

that this collection will help to overcome the usual rifts in communication that divide the academic world from the general public. The distinctive contributions of British Columbia's

Black residents certainly deserves wider recognition, and it has its eloquent testimony in this dynamic collection.

*NFB Kids: Portrayals of Children  
by the National Film Board of Canada, 1939-1989*

Brian J. Low

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**I**S THERE A CANADIAN BOOMER alive who cannot recall those school days when the Bell and Howell 16 mm. projector came out and earnest documentary films about salmon fishing in British Columbia, wheat farming in Saskatchewan, and fruit growing in the Niagara were shown? Through the efforts of classroom teachers, ever grateful for classroom resources of any kind that might hold the interest of students, the National Film Board (NFB) has been a ubiquitous presence in the lives of Canadian children. Now Brian Low convincingly demonstrates that the NFB, for its part, had a deep and abiding interest in children.

The film collection housed in the NFB Archives is clearly a very rich source for social historians and, if nothing else, *NFB Kids* serves to highlight this fact. In an impressive display of research, Low viewed 250 films that contain substantial portrayals of children and that, over a fifty-year period, have provided evidence of "transitions in ... imagery and

narrative" (2). He argues that three different, though overlapping, approaches to children can be found in NFB films but that, in all cases, the purpose was to promote "practices and principles expected by childhood experts to produce desirable outcomes" (16).

In the earliest period, 1939 to 1946, when John Grierson was in charge of the NFB, films were geared towards the goals of progressivism. The need for improvements in the conditions of rural education and an emphasis on cooperative group efforts to enhance community life were central themes. Young people, under the suggestion and direction of adults, were portrayed as learning about, implementing, and benefiting from cooperative team projects of various kinds.

Within this context, readers of *BC Studies* will be interested in the chapter that describes how the children of Lantzville on Vancouver Island became participants in the 1944 film, *Lessons in Living*. Designed to promote the acceptance of an activity-based pedagogy leading to acts of social

responsibility, this film recreated in docu-drama style an event that was reported to have taken place in Alberta two or three years earlier. Indeed, a very similar tale of the way in which children, through a school project, revitalized a whole community can be found in Donald Dickie's 1940 text, *The Enterprise in Theory and Practice*, although here the story is told by a female school teacher who actually did it and not a male official from an education department.

If, during the first period, children were portrayed as capable of actively participating in the redemption of society, during the second period, 1947 to 1967, they were portrayed as having to be saved through the tenets of the mental hygiene movement. According to Low, a new emphasis on child-rearing and on building autonomous youngsters is evident, and the focus of films shifts to individual psychological development and a concern for personal happiness and group acceptance. Low argues that, during this period, adults (especially parents) began to lose their authority and power while experts of various kinds prescribed methods for bringing up independent children. Parents, particularly mothers, were blamed if children experienced problems with eating, friendships, behaviour, or other aspects of their lives.

By the third period, 1968 to 1989, NFB films were portraying children free from family controls. It is no wonder then, Low argues, that the emphasis shifted to troubled youths and to social issues such as drug abuse, incest, family violence, mental illness, and suicide. Using an unacknowledged

structural-functionalist analysis, Low claims that families and communities were now marked by "disequilibrium." For the most part, Low seems to feel that this disequilibrium resulted from the loss of male power and authority in the family and society – a loss that was brought on by the (male) mental hygiene experts and the ideas of the early twentieth-century Swedish author Ellen Key. Furthermore, Low takes the position that children were captured by the feminists of Studio D, who promoted democratic family forms and who valued girls. According to Low, these feminists ensured that, during this third period, "females emerge[d] to ideological dominance" and that even "veteran male film-makers" succumbed to the hegemony of Studio D and "adopt[ed] the principle of featuring girls in strong leading roles" (204). One shudders at the horror of it all.

*NFB Kids* has much to recommend it. Although the many descriptions of film content grow tiresome, Low is working with the considerable challenge of converting moving images, recorded sound, and verbal narrative to paper. He alerts us to a wonderful source for historical research and provides a ground-breaking study with links to a limited portion of the key literature on the history of childhood and youth. This book should encourage further studies that make use of the sophisticated theoretical insights of cultural and film studies in order to more fully situate the NFB and its children within the full complexity of their social context.