

# BOOKS

By James Forrester



OSMOND BORRADAILE with Anita Borradaile Hadley

## *Life through a Lens: Memoirs of a Cinematographer*

by Osmond Borradaile

Edited by Anita Borradaile Hadley, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001. \$49.95.

*Life through a Lens* is a record of a remarkable life. There are so few histories of cameramen – and their contribution to this visual medium is so colossal – that a book like this is priceless. It serves as a wonderful resource for the thousands of young people studying film history and for those of us old enough to remember the films that Osmond Borradaile worked on.

Kevin Brownlow, the noted British film historian, neatly summarizes the obvious value of this volume in his cover comment. "This book would be noteworthy in itself simply for the fact that very few cinematographers left behind more than their body of work as testimony to their ability. Visual artists are not generally renowned for their skill with words." However, "Bordie," as he was affectionately known, wrote an exceptional memoir before his death in 1999 that deserves to reach a readership beyond the limitation of those

interested in cinematography. Born in Winnipeg in 1898, he details his early years in Saskatchewan and British Columbia, a family tragedy prompting a subsequent move to California in 1914, and his need to quit school, which provided the motivation for his subsequent employment in the film laboratories of Hollywood.

Through persistence and a friendly reference, he started his film career as a camera assistant in Sam Wood's Paramount Studio unit, shooting silent films with Gloria Swanson, Rudolph Valentino and Clara Bow. His personal interest in aviation led to work as a camera operator on the Howard Hughes feature *Hell's Angels*, during the era when the name conjured up images of young men flying biplanes not riding Harleys. After the advent of sound recording, he took advantage of an opportunity to work at Paramount's European studio outside of Paris, where he was able to acquire sufficient feature-film credits to become a director of photography. Paramount closed the studio in the middle of the Great Depression and moved its production facility to England, where Borradaile went to work for the Korda brothers at London Films.

During the 1930s and 1940s, Borradaile developed a reputation as "the greatest exterior camera artist in the world," according to fellow Canadian, actor Raymond Massey. Many classic British features such as *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (1934), *Elephant Boy* (1937), *The Drum* (1938), *Four Feathers* (1939), *The Thief of Bagdad* (1940), *The Overlanders* (1946) and *Scott of the Antarctic* (1948) contain his exquisite scenic footage. All of these productions required not only great skill as a cinematographer, but personal sacrifice and perseverance. There were no air-conditioned trailers, helicopters or canteen trucks on these expeditions. The chapter describing the shooting of *The Drum* in 1937, exemplifies the reality of second-unit work at that time. Borradaile and three assistants hauled an 80-pound, three-strip Technicolor camera, all their gear and 18,300 metres of temperamental stock over the Himalayas on pack mules. This was his first experience with shooting colour and the early stock was very sensitive to heat: a major headache when the temperature could soar to 40 degrees Celsius.

In 1949, he returned to Canada, settled in the Fraser Valley of British Columbia, and declined further assignments from Hollywood or London. During the 1950s he did accept contracts to shoot a number of NFB shorts and one documentary feature, *Royal Journey*, which won a British Film Academy Award and a Canadian Film Award for Best Feature Film in 1952. He was presented with an Order of Canada in 1982.

The core manuscript was written when the author was in his 80s and the original intent was to simply record his life experiences for his immediate family. More recently, his daughter, Anita Borradaile Hadley, edited the draft memoir, reshaping it into a more polished autobiography. Having worked with oral histories and anecdotal recollections myself, I realize what a delicate balancing act this process is. In the editor's preface, she mentions that her "guiding principle throughout has been to let Bordie's voice be heard." In this she has done exceptionally well.

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