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## CLARENCE BROWN

### A Survey Of His Work

By  
WILLIAM K. EVERSON

PERHAPS even more irksome than being an under-rated or neglected director (he at least stands a chance of being discovered and celebrated belatedly) is the fate of the director who is acknowledged, casually, as a craftsman and thereafter so taken for granted that his art is rarely discussed at all. Such is certainly the case with Clarence Brown, one of Hollywood's finest directors, who after more than thirty years of consistently high quality and usually commercially successful films (nearly 50 of them) finds himself listed in the current catalogue of America's foremost 16mm distributor as "an unknown director" presumably worthy of reappraisal. Even Andrew Sarris, in his methodical and thoughtful survey of American directors has apparently not made up his mind about him, classifying him under "subject for further research." Fortunately Brown's films themselves have begun to bring about the attention that their maker deserves: first, tentatively, through isolated film society showings, then on a much broader scope encompassing theatrical reissues. Not least, Kevin Brownlow's superb book on the silent

cinema, *The Parade's Gone By*, focused long overdue attention on Brown, and in literally making him one of the "stars" of that book has placed Brown alongside Griffith, Ford and other giants of the American cinema as a film-maker whose work not only deserves study but, more importantly, survives on its own merits and is still valid both from artistic and entertainment standpoints. Lest one suspect that Brown himself has been smarting over this seeming inattention, it should be stressed immediately that he has not. A successful director from the beginning, he was almost always in the position of being able to select just the properties he wanted, and he made far fewer films than such contemporary directors as John Ford or Henry King. He gained tremendous satisfaction from jobs well done, and into the bargain made a great deal of money for his studio — and for himself. In happy, wealthy and comfortable retirement since '52, he is now in his 80's, healthy and virile, content, but doubtless well pleased that recognition — particularly from film students — has come to his work at last.

In fairness, the lack of recorded



*In THE LIGHT IN THE DARK, a climactic 3-shot of Hope Hampton, Lon Chaney & E. K. Lincoln, which conveys the solution of the story visually, without recourse to subtitle*

appreciation of his work up until this point is at least understandable. His style has always been deceptively unobtrusive and subtle. Moreover, the majority of his films from '25 on have been elaborate star vehicles for Valentino, Garbo, Gable, Gilbert, Crawford, Hepburn and other major stars of both silent and sound eras. Too, virtually all of them were made for MGM, so that apart from being star vehicles they were drenched in production values — elaborate sets, stunning art direction and decor, meticulous lighting and photography. Small wonder (especially in the '20s and '30s when critical writing on film was virtually non-existent) that Brown's contribution to the films, if noted at all, usually took second place to considerations of whether they were up to or below the standards of the star's work, or whether the fans would like their idol in this or that new kind of role. In some ways, Brown's talents

can best be measured by his earlier silents — *Smouldering Fires* ('24) in particular — where the production is simple, the glitter and the big stars have not yet descended on him — and it is Brown's contribution that is obviously the major one. Even in such a film, his directorial style is still discreet and unobtrusive, but there is less between it and the viewer. *Smouldering Fires* is a triangle story — almost a soap opera, though an intelligent one — and because it *is* a triangle, Brown tells much of his story in sensitively composed (and acted) three-shots, with the two women (Pauline Frederick and Laura LaPlante) and the man (Malcolm MacGregor) so photographed and arranged within the frame that they can convey emotions, thoughts and motivations in a single set-up. Brown even finishes his film with a single three-shot in which the facial expressions tell the audience not only what *is* happening but what is *going* to happen; an economical and extraordinarily subtle climax to a story which most other directors would have taken a reel to achieve with a great deal of exposition and subtitles. (Michael Curtiz, a dynamic but not always subtle director, *did* take more than a reel to disentangle his characters from not dissimilar predicaments in his silent *The Third Degree*). I cite *Smouldering Fires* particularly because its sophistry always bowls over current audiences that are not even primarily film-study oriented. Normal entertainment-seekers have seen *Smouldering Fires* in public showings in New York in the past few years.



expecting little, and have been totally enraptured by the skill and entirely undated elegance with which Brown delicately handles emotional problems *visually*, without sound, and with a limited recourse to subtitles. The three-shot for triangle stories was a visual motif that Brown explored in a number of his silents: earlier, in *The Light in the Dark* ('22) and later in *The Goose Woman* ('25). Brown, alas, is perhaps (and unwittingly) his own

worst enemy in delaying appreciation of these earlier works. A thorough perfectionist, he realises the enormous superiority of 35mm prints over 16mm — and at festivals with which he is connected, automatically rejects the use of any 16mm copies — thus dooming to exclusion many of the rarer early works which unfortunately now exist only in 16mm. The perfectionist in him also realises the tremendous advantages that working at a major

*THE LIGHT IN THE DARK: one of the deliberate painting-like images stressing Brown's adherence to pictorial style of Maurice Tourneur*



studio offers — and to him, the earlier films, made at smaller studios like Universal, or independents prior to that, can not hope to have the polished craftsmanship that the facilities (and technicians) at MGM provided. This is, to him, another quite justifiable reason not to show the earlier films. He is not ashamed of them, but regards them as stepping-stones to the later, more ambitious films. Yet ironically, Brown's weaker films and his mistakes are almost all to be found in his MGM films made at the height of the studio's affluence, when Brown

had maximum call on stars, Technicolor and other expensive assets.

Earlier this year the University of Tennessee hosted an elaborate Testimonial/Festival to Brown who graduated from the Knoxville campus in '10 with a double degree in mechanical and electrical engineering, but within two or three years became so enamored of the new art of the movies — and especially the movies made by one particular director, Maurice Tourneur — that he immediately decided to make them his life's work. (Brown was born on May 10, 1890, in Clinton,

*Rudolph Valentino in THE EAGLE*







*Garbo & Gilbert in  
FLESH AND THE DEVIL*

Mass., but his parents, his father a loom-repairer and his mother a weaver, soon settled in to work at Knoxville's Brookside Mills). The university had feted Brown in the past, most notably in '70 with the opening of its plush 626-seat Clarence Brown Theatre, which he had largely funded, but this was its first full-scale celebration of Brown for his directorial achievements. Highlights of the official three-day Festival (May 27-29) — which on campus was actually a much longer affair thanks to workshops, study groups and screening sessions — were the declaration by the Governor of Tennessee of Sunday May 27 as Clarence Brown Day throughout the state; the awarding of a commemorative plaque; and the official presentation of Brown's lifetime collection of scripts, production stills, scrapbooks, correspondence and other historical memorabilia to the university. This collection will serve as the nucleus of

archival reference material in the university's expanding film study program. Probably no other director's complete career is so totally documented in any archive.

Six major Brown films were included in this open-to-the-public Festival. Violent storms and flooding throughout the area during the first day even removed the major competition of the Great Smoky Mountains, though Garbo (in *Anna Karenina*) may have been a not inconsiderable factor in making for a packed house with many turnaways. (A pity that astute showmanship hadn't anticipated the weather and scheduled Brown's *The Rains Came* instead!)

*Garbo & Clarence Brown with technician  
on set of ANNA CHRISTIE*





*Gene Raymond, Joan Crawford  
& Jean Dixon in SADIE MCKEE*

However, succeeding days without Garbo and *with* sunny weather drew equally large attendances. Brown was visibly moved by the genuine and tremendously enthusiastic response that greeted each film, and by the frequent standing ovations. It's highly probable that the largely non-film-oriented audience didn't understand exactly what Brown's contribution to the films was, but the artistry and entertainment values were totally unimpaired by the passage of time. The taste, intelligence and stunning print-quality (via MGM studio copies) were definitely enhanced by comparison with contemporary standards in all three areas. Brown himself frequently remarked that the films were made in, and for, another age, adding that by today's standards there might be an undue amount of "corn." Perhaps there was to a degree — but the corn was wholesome, and the sentiment honest. Brown's taste has always been impeccable — and while *standards* of taste have a deplorable habit of declining, *criteria* of taste never do. Brown's films have always been good audience films, but possib-

ly this admittedly non-metropolitan audience was reacting so favorably to the over-riding good taste of all of the films as much as they were to the still solid story values. I had screened *Of Human Hearts* ('38) privately just a few weeks earlier, and frankly had been disappointed. It seemed a rather cold film when it needed constant warmth; perhaps fooled by MGM's usually rigid type-casting system, I found myself totally in sympathy with James Stewart's actions and behavior, and it came as rather a shock towards the end of the film to realise that he was actually a selfish and *unsympathetic* character. Perhaps it was more of a shock to realise that behavioral patterns regarded as vices a hundred years ago (or even 35 years ago, when the film was made) have now become *commonplace* behavioral patterns! In any event, what had seemed like a rather distant and cold film when seen alone, came beautifully to life when played as it was meant to be played — before a full audience, a large percentage of which was weeping copiously!

*Clark Gable & Joan Crawford  
in CHAINED*





Brown's apparently unemotional stance at times is merely another example of his reluctance to impose his own personality on his work. Just as he never thrusts obvious filmic technique on the viewer, so does he prefer not to adopt a personal point of view with his narrative. Particularly with stories told in a historic context, he seems to draw himself back to the position of an observer, so that he is saying in effect, "This is how it was," and letting the story tell itself without apparent prodding or manipulation on his part.

*Clarence Brown & Garbo*  
on set of ANNA KARENINA



*Garbo & Fredric March in*  
ANNA KARENINA

Yet so sure is his hold on collective audience emotions, that when such films play before an audience, that initial aloofness disappears totally and the films work. Even *National Velvet*, with its almost inexcusably artificial wartime "exterior" sets, and its predictable plot, had audiences totally enthralled and on the edges of their seats for the climactic race, even though there could be no doubt as to its outcome. (I noted similar reactions and response in recent theatrical revivals of the film in New York). Brown felt that it succeeded, despite its ob-





*Myrna Loy & Clark Gable in  
WIFE VS. SECRETARY*

viousness and its fairy-tale quality, "because it offers a little love and above all a little hope . . . something we all need, and something that few films give us today." The relaxed, natural yet forceful performances that Brown drew from Elizabeth Taylor and Jackie Jenkins in that film were a reminder of what a talent (one shared with John Ford incidentally) that Brown had for working with child performers. Footage exists of the screen-test that Brown shot of Leatrice Joy Fountain (daughter of Leatrice Joy and John Gilbert), an extremely handsome and sensitive girl who gave a striking performance in *Of Human Hearts*, but did not subsequently pursue an acting career. In the screen test,

one can sense the awkwardness and lack of confidence of the child in her first moments, and then one can see the self-consciousness disappear, and a grace and thoughtfulness take over under Brown's guidance.

One thing which became markedly apparent in a concentrated viewing of Brown's films was that he was one of the very few directors (Ford certainly was another) who never abandoned the narrative style of the silent films. So well edited and composed were his talkies, and so adroit in their use of the mobile camera, that most of them still told their stories visually rather than verbally. Although the experiment isn't necessarily recommended (especially with Garbo's soft, musical voice involved) it would be possible to take a talkie like *Anna Karenina*, remove the sound track entirely, and with the insertion of a very few subtitles, still have a perfectly viable film in the tradition of the classic silents. (Many of the moments of greatest emotional conflict in *Anna Karenina* are silent; Anna having to make her choice in the garden, being tugged in one direction by her small son, in the

*Gable & Jean Harlow in  
WIFE VS. SECRETARY*



other by her lover — Brown's beloved three-shot motif again).

Such other films in the Festival as *Ah Wilderness*, *The Yearling* and *Intruder in the Dust* emphasised Brown's work in the field of Americana (possibly he runs second only to Henry King in this category) and the permanence and sustaining values of those films.

Quite accidentally, this was brought home by the University's playing host to a high school Junior Prom the night before the Festival. Tennessee's social adjuncts to education have changed little through the years, and traditions and behavioral codes are adhered to carefully. The prom (at least to the eyes of a jaded New Yorker) seemed a delightful, happy, innocent throwback to the 20's and 30's, full of fun and courtesy and simple excitement. The next day's *Ah Wilderness* opens with a yesteryear prom, and a direct comparison with the real thing showed how accurately Brown had caught and recorded all of the nuances of such an event. *Ah Wilderness!* is a film in which Brown consciously tried to incorporate many of his own adolescent memories, and designed many scenes by copying directly from his old school photographs.

Brown, a robust 83, appeared at all the functions. An intensely retiring individual, he did not (apart from expressing his thanks in a few eloquent words) participate in the public events, claiming that all of his films were made so long ago that he couldn't make any useful comment. However, in the smaller informal



*Garbo & Clarence Brown discussing a scene on set of CONQUEST*

gatherings of students, and at the luncheons (and accidental reunions with childhood friends) that punctuated the long weekend, he was a gold-mine of obviously reliable information, immediately responding to technical questions regarding specific shots (he explained at great length the elaborate reflection shot involving miniatures and back projection as Garbo gazes out of the train window in *Anna Karenina*) as well as the more obvious and anticipated ones concerning working with Valentino, Garbo, and Gable. His memory is clearly in *much* better shape than (an obvious example!) Frank Capra's. Once, when I asked him why he used (and presumably asked for) Clyde deVinna (a surprising choice of cameraman for Brown, and particularly for *Ah Wilderness!*) he immediately recalled exactly *why* he had wanted him, and also some of the specific photographic





Garbo & Charles Boyer in  
CONQUEST

problems that deVinna had solved on that film.

Brown surprised everybody by remarking that his happiest working conditions were at 20th Century-Fox, where he made his only non-MGM film in the last 25 years of his career. Admittedly he was a "prestige" visitor, brought in especially as part of a dual loan-out deal also involving Myrna Loy, to direct *The Rains Came*. Fox's facilities he felt were infinitely superior to MGM's, not only in what they offered *physically* in terms of sets, special effects etc., but more importantly in the sense of team-work that permeated Fox at the time. MGM was departmentalised, each individual department concerned only with its own job, and in keeping its cost outlay to an absolute minimum in order to impress the higher-ups with that department's economic efficiency. Fox on the other hand was concerned more with the end product, and encouraged the team spirit and cooperation necessary to achieve it. *The Rains Came* (in which, through Myrna Loy and Tyrone Power, he recreated his famous lighted-match love-scene from

the Garbo-Gilbert *Flesh and the Devil*) was and is an extremely handsome production, and a much better film, he feels, than he could have made at MGM. Brown frequently paid tribute to his mentor, Maurice Tourneur, the great silent pictorialist director. In an interview with Harry Haun in "The Nashville Tennessean Magazine," Brown had this to say of Tourneur:

"During 1913 and 1914, I began to realise that if a picture had the name of Maurice Tourneur on it, it was somehow better than the rest. There was more going for it, more to keep the eye busy," (Brown contrived to meet Tourneur, and to go to work for him in Fort Lee, N. J., an association and apprenticeship that led to Brown's own entry into direction a few years later). "Tourneur was my god. I owe it all to him. Before he got into film-making, he was a painter. He used the screen like a canvas. Everything I know about lighting and composition and arrangement I learned from him." Reputedly Brown directed more than half of Tourneur's *The Last of the Mohicans* ('20) when Tourneur became ill — and without dismissing Tourneur's tremendous talent or his own very real contribution to that marvellous film, added credence is lent to the story by Brown's own much later *The Trail of '98* ('28). The similarities in both films are such that it is quite obvious that Brown had to have done significant work on the earlier film. Together with Henry King's *Tol'able David*, *The Last of the Mohicans* and *The Trail of '98* — masterpieces, all three — represent a trilogy of the

very best of filmed Americana. *The Trail of '98* still exists, but sadly is withheld for legal reasons; hopefully it will one day be cleared for exhibition again, for it might even turn out to be Brown's finest film. Certainly, by any standards, it is a classic — and too, is a high point in Harry Carey's otherwise somewhat stereotyped career. There's a superb moment in which Carey — vicious, a thorough villain, but with a sense of humor — comes back to town after a long, hazardous, near-starvation trek through the wilderness during which he has existed solely on canned beans. Now, back in civilization, he lines up cans of beans in a row — and tells them to watch while he eats a huge, juicy steak!

With no axes to grind, and generally contented with the end result of his 40 years in film, Brown was provoked to criticism of contemporary film only when asked his views on the current sex-oriented and pornographic films. He said he'd never seen one, and left no doubts as to where his views lay. University of Tennessee authorities can vouch for this; on those rare

*Clark Gable & Norma Shearer in  
IDIOT'S DELIGHT*



*Gable & chorus girls in  
IDIOT'S DELIGHT*

occasions when a near-pornographic film, even an academically viable one, has been booked into the Clarence Brown Theatre on campus, and Brown hears about it, the Western Union lines are buzzing in protest instantly. Now such films, when thought necessary for specific courses, are tactfully shunted into one of the university's *other* screening rooms! Sex crept into Brown's own anecdotes only once when, under extreme pressure, he agreed to tell a risqué and revelatory tale about Mickey Rooney's amatory prowess — but only if the ladies present left the room, which they did. Neither Rooney nor the deprived ladies need have had any qualms, however — the story, as warmly and humorously told by Mr. Brown, would get at the very most a GP rating in today's market!

Regardless of his personal dismay at the stress on pornographic material today, Brown pointed out that his faith in the industry's ultimate return





*Elizabeth Taylor, Mickey Rooney,  
Donald Crisp & Ann Revere  
in NATIONAL VELVET*

to better and more wholesome films was immeasurably boosted by the high scholastic quality of the critical and historical work in film presented by the University of Tennessee students during his stay.

A number of historians and specialists were busy throughout the Tennessee Festival, conducting adjunct workshops and screenings, and introducing the major events, among them Robert Davis of Southern Illinois University; Paul Spehr of the Library of Congress; Douglas Lemza of Films Inc.; and Dr. John Jellicorse, Professor of Theatre at U. of T. Marta Turnbull and Jeff Bradley headed the corps of students who worked hard to organise the Festival, which will be repeated and expanded on future occasions. As a footnote to that, I might add that while U of T clearly has a stake in Brown personally, as one of their most distinguished alumni, attention is being directed to Brown's work at other universities too. David Bradley's classes at UCLA in California, my own at NYU, and Kevin Brownlow's in London, are among several that are

using Brown's films regularly, not *just* because Brown deserves greater recognition, but more importantly because his films are still a model from which new film students can profitably learn much.

### THE FILMS OF CLARENCE BROWN

A more complete analysis of Brown's films, with credits, plot details and critical comment, is planned for a future issue of FIR. The films that Brown worked on under Maurice Tourneur (*Trilby*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, etc.) are not listed hereunder, nor the several MGM films on which he was called in as "doctor."

- 1920 THE GREAT REDEEMER
- 1922 THE LIGHT IN THE DARK
- 1923 DON'T MARRY FOR MONEY  
THE ACQUITTAL
- 1924 THE SIGNAL TOWER  
BUTTERFLY  
SMOULDERING FIRES
- 1925 THE EAGLE  
THE GOOSE WOMAN
- 1926 KIKI  
FLESH AND THE DEVIL
- 1928 THE TRAIL OF '98
- 1929 A WOMAN OF AFFAIRS  
WONDER OF WOMEN  
NAVY BLUES
- 1930 ANNA CHRISTIE  
ROMANCE
- 1931 INSPIRATION  
A FREE SOUL  
POSSESSED
- 1932 EMMA  
LETTY LYNTON  
THE SON-DAUGHTER
- 1933 LOOKING FORWARD  
NIGHT FLIGHT
- 1934 SADIE McKEE  
CHAINED
- 1935 ANNA KARENINA  
AH, WILDERNESS!
- 1936 WIFE VERSUS SECRETARY  
THE GORGEOUS HUSSY
- 1937 CONQUEST
- 1938 OF HUMAN HEARTS
- 1939 IDIOT'S DELIGHT  
THE RAINS CAME
- 1940 EDISON THE MAN
- 1941 COME LIVE WITH ME  
THEY MET IN BOMBAY

1943 THE HUMAN COMEDY  
1944 THE WHITE CLIFFS OF DOVER  
NATIONAL VELVET  
1946 THE YEARLING  
1947 SONG OF LOVE

1949 INTRUDER IN THE DUST  
1950 TO PLEASE A LADY  
1951 ANGELS IN THE OUTFIELD  
WHEN IN ROME  
1952 PLYMOUTH ADVENTURE



*Clarence Brown emphasizes a point at one of University of Tennessee seminars. (At left, Jeff Bradley, one of the student organizers of festival).*

PHOTO CREDITS: Karl Brown, p. 620; William K. Everson, cover; pp. 578-89; Kenneth G. Lawrence, pp. 594-5, 597, 599, 601, 603-4, 607-8; United Artists, p. 624; Warner Bros., 592.