

Notes

By Gerald Pratley

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AND NOW A WORD ABOUT BIOGRAPHY

During the Fifties the number of books published dealing seriously with the cinema, including biographies of filmmakers, was never more than a trickle. Students of film and its enthusiasts looked forward eagerly to new volumes coming out along with the very few journals devoted to the thoughtful consideration of motion pictures: (*Sight and Sound* (BFI)), *Film* (UCLA). Television was seldom in the publishing picture at that time other than in commercial magazines. What literature became available about film during these years was easy to keep up with; there was time to read the books and magazines thoroughly, and without having to spend an entire pay cheque every week to purchase them.

Contrast this situation with today; the trickle is a constantly running tide, film and tv books in English of all kinds pour from the regular presses, at one end, and from the University presses at the other -- from the US, the UK and even Canada. With a total estimated at being around the 2,000-a-year mark, one would have to be very wealthy to buy them all and be a non-working person to find time to read them -- fortunately not all of them are worth reading.

Biographies head the list at the moment and during past months we have been more than well served with books about directors and performers. Among the first category are *David Lean* (Kevin Brownlow), *Fritz Lang* (Patrick McGilligan), *Howard Hawks* (Todd McCarthy), three on *Steven Spielberg*, (John Baxter, Andrew Yule, Y. Lushitzky); and in the second category are *Bogart* (Sperber & Lax), *Mary Pickford* (Eileen Whitfield), *Marie Dressler* (Betty Lee) and autobiographies ranging from Stanley Kramer to Isabella Rossellini. Among the many celebrity books on Hollywood we learn a lot we really didn't need to know. Then there are published scripts; every film seems to have one these days, everyone can read them and learn to become a screenwriter!

Possibly the one book which should interest busy tv producers, executives and writers today is Jon Krampner's engrossing and concerned, *The Man in the Shadows: Fred Coe and the Golden Age of Television*. The long title suggests a University publication and indeed it is, from Rutgers University Press (243 pages), but being learned doesn't make it unreadable.

The Fifties is now thought of as being the Golden Age of Television in the United States with its compelling and often controversial live performances of adaptations from plays and original hour-long teledramas. These provided training years for now famous cinema directors: John Frankenheimer, Sidney Lumet, Sidney Pollack, Arthur Hiller, Daniel Petrie and Delbert Mann, to name a few. (Compared to them, the tv directors who turn to Hollywood today are little more than cramped makers of commercials their trademark being make it fast, furious and violent.)

The presiding genius of the Golden Age -- or one who became better known than others -- was Fred Coe, often called one of TV's smartest, boldest pioneers who produced the *Philco Playhouse*, and later *Playhouse 90*. Writers in those days, encouraged by Fred Coe, had few restraints placed upon them. They used their imagination to depict important subjects, with intelligent dialogue spoken by true-to-life characters. But it was not all plain sailing. Fred Coe was noted for his battles with sponsors, his fights on behalf of blacklisted actors and writers during the McCarthy witch hunt years, and for his untiring efforts in persuading stage actors to drop their disdain for television to appear in his production of plays they had appeared in on Broadway -- Jose Ferrer, for example, in *Cyrano de Bergerac*. In 1955 Coe staged *Peter Pan* with Mary Martin. The ratings were higher than those of any other programme up until that time.

As the years quickly passed all this seemed as nothing and in the fast, furious, and mercenary, cut-throat advance of television with newcomers to the networks, Coe was pushed aside. He was soon forgotten except by those who remembered the past and what he accomplished. This book places him on permanent record. Interestingly as this biography in praise of Coe came out, the *New York Times* ran a Media piece on

the programme, *Biography*, seen on the Arts and Entertainment (A&E) channel. This commercial cable company owned by NBC, ABC, and the Hearst Corporation, regularly draws over a million viewers for *Biography*, its most popular broadcast. Proclaiming that "Every Life Has a Story", *Biography* puts no limits on what it decides to tell us about those who are considered to be among the famous -- from artists and authors, producers and princesses, composers and criminals, politicians and presidents, models to movie stars. There are several "cross-over" elements at work here, reflecting on the current debate over whether watching television is taking precedence over reading books. Will watching television biographies on certain individuals be easier than reading books about them? The sensible answer, of course, is that no television programme can better books, both comprehensive and beautifully written; but those sensational enough in their so-called revelations are bound to be both read and watched if only because the viewers will see moving pictures of the people they have read about bringing them even more vividly to life -- that is of course, if the subjects were born after the coming of the movies and television, otherwise it's all still pictures - which might well have been included in the books.

Either way, A&E is now having it both ways. It has changed its programme guide for which 95,000 subscribers pay \$18.00 a year to a magazine called *Biography* with the subscription list growing to 124,000. Like the programme it is named after the guide provides profiles of the famous (John Travolta) along with the usual listings of all A&E programmes. With Hearst behind it, this new guide has found its place on news stands and is selling at \$2.99 to over 40,000 eager buyers thirsting to know more about celebrities. This then becomes an inexpensive way to promote the programme. But this is not all: A&E does a great business selling its home videos of *Biography*, with Churchill, Jesus and the Pope being best sellers. Is there any danger of running out of famous people? Probably not, fame is now somewhat like a disease, lasts for 15 minutes, with the word "famous" becoming as misused and meaningless as "classic". And although *Pride and Prejudice* was not a *Biography*, it has brought in \$1.6m from the sale of 160,000 videos at \$100.00 each. With this kind of monetary return, low-budget film producers might well leave the cinemas to the producers of block busters and concentrate on life's living stories!

Author Information

Gerald PRATLEY, OC, LLD, started his career as film critic with the CBC. In 1969, he founded the Ontario Film Institute which he directed until 1990. He has written several books and numerous articles on film, including *Torn Sprockets*, a history of Canadian cinema. He taught Film History in universities in Toronto and Waterloo, Canada and holds three honorary degrees from Canadian and US universities.

Gerald A. Pratley (1923-2011) was born and educated in London, England, and came to Canada in 1946. He started working in Toronto for the CBC as a scriptwriter. He was drawn toward working in motion pictures, and became, in 1948, the CBC's first film critic and commentator.

Gerald Pratley broadcast three programmes a week, *Pratley at the Movies*, *The Movie Scene*, *Music From the Films*, and others, until 1975. During this time he also became the first post-war chairman of the Toronto Film Society, chairman of the Toronto and District Film Council and co-founder of the A-G-E Film Society and correspondent for international magazines such as *Films and Filming*, *Film In Review*, *Variety*, *Hollywood Quarterly* and *International Film Guide*. During the 1950s he wrote for *Canadian Film Weekly* and *Canadian Film Digest*.

He became known as a speaker on all aspects of motion picture art and industry, and was invited to teach film history at the University of Toronto, York University, University of Waterloo, Seneca College and Ryerson Polytechnical University, with individual lectures being given at many other Canadian and US universities and colleges. He has served as a member of various judging panels of competitions and festivals, being one of the members of the first Canadian Film Awards in 1949.

From 1970 to 1975 he was the director of the Stratford (Ontario) International Film Festival, and from 1969 to 1976 he was Chairman of the International Jury of the Canadian Film Awards. He has attended all the world's leading festivals of film, and in particular, for 30 years, the Cannes Festival as CBC correspondent. He has written six books, *The Films of Frankenheimer: Forty Years in Film*; *The Cinema of John Frankenheimer*;

The Cinema of Otto Preminger; The Cinema of David Lean; The Cinema of John Huston, and Torn Sprockets, a history of the Canadian cinema.

Gerald Pratley has served on the Advisory Boards of the film departments of Ryerson Polytechnical University and Humber College, and as a member of the programme committee of TV Ontario. In 1968 he became the founder-director of the Ontario Film Institute of the Province of Ontario, an organization which has distinguished itself in archival holdings and public service and is known since 1990 as the Cinematheque of Ontario. He taught Film History courses at the Department of Film and Photography, Ryerson Polytechnic University, Toronto and the University of Waterloo.

In 1984, Gerald Pratley was made a Member of the Order of Canada and in 2003 **Officer of the Order of Canada** for his service to Canada through film appreciation. He holds Honorary Degrees in Letters and Fine Arts from York and Waterloo Universities (Ont., Canada) and Bowling Green State University (Ohio, USA).

In 2002, Gerald Pratley received a **Special Genie Award** from the Academy of Canadian Cinema & Television in recognition of his lifelong dedication to the promotion and his exceptional support of Canadian cinema.

He died on 14 March 2011 in Ontario, Canada.