

One Hundred Years After: Film and History in Atlantic Canada

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REVIEW ESSAYS/NOTES CRITIQUES

One Hundred Years After: Film and History in Atlantic Canada

IT ALL STARTED ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO, when the movies first came to Canada. They reached Montreal, Ottawa and Toronto in the summer of 1896. They arrived in Saint John in November that year, when audiences at the Opera House were treated to a short programme of New York street scenes and a circus parade; a few weeks later local spectators saw one of the famous early shorts, "The Kiss".¹ These were modest beginnings, but in the century that followed the movies have become one of the principal languages of the 20th century. Indeed, as Gore Vidal has suggested, "Movies are the lingua franca of the twentieth century".²

The importance of this new technology of communication has been slow to receive recognition as a subject for cultural studies. In a recent article the film archivist Sam Kula pointed out that as early as 1898 a Polish cinematographer published a tract entitled *Une nouvelle source de l'histoire*, which argued for the establishment of film archives to preserve this new kind of historical document. But the first "cinémathèques" — film libraries — did not emerge in Europe until the 1930s, and in Canada it was not until the 1970s that the Public Archives of Canada took up collection responsibilities in the field.³ Now, in the 1990s, film is at last coming into its own as a subject of study in Canada, stimulated by a widening interest in social and cultural history and by the successes of Canadian film-makers in a global industry. There are academic programmes in the field, and since 1990 the Film Studies Association of Canada has published a *Canadian Journal of Film Studies*.⁴

Film history itself has at least two main branches. One studies the history of film; another studies history *on* film. One film historian has made the distinction in these terms: "Today there are historians whose interest is the movies; increasingly there are also historians interested in the movies".⁵ In the first case the focus is on the history of a 20th century cultural industry, examining aspects of its economic, technical, social and aesthetic development. In the second case historians are more interested in using film to shed light on other historical problems, thus treating film as one more kind of historical evidence and another way of contributing to the interpretation of history. While the history *of* film is becoming a

1 David Folster, "First Flickers", *The New Brunswick Reader* (Saint John), 23 November 1996, pp. 17-18.

2 Gore Vidal, *Screening History* (Cambridge, 1992), p. 2.

3 Sam Kula, "Film Archives and the Centenary of Film", *Archivaria*, 40 (Fall 1995), pp. 210-25.

4 A major two-volume bibliography in the field is forthcoming from the University of Toronto Press: Loren R. Lerner, ed., *Canadian Film and Video: A Bibliography and Guide to the Literature*.

5 K.R.M. Short, "Preface" in Short, ed., *Feature Films as History* (London, 1981), p. 11.

recognized branch of cultural history, history *on* film has received less attention. Yet it cannot be denied that film has become one of the technologies of communication through which large numbers of people acquire information and ideas about the past.⁶ Some years ago, in this journal, Colin Howell discussed a selection of new documentary films about the history of Atlantic Canada. Several of these have had a healthy life in history classes over the last 15 years. His conclusions encouraged historians to pay more attention to the presentation of history on film, not only as a method of presenting history to students but also on the grounds that historians themselves may have something to contribute in this area.⁷

To mark the 100th anniversary of the arrival of film in Canada, the National Archives have released a selection of early films, under the title *Centenary Snapshots* (National Archives of Canada, 1995). This is a package of nine black and white films, each only a few minutes in length, produced by early film companies between 1899 and 1907. An achievement of good luck and technical resourcefulness, this package was reconstructed from surviving paper prints of early films held by the Library of Congress. A conventional sound track and explanatory titles have been added to the original silent footage; and the corporate sponsorship for the project (TMN's Moviepix) is prominently recognized — “in your face”, say my students — at the beginning and end of each item. As evidence about the Canadian past, this is a tentative collection of contemporary documents that confirm several familiar themes in the Canadian image at the turn of the century: there are war canoes, fire departments, prospectors on a northern trail, a train ride through the Niagara Gorge, the Musical Ride; three specific historical moments are recorded: Canadian volunteers depart for the South African War in 1899, the Duke of York visits Quebec (and Sir Wilfrid Laurier makes a brief screen appearance) in 1901, Tommy Burns defends his heavyweight title in California in 1907. Although more than 100 surviving films with Canadian content were identified among the Library of Congress holdings, none of the selections in this package refer to Atlantic Canada. This situation can be expected to improve as additional films from the same source are brought to light.⁸

Fast forward from the 1890s to the 1990s, and we meet the *Heritage Minutes*,

- 6 The *Journal of American History* has published an annual selection of movie reviews for the last decade; for an introductory statement by Robert Brent Toplin, which is still useful as a statement of why historians should take films seriously and how they should be assessed, see *Journal of American History*, 73, 3 (December 1986), pp. 819-21. He points out that films are necessarily less comprehensive than books and that they must often depend on limited visual evidence. Nevertheless, allowing for the requirements of popularization and simplification, they still require assessment as contributions to the historiography of their subject matter.
- 7 Colin Howell, “Film and History in Atlantic Canada”, *Acadiensis*, XI, 2 (Spring 1982), pp. 140-5.
- 8 Meanwhile, the various provincial archives have also begun to collect film and video footage that illustrates the region's past. For the time being the use of film as a primary source has been limited, but as historians make their way past the middle of the 20th century it seems likely that they will increasingly turn to the accumulating newsreel and broadcast reportage in the archives.

which represent the more common use of film as a secondary source for the presentation of Canadian history. Since their first appearance in 1991, these tiny feature films have been delivering short visual messages about Canadian history to literally millions of Canadians on television and movie screens and in classrooms. The challenge here is to tell a story of historical significance within the limits of a one-minute dramatic film production. In general the results demonstrate a high order of technical accomplishment in the use of script, music, camera and editing. In this they bear little resemblance to the short productions of a century ago and thus illustrate the evolution of the art of film-making over the century; indeed the more appropriate comparison is to the television commercials and movie trailers of today. By the summer of 1996 one beer company's television commercials were paying them the compliment of imitation; so too have the comedy team on *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*; now *Heritage Minutes* are also "part of our heritage".

The *Heritage Minutes* were sponsored by the CRB Foundation, as part of an effort to promote an awareness of Canadian history and, by extension, a sense of pride in the Canadian identity. The nationalism in these films is relatively low-key but stresses the individual courage, cooperative achievement and general resourcefulness of Canadians, as well as some of the ambiguities and accommodations of the Canadian identity. The participation of Professors Jean-Claude Robert and John Herd Thompson has given the material a professional polish. At least one critic has found the *Heritage Minutes* objectionable, both as film and as history, and some scholars have raised questions about the validity of various scenes and situations. The resulting discussion has illuminated the decision-making that goes into the production of such intensive short films as well as the constraints operating in the case of a project with explicitly nationalistic intentions.⁹ But on the whole the response to the *Heritage Minutes* has been sympathetic and largely positive. Certainly this is very teachable material; the selections are short enough to view more than once, and the best of them contain enough subtleties and implications to provoke discussion. Students have been concerned, reasonably enough, that, outside the classroom, most adult Canadians would not have the necessary knowledge to answer questions raised by the various episodes. This should not be seen as a specific criticism of the *Heritage Minutes*, as it leads naturally to a wider discussion about the challenge of disseminating good popular history to the general public. Support materials are available in the form of a magazine called *The Heritage Post*, but for university-level classes, whether on film or on history or both, instructors will need to rely on standard reference works such as *The Canadian Encyclopedia* as well as more specialized readings.

Among the 60 productions released to date, only a handful of items refer to the history of Atlantic Canada. In Series One *Halifax Explosion* is one of the most successful stories, a taut historical drama focusing on one man's heroic response to the disaster unfolding before his eyes. In Series Two *Vikings* presents a vision of L'Anse-aux-Meadows both at the time of Norse settlement and on its rediscovery in

9 Robert Fulford, "Heritage Minutes seem like hours", *Globe and Mail*, 30 June 1993; Elspeth Cameron, "Heritage Minutes: Culture and Myth" and Janice Dickin McGinnis, "Heritage Minutes: Myth and History", *Canadian Issues/Thèmes canadiens*, XVII (1995), pp. 13-36.

the 20th century. An enactment of the famous Robert Harris painting, *Rural Teacher*, can be imagined as a Prince Edward Island story and brings that work of art to life with revealing characterizations and dialogue. Series Three includes *Marconi*, a visit with the Italian scientist at his experimental telegraph station on Signal Hill. There is also a tribute to the heroism of the coal miner Maurice Ruddick, one of the men who survived the 1958 disaster in Springhill but, because he was black, was unable to accept an invitation to the survivors to visit a posh resort in the southern United States. In Series Four *Paris Crew* shows Saint John rowers in Paris in 1867 outdoing the English and French competition to capture a world championship for the new Dominion. *Bluenose* shows Angus Walters at the helm of the famous schooner in its last great race in 1938. Series Five includes a glimpse of the voyage of John Cabot's Matthew in 1497, when the immense cod stocks slowed the vessel's progress through northern waters — an ironic comment on the depletion of the resource in the last five centuries. There is also a tribute to John Humphrey, the New Brunswicker who, as a Canadian diplomat, helped draft the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This hardly adds up to a comprehensive view of Atlantic Provinces history, or even an adequate introduction to the current state of knowledge. Given the enormous supply of history in this region, a recent group of honours students who had done their reading in regional history had no difficulty proposing additional topics for inclusion in the series. Among individuals suggested there were W.S. Fielding, Edith Archibald, William Coaker, Jimmy Tompkins, Joseph R. Smallwood, Grace Annie Lockhart, Wilfred Grenfell, Alexander Gibson, Lord Beaverbrook and J.B. McLachlan. Suggested themes included the history of the Acadians, life and work in the lumber woods, the so-called golden age of sail, the almost-successful early suffrage campaigns in the Maritimes, the harvest excursions into the prairie west, the political campaigns of Maritime Rights, the story of the steelworkers and the Nova Scotia Trade Union Act, the invention of the chocolate bar by Ganong's and the invention of Scottish Nova Scotia by Angus L. Macdonald — and more.

One substantial recent effort to promote the study of film in Canada is a package of study materials on documentary film produced by the National Film Board under the title *Constructing Reality*. This six-cassette video anthology is accompanied by a 288-page book by Arlene Moscovitch, *Constructing Reality: Exploring Media Issues in Documentary* (National Film Board of Canada, Montréal, 1993) which introduces the major themes and the individual selections in the package. The book is interesting in its own right as an exposition of the theme that documentaries are "constructions" that depend on the decisions made by film-makers. Such decisions are informed by a variety of considerations, including technical, aesthetic and financial factors as well as the social and political outlook of the film-makers and the institutions they depend upon for patronage. The choice of images, the narrative form, the voice (omniscient, personal or pluralist) all involve decisions that structure the film. Accordingly, we have an updated statement of John Grierson's famous definition of the documentary as "the creative treatment of actuality":

Comprising footage of real-life events, people, places and situations, a

documentary can appear to be a transparent, unmediated ‘window on the world’. However, like all film and video productions, documentaries are constructions — highly compressed and shaped versions of ‘real’ space and ‘real’ time (p. 114).

One of the strengths of the documentary is the authority of its appeal — it shows us “actual people in actual situations”. It is important to keep in mind that this knowledge conditions the response of viewers. In the case of films about history, the authenticity effect is doubly reinforced, first by the appeal of “reality” evident in the film treatment and secondly by the authority of “history” implied in the underlying research and preparation; indeed the authority of “history” is often also sufficient to lend credibility to non-documentary, overtly fictional accounts when they are placed in recognizable historical settings.

Ten of the items in *Constructing Reality* are identified as historical documentaries. They include ground-breaking National Film Board classics such as *City of Gold* (1957) and *The Ballad of Crowfoot* (1968), the useful potted history of Canadian film *Has Anybody Here Seen Canada?* (1978) and the innovative treatment of the 1950s Marilyn, Bell and Monroe, in Brenda Longfellow’s independent production *Our Marilyn* (1989). The problems of docu-drama are discussed in connection with excerpts from *The Kid Who Couldn’t Miss* (1982), the NFB film about Billy Bishop that anticipated some of the controversy surrounding *The Valour and the Horror*.¹⁰ Supporting materials include interviews, script excerpts and technical analysis, as well as suggested class activities. In all, this is a well-conceived project which can be recommended for use in film history classes. Unfortunately for those focusing on Atlantic Canada, only two of the selections in this package make specific reference to the region, one of them only in passing.

The first of these is an excellent choice. *Black Mother, Black Daughter* (National Film Board, 1989) is presented as “an example of the increasing use of documentary as a means of disseminating unwritten chapters of social history”. The film uses some of the most effective tools in the language of the historical documentary. Interviews with scholarly experts or prominent figures are avoided in favour of an oral history that gives us firsthand visits with the people who are the subject of the film. Although there is a good deal here about injustice and hardship, this is not a history of specific struggles for civil rights or economic citizenship. It is instead a respectful portrait of the quest for survival and improvement within the

10 On this controversy see “The Valour and the Horror”, *Report of the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology* (January 1993) and David J. Bercuson and S.F. Wise, eds., *The Valour and the Horror Revisited* (Montreal and Kingston, 1994). The most useful discussion in the latter volume is Bill McAndrew’s chapter, “The Canadians on Verrières Ridge: An Historiographical Survey”, which makes the point that the Normandy campaign itself has been the subject of a longstanding historiographic debate about responsibility for strategy and operations. The implication, moreover, is that it is appropriate to compare recent films with other film treatments of the same subject; consequently, the appropriate comparison for *In Desperate Battle: Normandy 1944* is the earlier documentary *The Norman Summer* (1962), part of the semi-official *Canada at War* series produced by the National Film Board.

black community, a theme presented by directors Sylvia Hamilton and Claire Prieto through the role of women in nurturing and preserving the black community.

This story is embodied in the experience of Hamilton's own mother, who tells how she was refused admission to nursing school in Nova Scotia but did succeed in becoming a teacher. It is there in another half-dozen stories of women who triumphed over racism and poverty by relying on the resources of their family, church and community. We learn that the roots of the black community are at least as deep as those of the Loyalists, despite their poor representation in local historical museums at the time the film was being made. In one of the key scenes in the film women gather around the table at Edith Clayton's home, making baskets and sharing the stories of their lives. From their conversation we learn much about the working world of black women over the generations — they were seamstresses and cooks, midwives, weavers and basket makers, they hired out for housework and they raised their own families under often difficult conditions. We learn as well something of the achievements of Hamilton's own generation of women. Daurene Lewis, a descendant of the toughminded Rose Fortune of Annapolis Royal, said to be "the first female policewoman in North America", grew up in a community where the dances were segregated — but she eventually became mayor of the town and entered provincial politics. Delvina Bernard speaks on behalf of the a cappella group, Four the Moment, whose searing version of "Lydia Jackson" is one of the emotional high points of the film. Hamilton herself speaks personally at several points in the film, introducing both her mother and her daughter.¹¹

Black Mother, Black Daughter succeeds at several levels, both as a form of cultural transmission from mothers to daughters and as a general introduction to black history in Nova Scotia. It also demonstrates the power of oral history in the telling of social history. Yet even the most successful documentary cannot cover everything. In this case, for instance, Africville is mentioned several times without explanatory detail, and one woman comments to her friends, "Of course, you all know the story of Africville...". It is a reminder that there is much other history to be told, only some of which can be found on film.¹²

Atlantic Canada also appears again in this study package, less convincingly this time, in *Sandspit to Dildo* (Fast Forward Productions, 1989), a fast-moving travelogue recorded by director Chris Mullington during a cross-country trip with a video camera in the summer of 1989. The journey begins with skateboarders in Vancouver explaining their technique, and ends in a short visit with a silent, blinking (and unidentified) J.R. Smallwood in Newfoundland. Along the way there are disconnected scenes of dancing men in Whitehorse and children in Tuktoyaktuk, a rodeo in Alberta and a sundance ceremony in Saskatchewan. We also meet an

11 For a discussion of the making of the film, see Sylvia Hamilton, "Film as a Medium to Reveal Research about Black Women's Lives", *Atlantis*, 20, 1 (Fall-Winter 1995), pp. 163-7.

12 In this case another recent production, *Remember Africville* (National Film Board, 1991), provides an informative account of the destruction of the black community and its significance in local history. For a recent discussion, see Mark Davis, "Recent Black Maritime Studies", *Acadiensis*, XXIII, 2 (Spring 1994), pp. 148-54.

anti-nazi skinhead in Winnipeg and a young beer-drinking guide in the backstreets of Quebec City. Atlantic Canada is represented by a glimpse of Stompin' Tom Connors' home at Skinner's Pond, a visit with a centenarian at Middle West Pubnico in Nova Scotia, several short takes from Newfoundland and a performance of Uniacke Square by a rap singer in north-end Halifax. Is there anything missing? Of course — New Brunswick is entirely overlooked. "I went there", explains Mullington, "but I didn't get anything that I wanted to use" (p. 254). That simple statement confirms again the essential point that documentaries, like other forms of authorship, are socially constructed. Hence we have a travelogue that casually omits one of the ten provinces from the Canadian image! Still, there is something refreshing about a travelogue that leaves out Peggy's Cove and the Bluenose (and Toronto) and focuses instead on the underside of the Canadian scene.

But what does this documentary tell us about the Canada that existed at the end of the 1980s, when the country seemed to be breaking apart on the shoals of Meech Lake? Is it telling us that the old unities of the Canadian identity are no longer meaningful? Or are the representations of youth and age, 'northern-ness', 'western-ness' and 'maritimicity', among other things, actually attempts to reconstruct the Canadian identity? While the country may look much like a backdrop for a music video production, there is certainly the suggestion of redemption in the uniqueness of the characters encountered along the way. Unfortunately, the video tells us almost nothing about who these people are or what place they occupy in the Canadian scene. In semiotic terms Stompin' Tom, Uniacke Square and J.R. Smallwood may all be recognized by the inquiring viewer as signifiers of one kind or another, but the video itself gives us little help in attaching them to a social context. Is the language of this video an extreme form of the compression effect of the documentary? Or is it a calculated effect, implying a postmodernist rejection of narrative history? In either event, the approach is provocative, and it confirms the film-maker's power of editorial selection.¹³

An intriguing contribution to defining the Canadian identity is contained in the independent production about the Red Bank First Nation, *The Village of 30 Centuries* (Metepenagiag Development Corporation, 1995). From time to time historians have been tempted to debate the appropriate starting point for Canadian history — should it be 1867? 1763? 1604? 1497? As the title of this film implies, the origins of Canadian history in this case can actually be located some 3,000 years ago. This film is not explicitly historical, nor does it directly address current political issues; its main purpose is to document the rediscovery of traditions and the reinvigoration of native spirituality among the people of contemporary Red Bank, which is located advantageously at the confluence of the Northwest and Little Southwest Miramichi Rivers. Along the way, we are introduced to the discovery and excavation of the Augustine Mound and Oxbow Site in the 1970s, sites that have been dated 2,400 to 2,900 years in the past. Conversations with elders such as Joe Mike Augustine (1911-95) and researchers such as archaeologist

13 For another discussion of the contemporary documentary tradition, including interviews with the film-makers, see Peter Steven, *Brink of Reality: New Canadian Documentary Film and Video* (Toronto, 1993).

Chris Turnbull make telling points about the cultural legacy of the site and the significance of local history. Their observations demonstrate the role both of oral tradition and archaeological analysis in documenting the antiquity of what are appropriately called “the first peoples” of this land. Red Bank is accordingly identified as the oldest site of continuous human settlement in present-day New Brunswick. Although all of us on this continent may be immigrants of one kind or another, the primacy of native occupancy must be recognized as the starting point for regional history.¹⁴

Another point of entry into New Brunswick history is documented in *Partridge Island: A Gateway to North America* (Signal Video Productions, 1995). This 14-minute film, prepared for the Partridge Island Museum, traces the changing use of this small island in Saint John harbour over the course of two centuries. In the 18th century it was the site of an early lighthouse powered by whale oil; in the 19th century Robert Foulis introduced his steam-powered fog whistle here; in the 20th century it became the site for radio and other modern installations. In wartime it has served as a military training site and observation post. The most famous chapter in the island’s history was as the location for a quarantine hospital for immigrants established in 1830; in the following decades some 2,000 unfortunate Irish immigrants were buried here. The island has also served as a site for picnics, concerts and Highland games and, most recently, as a tourist attraction. And for those whose families worked on the island, it has also been a home. This is an effective short treatment that offers an introduction to several aspects of local history in Saint John.

The port of Saint John also features prominently in *The Marco Polo: Queen of the Seas* (National Film Board, 1995). The Marco Polo was built in Saint John and launched in the spring of 1851. It was designed by the builder James Smith to have the sleekness of a clipper ship as well as the width of a timber ship. In 1852 it was sold to the Black Ball Line of Liverpool and refitted as a passenger vessel. On its first voyage to Australia in 1852 the Marco Polo circled the globe in less than six months, a record time, and was acclaimed as “the fastest ship in the world”. The Marco Polo ultimately made 17 round-trip voyages to Australia. Although the passenger traffic to Australia is the centrepiece of the film, for more than half its life the Marco Polo carried more modest loads in the cargo trade, by far the most typical experience of New Brunswick-built vessels. In 1868 the vessel returned to the cargo trade and then, after 32 years of service, was wrecked on the Cavendish coast of Prince Edward Island (a scene witnessed by the young L.M. Montgomery) in 1883. The film treatment is creative, demonstrating some of the imaginative possibilities of documentary film-making. Most of the narrative voice is provided by characters associated with the Marco Polo. “Charles”, a writer for the *Illustrated London News*, observes shipboard conditions and even flirts briefly with one of the passengers, “Jenny”, who is bound to join her convict husband in Australia.

14 For a sustained discussion of early sites in the region, some of them 10,000 years old, see Stephen A. Davis, “Early Societies: Sequences of Change”, in P.A. Buckner and John G. Reid, eds., *The Atlantic Region to Confederation: A History* (Fredericton/Toronto, 1994), pp. 3-21.

Meanwhile, the images of the shipbuilder James Smith and the captain James “Bully” Forbes float in and out of the film like Monty Python cut-outs, debating the existential merits and destiny of the ship.

This is the stuff that the legends of the golden age are made of, and for the most part the film gives the story a suitably romantic gloss. There are also some subtexts, which careful viewers of the film may want to follow as well. That record-breaking voyage to Australia was no picnic, and for the more than 900 passengers on board there was a world of difference between the first-class cabins and the steerage accommodations. When a measles epidemic broke out, 52 of the 327 children on board died during the voyage. Bully Forbes was indeed one of the age’s iron men. He drove the ship with a fierce determination, refusing to slacken sails in raging winds that terrified the crew. He did not hesitate to beat his men for infractions of the rules, and when they reached Melbourne he promptly had the whole crew incarcerated in the local jail for the duration of the turnaround so that they would not jump ship. At another level of meaning, this is a very contemporary film, as it describes the campaign to construct a replica of the Marco Polo. Schoolchildren visit the New Brunswick Museum to examine a model and learn “a bit of culture”. There are discussions with the mint and the post office about commemorative issues. There are sweatshirts for sale on the waterfront, the unveiling of a memorial plaque, a trivia contest on the radio, even a concert where musicians are performing the Marco Polo Suite. One of the spokesmen for the restoration describes the Marco Polo as “a positive, inclusive symbol” of Canada’s participation in the global economy of the 19th century. Meanwhile, in Australia there is a Marco Polo Day, in which Australians celebrate the historic link between Canada and Australia. All this shows something of the climate of tourist promotion and the uses of history in the 1990s.

Obviously there are any number of historical films to be made about the age of sail. This one is not especially original as it avoids much of the recent historical writing on the subject. No reasons are given, for instance, for the rise or the fall of the shipbuilding industry in Saint John, and there is no assessment of the industry’s contributions to the local and regional economies. Like generations of popular historians before them, in this case the film-makers have chosen to participate in a celebration of the romantic vision of the golden age. The social history and life stories contained in Judith Fingard’s *Jack in Port*, and the larger business decisions that promoted economic expansion at the expense of the community, documented in *Maritime Capital*, provide ample scope for more realistic treatments of the region’s maritime tradition.¹⁵

A more critical approach to regional mythology is contained in *Evangeline’s Quest* (National Film Board, 1996). This is a thoughtful piece of cultural history, also inventively presented. The off-screen narrative voice of *Evangeline* (supplied by

15 Judith Fingard, *Jack in Port: Sailortowns of Eastern Canada* (Toronto, 1982); Eric W. Sager and Gerald E. Panting, *Maritime Capital: The Shipping Industry in Atlantic Canada, 1820-1914* (Montreal and Kingston, 1990). See also the collection of stories edited and introduced by Lewis Jackson and Ian McKay, *Windjammers and Bluenose Sailors: Stories of the Sea by Colin McKay* (Lockeport, 1993).

the film's director Ginette Pellerin) searches for her own true self among the many images of Evangeline contained in the history of the Acadians. Occasionally the mythical Evangeline even engages in snatches of conversation with an on-screen historian (presented by researcher and writer Maurice Basque). "I had to come back...", she explains early on, "so many things were being said about me".

Evangeline's Quest traces the evolution of the Evangeline myth through several phases and explains the conditions under which the various versions of Evangeline were constructed. The invention of Evangeline by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow 150 years ago will be familiar to readers of regional history from the work of Naomi Griffiths. Although Longfellow had never visited Acadia and some of his descriptions are misleading, his epic verse was soon adopted by an Acadian leadership anxious to construct an Acadian identity in the modern world. This was an "inadvertent achievement" on Longfellow's part, writes Griffiths, as the poet's purpose was to celebrate the faithfulness of women, not the survival of the Acadians. Translated into some 130 languages, the poem offered a kind of "poetic justice" for a suffering people.¹⁶ Moreover, the story of Evangeline and Gabriel became the Adam and Eve of the Acadian people, observes Japanese anthropologist Kasuko Ohta in the film, a creation myth that confirmed the historic existence of an Acadian community. This is perhaps a problematic claim for historians, as Griffiths and others have made the important argument that the Acadians had already succeeded in constituting themselves as a distinct people at least as early as 1710; the creation of the Acadian identity did not require the intervention of an American poet a century and a half later. Indeed, the writer Antonine Maillet has lamented the prominence of "evangelinisme" in Acadian culture and has attempted to construct alternative heroines who are better rooted in the social history of the community. This perspective could have been more strongly presented in the film, perhaps by means of a conversation with Maillet, herself the author of an earlier revisionist version of the heroine, *Evangeline Deusse* (1985).¹⁷

The quest also takes Evangeline to Louisiana, where she reappears as Emmeline Labiche and is buried under a famous oak tree in St. Martinville. Historians Carl Brasseaux and Barry Jean Ancelet explain how Evangeline was used to rehabilitate the public image of Acadians and Cajuns in the southern states, though again at the cost of neglecting much of the actual social history of the community. Meanwhile, back at Grand Pré ethnologist Barbara Leblanc helps explain how the Dominion Atlantic Railway was making Evangeline the first patron saint of Nova Scotia tourism by establishing the famous gardens and park and promoting the "Land of Evangeline" as a tourist destination. The various uses of Evangeline have also attracted critics. For instance, in her popular song "Evangeline, Acadian Queen", Angèle Arsenault satirizes the trivialization and commercialization of the Acadian identity. By the 1960s and 1970s, the cult of Evangeline was no longer

16 Naomi Griffiths, "Longfellow's *Evangeline*: The Birth and Acceptance of a Legend", *Acadiensis*, XI, 2 (Spring 1982), pp. 28-41.

17 For an early critique of "evangelinisme" as the ideology of the 19th-century Acadian renaissance, see Antonine Maillet, *Rabelais et les traditions populaires en Acadie* (Les presses de l'université Laval, 1971), pp. 10-14.

attractive to many Acadians, on the grounds that she was too closely associated with deference and fatalism and an excessively simplistic version of Acadian history.

And lest we forget, *Evangeline* was also the star of Canada's first feature-length dramatic film. Produced in 1913 by the Canadian Bioscope Company and filmed in Nova Scotia, *Evangeline* was well-received by reviewers, but there appear to be no surviving copies. More accessible is a 1929 United Artists production starring Dolores del Río. That was already the fifth film to be based on Longfellow's poem and, writes Josette Déléas, it too belonged to the era before Acadians entered the "cinéma des êtres réels".¹⁸ It seems appropriate, at last, to have, in *Evangeline's Quest*, a film that succeeds in liberating *Evangeline* from the legacy of Longfellow. As a conscious meditation on the relationship between myth and history, the film documents the prominence of the *Evangeline* myth and alerts us to the complexity of cultural history in the region.

There are good things to be said too about *Chandler's Mill* (National Film Board, 1991), an interesting attempt to portray the industrialization of the Maritimes in human terms. This film is a piece of short fiction, set in a small New Brunswick milltown at the time of the hearings of the Royal Commission on the Relations of Labour and Capital. The commission visited half a dozen places in New Brunswick in the spring of 1888 (the film mistakenly dates the moment in 1889, which is the date of the published report, not the hearings), but there is no evidence that the commission visited small rural villages such as the one shown here.

The film was shot in the 19th-century buildings at King's Landing Historical Settlement and also at the Briggs and Little woollen mill at nearby Harvey Station, a small and very successful local mill where the production methods and technology in place in 1990 (before a fire destroyed the building) seemed to date from the 1920s and 1930s but were not markedly different from those of the late 19th century. There are short glimpses of the washing, carding, dyeing and spinning of wool, and we get a good sense of the atmosphere of the industry: the noise of the machinery drowns out the conversation of workers. A banquet scene appears to enact a relationship of deference between workers and paternalists, but the strains are evident. For the men, women and children who work in the mill, the long hours, the low pay and the fines are all sources of grievance. We hear reference to several accidents, including the death of a boy, the only compensation paid by the proprietor being the provision of a pine box for burial. In one shot a boy urinates hastily into one of the vats, and in a brief encounter between the foreman and a young girl there is the menace of sexual exploitation. The impending visit of the royal commission brings the situation to a head. For some reason, which is not explained, there is the idea of signing up members into the Knights of Labor (which was not in fact active in the Maritimes, except among telegraph operators) and gathering enough names to hold a vote. This sounds suspiciously like a suggestion that the commission had the power to order votes and certify unions as collective

18 Josette Déléas, *Images d'Acadiens et de Cadiens de 1908 à 1994 (Filmographie acadienne)* (Moncton, 1995). pp. vii-viii, 33-5.

bargaining agents — a significant historical anomaly, as such procedures would not become a part of the labour relations system for at least another half-century. At the end of the film it is not clear whether the workers have actually achieved any improvements in hours or wages, but they have learned some of the lessons of class solidarity and students have been introduced to some of the realities of life and work in the early days of the industrial revolution in the Maritimes.¹⁹

The industrial history of another part of the region is treated in a more ethnographic fashion in *Making Steel* (Beaton Institute Steel Project/National Film Board, 1992). This film reviews the history of the steel industry in Sydney, Nova Scotia, with a view to establishing a record of “the complexity, the awesome beauty, the skills and dangers” of a local industry that has lately entered a period of abrupt decline. Directed by the folklorist, archivist and historian Elizabeth Beaton, the film is part of a larger project at the University College of Cape Breton that documents the history of the local steel industry.

Making Steel is conveniently divided into three sections, each about 20 minutes in length, divisions that make it more suitable for classroom use than many of the longer documentaries. The first part examines the technology of steel-making as it existed for most of the 20th century. The use of resources and technology is presented as an unproblematic process, but the student should come away with an appreciation of the basic recipe for coking, smelting, refining and shaping one of the 20th century’s basic industrial materials. The second part reviews the history of the industry from the building of the Sydney plant in 1899 to the shutdown of the old integrated plant in 1989. Using archival photographs, newspaper clippings and film footage, this historical exposition underlines the growth of cultural diversity and working class solidarity within the industrial community. Although the early development of the industry is now a fairly well-known chapter in regional history, the film draws special attention to several more neglected aspects of the story, such as the employment of more than 1,000 women at the plant in the Second World War, the peak employment levels and diversified production of the late 1940s and early 1950s, and the struggle for public ownership that followed the announcement of Black Friday in 1967. Was the ultimate failure of the plant due to weak resources? changes in the world market? failure to diversify? outside control? failure to reinvest? a weak form of public ownership? The film cannot answer these important questions, but it deserves credit for posing them clearly. The third section of the film makes the case that steel-making involved a unique culture of work. The steel industry had its own language, its own informal rules of behaviour, its own occupational hierarchies and hazards. The narrative in this part of the film is told entirely in the voices of individual steelworkers. They convey a sense of satisfaction in their work and also a sense of frustration that a way of life is coming to an end with few discernible alternatives in place for the future.

19 For an introduction to the royal commission, see Greg Kealey, ed., *Canada Investigates Industrialism* (Toronto, 1973). My thanks to Janice Cook, and to students in my class on *The Canadian Worker in the 19th Century*, for comments on this film. One student claimed that in one of the scenes he could see moving traffic on the other side of the river, but this flaw was not visible on the video version of the film.

For many Canadians industrial Cape Breton is best known through the musical performances of the coal miners' chorus, The Men of the Deeps. Established in 1967, and composed exclusively of men who have worked in the mines, this group has performed across the country and around the world. Dressed in miners' work clothes, complete with their helmets and lights, they present a repertoire that is a mix of industrial and local folk song. *The Men of the Deeps: A Day Underground* (Folkus Atlantic, 1996) shows the men in a representative performance, culminating in Rita MacNeil's well-known "Workingman". This is more than a concert video, however, as the film also takes us down the Phalen coal mine, where the underground scenes give a vivid sense of the hazards and challenges of the contemporary workplace. Viewing these scenes in a well-equipped, well-regulated industry, where workers are protected by their union membership, carries a cautionary subtext as we think, inevitably, of the 1992 Westray Disaster. Indeed, one of the miners reads a poem composed in honour of the lost men. Clearly these are workers who are used to living with their history, and, as in the case of the steelworkers, these individuals give us a sense of the potential satisfactions and solidarities of the workplace.²⁰

A little known chapter in regional history is presented in *Both Sides of the Wire* (Black River Productions, 1993). This film tells the story of the wartime refugees from fascism who were rounded up in Britain in the spring of 1940 and transported to, among other destinations, an internment camp in the New Brunswick woods. Here at Camp B, an hour's drive from Fredericton on the road to Minto, the landscape is now overgrown, with only a few cement foundations and strands of barbed wire to remind visitors of the extraordinary wartime episode that was enacted here. The film brings us face to face with a dozen former inmates of the camp, among them distinguished scholars and scientists who are now resident in Canada, the United States and Britain. In 1940 these same men were regarded as enemy aliens and a threat to domestic security.

More than 50 years later the interviewees show little resentment at the wartime judgement that landed them behind barbed wire. Many had left their families behind, and some of them were escapees from the death camps; they knew full well that they had already escaped a worse fate. In between their domestic chores and work details, the men in the camp maintained a lively intellectual life, conducting classes and discussions and performing recitals and plays. The story thus shows us the resilience of the human spirit under bleak conditions. Their story also sheds light on the easy suspicions of immigrants and the anti-semitism that characterized British and Canadian society in the 1930s. As one of the interviewees comments, "Canada didn't want to understand that a Jew could not be a friend of Hitler". This is a piece of local history that serves to open up discussion of world issues, such as

20 On the Men of the Deeps see John C. O'Donnell, "And Now the Fields are Green": *A Collection of Coal Mining Songs in Canada* (Sydney, 1992), as well as my review in *Canadian Folklore canadien*, 16, 1 (1994), pp. 216-20. Folkus Atlantic have also produced *From the Heart*, which introduces other local traditions through the Acadian fiddle of Eddy Poirier, the Scottish piano music of Dougie MacPhee and the native chanting and drumming of Sarah Denny. Another production, *The Fortress of Louisbourg: Making History*, explores the well-developed presentation of 18th-century Louisbourg at the National Historic Park.

the rise of fascism, anti-semitism both abroad and at home, and the treatment of refugees in what one of the former inmates calls “the century of the refugee”.

While very successful on several levels, the film also demonstrates how tempting it is to simplify historical narrative in the course of popularization. The film is “based on” a two-volume book by local historian Ted Jones, which contains a detailed compilation of information about the camp, and there was no easy way for a 47-minute film to summarize all of Jones’ extensive archival research.²¹ The most significant weakness is the ready assumption that all of the camp inmates were Jewish by origin or by religion. The documentation in Jones’ book, as well as in memoirs such as that by Eric Koch, shows that the camp population was more diverse. Most were indeed Jewish, but there were also Protestants and Catholics, even priests among the number; what they all had in common was not their religious or ethnic background but their anti-fascism. In addition, one must keep in mind that the film portrays only one chapter in the camp’s history. Following the departure of the anti-fascist refugees in 1941, the camp was used to house captured German and Italian sailors, prisoners of war and other foreigners who were considered a threat to national security, as well as Canadians who were opposed to the war or identified as supporters of Nazi Germany or Fascist Italy, including such luminaries as Camillien Houde and Adrien Arcand. Interestingly, there was also an earlier phase in the history of the camp, as the site was originally opened up in the 1930s as one of the relief camps established in the Great Depression under the Department of National Defence. Of course, the story of the anti-fascist refugees was more than enough for one documentary and the film stands on its own as a contribution to the rediscovery of local history.

Another useful contribution to regional history is found in a short film about the public career of Muriel McQueen Fergusson. Although the evolution of Canadian feminism is often described in terms of “first-wave” and “second-wave” feminisms, her life of activism on behalf of women’s causes has spanned both periods and has been described as an instance of “inter-wave feminism”. *The Honorable Muriel McQueen Fergusson* (Acrolect International, 1996) is a tribute to a public figure who helped change the status of women in 20th century New Brunswick.

Born into a prominent New Brunswick family in 1899, Muriel McQueen completed her education at Mount Allison University and was ambitious to pursue a career as a lawyer. She trained in her father’s law office (a substitute for attending law school as she had wished) and was admitted to the bar in 1924. Although women in New Brunswick were still not eligible to hold public office, she was briefly active in provincial politics when she campaigned for the Liberals in the 1925 election. When she married fellow lawyer Aubrey Fergusson in 1926, the social notes passed over their common professional qualifications and described her only as “a popular Shediac girl”. Soon enough she seemed ready to settle into the conventional life of the married middle class woman. But her husband’s illness and subsequent death brought her back into the public sphere as a lawyer, probate court judge and, in wartime, as counsel for the Wartime Prices and Trade Board.

21 Ted Jones, *Both Sides of the Wire*, 2 volumes (Fredericton, 1988, 1989). See also Eric Koch, *Deemed Suspect: A Wartime Blunder* (Toronto, 1980).

Following the war she campaigned for votes for women in civic elections (and in 1951 became Fredericton's first female alderman) and won a reputation as an early advocate of employment equity. On the recommendation of Milton Gregg, she was appointed to the Senate in 1953, the first female senator from the Atlantic Provinces; there she helped invigorate the atmosphere of that particular old boys' club by directing attention to issues such as family poverty and the status of women. Her political effectiveness was recognized in 1972 when she was appointed as the Senate's first female speaker.

Written, produced and directed by Semra Yuksel, this film succeeds very well as an introduction to the life and times of a woman who not only witnessed major changes but also had the satisfaction of playing an influential part in bringing them about. Short interviews with those who knew her serve to underline her significance as a public figure and as a role model. Historians E.R. Forbes and Gail Campbell, in brief comments, make it clear that her chosen methods included the intensive mobilization of women's business and professional networks and a general strategy based on the premise that "molasses catches more flies than vinegar". Although Fergusson's public career has received relatively little attention in Canadian political history, this film should help promote further interest in her public activities and those of other women who fall outside the scope of "first-wave" and "second-wave" feminisms.²²

Most historians readily accept the documentary film as a useful form of historical presentation, but no discussion of film and history in Atlantic Canada in the 1990s can be complete without reference to the production of dramatic feature films as well. This genre also has its own strengths and weaknesses as a form of presentation. As early as 1939, the *Canadian Historical Review* presented a discussion by the artist C.W. Jefferys — himself a popularizer of Canadian history — of several recent Hollywood movies that addressed the Canadian past with mixed results as to "their accuracy of detail and the general truthfulness of their conception and presentation".²³ Most recently, in a collection of essays entitled *Visions of the Past*, the American historian Robert Rosenstone has urged historians to consider the challenges and opportunities involved when historical themes are presented in the form of film fiction. His observations identify some of the special characteristics of the historical feature, along the following lines. A dramatic film usually will emphasize a strong story line with a clear beginning, middle and end. It will usually focus on individuals who can be understood to represent in their persons specific historical ideas or forces and can be placed in situations that demonstrate the conflict of emotions. A film will also strive to present the look and feel of its time and place in ways that the viewers will accept as authentic. Such a film can also be very successful in showing history as an integrated process in

22 For one account, see Joanne Reid, "Muriel McQueen Fergusson: A Study of Interwave Feminism in New Brunswick", M. A. Report, University of New Brunswick, 1988. Professor Gail Campbell has recently undertaken a larger study of her career.

23 C.W. Jefferys, "History in Motion Pictures", *Canadian Historical Review*, XXII, 4 (December 1941), pp. 361-8, and the response in the following issue by C. P. Wilson, editor of *The Beaver*, who served as technical advisor on one of the films under discussion.

which a variety of factors, usually analyzed separately in written history, can be shown simultaneously as part of the complexity of character and circumstance.²⁴

Despite the brave beginnings symbolized by Canada's first feature film, *Evangeline* (1913), the Atlantic Region has not loomed large in the history of the feature film in Canada.²⁵ With the rise of Hollywood to its dominant position in the North American industry, opportunities to produce and distribute Canadian feature films virtually disappeared. As the Massey Report commented in the 1950s (without making any policy recommendations to change the situation), "Nearly all Canadians go to the movies; and most movies come from Hollywood".²⁶ Canadian film-makers made their reputation either as documentary film-makers at home or as participants in the global industry outside the country. For Canadian films, the big breakthrough came at the end of the 1960s when government policy offered support to the industry in the form of tax breaks and investment capital. One of the first successes of that new wave of film-making was Don Shebib's *Goin' Down the Road* (1970), the story of two Maritimers seeking their fortune in the Toronto of the 1960s; it is still recognized as a pioneering work in Canadian film history; what was a topical drama at the time can also be recognized now as a creative treatment of one of the durable themes in regional history. Since then the region has had a small but vigorous presence in the evolving Canadian film industry, and the achievement is illustrated by two very accomplished and well-received recent feature films, *Secret Nation* (Black Spot/National Film Board, 1992) and *Margaret's Museum* (Ranfilm/ImageX/Télé-action/Skyline, 1995). Both films explore dimensions of the region's history, and their popularity with audiences seems to indicate the relevance of the past in the regional identity.

Secret Nation advances boldly into the territory of a significant chapter in regional history, namely the entry of Newfoundland into Confederation in 1949. More precisely, the film is concerned with the question, as stated in the film publicity, "What happened on the night of July 22, 1948?" That was the date of the second referendum ballot, in which the results (52.34 per cent yes) endorsed

24 Robert Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Harvard University Press, 1995), especially Chapter 2. For an interesting recent American compendium of reviews by historians, see Mark C. Carnes, ed., *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies* (New York, 1995), which includes an appreciation of at least one Canadian film, *Black Robe*.

25 One prominent film to survive from this early era was *The Viking* (1931), which has recently been reissued in an archival edition. This Newfoundland romance has considerable interest for its almost ethnographic documentation of the seal hunt as well as the appearances of Wilfred Grenfell and Bob Bartlett. The archival edition of *The Viking* was produced by the Newfoundland Historic Parks Association in conjunction with the National Archives of Canada. The filming of *The Viking* (so named for the principal vessel) was itself a disaster in which the film-maker Varick Frissell and some 25 sealers and crew perished. See Peter Morris, *Embattled Shadows: A History of Canadian Cinema, 1895-1939* (Montreal, 1978), pp. 204-15.

26 Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences, 1949-1951, *Report* (Ottawa, 1951), p. 50. For general developments, see Morris, *Embattled Shadows*, Pierre Berton, *Hollywood's Canada: The Americanization of Our National Image* (Toronto, 1975), and Ted Magder, *Canada's Hollywood: The Canadian State and Feature Films* (Toronto 1993).

Confederation by a small majority. As Peter Neary has pointed out, doubts about the legitimacy of the vote have never disappeared and conspiracy theories have had a renewed life in recent years.²⁷ The opening titles of *Secret Nation* confirm this in stating the film's premise: "The events surrounding Newfoundland's Confederation with Canada in 1949 are shrouded in controversy. These events, fictionalised here for dramatic purposes, form the basis of the political story in this film".

The action of the film is driven by the determination of a history graduate student, Frieda Vokey (Cathy Jones) to complete her dissertation. Following a confrontation with a supervisory committee at McGill University, she flies home to St. John's under the threat of a deadline. She is met at the airport as a long lost stranger by her mother Oona Vokey (Mary Walsh). Her brother (Rick Mercer) too has just returned home from a short career as a performance artist in New York. And Frieda is reunited, awkwardly, with her father Lester Vokey (Michael Wade), now an alcoholic journalist, who was a delegate to the National Convention in 1946-48 and a member of the anti-Confederate camp led by Peter Cashin. Back in her old room with her Nancy Drew novels, Frieda begins to ponder the various clues and leads that are coming her way. Chief among them is the death of Leo Cryptus, Chief Returning Officer in the 1948 referenda. Historian-as-detective, Frieda is soon hot on the trail of his private papers, as is her chief rival, history professor Dan Maddox (Ron Hynes). Like a distant local cousin of another student of history, *The Nasty Girl* (1989), she begins to ask uncomfortable questions.

Historians may quibble at some of the less complimentary depictions of the professoriate enacted here, although on the positive side it is made clear that doing history involves some long hours and hard work in the archives. On the whole this is a well-constructed, fast-paced film that juggles a number of comic and dramatic elements in plot, dialogue and setting. Compared to another recent attempt to make a regional political thriller, *Buried on Sunday* (1993), this is a very well-conceived film, for which director Michael Jones and screenwriter Edward Riche deserve much credit. Although the cast features a number of familiar faces from the satirical television shows that have come out of Newfoundland, the comic edge is almost always under control. Cathy Jones and Mary Walsh in particular are very successful in playing the dramatic subtleties of their parts. Some of the individual characterizations, such as Michael Wade's troubled Lester Vokey, Rick Mercer's caring taxi despatcher and Ken Campbell's officious Cecil Parkinson (the St. John's lawyer who guards access to the aged and ailing Joseph Smallwood) are especially memorable.

One of the more notable cinematic achievements in the film is the enactment of

27 Peter Neary, "Newfoundland's Union with Canada: Conspiracy or Choice?", *Acadiensis*, XII, 2 (Spring 1983), pp. 110-19. Neary's conclusion is that "Great Britain and Canada had certainly worked together to put the choice of Confederation before Newfoundlanders, but they could not and did not make that choice for them ... Ultimately, in a fair and democratic electoral contest, Newfoundlanders had to decide their constitutional future themselves". See also Neary, *Newfoundland in the North Atlantic World, 1919-1949* (Kingston and Montreal, 1988). For an influential account that favours the conspiracy theory, see Bren Walsh, *More Than a Poor Majority: The Story of Newfoundland's Confederation with Canada* (St. John's, 1985); Walsh, a St. John's journalist who died in 1989, is acknowledged in the film credits.

historic scenes from the National Convention. This is done in such persuasive documentary style (using archival recordings of Smallwood and Cashin for the audio and actors for the visual elements) that most viewers (despite a disclaimer in one of the titles) will be convinced this is authentic historical footage. Other documentary footage is also used in the film, in this case to provide visual evidence associated with pre-Confederation Newfoundland. There is something of a problem here, as all of this material is decidedly positive — bustling streets, busy outports, happy faces, lots of fish. It may well be true that this is the surviving visual record of Newfoundland history, and if so it shapes Frieda's perceptions of the idyllic condition of Newfoundland before Confederation. Although there are references in the dialogue to unemployment, poverty, tuberculosis and malnutrition, none of these are reinforced in the visual imagery of the film, so the effect is not convincing. Moreover, there is no real assessment of the failures of the traditional economy under the management of the Newfoundland ruling classes during the era of responsible government prior to the Commission of Government in 1934. If the central question in Frieda's thesis is to consider the conditions under which a sovereign nation gives up its independence, then the examiners (and the viewers) need more of an explanation of the actual conditions of dependence that already existed in Newfoundland before Confederation. Perhaps Frieda's professors should have assigned her a little more David Alexander.²⁸

The key historical suggestion in the film is that Newfoundland was betrayed into Confederation by the secret alteration of voting returns on the night of 22 July 1948. Although archival documents are shown in the film, no evidence for such a crime has actually been located, and the screenplay conveniently provides for the destruction of the relevant documents by British officials. It can be argued that there is other evidence of irregularities in the conduct of the election, such as recollections of missing ballot boxes and inconsistencies in the returns, but none of this evidence adds up to confirmation of a conspiracy. Moreover, it is striking that in its efforts to reverse the outcome of the referendum, the Responsible Government League failed to appeal for a recount of the ballots.²⁹

Certainly, it cannot be argued that there was little or no support for Confederation in Newfoundland. In the first referendum there were three choices. Confederation received 41.1 per cent of the vote and Responsible Government (a return to conditions as they existed in 1934) 44.6 per cent. The remaining 14.3 per cent, who voted for a continuation of Commission Government, presumably were sceptical about a return to independence and it is not surprising that the great

28 See David Alexander, "Newfoundland's Traditional Economy and Development to 1934", *Acadiensis*, V, 2 (Spring 1976), pp. 56-78 and, for his comparison of the Maritime and Newfoundland experiences inside and outside Confederation respectively, see "Economic Growth in the Atlantic Region, 1880-1940", *Acadiensis*, VIII, 1 (Autumn 1978), pp. 47-76. The latter is reprinted in David Alexander, *Atlantic Canada and Confederation: Essays in Canadian Political Economy* (Toronto 1983), which also contains a bibliography of his work.

29 An interesting review of *Secret Nation*, containing a statement of the case for a conspiracy to manipulate the vote, is included in John Edward Fitzgerald, "Newfoundland Politics and Confederation Revisited: Three New Works", *Newfoundland Studies*, 9, 1 (Spring 1993), pp. 109-19 especially.

majority of these voters seemed to opt for Confederation and give it the necessary majority on the second ballot. Whether or not the voting returns were altered, it remains clear that Newfoundland at this stage was in the grip of a major debate about its future, with opinion polarized around two apparent alternatives and two political camps. Any effort on the part of the British government to deny Newfoundlanders a choice that included Confederation as one of the options could easily be portrayed as a betrayal of democracy. This was Smallwood's point, when he urged the British government — Clement Attlee's Labour Government, which had some interest in decolonization — to include Confederation on the ballot. Ironically, the National Convention (represented in the film as the bastion of democratic sentiment and the defender of self-determination) recommended that Confederation be excluded from the referendum. For students of Canadian history, there is an implied lesson in comparative history here. None of the other provinces that entered Confederation did so after consulting the wishes of the people through a relatively straightforward "yes" or "no" ballot. Accordingly, the film unintentionally serves as a reminder that the process by which Newfoundland entered Confederation, flawed or not, was more democratic than that experienced by any other province.³⁰

Could Newfoundland have achieved better terms through a different strategy, a two-stage strategy that proceeded first to a restoration of Responsible Government and then to a consideration of Confederation, or other arrangements? Perhaps so, although this would have required uncustomary flexibility in Ottawa as the idea of asymmetrical federalism was still far in the future. But it is unlikely Smallwood considered this an acceptable option, because his own political agenda also involved a form of internal social revolution that sought to destroy permanently the already battered position of the St. John's ruling classes. He could not risk the possibility of restoring the traditional hegemony that, in his view, was largely responsible for a legacy of mismanagement and immiserization. As it turned out, Smallwood's new political regime was constructed on the basis of bureaucratic and corporate patronage dressed up with a good deal of populist rhetoric; but in Smallwood's view, and for most of his contemporaries in 1948 at least, Confederation seemed to be a reasonable bargain. If the achievements fell short of their best hopes, that is perhaps the stuff of another story.³¹

At another level of analysis, of course, *Secret Nation* is not a film about the 1940s at all. Rather it is about a later, post-Confederation generation, represented by Frieda, who are exploring the terms of the Confederation bargain almost half a century after the fact. Their perspective includes a sense of grievance about the bleak social and economic landscape of the contemporary scene and accordingly

30 My thanks to Dr. Jeff A. Webb, who shared with me his unpublished critique of the conspiracy theory surrounding the referendum votes. See also Jeff A. Webb, "The Responsible Government League and the Confederation Campaigns of 1948", *Newfoundland Studies*, 5, 2 (Fall 1989), pp. 203-20, and his "Newfoundland's National Convention, 1940-48", M. A. thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1987.

31 For Smallwood's role, as well as the author's personal evidence of the campaign, see Harold Horwood, *Joey: The Life and Political Times of Joey Smallwood* (Toronto, 1989).

voices strong misgivings about the behaviour of a generation that gave up the nation's sovereignty. As such, *Secret Nation* is as much about the neo-nationalist sensibilities of the contemporary period as it is about the events of the Confederation era.³² This theme comes to the fore in the party scenes at the LSPU hall, where various characters mill about dressed as historical figures, including several Brian Peckfords, one of them played by himself. Meanwhile, a punk band dressed in Viking costume performs an anthem of regional protest — “Alienation”. For more subtle tastes, the interview between Frieda and Smallwood is a fine piece of satirical writing that again conveys the sense of contemporary grievance. In response to Frieda's questions, Smallwood, only a few weeks from his death, is able to make only a few indecipherable noises. The lawyer Parkinson steps in to give a translation that captures the official version of Newfoundland's status in Confederation: “Due to the unique Canadian federal structure provincial autonomy over key issues can be perceived as an acceptably transformed retention of national status. We retained a national character while realizing enormous benefits, material and immediate, from Confederation”. Frieda is sceptical — “He said that?” — and goes on to voice her own critique: “Looking at our current situation in Newfoundland, our resources, fisheries, oil all owned by Canada, our hydro-electric stolen by Quebec, our insignificant almost non-existent voice in the Canadian federation, the humiliation of mindless make-work projects and transfer payments, the taunting insults of Quebec and the rest of Canada about these things, the practically bankrupt provincial economy, do you think maybe Mr. Cashin was right, maybe we shouldn't have joined Canada in the way that we did?” This speech contains a legitimate critique of the Canadian political economy and presumably represents the point of view of the film-makers, but it does not depend on the existence of a conspiracy to betray Newfoundland into Confederation in 1948.

Just as the documentary *Empty Harbours, Empty Dreams* (1979) argued some years ago that Confederation was an “historical mistake” for the Maritimes,³³ *Secret Nation* also constructs its historical narrative on an assumption about the origins of present-day grievances. Whether or not Confederation itself is the principal cause of the region's difficulties, or to what extent it is responsible, is one of the ongoing debates in the history of Atlantic Canada. It is worth keeping in mind that the Newfoundland experience of embattled dependency has been echoed in each of the Maritime Provinces, and in other parts of Canada as well, and it can even be argued that the same kind of “lament for a nation” has also been intermittently articulated on behalf of Canada as a whole for some decades. As such, the experience of Newfoundland in the second half of the 20th century is one more case study in the fate of small communities, regions and states in the age of

32 For one early account of contemporary sensibilities, see James Overton, “Towards a Critical Analysis of Neo-Nationalism in Newfoundland”, in Robert J. Brym and R. James Sacouman, eds., *Underdevelopment and Social Movements in Atlantic Canada* (Toronto, 1979), pp. 219-49.

33 For a comment on “the romantic view of regional history that much of the recent scholarship has attempted to modify”, see Howell, “Film and History in Atlantic Canada”.

globalization. The jury is still out on the alternatives. But as long as we remember that *Secret Nation* is a work of fiction, a form of speculative history, the film serves a useful purpose. Although the conspiracy theory may not hold water, *Secret Nation* introduces some of the complexities of the Confederation process and conveys a sense of the mixed results that followed. A small course of reading in Newfoundland history, before or after viewing, should add to the value and enjoyment of this sophisticated and entertaining film.

If *Secret Nation* is likely to be classified in the movie listings as a conspiracy drama, *Margaret's Museum* seems destined to be identified in North American film culture as a romantic tragedy. The love theme revolves around Margaret MacNeil, a young woman who lives with an embittered, lonely mother and a proud, dying grandfather in a distant Nova Scotia coal town. They inhabit one half of an old company house (the other half has subsided into the pits below) and they also live with the memories of Margaret's older brother and her father, who were killed in the mines. Into this unhappy domestic setting comes Neil Currie, a big likeable country Gael from St. Andrew's Channel (Margaret's mother has never heard of the place). Neil announces he will not work in the mines and sets to playing bagpipes (Margaret apparently has never seen pipes before), composing songs, talking Gaelic and courting Margaret. Soon enough they are married and living in a makeshift house on the deserted headlands above the ocean shore. Neil is washing dishes and doing odd jobs for a living, but he is also wanting children and Margaret tells him he cannot support a family on music and love. So there he is down the mine, along with Margaret's younger brother, who is eager to come of age by going down the pit. Except for the morbid twist that frames the story, the plot is more or less conventional. As one of the Toronto reviewers pointed out, coal mining films always seem to end in disaster: "After all, in the movies when a young woman in a mining town marries a young man who promises that he'll never go down the mine, we can be pretty sure that not only will he go down the mine but the mine will fall on him. Why else set a movie in a mining town?"³⁴

On the whole, *Margaret's Museum* is a film made with a good deal of attention to detail, and the production values are superior. The costume design and photography are handsome, and the musical score is excellent. As we might expect in a film that was shot mostly on-location in the Cape Breton coal towns, much of the physical detail seems faithful to time and place. So too is the dramatic scenery along the shores, although the colliery scenes, which were filmed in Scotland, understandably have a less familiar look (and show no evidence of the advancing mechanization of production in the Cape Breton mines). The characterizations of Angus (Margaret's uncle) by Kenneth Welsh and Catherine (Margaret's mother) by Kate Nelligan are particularly moving, and the British actress Helena Bonham Carter, usually known for playing upper crust characters, has managed a considerable feat in reinventing herself as a working class heroine. Although no

34 *NOW*, 25-31 January 1996, p. 51. For an interesting discussion of films related to labour studies and working-class history, including the sub-genre of mining films, see Tom Zaniello, *Working Stiffs, Unions Maids, Reds, and Riffraff: An Organized Guide to Films About Labour* (Ithaca, 1996); for a review, see *Labour/Le Travail*, 41 (Spring 1998), forthcoming.

exact date is given in the film itself, the film publicity places the setting in the late 1940s. This is confirmed by the surprising number of late-model cars that seem to be available to the coal miners, although a number of older trucks are also in evidence.

Most viewers will probably take the social landscape of *Margaret's Museum* at face value as a relatively accurate portrait of Glace Bay at the end of the 1940s. In the film the general impression is that Glace Bay is a small colliery village, where there are few alternatives to underground work and few avenues of escape. The press kits even describe Glace Bay as a "little outpost" located "in a forgotten corner of the world", an image that conforms readily to widespread stereotypes about mining communities; the publicity also adds, menacingly perhaps, "Glace Bay will never be the same again". And the Glace Bay of *Margaret's Museum* is indeed something else. In historical terms, Glace Bay at this time was a much more complex and sizeable community (1951 population: 25,586) than portrayed in the film. As for alternative opportunities, there was already a substantial non-mining employment sector in the town and large numbers of people (more than 5,000 people in each of the decades of the 1940s and 1950s) were leaving for other places. Although conditions were in many respects deficient, Glace Bay had significantly better services, such as running water and indoor facilities, than other mining towns; the idea that Margaret (who sneaks into the washhouse for a shower) might actually be "the first woman in Glace Bay to have a shower" is not plausible. Most strikingly, the company stores, which are important to one of the sub-plots in the film, had long since closed down by this time, discredited casualties of the labour wars of the 1920s. Many of the company stores had been replaced by the miners' own cooperative stores; indeed the sign in the window of Angus' house appears to signify that he gets his milk from the Cape Breton Dairymen's Cooperative — surprising if Angus was truly a prisoner of the company store system.³⁵

The mining stereotype also appears in the treatment of one of the central themes in the film, the danger of the miners' work. "When we began writing the script", director Mort Ransen has commented in some of the film publicity, "we thought we were working on a historical piece, recreating the times of the terrible coal mine disasters during the late 1940s and 1950s. Then — in 1992 — it exploded in our faces". This is a revealing statement, as it suggests the weakness of the writers' grasp of local history. In the first place, the characterization of the 1940s as a period of mine disasters is misleading. It is true that the death rate remained unacceptably high (an average of more than ten deaths per year in 1946-55, the great majority of them from falls of stone and haulage accidents; there were no

35 For the press kit, see F-40-452, The Film Reference Library, Toronto. For another view of Glace Bay in this period, see Don Macgillivray, "Glace Bay: Images and Impressions", in *Mining Photographs and Other Pictures: A Selection from the Negative Archives of Shedden Studio, Glace Bay, Cape Breton, 1948-1968* (Halifax/Sydney, 1983), pp. 171-91 *et passim*. Other relevant reading might include David Frank, "Tradition and Culture in the Cape Breton Mining Community in the Early Twentieth Century", in Kenneth Donovan, ed., *Cape Breton at 200: Historical Essays in Honour of the Island's Bicentennial, 1785-1985* (Sydney, 1985), pp. 203-18, and Steve Penfold, "'Have You No Manhood in You?': Gender and Class in the Cape Breton Coal Towns, 1920-1926", *Acadiensis*, XXIII, 2 (Spring 1984), pp. 21-44.

major disasters in this period); but the long-run trend was towards greater safety (a generation earlier in 1916-25 the annual death toll was more than twice as high). Under conditions of union recognition, the coal miners were able to promote increased attention to safety regulations and enforcement, largely through the vigilance of local mine committees, collective agreements and political influence. To be sure, recognition of the ravages of black lung and other hazards was still limited, and the case of Margaret's immobilized but still spirited grandfather is a familiar portrait. But it is unfortunate that the film conveys the impression that the coal miners were powerless in the face of the dangers of their industry. In one of his brief assessments of the balance of power in the coal industry, Angus grumbles that "the company would never go for more safety regulations; all they care about is money". This was probably true of Dominion Coal at the turn of the century, but whether it was also true half a century later, when the miners had the benefit of a strong union (and, perhaps, a more enlightened employer) is less certain. In this case the scriptwriters appear to have taken their cue from the Westray Disaster of 1992, which has been a particularly startling contemporary tragedy precisely because it involved so many departures from established expectations in the industry.

Perhaps the most important absence in the social landscape of *Margaret's Museum* is the theme of class solidarity. In the film the miners' union has a shadowy presence and it appears to be extremely weak; yet in the 1940s District 26 of the United Mine Workers of America was one of the more successful local unions in Canada and its campaigns for better wages, welfare and retirement plans, paid vacations and even public ownership of the industry were an important part of the local political culture. In elections the miners voted for the CCF MP Clarie Gillis. In this connection it is worth noting the difference between the film and the short novel by Sheldon Currie which provided the basis for the film narrative. The point is illustrated by the scene where the mine manager (of course in the historical Glace Bay there were several operating mines and more than one manager) knocks on the door, a rather ineffectual father (and hardly an appropriate embodiment of corporate power) in search of his daughter. Inside the house Margaret and Neil and the young couple are playing cards and flirting; but in Currie's book they are playing cards and flirting and also discussing a strike, and there is even a short conversation with the manager about the political economy of the coal industry and why the coal miners cannot be fairly paid. In the book Margaret's brother is a union organizer who even succeeds in convincing the mystic-minded Neil that they cannot avoid a showdown with the company; during the strike that follows (only in the book) Margaret participates in gathering support for the cause among the women in the coal towns, thus underlining an important theme about class and gender solidarities in the community.³⁶ None of this appears in the film. In defence,

36 Sheldon Currie, *The Glace Bay Miners' Museum: The Novel* (Wreck Cove, 1995). See also his earlier collection of short stories, *The Glace Bay Miner's Museum* (Montreal, 1979). There was a major miners' strike in 1947, which lasted for three months and attracted national attention. The writing of the script, by Gerald Wexler and Mort Ransen (who directed the film), apparently also involved some tensions over the balance of themes in the film: see Ray

the film-makers might well argue that the success of a film depends on simplification of the narrative and the ability to tell a story through believable characters. Needless to say, the film-makers were not under an obligation to make a drama of class struggle instead of a romantic tragedy. But when they refer to matters such as the nature of the community and the general balance of power between labour and capital in the coal towns, the references should be relatively accurate, even if these matters remain in the background.

As history, then, the film delivers less than first appears, largely because it confuses the sensibilities of the 1990s with the social conditions of the 1890s and the historical setting of the 1940s. Despite appearances, the film lacks a sense of history and subscribes instead to the essentialist idea that mining towns are unchanging places exempt from the forces of history. Because they stand outside history, conditions can, as a result, be freely transposed from one historical era to another without fear of inconsistency. A corollary seems to be that the men and women of the coal community are imprisoned in a culture of fatalism and that they do not have the capacity to act in solidarity or to bring about changes in their condition. Accordingly, Margaret's mother represents the devastated mentality of the women: "We feed off each other like buzzards, that's what they've done to us", and Margaret's revolt is an instinctive but doomed reaction grounded in her personal loyalties and passions. As for the goodhearted Angus, who does his best to look out for Margaret and protect her brother, he fears the company, shuns the union, burns down a non-existent company store and is uncomprehending to the end; he can only shake his head in dismay at the way the miners are manipulated by the company — and by their women: "They got you coming and going".³⁷

Given the expansion of film-making activity in the Atlantic Provinces in recent years, the number of films addressing historical themes seems likely to increase. Some films break new ground in historical research, especially when new sources are discovered and oral history is utilized, and other films intervene in fields where there is a well-developed historiography; but in either case the skills of historians are relevant and should enhance both the accuracy and the value of film treatments. As anyone who has watched or participated in the making of a film is aware, film-making is a collaborative form of art that involves a division of labour among a large number of specialists. Accordingly, it should not be difficult to accept the idea of including sympathetic historians among the members of the film-making team when a film focuses on historical subject matter.

Conlogue, "The Road to Margaret's Museum", *The Globe and Mail*, 16 March 1996. A somewhat different adaptation of Currie's work is presented in Wendy Lill's stage play, *The Glace Bay Miners' Museum* (1996).

37 Other assessments of the film have been somewhat more positive and have accepted Margaret as a reasonably sympathetic working class heroine whose revolt against the coal culture makes sense in dramatic and psychological terms. Indeed, in *Canadian Forum*, the usually perceptive film critic Noreen Golfman has argued that this film succeeds in resisting clichés associated with mining films: "What's especially appealing about *Margaret's Museum* is the way it actively resists resolving its tragic themes — the inevitability of mining and its exploitative conditions, the impossibility of love in such circumstances — in a rationale of fatalism". Margaret's "creative fury", she suggests, may well capture the imagination of other Canadians who also resent "the brutal impositions of corporate efficiencies". See Noreen Golfman, "Mining: Margaret's Museum", *Canadian Forum* (April 1996), pp. 28-31.

If a successful popular history should welcome the existence of a body of established research and the availability of professional skills in the field, historians themselves should welcome the opportunity to participate in this form of historical presentation. In doing so, they will need to adjust their expectations and learn how to appreciate the special features of film as a language of history, both in the case of documentaries and in the case of dramatic films. After all, a film is a form of visual history, not a journal article or a scholarly monograph. All historical narratives are a form of cultural construction, and visual history is perhaps best recognized as a special case of the general problem of the presentation and popularization of history.

In his meditations on film and history, Gore Vidal has argued that history should be the backbone of the public school curriculum. Departments of Education, at least in Atlantic Canada and apparently in most provinces, do not appear to be in agreement with this prescription, as Canadian history has, in most cases, ceased to be a required subject for high school graduation. More controversial is Vidal's further suggestion that film should be the principal text for a history programme, on the grounds that the literacy of the current generation is heavily influenced by moving images and that this situation is unlikely to change.³⁸ Before such a recommendation can be followed, even in part, it will be necessary for public institutions, including schools, public and university libraries, to adopt collections policies that make adequate source materials available for teaching and study purposes. One hundred years after the arrival of film in Canada, we still have not come to grips with the implications of the new technology and the new forms of communication it has produced. At the end of the 20th century, the importance of historical and visual literacy in Canada remains inadequately recognized.³⁹

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38 Vidal, *Screening History*, p. 94.

39 The shutdown of the NFB film and video loan services, which took effect suddenly in the summer of 1996, has limited the availability of documentary films for teaching purposes; as an alternative users are now asked to purchase necessary materials on video. Meanwhile, the University of New Brunswick, while lacking a film and video collection policy of its own, has received a substantial collection of 16 mm. documentary films from the discontinued NFB distribution system.