How They Saw Us:

by Yvonne Mathews-Klein

Of all the thousands of films made by the National Film Board over the last thirty-odd years, only a relative handful have survived into the present catalogue. The rest, many of them made to serve specifically defined, utilitarian ends, have sunk to rest in the archives of the NFB after their particular purpose was achieved. Today, when the social concerns to which they addressed themselves have faded into history, they are still interesting, less for their specific cinematic qualities, than for what they reveal, often unwittingly, about the social preoccupations which produced them and which dominate their imagery.

N.F.B. film: Is It A Woman's World?

Images of Women

in National Film Board Films

of the 1940's and 1950's

Pictou Shipyard, Pictou, N.S., Jan., 1943
Mrs. A. Mac Mackay handles a rivetter,
N.F.B. film: Women are Warriors

Films drawn from the 1940s and the 1950s are of particular interest to students of women's history since this twenty-year period was of intense definition and re-definition of the role women were expected to play in society at large. During these decades, a number of films were made which reflect, in a Canadian context, the general North American fascination with "women's place." Almost all of them concern themselves with women working; all of them, whether intentionally or not, establish limits to women's full participation in the labour force which arise out of an underlying, and fixed, notion of what is appropriate feminine behaviour; all of them view women as a special

variety of human being and, hence, a problem. The films I will discuss document the widely different social demands made on women in the war years and in the post-war period. What unites them is the apparent enormous difficulty that woman-as-subject presented to the male film-makers of those decades.

The NFB films of the 1940s and 1950s are no different from virtually any other film of that era in regard to the way women are viewed: we see in them a profound confusion about the meaning of women when divorced from their traditional connections and occupations. Generally speaking, by 1940 the issue of women's rights, except in Quebec, was consciously dead. Women had achieved "equality" through the vote some twenty years previously; the succeeding decades had produced conspicuous examples of women of extraordinary achievement in virtually every possible "masculine" pursuit; in short, at least for the young, unmarried woman, absolute equality was assumed. And yet the most cursory examination of actual social fact revealed that this equality, even for the young working girl, was illusory. Most young women, then as now, were channelled into clerical and service occupations, and they were expected to view these jobs as timefillers until marriage and motherhood, which remained their natural careers.

Thus the problem confronting the propagandists who took on the task of recruiting women into the services in World War II was rather different from that of World War I. For the first war, the major concern was to convince women that they were indeed able to undertake the jobs that they had been told for generations they were physically and mentally unsuited for. The energy generated by the radical women's suffrage movement made this an easier task than it might otherwise have been. The government, especially in Britain, recruited women to war service on the tacit assumption that their activities would prove them ready for full citizenship after the war. But in the 1940s, there was no need to present the war to women as the route to profound social change, since all the change necessary was thought to have occurred. The recruitment pitch could not be made, however, on precisely the same grounds as it was to men. The connection between manhood, glory, duty and war has stood for thousands of years, and killing in appropriate circumstances has always been accepted as the proper business of men. Women, however, are classical non-combatants and one of the tasks of these films turned out to be to present women with the opportunity to engage in the war effort while simultaneously reassuring them that their role would remain secondary, supportive and non-lethal. Thus, from the very beginning, the films were caught in a contradiction:

war was for men; any participation by women had to be construed within the previously existing definitions of acceptable feminine activity.

When we look at a film like Proudly She Marches (1943), we can see the traces of these uneasily resolved and conflicting counter-currents. Beginning as it does by recalling the most patronizing and condescending definitions of womanhood as "the flower and ornament" of the race, it consciously seeks to ally itself with women's aspirations to extend the scope of their activity and broaden their sense of involvement in the war effort. The challenge to men in a comparable film would be to prove their manhood; to women it is to re-define femininity. But as the film progresses, this laudable direction begins to be lost under the filmmakers' compulsion not to attack too profoundly the traditional definition of appropriate feminine behaviour.

In the early scenes of basic training, for example, in this film and in Wings on Her Shoulders, a similar film of the same vintage, it is assumed that women will need to be reassured about questions of personal vanity. A recurrent motif in the women's recruitment films is the attention paid to hair-styles--the short hair required of women in the services seemed to trouble the filmmakers whereas the induction haircut remained a source of considerable comedy in films about servicemen. Women are reassured that, though shorn, they are still pretty and male hair-stylists are introduced to demonstrate that the government cared about the sacrifice represented by the new coiffure.

In recruitment films for both men and women, raw recruits are frequently exposed in their unavoidable awkwardness. The point in the men's films is initiatory--once through the learning stages, the boys will have become men. In the women's films, whatever the intention, the effect is different, for the awkwardness of the women in these sequences arises from the fact that they are physically out of place: too short to reach the top bunk, designed for taller, stronger men. Tear gas drill becomes trivial when the narrator comments that "every girl likes to have a good cry," because the drill is not serious for women: presumably they will never be gassed. What for men is a deadly possibility remains for women a kind of game, and a game involving stereotypical "feminine" behaviour at that.

Even more to the point is the way Proudly She Marches is constructed. As each career possibility is examined, we see the same sequence of events--the male expert trains the woman in her new job; he examines her for competence; then graduates her into the man's world in a ritual sequence which shows her literally replacing

a man who hops up in the middle of what he is doing and rushes off, presumably to kill the enemy. The effect of this repetitive series of gestures is to remind the viewer that the jobs these women are doing are both secondary and temporary. The indecent haste with which the naval draughtsman quits his desk affirms a male hierarchy of values: if this job were really worthy of a man during a war, he would be loath to leave it. Since each man is being relieved for combat, clearly women will hold these jobs only temporarily, as the end of the war was already in sight when the film was made.(2) Even when a recruitment film openly expresses the sentiment that women will carry on their newly-learnt skills after the war, as Wings on Her Shoulders does, it is with little confidence. The repetitive visual and narrative message of that film is that women wear "wings on their shoulders so that men might fly," a statement that accurately forecasts the service role of women in post-war civil aviation.

The point I am attempting to make about these films may emerge more clearly perhaps when they are compared with the British film made by women, Women at War (1942). Even when we allow for the profound differences between England and Canada during World War II--for the total mobilization of the British population, for the fear of invasion and the pressures on a society under siege, there emerges in this film a subtly different consciousness and set of priorities. Women at War is a film about women, by women, and is primarily addressed to women, to the North American women whose war relief activities were so greatly needed in Britain. Rather than viewing the activities of women at war as extraordinary, this film makes the overt statement that women's war work is the direct extension of their normal peacetime activities, of traditional "women's work." But whereas in the Canadian films, the women portrayed are invariably subtly condescended to, and their work seen as secondary to the primary male task of killing, in this film the women are seen performing tasks which are primary in themselves. From the male point of view, expressed in the Canadian films, women hardly existed in the "real world" at all before the war; the work they traditionally did was not perceived as real work, but instead as a natural extension of their biological reality. But the women who made Women at War obviously understood that the work women had done before the war, like that they did during it, was "real," that the tasks of feeding, nurturing, supporting and succouring, which men tend to discount until they are withdrawn, are central to the maintenance of social coherence. Thus the film unself-consciously couples shots of women engaged in heavy industry and fighting

fires on rooftops with shots of women decorating shop windows blown out in the blitz. According to the melodramatic scale of values implicit in, say, Wings on Her Shoulders, in which progress toward victory is judged solely in terms of numbers killed and cities destroyed, an activity like painting windows might seem quaintly "feminine" and largely irrelevant; to the British women, however, concerned as they were with the necessity of preserving social values under the pressure of mass warfare, such an undertaking is clearly honourable and important war work in its own terms.

When we view the Canadian films and Women at War together, what strikes us immediately is the degree to which the British film accepts without question the competence of women to do what they are in fact doing. The male tutor, so dear to the Canadian films, is almost wholly absent. We see women in this film at the point when they have learned the work and are proceeding with it autonomously. The world of women at work is the normal world in Women at War.(3)

Also absent from this film is a motif which figures prominently in the Canadian films--the element of sexual competition. The men who made the recruitment films evidently felt that the opportunity provided by the services for women to "get back" at men, to humble their pride, might be a strong selling point. The persistence of this motif, for example in the jeep sequence or in the footage dealing with target practice, suggests indeed a certain masculine uneasiness at the prospect of being found out, of having their preciously-guarded trade secrets demystified when they have to share them with women, an uneasiness which is masked by visual humour. The women of Women at War, confident of their own capabilities, seem under no compulsion to score points in a war between the sexes dictated on masculine terms.

The contradictions inherent in the war recruitment films become even more apparent in Careers and Cradles (1947), which addresses itself to the vexed question of the role of women in the post-war world. The primary concern following World War II was to avoid the economic and consequent social dislocations which had followed the first war. It was essential somehow to find a means to convert wartime production to peacetime uses. The significant factor in war production is that what is produced is wholly disposable--a bomb can be dropped only once. To find a peacetime analogue to wartime disposability it was necessary to base an economy on rising expectations and infinite duplication. Suburban tract housing reflects these principles to perfection. But to make the style of life implied by this kind of housing attractive, women had to be converted from production to consumption; had to be convinced indeed that consumption

was a kind of production, that consumption could be seen as a career. In North America generally in the years after the war, women were subjected to an overwhelming pressure of propaganda from all sides which sought to persuade them that their social duty was to consume; to consume wisely, intelligently, cleverly, but above all to consume. The population as a whole, furthermore, had to be convinced of the worth and wisdom of a middle-class set of values--the predominantly agricultural and working-class population of the pre-war years was transformed in the post-war era to an upwardly mobile, fuzzily-defined class which abandoned its traditional neighbourhoods for suburban individualism. It was impossible, and probably unwise, to attempt to convince women to forgo higher education; more promising was to encourage them to go to college, not as a step toward a career, but as a route to marriage. Thus, throughout the decade following World War II, women were the object of a complex and confused series of double messages. Flattered and assured of their immense, if undefined, power, women were simultaneously trivialized at every opportunity. The primary message that a young woman growing up in the fifties received was that no undertaking which deflected her energies from her primary task as wife and mother was to be taken seriously. Careers outside the home were made to seem subtly abnormal; homemaking was magnified so that it appeared to demand a woman's entire waking attention.

Careers and Cradles nicely expresses the transition between the relative openness of the war years to the stifling domesticity of the fifties. It begins by announcing the achievement of complete equality between the sexes, thanks to the suffrage movement and the war. But even as it does so the visual images provide another message. The young woman off to work is hyper-conscious of her sexual attractiveness--we suspect she will not be working long. As she competes with men in the business world "on an equal footing" we see her teetering on absurdly high heels and we know that it is her own fault if she does not succeed--her "feminine" vanity stands in the way. Would she not be happier in the home? As the roll of Canadian women of achievement is called, we note that virtually all of them are practically unique in their respective fields; yes, we nod, it is possible for a woman to become an aircraft engineer or an astronomer, but is it likely? Is the undertaking worth the sacrifice implied if success is so improbable?

The film almost audibly heaves a sigh of relief as it turns from "careers" to "cradles." Trumpeting a wholly incomprehensible statistic (for every eight women who married in grandmother's day, twelve women are choosing marriage today), the film inves-

tigates the problems a highly-educated, middle-class woman faces in marriage. Her education has not prepared her adequately for the work she will now be doing: she cannot even make the toast properly. Moreover, she may have developed abilities and skills which she fears will be wasted in repetitive household drudgery, but her anxieties are unfounded. Her education in fact provides a way out of the monotony--the film cuts from dishwashing to a sign proclaiming "House of Ideas." If we expect to find some sort of creative alternative to housework behind this sign, we are disappointed. We find instead the model rooms of a department store and a model kitchen with every possible appliance. The film assures us that this typical young housewife, with her college education, "wants it all," that whatever disappointments or frustrations she may experience in her daily life, she has been trained to understand that these scientifically designed appliances represent the modern way to deal with age-old problems, represent a better life. This young housewife is encouraged to demand day-care for her child, not so that she can go off to work, but to free her for a day's shopping. Hers is a modern marriage, so she may go off from time to time with a woman friend while her husband stays home with the baby, but his awkwardness with a diaper is so apparent, and the amusement of the women at his incompetence so evident, that we know this is an exceptional occasion and not part of the daily routine. Finally we are assured that women exercise real power in society: the matronly members of a woman's organization are shown inspecting the plans of what appears to be a new sub-division. The power is, however, an illusion--the women are viewing the site after construction has begun and it seems unlikely that they have been consulted by the developers in any serious way. The film ends with a montage of key images and with the narrator's enthusiastic conclusion that whatever a woman chooses, a career, the home or a combination of the two (a possibility in no way touched on by the film itself) she can rest content in the knowledge that no woman in history has been so fortunate as she.

However tentative a commitment the filmmakers of the forties may have had to the principle of women's equality, nevertheless the overall impression left by these films is that women are competent to carry out work on the same terms and under largely the same conditions as men. The women we see in the war films may not be Amazons, but neither are they the subservient, decorative adjuncts they often are in the films of the fifties. The separation between the masculine "real world" of serious work and the feminine fantasy world of glamour, fashion and ambitionless inconsequence which the films of the forties had done much to

dissolve is re-established in the succeeding decade with a new rigidity.

The rapidity with which the ground gained by women during the war was lost after it can be seen in three films of the 1950s which deal with working women. Woman at Work (1958), was made as a propaganda film to be shown to prospective female immigrants to Canada, designed to inform them of the employment opportunities they might expect here. By the time this film was made, the contraction of career opportunities for women had progressed to such a degree that the makers of this film seem wholly unaware that the picture of Canadian employment for women they present is something less than attractive to the ambitious woman. Although the narrative promises great opportunities to the woman immigrant, the revolving card file of actual jobs visually suggests the degree to which women were actually being confined to conventional and dead-end employment. The soundtrack emphasizes that a large number of the women appearing in the film still hold the same job they took when they arrived in Canada three, four or five years previously, a situation which might have seemed attractive in terms of security, but which hardly depicts Canada as a land open to women's significant upward advancement. In fact, one of the more dramatic promotions in the film is the one which shows a woman moving from meat wrapper to cashier in a supermarket.

There is no consciousness of the enormous waste of women's talents which certain of these jobs entail. For example, a woman who speaks six European languages is said to find a satisfactory outlet for her abilities being a waitress in a downtown Montreal fish restaurant. The film consistently describes the employment opportunities open to women in inflated language: the "ever-widening field of opportunity" presented by banking means employment as a bookkeeping machine operator or teller; the "vast field of merchandising" shows us department store clerks, department assistant (after five years on the job) and the previously-mentioned wrappers and cashiers. In general, the film strenuously avoids any mention of salaries or promotions and any discussion of what it cannot avoid showing us, that in the main, executive, administrative, technical and professional positions were occupied by men. It prefers to concentrate on the fringe elements of the jobs it describes: the bowling alleys at Sun Life, the "ideal working conditions"in Steinberg's meat packing department and, of course, the possibility of finding a husband in one's new land. The peculiar double message of the fifties is very evident in this film--on the one hand, we see women doing mechanical or low level jobs

hile, on the other, the narration escribes what they are doing in in-flated language. Office work and aitressing are honourable and neces-ary; they are not careers in the ense the film makes them out to be. he conventional promise of the New orld to the (male) European immi-rant of unlimited opportunity in art accounts for the rhetoric of the erbal message of this film. The pro-ound social conviction of the 1950s hat women require less satisfaction nd stimulation from their jobs than en because their real work lies lsewhere--in the home--relieves the ilmmakers of any embarrassment at the ailure of this promise as far as omen are concerned.

The same kind of simultaneous trivializ-ation and inflation occurs in Service In the Sky (1957), the brief "Eyewit-ess" film about stewardesses. The ilm was made to document a new job pportunity for women: long-distance air travel was no longer so rigorous as to demand the presence of a registered nurse on board, so that middle-class college women could be recruited into what was touted as a glamour job. To interest this group, the work had to be made to appear de-manding enough to require higher educa-tion. A heavy-handed narration in this film magnifies the challenges of the job; the visual representation of the trainees, which emphasizes their fragility, makes them appear barely able to meet them. It is instructive to compare this film with either Wings on Her Shoulders or Women at War as an example of how quickly what appears to be a permanent social change can be eroded. If the women in Wings seemed somewhat out of place in the man's world of flying, in this film they seem descended from another planet as they hobble about in high heels and fur coats gazing in awe at the big planes the men are servicing. One of their more important functions aboard the planes, which goes unmentioned in the narration, is visually suggested by the open sexual admiration with which the mechanics stare back at them. The younger sisters of the same women who fought real incendiary bombs on the roof-tops of London here shrink timidly from a demonstration fire in a waste-basket. They struggle in per-plexity with the complications of filling out ticket forms and rise to meet the real challenge of the job--soothing an irate customer who has had coffee spilled in his lap. The women who were, in Wings, promised an equal spot in post-war aviation are firmly put in their place in Service in the Sky, where they are seen as decorative, though witless, adjuncts to the real business of flying. Toward the end of the film, the real attraction of the job for women emerges--stewardesses last only a few years on the job, we are told; they all marry and retire thankfully to the home, where their airborne skills of tactful service will presumably find ample expression.

In the fifties, the most visible woman was the one who has figured so largely in the films we have been discussing--the young, middle-class woman with considerable education. Publically, at least, working-class women, poor women, single mothers and the happily unmarried woman hardly appeared to exist. When the NFB turned its attention to the situation of the working-class woman, in Needles and Pins (1955), a film made with the cooperation of the ILGWU, it is characteristic of the period that both union and filmmakers should concentrate not on working conditions or the general quality of life in the garment trade, but on the opportunities for social advancement represented by the union's "self-improvement" programme. The general unreality of this approach is heightened by the fact that what we are seeing is a dubbed English version of the French-language original which had a narration written by Anne Hébert. Nevertheless, the English version is reasonably faithful to the original; the primary effect of the translation is to transform what was merely sentimental in the French commentary into occasional unreflective racism. The young woman in this film succeeds in becoming the Queen of the Dressmakers' Ball by taking a series of courses in ballet, elocution, charm and manners and she appears to do it all in English. The job she is hired to do in the dress factory fades into insignificance--it is the intangibles that count. The hard, mean, exhausting labour of the sewing-machine operator appears as merely another arena for individual self-expression, especially as the film maintains that the garment trade is centred in Montreal because of the innate talents of French women for couture. The film approves of the paternalism of the bosses, who make appreciative little speeches at the ball as our heroine is crowned with a tinsel thimble, wearing a dress donated by her kindly employer. Perhaps the most telling line in the film occurs when the young woman displays her finery to her family. She knows she is a success because her family treats her as a lady. (This is a motif even more significant in the French original where the young woman becomes emancipated from authoritarian paternal control because of her newly-learnt middle-class accomplishments.) This film might better be left in peaceful oblivion except for the fact that it documents so precisely the twin drives of the manipulation of women in the fifties: the imposition of middle-class values on the broadest possible social group in order to increase consumption and the distraction of women from genuine political complaint through the substitution of glitter and glamour for challenging and remunerative employment.

The final film in this series, Is It a Woman's World? (1957), serves as a kind of summary of the confusions of the period around the "woman question." Like Careers and Cradles, its counter-

part made ten years previously, this film attempts less to document women's actual role in society than to establish a theory of what that role ought to be. Is It a Woman's World? is more ambitious than the earlier film, however, for it is not so much concerned with establishing appropriate models of behaviour for the sexes within a social and economic context as it is with investigating the "nature" of the sexes themselves--the irreducible, biologically-determined differences which place iron limits on social change and transcend all political argument.

Made for early television and meant to be a kind of educational thought-provoker to stimulate living-room conversation, the film pretends to take an objective look at the question of the position of women in modern society. Through reversing the sexual roles, the film attacks certain of the old myths of women's inferiority but does so in such a context that the attack itself seems hardly credible. The women who act like men in the early part of the film are made to seem unlovely, sexually unattractive harridans--the underlying presumption of the film is that an inequality must exist between the sexes and that if men do not rule then ugly women will. When, in the second half, the men return the women's attack, a great many tired falsehoods are allowed to stand unchallenged. The great lie of the fifties was that women were said to have true economic power in society. As the film puts it, "eight out of every ten Canadian dollars" was spent by women. What this statistic ignores, of course, is the amount of discretionary spending available to the average household. Almost every cent of those famous eight dollars went to clothing, food and shelter, a fact which does much to undercut the projected image of woman as spendthrift. The woman who, for ten years, had been encouraged to regard consumption as a career is now held responsible for driving her husband into an early grave through extravagance.

The theoretical basis for this film may be found in the popular psychology of the period, much of which derived from Philip Wylie's famous attack on "Momism" of 1940. In the United States in the 1950s some explanation was being sought for the undeniable malaise which was demonstrably eroding the universal contentment promised for the post-war years. The demands of the Cold War made it imprudent to seek a political cause for an uneasiness which was becoming statistically apparent in the figures for divorce, alcoholism and psychological breakdown. Thus it became fashionable to seek a personal "psychological" explanation for what seemed to be troubling the nation as a whole. One very common analysis put the blame on the thwarted ambitions of women who, hyper-educated and led by an egalitarian society to expect full participation in social

decisions, found home-making an insufficiently challenging arena for her talents. Instead of gracefully accepting these limitations to her power and finding psychic and emotional fulfilment in the creation of a warm and supportive environment for her family, the woman, Philip Wylie's "Mom," selfishly turned her ambitions toward her husband and sons, seeking to bind them to her will and make of them emotional cripples, emasculated, harried little beings seeking only to do her bidding. This explanation of the American malaise took on the quality of myth and began to crop up everywhere--from True Romances and Love comics to the graduate departments of English literature which inflated the reputations of writers like Hemingway and D.H. Lawrence who were early exponents of this particular view of the relations between the sexes. Is It a Woman's World? demonstrates that Wylie's analysis was exported to Canada as well and, as the writer of the script recalls, was certainly used as one source for the film's analysis.

To its credit, the film treads, if gingerly, over some dangerous terrain. The sexual humiliation of women in business, the oppressive nature of chivalry, the virtual exclusion of women from positions of power, the limitations on women's career ambitions, the inequality of pay scales are all at least mentioned in the first half of the film. But the way the film is put together permits it to evade providing any answers to the questions it raises. By casting it in the form of a "problem" film, the filmmakers exempt themselves from the responsibility of making any overt statement. They do, however, suggest their answer to the question posed by the film's title, and that answer is "yes." The figure of the eternal feminine, who floats through the film in her high heels and full skirt, is there to remind the viewer that the source of woman's true power is her sexuality, her ability to enchant and bind the hapless male. The dream figure who becomes real at the end of the film transcends all rational argument as we watch the misogynist "hero" being drawn helplessly in her wake into a life of domesticity and service to the mythic female.

We end our series in the late nineteen fifties because our concern has been historical--to rescue from the oblivion of the archives films which document a particular period of Canada's recent past. But certainly there exist a number of later films in the current catalogue which may be subjected to a similar kind of analysis. The film industry in Canada, as in North America generally, whether public or private, has been a male preserve, at least as far as its executive, technical and directorial positions are concerned. The shimmering and shifting images of women on the screen which have shaped our idea of ourselves have been for the most part the product of the male imagination, bemused by the need to

deal with an experience which appears bewilderingly different to its own. Indeed, these films are notable because they do at least make an effort to come to terms with the existence of women; a significant number of NFB films simply do not portray women at all, suggesting that a more comfortable vision of the world is one which renders an entire sex invisible. The film industry has not changed much over the last twenty years; what has changed is women's consciousness of how the stereotypes in film oppress us and our growing determination no longer to bend ourselves to fit them. We still await the emergence of a significant number of filmmakers to whom women's experience is not an aberration but a simple reality.

NOTES

1. This article, in a slightly different form, was originally prepared as support material for the archival film package, "How They Saw Us: Images of Women in National Film Board Films in the 1940s and 1950s," and is reprinted here with the permission of the National Film Board.

2. See Ruth Pierson, "Women's Emancipation and the Recruitment of Women into the Labour Force in World War II," in Trofimenkoff and Prentice eds., The Neglected Majority (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977) for a discussion of the larger context of women's war-time employment. In the factory as well as the armed forces, there seems never to have been any intention to encourage women to regard their employment as anything other than a temporary expedient.

3. A film which incorporates substantial footage from Women at War, Women are Warriors, directed by Jane Marsh Beveridge in 1943, has a similar perspective. In the section of the film dealing with a Canadian aircraft factory, the women workers far outnumber the men and are shown not merely working without male supervision but acting as supervisors themselves.