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Film Reviews, by Jno.

Flaherty and the Eskimos

NANOOK OF THE NORTH

(Flaherty)

WHEN I first saw *Nanook* (in the early 'twenties) I was too young to retain any detailed impression of it, and until a few days ago all that I could recall of this earliest of all documentaries was a vague memory of unending vistas of ice and snow. The knowledge that I had seen one of the greatest one-man films ever made but could remember nothing worthwhile about it annoyed me for years, whenever the subject of Robert Flaherty or Eskimos came up, and though it never exactly reached the dimensions of a frustration complex I was more than glad when the Wellington Film Society invited me to renew acquaintance with *Nanook* the other evening.

The print which the Society has acquired is a good one—but in almost every way the film has worn well. Familiarity with the documentary approach may rob us of some of the excitement which *Nanook* must have aroused in the intelligent filmgoer of 25 years ago (I think in particular of the effect of this and other Flaherty films on John Grierson), but it is still impossible not to be impressed by what Flaherty accomplished single-handed—under unusually trying conditions—and by the skill with which he selected and edited his material. For all its episodic structure, *Nanook* is a good story, and a meaningful one.

But is it a true story? When the film was revived in London just about a year ago, one English writer resurged a criticism of it made in 1927 by the explorer Vilhjalmur Stefansson. Writing in his book *The Standardization of Error*, Stefansson attacked the film as being untrue to fact in several respects. Since Hudson's Bay Eskimos had been well supplied with firearms ever since the days of the American Revolution, it was inaccurate, said Stefansson, to show *Nanook* and his friends using primitive harpoons to capture seal and walrus. Further, no real Eskimos ever hunted seals through the ice, as *Nanook* is shown doing in one of the most exciting episodes of the film. Eskimos, Stefansson went on, were no more capable than other human beings of eating vast quantities of oil and blubber, and the interior of an igloo is not cold enough to make the breath condense unless it has been cut in two to make a movie shot.

Since Stefansson probably knows more about the Eskimo than any other living white man, one would be something more than rash to try and answer him on his own ground, but *Nanook* is hardly intended to be a scientific document. In Grierson's phrase, it is an example of the creative treatment of reality. The theme of the film is man's struggle against hunger in a particular environment and *Nanook* is, in a sense, a composite Eskimo. If the Hudson's Bay Eskimos hunt with firearms, we have it on Stefansson's own authority that the Coronation Gulf Eskimos two or three decades ago had

BAROMETER

FINE: "*Nanook of the North*."
OVERCAST: "*The Courtneys of Curzon Street*."
DULL: "*Last of the Redmen*."

never heard of them. And if, as Stefansson has pointed out elsewhere, more than half the Eskimos in the world have never seen a snow house, that fact would not of itself refute Paul Rotha's statement that "the screen has probably no more simply treated yet brilliantly instructive sequence than that in which *Nanook* builds his igloo."

Uninhibited by any considerations of scientific accuracy, I enjoyed every moment of the film, but I did notice that there was no ground at all for the oil-and-blubber criticism. Neither *Nanook* nor any of his numerous dependants is seen eating blubber alone at any time and Flaherty explicitly states in one of his lengthy sub-titles that when it is used for food it is used much as we use butter. The famous battle which *Nanook* has with the harpooned seal may be a fake, but in that case both Flaherty and *Nanook* deserve some congratulation for making a thoroughly convincing performance of it.

If a sour note can be detected in Stefansson's criticisms, there is nothing sour in Flaherty's picture. It is warm in its understanding of primitive humanity and has a quality of dignity which unfortunately is almost as rare in films to-day as it was when *Nanook* was made a quarter of a century ago.

THE COURTNEYS OF CURZON STREET

(London Films)

WHEN *The Courtneys of Curzon Street* won the British National Film Award for the most popular picture of 1947 that made two wins in a row for Herbert Wilcox, the producer-director. It must be assumed, therefore, that Mr. Wilcox knows his public, and it is perhaps fair to assume too that forty million Britons (or a substantial percentage of them) can't be wrong so consistently. Even so, I could not regard this film as other than trashy, sentimental, romantic stuff. Stouter proletarians would, I imagine, be even more forthright in their selection of epithets.

The saga of the Courtneys is really the romance of Cathie O'Halloran (Anna Neagle), personal maid to old Lady Courtney, who falls in love with and eventually marries the Young Master (Michael Wilding) at the turn of the century. Following faithfully the behaviour pattern set down for such stories, Cathie discovers shortly after her marriage that their union is endangering young Edward's military career (Household Cavalry and all that) so she decides to leave Him Forever and retreats to Ireland with her mother. Edward goes to India to forget and does it so effectively that the 1914-18 war is half over before he meets his wife again and makes the acquaintance of his fifteen-year-old son. Cathie by this time is the most glamorous figure on the English musical comedy stage, and of course socially quite acceptable,

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