

Exhibition Review

Beyond the printed word ... newsreel and broadcast reporting in Canada/ Au-delà de l'écrit ... actualités filmées et reportages radio et télé diffusés au Canada. NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF CANADA. Co-sponsored by, and mounted at, the National Museum of Science and Technology, Ottawa. 7 April 1988–31 March 1991. 348 p. catalogue, \$5.00 (Canada), \$6.00 (other countries).

It is always a pleasure to see the names of archivists and archival technicians “up in lights,” but never more so than at *Beyond the printed word ... newsreel and broadcast reporting in Canada*, the year-long exhibition installed at the National Museum of Science and Technology in Ottawa. The exhibition, which breaks new ground in terms of both content and technology, is the creation of the staff of the Moving Image and Sound Archives Division of the National Archives of Canada.

The exhibition provides, through the use of newsreels, radio, and television broadcasts, a glimpse back at the way the news has been reported to Canadians. Actual newsreels and broadcasts (246 of them, along with nearly 70 artifacts) are presented. Most of the archival documents are from the collection of the National Archives, but regional archives, private collectors, and broadcasters themselves have also provided material.

Fittingly, modern technology has been used to make the exhibition responsive to the interests of museum visitors, who may actually construct their own exhibition through the use of keypad-controlled selectors and quick access video discs. The writer was keen to see the footage of the explosion of Ripple Rock, an event which took place in 1958 and was one of his most memorable early television experiences. Eager to see if the recording measured up to my memory of the incident, I simply pushed the appropriate button on the console displaying the stories from the 1950s, and was able to view the item. Great explosion! Great television! Wonderful technology!

The technology also allows the curators to record the number of times that each of the 246 items is requested. Some interesting, but perhaps not unexpected patterns have emerged. There seems to be no preference for older versus more recent stories, although the 1950s is emerging as the most popular decade. There does, however, seem to be a definite preference for stories involving war, violence, and sports. During the first two months of the exhibition, the most popular story was the newsreel

showing the 1946 explosion of an atomic bomb at Bikini Atoll. The most popular Canadian story was the winning goal by Paul Henderson in the 1972 Canada–Russia hockey series. Of the most popular fifteen stories, eleven involved either sports or violence.

This is the first major exhibition to highlight the holdings of the Moving Image and Sound Archives Division of the National Archives of Canada. The designers must, therefore, have been under considerable pressure to mount a “Treasures of ...” exhibition, a showcase of the full range of their holdings. They are to be congratulated, therefore, for resisting this approach while finding a theme broad enough to show much of their holdings while examining a subject of broad popular appeal. Although the exhibition has a theme — newsreel and broadcast reporting in Canada — it really does not have a story line. Visitors to the exhibition are presented with a wide range of options from which they must select. In fact, it was never intended that any one visitor would view and audition all of the material. It would take about eight hours simply to play back everything once. In some ways, of course, this process is a little like archival research where the array of potential sources exceeds a researcher’s ability to review it all.

The fact that visitors to the exhibition are selecting their own material (or at least looking on while someone else makes the selection) means that there is much more interaction than there would be if they were simply watching a documentary film or programme based on the same material.

Consumers of broadcast news are not accustomed to being able to review and critically examine the broadcasts over a period of time. Nor are broadcasters used to having their broadcasts re-examined years afterwards. It was important, therefore, that the selection of the items and their editing for presentation be done with great care. This has been done, in the words of one of the archivists, in order to “let the seams show.” In fact, this approach, of letting the viewer see (or at least have a hint of) how the various stories were constructed, is one of the most satisfying parts of the exhibition.

Accompanying the exhibition is a most informative catalogue which introduces the various sections of the exhibition and describes each of the excerpts and artifacts in detail. The catalogue is full of important and interesting details about the history of Canadian news reporting. Especially fascinating are some of the technical details about changing news formats from newsreels and radio to television. There are many insightful comments about the changing styles of news reporting. The catalogue will become a standard reference book, especially for the history of Canadian newsreel companies. The exhibition also formed the basis of a three-day symposium held in October 1988. Co-sponsored by the National Archives of Canada and the Association for the Study of Canadian Radio and Television, the symposium responded to the increasing awareness of the value of news documents both as reusable broadcast material and as part of Canada’s archival heritage.

The exhibition has been very elegantly designed and built at a scale and cost beyond the resources of the National Archives of Canada and the National Museum of Science and Technology. However, a number of Canadian corporations, notably Kodak Canada, Ampex Corporation, Sony of Canada, and 3M Canada supported the project. The Kodak Theatre for newsreels is wonderful, providing a quiet place

for viewing the films that is away from the clamour of the rest of the museum. In fact, the entire exhibition was a welcome relief from some of the noisy, hectic “arcades” that the museum seems to favour.

Quibbles? I have three. On the day I toured the exhibition, the audio levels were too low in the radio part of the exhibition. I suspect this was a temporary technical problem. I am not very happy about the typography and layout of the catalogue, which has a bitty and chopped-up appearance. Finally, it is a great pity that the exhibition will not tour Canada. It is an important event in which more Canadians should be able to participate.

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