

**Budge: What Happened to Canada's King of Film**

By Barbara Wade Rose. 1998, 260 pages. ECW Press. Distributed by General. \$16.95.

**Cartoon Charlie: The Life and Art of Animation Pioneer Charles Thorson**

By Gene Walz. 1988. 221 pages. Great Plains Publications. \$29.95.



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Thorson's "Grumpy".

These days, with the Canadian film industry recovering from a panic attack over which companies would receive payments from a badly depleted cable fund and Toronto's artists still reeling from acute grants shortages at the Ontario Arts Council, it is particularly appropriate to look at the lives and times of two of this country's earliest film artists.

Charles Thorson, an animation talent long before the days of Nelvana or the National Film Board, had to move to the United States in order to ply his trade at Disney and Warner Bros. studios during Hollywood's golden age in the 1930s. F.R. "Budge" Crawley, the founder of a company that made thousands of highly regarded industrial documentaries, fought an epochal and ultimately losing battle to transform himself into a media mogul producing "Northerns" for a Canadian and international film audience. Despite creating impressive bodies of work, both men were frustrated by commercial considerations that they

could not change. Rogues, artists, hard drinkers and womanizers, Crawley and Thorson are fascinating subjects for biographers.

Canadian baby boomers, and those older, are likely to recall Budge Crawley as the lone filmmaker who provided a significant private voice in the 1950s and 1960s, opposing those heard from the government-funded media agencies, the NFB and CBC. Younger generations may not know him at all, or will possibly only recognize his name as the producer of the feature documentary, *The Man Who Skied Down Everest*, which won an Academy Award in 1976. When *The Globe and Mail* published an article on Canadian Oscar winners last spring, Crawley was mistakenly left off the list. That's quite a fall for someone who Barbara Wade Rose calls "Canada's King of Film."

When Crawley Films celebrated its 25th anniversary in 1964, Rose calculates that it had received 143 awards, and Crawley's feature film of that silver anniversary year, *The Luck of Ginger Coffey*, gained critical huzzahs from the United States to the Soviet Union. Yet Crawley claimed himself to be dissatisfied. "There isn't the same pride taken by Canadians in achievements in the cultural field...as in many other countries" is a telling Crawley statement.

Crawley's life is skillfully evoked by Rose, a veteran journalist. One learns of his youth in Ottawa, his free-spirited athleticism and bravado, and the paterfamilias, a wealthy accountant who funded his filmmaking son but kept him under strict fiscal reins for the majority of his life. Budge's two marriages, to his filmmaking partner Judith and the more politically astute Lenore (which overlapped for years) is recounted without getting into tabloid-style excesses. And Budge's fall from grace, turning into a fiscally irresponsible feature-filmmaking producer after the death of his father, is given a convincing Freudian spin. Missing from Rose's book are a selected filmography and a more detailed description of Crawley's filmmaking prowess. Still these are quibbles in what is a fine biography of a major Canadian film producer.

By contrast, Gene Walz, a film professor and filmmaker, expends a great deal of effort recreating the films that Charles

Thorson had a hand in creating. Walz has to do this because Thorson laboured in Hollywood animation studios and received no formal film credits for his work. His role, and that of many of his contemporaries, can reasonably be compared to that of medieval masons who helped to build the great cathedrals of Europe. A character animator, Thorson employed his brilliant draftsmanship to aid in the full development of such well-loved figures as Bugs Bunny, Elmer Fudd, Little Hiawatha, the Seven Dwarfs and possibly Snow White.

The Snow White tale best exemplifies Walz's methodology and his problem with recreating Thorson's work. Born and raised in Winnipeg from Icelandic parents, Charlie Thorson spent a good deal of his life drawing advertising copy for Eaton's catalogues, drinking with his buddies, vagabonding, living in hotels, eating in restaurants and falling in love with good-looking women. Falling into the latter two categories is Kristin Solvadottir, an Icelandic beauty who worked as a waitress at the Wevel Café, Thorson's hang-out in 1934, shortly before he departed Winnipeg for Walt Disney's studio. Her face does resemble that of Snow White's and it is true that Thorson did work on the film. Through drawings reproduced in the book, photos of the waitress and a generously speculative text by Walz, the probability that an unknown Winnipegger served as the model for Snow White is reasonably stated.

You may also be convinced by Walz that Thorson's cartoony drawings of a rabbit for animation director Bugs Hardaway, dubbed "Bug's bunny," coupled with the Winnipeg artist's drawings of Max Hare for Disney justifies the claim that "Cartoon Charlie" originated Bugs Bunny, Warner Bros.' most famous animated character. Or you may not be. What is clear is that Walz has produced a loving text which brings Charlie Thorson's sad, but brilliant, life into perspective. An amazing character, Thorson was his own worst enemy, making fine work and charming people and then figuring out a way to offend his supporters and receive nothing for his efforts. Thanks to Walz, and an overly oblong book design that allows the reader to—uncomfortably but rewardingly—hold a plethora of Thorson's drawings, this unknown artist may finally achieve recognition in Canada and abroad. ■