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The Parade's Gone By

Clarence Brown is one of the great names of American motion pictures —one of the few whose mastery was undiminished by the arrival of sound. Thanks to the widespread fame of his Garbo pictures—*Anna Christie, Conquest,* and *Anna Karenina*—Clarence Brown is unlikely to become a neglected master. His *Intruder in the Dust,* a study of racial conflict in the South, is the finest picture ever made on the subject. His *The Yearling* has become a classic.

Yet his films of the silent era have been completely forgotten. Although highly successful financially, they tended to be overlooked at the time when the volume of big specials crowded out fine productions of more modest budgets. Superb films like *Smouldering Fires* (1924) with Pauline Frederick and *The Goose Woman* (1925) with Louise Dresser were well reviewed and well received, but they were not to receive the unrestrained enthusiasm they deserved until rediscovered, forty years later, by a new generation. Their revival, at the National Film Theatre, London, the Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society, New York, and the Cinémathèque Française, Paris, caused some hurried reappraisal of Clarence Brown's early work. Audiences were struck by the freshness of the films, and many people commented on "the remarkably modern techniques."

Due to his success with Garbo, Brown has become celebrated in the narrow classification of "a woman's director." Yet he drew from Valentino what was probably his finest performance in *The Eagle* (1925). He handled action sequences with real vigor and with *The Trail of '98* (1928) proved his mastery of spectacle.

His style is one of deceptive simplicity, but the apparently effortless ease is the result of tremendous care. Clarence Brown as a director was concerned not only with performances, but with lighting, composition, editing, story construction —every stage in the process of film making.

Brown was a brilliant technician, but he also had a warm feeling for people. In his handling of players, and of situations, he achieved a naturalism that, even when stylized, was always convincing. *The Eagle,* for instance, was a highly romantic story, in settings of deliberate artificiality, but Brown's evocation of atmosphere, and his gentle humor, gave the slight story real stature.

Apart from their expert skill, the trademark of Clarence Brown pictures has always been their imaginative visual values. This, he says, he owes to Maurice Tourneur, the great director who gave him his first job in films.

"Maurice Tourneur was my god. I owe him everything I've got in the world. For me, he was the greatest man who ever lived. If it hadn't been for him, I'd still be fixing automobiles." I interviewed Clarence Brown in Paris in September 1965 and October 1966.

Born in Clinton, Massachusetts, in 1890, Clarence Brown was the son of a cotton manufacturer, Larkin H. Brown. The family moved to the South when Brown was eleven; after high school, he attended the University of Tennessee, and graduated at nineteen with two degrees in engineering. His father wanted him to enter the cotton business, but Brown's passionate interest in cars caused him to leave home and start work with the Moline Automobile Company, in Illinois, and later with the Stevens Duryea Company, of Massachusetts.

CLARENCE BROWN: I became the traveling expert mechanic for Stevens Duryea. One of my calls was to a dealer in Birmingham, Alabama, who took a

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We went through the city of Denver and picked up derelicts off the streets—tramps, people who were broke, and people who were starving. We got them to the railroad station ready to leave at two in the morning. During the trip to the Great Divide, which took about four hours, the assistants clothed them. Now this is two thousand people—they put rubber boots on them, heavy underwear, heavy socks, mackinaws, and dressed them just as they would have been at the time of the Gold Rush. They were given their breakfast en route.

The train arrived at eight a.m. As they got off, we handed them their packs and steered them so that they had to climb the pass. Our cameras were all set and rehearsed, and I had telephones to each of the three or four camera locations. By the time they reached the top, and we had got what we wanted, it was two p.m. We picked them up in the train and fed them on the way to Denver.

But we had a problem. We needed them for a second day of shooting. We couldn't bring them back the following day—they didn't get back to Denver until eight p.m. So we had to skip a day—we gave them a call for the second day at two a.m. We probably lost twenty per cent, but it didn't matter so much because by then I had all my long shots.

We worked at eleven thousand six hundred feet for five weeks. I had to send a number of people down; they just couldn't take it. We couldn't walk fast, we couldn't run—we could hardly do anything at that altitude. We had little oil lamps on the cameras, with pipes fitted to the interior, to prevent the mechanism from freezing and to control static. [Static was a bugbear at that time; the intense cold caused electrostatic flashes to register on the film. Moving through the metal camera gate the film built up its own electricity.] Some of our scenes were just streaked with static.

Trail of '98 was the hardest picture I ever made. The next hardest was *The Yearling;* instead of fighting cold we were fighting heat—in the middle of Florida, in the summertime.

A Woman of Affairs, with Greta Garbo, John Gilbert, and Dorothy Sebastian, was my last silent picture. [Clarence Brown also remade most of *The Cossacks,* with John Gilbert and Renee Adoree, but did not seek a credit. Direction was attributed to George Hill, who had made the original.]

The talkies had already arrived, and John Gilbert went completely ham in the middle of shooting, demonstrating what he was going to do in his first sound film. He began speaking the titles with great flamboyance.

He wasn't alone in this. Many other actors—particularly those with stage experience—went back to that melodramatic, expansive-gesture stuff. Well, I was never on the stage. I knew nothing about that type of acting. I only knew what was human and what I saw in real life.

We taught the Broadway stage how to act. They used to come on the set, those stage actors, and throw their voices up to the gallery. Whenever I had to direct a New York stage actor, I did an imitation of him.

"This is how you're playing it," I would say. "Is this how a human being behaves? You're talking to me when you make a scene. It's intimate. The camera is there, and I'm here, right beside it. But you're projecting yourself way out to an audience."

I would never impose a performance on an actor, however. That was one of the troubles with Lubitsch's pictures. He was one of the greatest directors, but every

knows he's prepared for something. When he bursts in on them and finds them in this compromising position on the couch, I put the camera down by MacDermott's hand. I shot through his fingers at Garbo and Gilbert as he clenched his fist over them.

MacDermott challenges Gilbert to a duel. I shot this in silhouette. The two men start back to back, then they walk out of picture. There are two bursts of smoke from each side of screen. We dissolve out to a shot over Garbo's shoulder as she tries on a black hat in a millinery shop. In her hand is a handkerchief with a black border. She has a slight smile on her face. That's how we told who was shot—without a subtitle or any other sort of explanation.

They put a happy ending on *Flesh and the Devil*—I had to shoot it and it killed me. When we ran it in Paris, I told them to cut it off.

I look back on my second M-G-M film, *Trail of '98*, with mixed emotions. It wasn't too hot. Storywise, directionwise, and actingwise I was never too happy with it. It was just one of those conglomerates.

I was a year making it, and I lost twenty pounds. It was my toughest assignment. It was the story of the great Klondike Gold Rush, and to duplicate the Chilkoot Pass we used a location at the Great Divide, about sixty miles outside Denver, 11,600 feet with temperatures as low as sixty below zero. And I had to have two thousand extra people up there—from a town like Denver! But we got it. We duplicated the Chilkoot Pass. Old sourdoughs who saw the picture thought it was the real thing.

John Seitz was my cameraman—he was one of the greatest. Harry Carey was wonderful in it, but I had a lousy leading man. We went to Alaska to do the rapids scenes, and we lost three men up there. When I left Denver, part of the company stayed behind. A large section of snow fell and two or three more men were killed. It was a tough picture. Oh God, it was tough.

At night, you'd look at a mountain and the snow would be covering the peak. The next morning, that mountain would be dry and the snow would be on the next peak. Fifty- to sixty-mile-an-hour winds had moved the whole lot over during the night. That's the kind of weather we had.

We lived in a train. We had about a hundred and twenty-four altogether in the company, with six Pullman cars and two diners. At the Pass was the highest railroad in the country—on the old Denver—Rio Grande, which ran out of Denver and right over the top of the mountain. At the top they had snowsheds.

The first night we spent in the snowsheds, I nearly went out of my head. I woke up in the middle of the night, almost suffocated by the fumes from the engine and the smoke pouring in from other trains passing through. I tried to get some air, but I couldn't find a way out. I'll never forget that experience.

When we came to the scenes with the two thousand people climbing up the Chilkoot Pass, we built a track parallel to their route and built a sled for our cameras. We lashed three cameras to the sled, with three different lenses. At the top was a power windlass, which could be controlled by signals from the camera, so that we were able to follow people up, stop, go back, and take close-ups of the incidents that happened on the way up.

As luck would have it, the railroad ran from the lower slopes of the pass and went around it, emerging again on the level at the top of the pass. This was of great assistance logistically.