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D. W. Griffith: Naive Genius

Homer Croy Highlights 'The Master' of The Silent Era in New, Breezy Book

By ROBERT J. LANDRY

Where are the promised "definitive" studies of David Wark Griffith? They do not appear. Meantime into the breach has moved Homer Croy, novelist, satirist, scenarist, himself now a pungent 76. His just-published "Star Maker" (Duell, Sloane & Pearce, \$3.95) is a brisk, readable, 208-page breeze-through, an evening's diversion essentially, yet wise, too.

About the basic illusion of glory, in life and in show business, there is ample reminder. The somewhat dreary question of Hollywood's proverbial indifference to hasbeens is raised, and yet what else could Griffith, or B. P. Schulberg, or name-your-own-eyeglaze case, expect from that jostling crowd?

It is only 11 years since Griffith died at 73. The ironies sharpen with time and Croy provides a service to understanding in his development of Griffith's Kentucky village background, his deep roots in the mythology of the Confederacy. For the career of this naive genius of the silents cannot be comprehended without recognition of a certain "hick" sentimentality which narrowed his vision unbelievably on occasion and excluded him almost completely from humor.

Not the least of the ironies in the Griffith career is that he yearned for acceptance as a writer and rather despised, while pioneer-

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3, the screen techniques of his time. Characteristically he did not even complete his own autobiography though he had time on his hands (16 years) after his last picture.

Griffith's naivete was expressed in many ways, including some of his feminine protegees about whom Croy, a gentleman for all flippancy, only hints. He does tease the reader to know more about, say, Carol Dempster. But the classic instance of D. W. taken by surprise was in his hurt when reviled by the Governor of Massachusetts (David I. Walsh) and the Mayor of New York (John P. Mitchell) and by so many other prominents because of the blow he delivered the Negro race in "The Birth of A Nation."

Griffith could not see and would not concede the charges, though he deleted 170 scenes at the time. Croy teases the reader and does not quite satisfy him in respect to "The Birth"—still a controversial film 44 years after its making, and today being revived as anti-Negro propaganda throughout the desegregation-tense South.

That Griffith, with his worship of his father, a hero of the Confederate cavalry, would tell the story of Reconstruction through the eyes of Thomas L. Dixon, was perhaps as logical as Himmler following Hitler—shared bias accounted for coincidence. Dixon was a Methodist clergyman who wrote a whole string of racist novels. His own glory dimmed with time and he ended selling real estate and accepting a piddling clerkship from a Republican President.

Croy remains neutral about "The Birth" though he remarks that in its being the first film to roadshow, the first to run "showtrains" and parties, everybody was having a picnic but 10,000,000 Negroes.

If naive was the word for Griffith, what was the key to the attitude of those who exploited this film with hooded night riders on the streets of America? The probe which the subject invites is yet to come.

Interesting, to, is the question of Griffith's nervous and unequal partnership in United Artists and his strange habit of turning out potboilers unworthy of his name and fame and then "coming back" at least half a dozen times with "Broken Blossoms," "Way Down East," "Orphans of the Storm," and so on.

The expanded interest in matters theatrical in the past 15 years would suggest that Croy's often illuminating, sometimes fiction-like text will be liked. He makes the mark in his own terms, which is enough. But beyond that he points the moral—the full Griffith story needs telling, though probably it may await an adequate foundation grant. Sources are already obscured and the very lack of data on the boxoffice receipts of "Birth of A Nation" itself suggests that part of the phenomenon is already hopelessly lost.

More to the immediate, short-range question: Croy's work raises the distinct possibility of a film based on Griffith's career, if there is enough honesty to do it justice, which is imagining a lot. In any event, if there's a film in Lon Chaney, there's one in D.W. and some of the original Griffith players are still around, per Mary Pickford (who wrote the intro for Croy) and the Gish girls.