

What we have is a brief, readable, tightly focused chronicle of the development of one department in one engineering school, the value and shortcomings of which flow directly from what it is.

Richard White  
University of Toronto

**Brian J. Low. *NFB Kids – Portrayals of Children by the National Film Board of Canada, 1939-1989*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University, 2002. Pp. 288.**

*NFB Kids* reminds us that the films of the NFB are an incredibly rich reserve of visual documents for social historians. Historians interested in childhood, in particular, have much to gain from surveying the vast array of representations of Canadian children's lives – everything from health, school, citizenship, First Nations, the Inuit and the north, immigration, sex education and sexual abuse, are spotlighted in the NFB catalogue. Low's work marks a useful "take one" on this important primary source material.

*NFB Kids* is perhaps best thought of as a guide to the array of material available in the NFB catalogue concerning children from 1939 to 1989. Low surveys virtually every film in the fifty-year period, setting his lens on those that concern or feature children prominently. What Low finds is indeed fascinating. We see children vacationing around the country, going to school, overcoming disabilities, engaging with technology, working, solving problems, and overcoming hardships. Children are the focus of the films Low surveys and their concerns, at least as adults construct them, are highlighted.

Low attempts to make some sense of NFB portrayals of children by organizing the book into a "progressive narrative" on the nature of both the NFB society and its children. He focuses first on the original stewardship of NFB founder, John Grierson, and his tenacious commitment to promoting "democratic citizenship" through film. Grierson's original intention, to use film as a powerful tool of propaganda to convince Canadians about the benefits of the "co-operative state" (p. 28), remained at the centre of the NFB for decades. A subsequent chapter

focusing on a particular film, “Lessons in Living” (1944), is arguably the strongest of the book. It explores the considerable gap between the film’s promotion of progressive education and the actual lives and needs of the community actors in the film. By “deconstructing” the portrayal of community improvement in “Lessons in Living,” based in the actual community of Lantzville, British Columbia, readers are shown the lies behind the film’s claims. The approach Low takes in this chapter suggests what could result if the analysis of NFB films are pushed to consider not just the reflected image in the “NFB mirror,” but the experiences of historical actors. While it does not surprise us that the magical turnaround of a community via school improvement was a farce manufactured by NFB filmmakers, it begs the question: what would such critical deconstruction reveal about the other NFB films Low includes in the book?

Remaining chapters offer chronological investigations of shifting themes in NFB films focusing on children. The postwar years saw the arrival of a new commissioner, Ross McLean, who sought to use film to help Canadians face up to the “riddles of readjustment” (p. 65). McLean wanted NFB films to reflect “what is” and “what could be” and, according to Low, “children played a prominent role in this cinematic readjustment of Canadian society” (p. 65). The 1950s and 1960s see NFB films reflecting the period’s concern with mental hygiene, modern childrearing techniques, the arrival of the “teenager,” and hippie culture. Throughout the chapters, however, some consideration of the complex and messy relationship between the film’s portrayals and the lives of actual children is claimed but never fully fleshed out. For example, Low attests, “as a body of films, the postwar portrayals of children constitute a panoramic record – an unfolding field of visions – of the changing physical, intellectual, and social realities of the peoples of Canada” (p. 66). The films tell only one half of this story and it is this half that Low concentrates on. In doing so, he offers some useful descriptions of what particular films contain. Much critical work on the “deconstruction” of these films, and their relationship to the secondary literature in the areas of parenting advice, education, race, class, and gender remains to be done. Low argues, for example, that “with the exception of children who are portrayed as troubled by physical or mental illness, the vast majority of them are portrayed as happy. Indeed, among some of the most ‘naturalistic’ portraits of children of this era, one finds

the sentimental images of 'childhood lost' so often associated with the period – such as with the happy campers in Ontario summer camps on Georgian Bay as represented in the film 'Holiday Island' (1948).” This is an important observation but needs to be taken one step further. Given the important work on the myth of the postwar golden era by authors such as Franca Iacovetta, Veronica Strong-Boag, and Mary Louise Adams, such film portrayals should be treated with critical suspicion.

The uneasy and complex relationship amongst the portrayals of Canadian children in NFB films, attempts to mould Canadian society into a particular image, and the lived experience of children in everyday situations remains a topic worth exploring. Particularly around issues of gender, race, and class, Low's first steps call for a continued critical analysis. The deeply racist nature of NFB films featuring First Nations, Inuit, and other children of non-White backgrounds are particularly insidious and demand critical attention on their own. In "People of the Potlatch" (1944), the film's narrator laments as an old chief dances, "Once he danced as a tribute to his Gods...Now he dances only to recall the old days." (36) In "Eskimo Summer" (1943) narrator Lorne Greene states "the gentle Eskimo is an example of perfect adaptation...Eskimos make good mechanics, and learn about engines quickly." (36). On "Chinese Canadians" (1954) narrator Fred Davis claims some "40,000 Chinese live in Vancouver...prejudice is on the decline."(85). Low hints at the problematic nature of these representations but never fully explores why and how NFB films contributed to the construction of Canada as a White, middle-class country.

Few historians have turned to NFB films for what they reflect about the changing nature of Canadian children and Canadian childhood. Low takes on this question in a particular, if perhaps somewhat unsatisfactory, way. Low does claim that the "coherency of the social history of NFB portrayals may be wholly attributed to its congruency with the social history of Canada..." (p. 4). This congruency between the films and the history, however, is only hinted at here. Rather than focussing precisely on the relationship between NFB portrayals of children and the "real" world, Low opts to present an "'in-house' history of a cinematic society" (p. 10). In this way, "NFB Kids," not

Canadian children who lived outside the camera's gaze, become the focus. The next step will be to bring the two together.

Mona Gleason  
University of British Columbia

**Little, Jack, I., ed. *Love Strong as Death: Lucy Peel's Canadian Journal, 1833-1836*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2001. Pp. 240.**

A newly married couple from the lesser English gentry, Lucy and Robert Peel arrived in the Eastern Townships in April 1833. Lucy Peel kept a letter journal that was sent in instalments to their families. This edition of Peel's accounts is based on transcriptions probably copied for circulation among family members. The last extant entry dates from December 1836, when the couple decided to return to England. Although the journal can be read as a self-consciously literary product – a genre of crafted life and travel writing from a particular period – the content is often private and timeless: a young couple justifying their choices as to where and how they would live; reassuring their families as to their happiness and the success of their marriage; and detailing their domestic concerns.

The introduction and footnotes to this edition contextualize the entries and make many useful links both to people and events in the Eastern Townships region and to broader cultural, social, and political processes on both sides of the Atlantic. J. I. Little notes the ways in which the Peels' experience and this journal resembled or differed from those of other gentry immigrants of the time to British North America or elsewhere. Little's introduction supplements his 1999 article for the *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*: "Gender and Gentility on the Lower Canadian Frontier: Lucy Peel's Journal, 1833-36." Both analyze the journal as a source for social history, with some themes developed more in the article, but the introduction to this edition adds more discussion of Peel's letters as literary works in a particular cultural context. For example, Little situates Peel's response to and representation of landscape within English Romanticism, within North American travel and emigrant writing, and within the scholarship on cultural production as "a