

# BOOK REVIEWS

## The Handbook of Canadian Films. Second Edition

by Eleanor Beattie

Peter Martin Associates Limited in association with Take One Magazine. 319 pages. \$6.95

Second editions of books on Canadian film are as rare as sequels to the films themselves. This being the case, we should be especially grateful to *Take One* and Peter Martin Associates for releasing the update of Eleanor Beattie's 1973 work. A *Handbook of Canadian Film*. Titled *The Handbook of Canadian Film* (as if someone had suddenly discovered the lack of competition), Beattie's new edition is 30% larger, 50% more usable and, in paperback, 250% more expensive than its predecessor. It's worth the price.

By far, the largest and most important section of the *Handbook* remains its annotated, alphabetical listing of major figures in Canadian film. The new book contains 131 names with capsule biographies, credits and bibliographies (as compared to 83 names in the first edition). Overall, however, there are actually fewer people mentioned in the new book. This is a result of Beattie's dropping the sections of animators, writers, actors, composers and miscellaneous "film people" which had previously provided shorter descriptions of literally dozens of figures. A good many of these people (e.g. Ted Allan, Bill Fruet, David Acoma, Jack Darcus) have been promoted to the major listings. Unfortunately, a few important names (Co Hoedeman, Maurice Blackburn, Evelyn Lambart among others) missed the cut and exist in the new edition largely as parts of other people's credits. At least one major figure noted in the pantheon section of the first edition (Jack Chambers), has all but disappeared.

There are other problems with the major filmmakers' list. Some credits aren't complete (surely at this stage of the game, there should be a list of all the films on which Richard Leiter-

man has worked). It would also be useful to have some indication of distributors, especially in those (frequent) cases where a film is not listed in the Canadian Federation of Film Societies' *Index*. Beattie writes in the preface that "the production company... provides a good lead to the distributor." Handbooks, one would think, should contain more than "good leads."

There should be some indication of whether French language films are available in English and *vice versa*. (Unfortunately, this sort of notation will not take up very much space.) We should be told whether translated prints are dubbed or subtitled and whether or not they are identical to the original film. At very least, the titles of all films should be in both official languages, with some indication of whether the translated title is official (i.e. that used by the distributor or filmmaker), or simply one provided by the *Handbook*.

Another serious problem in the listing of major filmmakers is its lack of historical perspective. Figures like Ernie Shipman, Gordon Sparling and Jane Marsh are either quickly dismissed in the introduction or totally excluded. Yet these people, and a dozen like them, are, by any estimate, among the top 131 filmmakers this country has known. Granted, their films are often hard to come by – but this will change. In the meantime, a growing number of people are beginning to look into Canada's first 50 years of filmmaking. And it would be nice to help them out.

In the two sections following the list of major filmmakers, Beattie deals with "film groups" and "community film and video." Both sections provide useful starts for anyone interested in their respective areas. The two sections might be combined, as the line between some of the film groups and some of the community groups is often a thin one. However, this is a small fault compared to the inexplicable lack of addresses for the "film groups." The text describing these groups provides clues to their locations. But, once again, more than a "lead" is called for.

The next three sections cover "Native Peoples and Film" (four pages), "Political and Third World Films" (four pages) and "Women in Film"

(six pages). These sections are at their best when providing names of organizations and basic bibliographies in the areas covered. They are weakest when recommending films via scant and apparently hastily composed filmographies. Almost all the Native Peoples and Women's films noted are merely extracts from the NFB catalogue, while the grand total for "political and third world films" is 13 for the former and four for the latter. Either more titles should be provided or the reader should simply be given the indications of where to write for complete filmographies in these areas.

The idea of having thematic sections is a good one and should be expanded upon. There might be similar sections on the avant garde, video art, films for the handicapped, film on media, etc. The section on animation should be restored. There might be a list of films on adolescence – failed maturity being a topic that Canadian cinema has exhausted like no other. There should be some indication of the nature and availability of archival Canadian films. Finally, and this could be difficult, there might be some guide to the best of student films and purely local films, works of some interest that would normally disappear.

The effectiveness of these thematic sections would depend on improvements in two areas in which the *Handbook* is presently weak. The first is cross-referencing. If after the major filmmakers listing, names of directors and films on that list were printed in **bold** type and other names in *italics*, considerable space could be saved for an expansion of thematic endeavours.

Secondly, a feedback system is needed. Beattie's own tireless efforts plus the collaboration of some of the most dedicated people in Canadian film have produced a strong beginning. But the *Handbook* is everyone's responsibility – its limitations are everyone's problem. We should all have a way of contributing.

This is especially true for the last 60 pages of the book, largely a listing of sources. No one individual can vouch for the completeness of these sections. And no one, other than those mentioned, is going to bother correcting a misprinted postal code or supply

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the name of a new contact person, new affiliate or new service available.

A random suggestion: reinstate the potpourri of names and titles that comprised sections 2-7 of the first edition. It was an excellent way of talking about people who have not yet established themselves, or who have come from other disciplines to make small but valuable contributions. This section might also include news on works in progress not mentioned elsewhere.

Another random suggestion: eliminate the stills. Outside of their use in textual analyses, stills in film literature seem to function solely as souvenirs of the real thing. The space could be better used for additional information.

The big suggestion: publish a third edition — and a fourth and a fifth. Try to make it an annual event. Surely, Ottawa should be supporting the *Handbook*, even if it does make such good sense to have one.

There are other works that do part of the job of Beattie's *Handbook* (the CFI's *Film Canadiana*, the CFFS *Index*, the membership lists of the various unions and guilds). There are works in the works that will be stronger in areas like history and criticism (Peter Morris' forthcoming *Embattled Shadows* and his *Dictionary of the Canadian Cinema*, Pierre Pageau and Yves Lever's anthology, *Cinéma Canadien et Québécois* and an anthology by Joyce Nelson and myself, *Canadian Film Reader*). But none of these projects take in the range of people, projects, organizations and ideas included here. It is efforts like *The Handbook of Canadian Film* that make one believe, in moments of stupid faith, that our 1000 false starts and 10,000 isolated visions form the coherent mass of a national cinema.

Seth Feldman

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