised (and blessed St. Bridget among them!) make many of us read history with

a different eye. And *the* question (be it of women's status in general or of women in the Church in particular) has been brought to the fore in a different context. In all of this, the movie has served its purpose, and that is no small achievement.

But the final critical assessment is far less enthusiastic. Is the use of the media in the fashion outlined above tolerable in our society? Had *Behind the Veil* yielded less to the manipulative media temptation and better respected the complexity of the human situation, it would have served its purpose far more effectively. Both the subject matter of this movie, and really, the documentary film medium as a whole, deserve different treatment.

Marc Gervais •

BEHIND THE VEIL d. Margaret Wescott cam. Susan Trow ed. Rosemarie Shapley sc./nar. Gloria Demers asst. cam. Bonnie Andrukaitis loc. sd. Ingrid M. Cusieli elect. Roger Martin, Walter Klymkiw loc. man. (St. Eustache, Quebec) Saverio Grana (Italy), Ewa Zebrowski (Chicago) Holly Dressel (Republic of Ireland) Claire Stevens res. Holly Dressel add. res. Rosemarie Shapley, Margaret Wescott, Signe Johansson vis. res. Elizabeth Schwartzbaum, Ewa Zebrowski, Ginny Stikeman, Micheline LeGuillou Irish cons. Part II Ann Dooley paintings of St. Bridget. Part II Char David anim. cam. Pierre Landry graphic cons. Wolf Koenig add. ed. Margaret Wescott, Donna Read p. & ed. assit. Donna Dudinsky orig. mus. Maribeth Solomon, Micky Erbe mus. ed. Diane Le Floch sd. ed. Jacqueline Newell re-rec. Jean-Pierre Joutel mus. mix Hayward Parrott unit admin. Gisèle Guibault sect'y Linda Paris Quillinan p. Signe Johansson exec. p. Kathleen Shannon p. National Film Board of Canada, Studio D dist. by National Film Board of Canada 16 mm, colour running time: 64 mins. (Part I), 66 mins. (Part II).

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