

MARY FIELD

by Gordon Mirams

IT is not merely an amusing irrelevancy to mention that Mary Field, O.B.E., besides being certainly the world authority on entertainment films for children, is also probably the world authority on medieval cod-fishing. For Mary Field, as executive head of the Children's Film Foundation of Great Britain, still brings to the making of her films that same belief in the value of research which she acquired as a student of Bedford College, University of London, working for her M.A. degree. She gained the degree with distinction in Commonwealth History, with a thesis on early Newfoundland (hence the cod-fishing sideline); and then took up the teaching of history and English at various secondary schools. She says she might still be doing this if one of her professors at the Institute of Historical Research (to which she had returned for post-graduate work), apparently unimpressed by her purely academic attainments, had not discovered by chance that she was interested in the cinema. He mentioned that there was a job offering with a film company which might attract her, and she got the position, that of "education manager" with British Instructional Films. That was in 1926. Since then the screen rather than the blackboard has dominated Mary Field's life. But it has never entirely supplanted it. Fundamentally she is still the teacher, still the research student with faith in the empirical approach.

During the past month she has been here to teach us, if we want to learn, something about the value of entertainment films for children. Now on her way back to England, she is doing the same thing for the Indian Government.

I had the privilege of being deputed by the Department of Internal Affairs to meet her in Auckland and accompany her during her ten days in the North Island.

Before I met her I had somehow, somewhere, or from somebody, got the impression that Mary Field (in private life Mrs. A. M. Hankin) was a person of very fixed and positive ideas, tending to be old-fashioned in her outlook, unyielding and even a little forbidding in her manner. In brief, something of the legendary "schoolmarm." The details of her career, including those mentioned above, tended to support this impression rather than to discount it. But this impression survived only a minute or so of her company. For here, one quickly realises, is a warm, gracious, and stimulating personality; a woman of great intelligence and wide experience, with a strong sense of fun; a person who not only sets you at once at your ease, but obviously enjoys meeting people and talking to them.

Despite the demands of her present tour of Australia, New Zealand, and India, with its unceasing round of newspaper interviews, radio talks, public lectures, and discussions with officials—as many as 15 engagements in one day—she seems to have untiring energy and quite unflagging enthusiasm: so much so that the only controversy provoked by her which I have encountered has centred round speculation as to her age. I imagine that *Who's Who*, or Mary Field herself if you asked her, would provide the answer; and I believe it might show that she is now in her sixties. If so, her energy is even more remarkable, but with such a personality the precise answer seems peculiarly irrelevant.

In capturing any audience, whether it is both houses of the Australian Legislature or a small group of hard-headed and cynical theatre executives, Mary Field is, of course, helped immeasurably by the fact that she has a success story to tell—the story of the children's entertainment film movement in Great Britain and, in recent years, in more and more countries throughout the world. Though she would be too modest to admit the fact, it is very much a story of her personal triumph against considerable odds in a field



MARY FIELD AND GORDON MIRAMS

"Children do not necessarily like Westerns—they have only been given Westerns"

whose increasing importance has been revealed by recent investigations into juvenile delinquency and the influence of the mass-media.

When she joined British Instructional Films in 1926, her first job was to check the facts for a travel film. Soon she was progressing upward through the various stages of actual production—as assistant-editor, editor, continuity-writer, script-writer, assistant-director, director, and production manager. In 1934 she joined the board of Gaumont-British Instructional Ltd. Her name, with that of F. Percy Smith, became increasingly associated with the fascinating series called *Secrets of Nature* and *Secrets of Life*. These were shorts in which ultra-slow photography and the micro-camera were used to reveal the speeded-up growth and infinite variety of plant and animal life in the fields and hedgerows of England. Three books (two of them Penguins), written in association with F. Percy Smith, were another outcome of this interest in cine-biology and the popularisation of science.

In 1944 came the major change in her film-producing career. At the request of J. Arthur Rank she switched from documentaries to making those entertainment films for children, of which *Bush Christmas* is the best known, not only in New Zealand, but throughout the world, where it can be encountered in several different languages. About 1949, Rank found the long-term financing of children's films too much for him as a personal venture, and stopped their production. So Mary Field joined the British Board of Film Censors for a year.

Again she put the experience to profit. She would certainly agree with John O'Shea, formerly my assistant in the censor's office here, and now with Pacific Films, that for training in actual film-making there is nothing like a period of film censorship, with its enforced discipline of watching the movies of other producers, good, bad, or indifferent. Mary Field's period with the British Board also helped the creation of that "designated list" of films, recommended by the censors as particularly

suitable for children, with which her own specially-produced films are now supplemented in Great Britain in order to provide continuity of programmes.

Since 1951 she has been back in very active production, building up and running the Children's Film Foundation, a non-profit-making organisation. She is turning out children's programmes not for Mr. Rank alone, but for every section of the British film industry (who collectively supply the finance), and for audiences numbering millions all over the world.

It is probably a natural and proper reaction that Mary Field should now continually stress that the films she is making are primarily for entertainment, and insist that they are not to be confused with the instructional and educational type of movie with which she used to be associated. They are films for the theatre, not the classroom: they must be enjoyable enough, as action and adventure stories. In their own right, to persuade children from seven to thirteen to want to spend their sixpences on seeing them, rather than the ordinary Western or gangster melodrama in the theatre across the road. She decries any attempt at publicly advertising to children that her films are made specially for them, since this causes the films to be immediately suspect as "educational." If her entertainment films do good, it must be done by example and "identification," by bringing the child audience into contact with "good company" (*Good Company*, incidentally, is the title of her latest book), and not by direct precept.

In short, Mary Field and her associates are building up a whole philosophy of children's entertainment as well as a practical technique for providing it. Inevitably in this sphere where nearly everybody has definite ideas about the upbringing of children, all of her theories do not go unchallenged. I gather too that she argues hotly with Unesco that it is on the wrong track because it tries to teach people by methods of formal instruction instead of using the approach through "entertainment." She

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THE HERO of "Trek to Masomba" explores ahead. This scene is from one of the children's films made under the supervision of Mary Field—an adventure story dealing with the settlement of Southern Rhodesia