

# The Film as a Recording Machine

DOCUMENTARY FILM. By Paul Rotha. New York: W. W. Norton & Company. 1939. 320 pp. \$3.75.

Reviewed by IRIS BARRY

EVERY motion picture is, in one sense, a document for it inevitably contains imbedded within it various kinds of information about the individuals and the society which produced it. The fashions of its particular time are recorded in it, however unintentionally, as regards ideas and opinions as well as regards clothing and speech. This is true even of costume or historical pictures, for we find that a film such as the Sara Bernhardt "Queen Elizabeth" or the Garbo "Queen Christina" usually tells us more about the era in which these particular actresses flourished than about ancient times.

But in a more special sense, the motion picture has been used since its beginnings as a recording machine. Important events—war, coronations, disasters—and exotic landscapes have always been attractive to it. The newsreels date from 1910. Travel films have been popular since they were run in simulated railway coaches in 1903. And in this work of reportage, an important step was taken by Robert Flaherty when he attempted to set the life of an Eskimo on the screen in "Nanook" and, while doing so, to enrich and humanize it by interpreting and selecting the photographic mate-

rial so as to present a particular point of view or opinion about it. To many lovers of cinematography, "Nanook" was the first true documentary film in the stricter sense in which it has recently been used, and Flaherty's later "Moana" and "Man of Aran" stand out as masterpieces in this particular field.

Latterly another kind of documentary film has developed. These are, as a rule, sponsored films made in order to express an opinion, to create good-will, or to carry a message. Just as some large industrial concern puts a program of concerts on the air, so in England other industrial concerns have similarly sponsored films illuminating some facet of social life. More important perhaps, the English government itself has undertaken film production. The Post Office, notably, has issued quite a number of intelligently-conceived motion pictures calculated to bring home to the English taxpayer exactly what services are being performed for him by that department. Neither these nor the others sponsored by industry have been what are commonly known as advertising films: but they might come under the heading of public relations. Young men of particular enthusiasms have entered this field of production—musicians, writers, and others who feel that in the film lies a new medium for the expression of faiths and opinions.

Better known in this country, of course, are the admirable films—also government made—of Pare Lorentz, "The Plow That Broke the Plains" and "The River." These set before the citizen problems that face him and his elected representatives and, at the same time, suggest solutions. Even more recent are films like Joris Ivens's "Spanish Earth" and "The 500,000,000" which examine and definitely take sides in current conflicts. In another mood "The City" has lately looked into the vital question of slum-clearance and town-planning.

Mr. Rotha's book traces the whole development of this approach to the use of the motion picture as an educative, clarifying, persuasive, and propagandist medium. In this, the second edition, he has added much new information and defines the purpose of documentary film, as he understands it, as an attempt to "bring to life" certain essential factors and problems of modern experience. This explanation is usefully supplemented by a further definition, given in a lucid preface by John Grierson, who says that the documentary film is attempting to close the gap between the citizen and the community and that it is seeking new ways, as radio has also done, of educating public opinion in a democracy. All who are interested in education in its broader sense will find this book of very considerable interest, while those interested solely in the motion picture for its own sake will find it a mine of information. The appendix with its copious data on directors and on films is especially useful: the book is essential to any decent library.

There are those who will consider the whole topic of British documentary film one of relatively narrow interest, since few of the films are to be seen here and then only semi-privately. It is perhaps true that its practitioners take themselves a trifle seriously and that Mr. Rotha—who is one of the most noted of them—writes at moments with a pontifical and almost immodest finality. There are, after all, other possible opinions about much that he states. He has a tendency, I feel, to attempt to restrict the medium itself and to insist overmuch what is and what is not good documentary film or, even, documentary film at all. But this is a fault that arises from enthusiasm and from a particular vocation. His comments on the social aspects of the cinema alone, not to mention the admirable illustrations, the useful appendix, and much else of real merit in the book, much more than outweigh it.

Iris Barry is curator of the Film Library of the New York Museum of Modern Art.



Courtesy of Museum of Modern Art Film Library

Still of "Moana of the South Seas," by Robert Flaherty.

## A Land with Little History

*AUSTRALIA: HER HERITAGE, HER FUTURE.* By Paul McGuire. New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company. 1939. 349 pp. \$3.50

Reviewed by JAMES FREDERICK GREEN

THE average American, when hearing the word "Australia," probably thinks of convicts, kangaroos, and koalas. Australia unfortunately remains, as it once appeared on maps, a *Terra Incognita*. Here is a delightful book that surveys the entire continent and describes not only the kangaroos but also landscapes, harbors, aborigines, deforestation, and social problems. Mr. McGuire, a young Australian author of detective stories, has an eye for the picturesque and a gift for colorful narrative. The constantly interesting text is enhanced by pages of excellent photographs, including a particularly appealing one of a koala family. Mr. McGuire's book, written with enthusiasm, understanding, and humor, is the best work of its kind that this reviewer has seen in recent years. It is such a model of description and analysis that one wishes Mr. McGuire might study fifty or sixty other countries.

The framework of the volume is a travelogue, for Mr. McGuire travels back and forth across his homeland. Sydney suggests the early history of

lusty poem or native song. Underlying this extraordinary collection of facts and fantasies is a very serious concern for the economic and political future of Australia, endangered by such diverse forces as deforestation, declining birth rate, Japanese imperialism, and the uncertainties of international trade. Still, "there has been no serious trial of arms on Australian territory. If the country without a history is happy, then Australia should be almost happy." Mr. McGuire fails only to provide his reader with a one-way passage across the Pacific.

## Five Countries

*WHAT TO SEE AND DO IN SCANDINAVIA.* By George W. Seaton. New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1939. 435 pp., with index. \$3.50.

*BIRCHLAND.* By Joran Birkeland. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc. 1939. 247 pp. \$2.50.

*PETTICOAT VAGABOND AMONG THE NOMADS.* By Neill James. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1939. 350 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by AGNES ROTHERY

GEORGE W. SEATON'S book is precisely what its title indicates. Here, in a single volume of convenient size and weight, is an up-to-date guide on the various routes and ways to reach Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, and Iceland: what clothes and luggage to take; what hotels and pensions to write ahead to for reservations—a necessary precaution in the summer season. The suggestions on "what to buy" in every locality will tempt the shopper, the lists of places of significance will satisfy the sightseer. The information as to food and weather, types and prices of land and water transportation, is explicit and reliable, and brief outlines on the separate and intermingling histories of the five countries, good photographs and maps, will clarify their relations to each other and help in finding one's way through the principal cities. Practically worked out itineraries are planned to fill the schedules for a two weeks' or a two months' holiday. It is written, not for the arm-chair traveler who might find the detailed tabulation bewildering, but for the traveler who is compiling plans for all or some of these excursions. It is a well-arranged and succinct handbook and will be of greatest value to any one who is touring these happily situated and wisely governed countries which have recently come into their proper place in the estimation of other nations as well as of American vacationists.

If Mr. Seaton's volume is a stream-

lined bus to carry as many passengers as want to go all over Scandinavia accompanied by a clearly enunciating guide-conductor, Joran Birkeland's "Birchland, A Journey Home to Norway" is a smaller, more intimate vehicle—perhaps the simple, two-wheeled



Travelling by pulkka in Lapland. From "Petticoat Vagabond."

"stolkjaerre" holding only the driver and a single passenger and jogging along a route chosen solely to please the writer. It will also please such readers as care to climb up beside her and enjoy a leisurely round of a few visits to Norwegian homes.

Joran Birkeland—who in her translations of Gosta af Geijerstam's delicately limpid little novels has revealed her sensitiveness of feeling and command of English—was born in Montana of a Norwegian father and mother. Although she knew none of her relatives in the old country and had never been invited to come back and make their acquaintance, after the death of her parents she yielded to her impulse to seek out their kinsfolk and, in coming into touch with them, come also into a deeper understanding of the long, vague line of ancestors from whom she had sprung and the land which was their background, their present home, and their means of livelihood. "I went to Norway because I knew I would feel at home there," she says simply. "And I needed to feel at home somewhere."

It was an unpretentious journey back to Norway and it is described with a fidelity that gives it a quiet value, not only for the stay-at-home reader who can take time to travel by imaginary "stolkjaerre" but for the bona fide traveler who will this coming summer whiz through all Scandinavia on the stream-lined bus. That she was able, in two months, to come into such appreciation is a tribute to her initiative and tact, for certainly the relatives were in no way overburdened with these qualities. That she has been able to convey to her readers the reticences and genuine goodness of middle-class Norwegian folk, the effect upon them of their stern and majestic natural environment, their simple ways of living, and their habits of thought, is a tribute to her ability as a writer.

Lapland is that part of Scandinavia



The Australian

the Australian colony; Canberra, the constitution and party politics; Melbourne, slums and cricket; Adelaide, agriculture and the wool industry; Peterborough, erosion and the expanding deserts. Every village and street-corner suggests some amusing bit of history or folk-lore, some quaint character out of the past or present, some