



Colin Browne / STRATHYRE

## INTRODUCTION

*Strathyre* was the name given by a young immigrant Scot, Colin MacKenzie, to a quarter section of land near Kamloops, B.C., which he homesteaded in 1912. At that time, the CPR owned all the land for twenty miles on either side of the track, and homesteads were offered for \$10.00, providing the owner built a house, a barn, and fenced the property within the first three years.

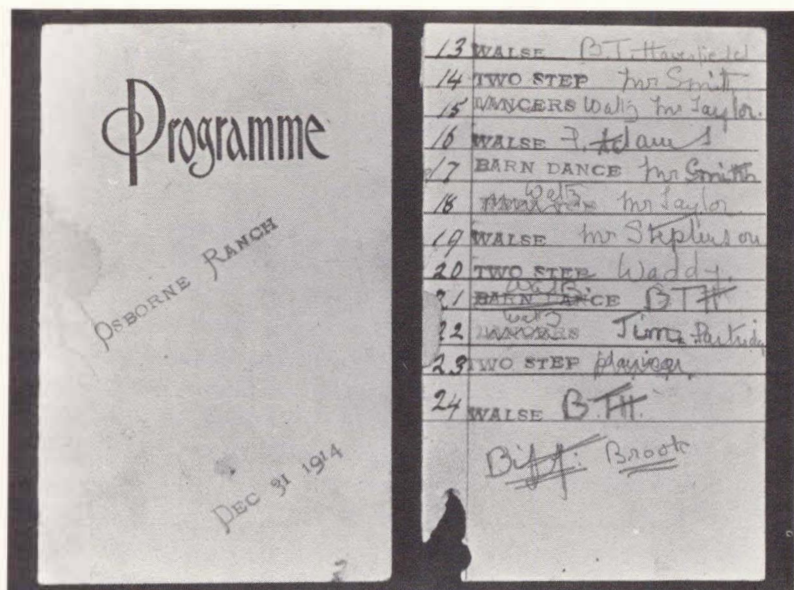
Colin married Nora Guernsey in Victoria in 1913. They removed to the homestead immediately, and in early 1914 she bore their first daughter, Margaret. That summer a school friend of Nora's arrived from England to help her out. Enid Stuckey brought her Kodak with her, and from July 1914 until February 1915 documented daily life on the ranch. Long winter nights were spent glueing the snapshots into an album and writing captions beneath them.

Enid had been corresponding with a young Englishman named Dick Ritchie, who, it seems, had also decided to seek a life in the Canadian West. Enid and Dick decided to rendezvous at Strathyre ranch on the last weekend of October. They became engaged in the little front room in a chair which collapsed under their weight and which consequently became a house landmark.

Dick Ritchie left for England and officer's training school. Enid followed him as soon as she could find someone to travel with (a young lady would never travel alone), and they were married in Felixstowe in spring 1915. Six weeks later Dick left for Mesopotamia, where he was killed at the Battle of Ctesiphon.

Colin and Nora MacKenzie stayed on until 1917, when Colin left for overseas, where he served with the Seaforth Highlanders until buried alive in a shell crater. Returning to the ranch, he found it too small, and he and Nora moved to Victoria and a succession of jinxed jobs which drove him back to Scotland in the early 1930's.

The structure of the film is a journey made by Colin MacKenzie's grandson, Colin Browne, and Dick Ritchie's grandson, Colin Ritchie, to look for the ranch and to recover a pair of chaps left behind by Dick when he left on November 1st, 1914. He had always planned to return.



## INTERVIEW WITH COLIN BROWNE

*INTERVIEWER: Penelope Connell*

*August 1979, North Vancouver*

*PC* Okay . . . so, how you began it, then . . .

*CB* Well, Colin [Ritchie] was really the one who was interested in the ranch, he knew about it before I did, because he had already come out to Canada, almost in his grandfather's footsteps, really — come out and worked on a ranch outside Calgary. So it was he who first started telling me about the ranch and he'd heard it from his grandmother so we decided that we'd go up and look for it. Then it occurred to me that it would be a good opportunity

— a good idea to make a film *about* . . . and he came back from England with all his albums, photographs and everything and I took one look at them and realized that if we could pull it off we'd really have something that was quite unique. And to me it was unique because I'd been working in the museum, making films for them about what I call "public" history, and I'd become sick of public history because it's a vast fiction anyway and it's not a fiction that you can do anything with. So I realized that the only way that I could ever deal with anything historical in a way that was satisfactory to me was to talk about personal history. And that's tied in with public history too, it's not separate. That's the thing. What still absolutely obsesses me is the period that occurred just before the First World War, because I don't think that we've ever gotten over that, that we've never been able to make any headway since that time. It's crippled all of us, in terms of being able to have faith in things, to have trust and spirit, the kind of spirit that we're talking about when we looked at these photographs.

*PC* The War comes across as a sort of fate, it simply causes people to vanish, it doesn't have any other particular effect. The people you have filmed don't experience anything except that their men disappear and never return.

*CB* Yes, you really see it from my grandmother's point of view. And — because she becomes the narrator of the film and her view was that they had to go and that they did their duty and it was a dreadful tragedy, but there was no question but that they had to go. That kind of statement is implicit, I think. But I think it's also really interesting to hear someone say — it's the first time I ever heard someone say — well, we didn't think about going at all, didn't even occur to us that it meant anything to us until we got the letter from my mother.

*PC* Okay, well, given all these albums and the written stuff, why didn't you write a novel, an illustrated novel?



*CB* Well, because I really wanted to chronicle the process of us going to look for this ranch. That was the important thing. And I really wanted to do it without any planning at all, without any setting up. I wanted it to be absolutely as fresh as possible and I realized that you can't do that in a novel. But when you make a film, I think you have a pretty good chance of doing that and so I really wanted for both Colin and I never to have seen the place before when we got there. And I wanted that to be our part of the saga, if you like.

We took Karl Spreitz with us who, as far as I'm concerned is the most sensitive camera man in the province. When we first arrived there, Colin and Ann started walking towards the house and we had to go and grab them and bring them back and say, don't go and look yet. Karl had to get his camera loaded and go with us when we looked. But he did go with us everywhere for the first time. Just — everything that we're doing there is registering for the first time. Well, we did set up a couple of shots where we sit on the porch and talk, but we're ad libbing and we just did it, just like that. And that, if the live part of the film has any value, that's it.



*PC* So, that's where the emotional freshness comes in.

*CB* Even Guy, with his joke with the photograph did that absolutely spontaneously. And everybody was quite wonderful and I think it's because television and radio trained people — especially old people — to know that at some point some young kid is going to come up with a tape recorder and get their story. They've listened for so long that they almost know how to behave. When we walked into the store, in fact, the lady in the store did not know we were coming in with the camera. We walked straight in and started talking with her, to the annoyance of some of the customers who finally left. And the lady in the sweater did not know that we were going to be photographing her. She walked straight out to the van and just started to talk. So both these — there was no practicing, there was nothing. And in fact the whole scene at the ranch was shot in four hours, four and a half hours. And that was it, we didn't have any more time. It's not a novel because a novel is a different structure altogether and that kind of visual freshness and tension too, you just can't get. And that to me is where film can be really valid.

*PC* Well, it sounds like you think of people as already walking around in a film, don't you? If they know how to act before a camera, are ready to become part of that . . .

*CB* I think that in 1979 people are absolutely aware of acting in front of a camera. I think people have forgotten how to pose, I think they know how to be natural now in front of cameras. And that's why Nina Rijinski has people posing. I've worked with the Film Board since, they set up those shots for hours. It seems a little strange. We didn't know what we were going to find and I was absolutely adamant that if we got a flat tire we would film the flat tire. If the car blew up we'd get the pieces. And if we found no ranch we'd film the hole in the ground and it was the intention from the very beginning that we would film everything no matter what happened and that would be the film, and we would not cancel the film if we went out and found out there was no ranch. And I had faith that that would work because I already had a structure to plunk it all into, and that moves into the novel or fiction part. We have an entire historical structure operating through us.

PC The structure is, in fact, your life.

CB It is our life, yeah, so we know the structure of that group of people who did the same thing we did, we know that they came out, we know the dates, we know where they went, we have the photographs and everything. And in fact, that's one of the interpenetrating processes that's going on — their process of coming and then finally leaving. And then we have our process, and it doesn't matter exactly *what* it is, just *that* it is, and the job in making a film is to see how those two processes fit together. And to find where they fit, because it's like sympathetic vibration between the strings of two instruments. So it wasn't as if we went up there and lolled around and enjoyed the place. In fact I sometimes think that I have to go back and get to know it. But at the same time I'm sure that we squeezed everything out of it that we possibly could anyway, and if I went back and spent a few days there I'd just be in a movie. We went at exactly the same time that Dick came down to become engaged to Enid; the weather was probably exactly the same for some bizarre reason, it should have been snowing. If you want to go farther it was All Hallows' Eve when we were there, it was All Saints' Day, it was the time of the spirits, death. So that we latched onto exactly the same time, we wanted to be open to that vortex — to let the similarities and the parallels and associations occur. I guess we all wanted to be mediums in that way really. Of course I haven't told you the whole story about the medium.

During the war there was a great spiritualistic revival and huge meetings at the Albert Hall. Well, Enid's mother — this was after Dick had been killed — Enid was in widow's weeds. Thousands of women all over London, just miserable, going to a lot of these meetings. Enid's mother was also going and she kept saying, why don't you come along dear? I'm sure you'll feel better. So Enid finally gave in to her mother's request to go to the Albert Hall. She left the baby who she called Dick — Richard Duncan after his father — with Marjorie for the evening and



The engagement is announced between Richard Ayers Ritchie, Lieutenant 3rd Battalion Norfolk Regiment, second son of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Ritchie, of Overstrand, Cromer, and Enid Kathleen, eldest daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Wilson Stuckey, of 91, Cromwell-road, Hove.

On Oct. 31 the mind of all-work, ~~became~~  
Enid K. became engaged to a cow-puncher  
by name Dick Ritchie from Chilcotin.  
This important event happening while the  
above two were occupying(?) the arm  
chair near the stove in the Strathgryse  
parlour. The chair is still considerably  
swollen and refuses to resume its  
normal shape. B.H. *over*

went off with her mother, you know, I'll please Mum, I'll go along to this meeting. Well, wham! first message of the evening was Enid and of course it was Dick and he said, "Enid, don't worry about me, I'm alright." That's what they always say, and it's wonderful to hear this, the experience is very exciting. "Things are fine here, I'm waiting for you forever." It was just about over, and then speaking through the medium he said: "Well, I have one more thing to say." And he'd already said: I love our baby, I think he's a wonderful baby, I'm very pleased, very very happy and proud father. "But there's one more thing," he said, "I'd like if possible for you to change the name of our child, because I want there to be only one Dick in your life."



The most exciting thing about editing a film this way, is when you run into those kinds of parallels that work when a phrase or sentence comes in, fits exactly with the picture, where they meet in that harmony, the strings all buzzing in harmony and then you know you have another piece that fits. For instance, when — after the two photographs of me appearing at the house, we're in the house and I'm tour-guiding around and on tape my grandmother's talking about the wooden stove and then about the piano. Well, in actual fact, although I didn't remember that, we talked about those in the same order when we were there, the wooden stove, and then the piano. The film of us in the house and the tape I did of my grandmother are precisely in synch, and so what happened is that while I'm standing there describing the dimensions of the wooden stove and the height and the pipe going out here, my grandmother sitting in Scotland 61 years later is describing exactly the same thing on tape. And then she goes on to talk about the piano. So what fit at this time was my grandmother's description, while I in fact was saying the same thing, but being much more expressive with my hands, so I cut the voice out and used my grandmother's voice. And then when I finished talking about the stove at exactly the same time as my grandmother switched to the piano, I started talking about the piano, so I cut my grandmother's voice at that point and used my voice talking about the piano. We were right on at that point. Absolute fusion. And that was another wonder, that's the kind of thing that I see all the time in the film. And often I wasn't keenly aware while I was doing it.

It wasn't until pretty well after high school that I first met Marjorie and so I appreciated her instantly and loved her enormously as did everyone in the family. She went to the grave with all the secrets, and some wonderful tales. They became very profound sources of finding out about myself. Those people were never cynical, they believed. What they believed in wasn't necessarily what I would believe in but they had a strong faith, if nothing else, in human nature. They hadn't found out that they should be cynical in the 20th Century. There's a quality in those people that, despite the fact that there needed to be economic and political changes very very badly, it was very nice to be an educated young man and have the wherewithal to come out to Canada and go back to the land. They could have lived in Kamloops and gone to movie houses during the week, so they weren't really pioneers. They made that choice to go there to live in that way, and they had the opportunity to leave it whenever they wanted. So they set off and did something, in fact, in opposition to what, in some respects, was really exciting at that time, which was not happening in North America, but in Europe the Vorticist movement in England, the painting movements in France — that's where things were actually happening. So they left that, they had no interest in that kind of thing and probably didn't know anything about Gaudier-Brezska or Ezra Pound or Wyndham Lewis. For that matter, those people would never have touched them; I doubt if they would have even known them. So it's not really their intellects that I'm after and it's not their political or economic side that I'm after, it's some other quality. And I guess that's really what the film is all about, that quality.

*PC* And this is not a nostalgic film. There's too much, even in things like the tinting of the photographs, there's too much artifice inherent even in the things that might otherwise be nostalgic for you to think about all that sentimental stuff. It's being created, even while they're living it.

CB Well, you see, that's the essence, when you look at old photographs and you look at the young men and women in them and you say: these were *people* at fourteen years old. If you look at the polaroids that are being taken around here, kids fourteen years old, there's nothing on their faces, it's just dismay. I sought that quality which says I am, and I know who I am, because I made it up. What Reaney means is not that you identify particular elements but that in identifying something, you find a point of unification of all things, and so to actually identify something when Reaney uses the expression, is to unify a thing. The other two terms that Reaney uses are myth and documentary. By myth I mean an imaginative constant, which is a constant imaginative structure that is the essence of millions of stories and when you reduce them all down like whale blubber you find that they have the same inherent structure in one culture. You call that structure a myth and that becomes one of the details that fits possibly into another myth or imaginative structure, which in the case of *Strathgryre* hinges on the whole myth of the Garden of Eden in some respects and a golden age, that kind of myth. And when you identify that interpenetration of the imaginative constant and the details, realize that those are working in synch, to use a film term, that fills you with such delight and awe that you know you have an identification. And that's really the excitement, I think, that we felt. And that's what we were trying to do.

Now, when I said there were several levels in all this, there really are, because we have the myth of the Golden Age and the Garden of Eden, for instance, and we have the grandfathers and grandsons and grandmothers, and all of those things work, all three. I don't know if I'm even able to say if we're mythologized. We've found those — if you want — luminous details that make up this interpenetration. We have discovered the constants in those details. For instance, when my grandmother talks about them not going to the war, that the war wasn't my grandfather's first interest, that tends to debunk a myth that all those men really wanted to go right away. So, I hope the film has managed to uncover what was closer to the way they really thought.

*PC* I don't think you can make any pretention that it's spontaneous. It's structured just as are the captions in the album, it's that kind of — not a carelessness, because it's absolutely careful, but an uncaring for how it's regarded later. Just that statement of it.

*CB* It's not really not caring, it's an identification of what has happened in a way that Reaney uses the term Identity, when he talks about himself as an identifier, and I think that I feel like an identifier. Enid, I'm certain, felt herself as an identifier. When I was back in Montreal not long ago Steve McCaffery was there saying how he never watches films, because they're totally passive and he refuses to let himself be put in that position. It's curious that in *The Deer Hunter* somewhere along the line the instructions must be to crank the sound up to full volume, it's the noisiest film I've ever seen. So, what does that say about film? Somehow they're desperate for attention, they want people to really listen. And the sound is interesting in *Strathyre* because there's a lot of sound, but I think because it keeps itself on a conversational level much of the time you can move through the sound in *Strathyre* and not have to hear, but hear what you want to hear. And so in a way *Strathyre* has that quality.

*PC* Books about films which include little strips of the film always interest me. They have the little side bits running down and I always wondered why they do that. It's unnecessary even though it's part of the film; to writers on film, the actual film strip that runs through the projector is as important as the images.

*CB* Yeah, that's absolutely true because that's its medium. In fact the only film I've thought of making recently is a ten-minute film of a projector going. The projector is a very forgotten part of the film but nothing happens without it and it seemed to me that a true exploration of the projector would be a most serious and most profound study. I sort of don't like projectors; they're clunky, they're noisy, they break, they get out of whack, they don't play the sound properly, they scratch film — they're very obnoxious things, really, projectors. I think they're like people's internal organs that they don't want to know anything about. The projector's like the lower colon and the kidney and those things in some respects and because in a way the projector's not the brain either. So, it would be that kind of thing, to look into the projector.

*PC* The intestines.

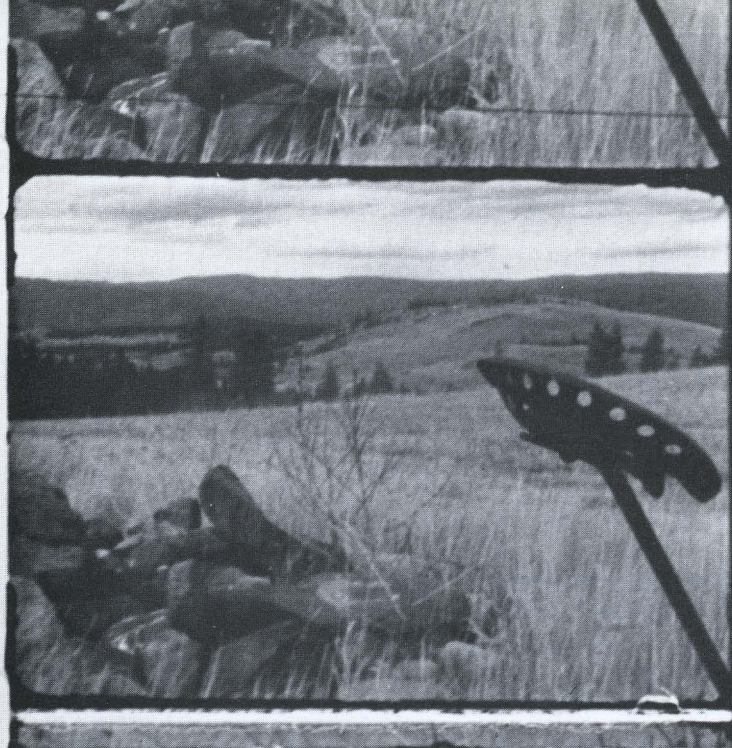
*CB* Yeah. I mean, when you look at the intestinal way in which the film goes through the projector . . .

*PC* Yeah, it does wind about and get all messed up in the middle.

*CB* And it goes in one end and comes out the other, and something is happening, what's happened, a bunch of plastic has gone in front of the light. Pretty interesting. So —

*PC* . . . transportable and as you said, the sound system is so inferior to the visual system, just as language is inferior to the image in a film. . . . a little metaphor going . . . (laughter)

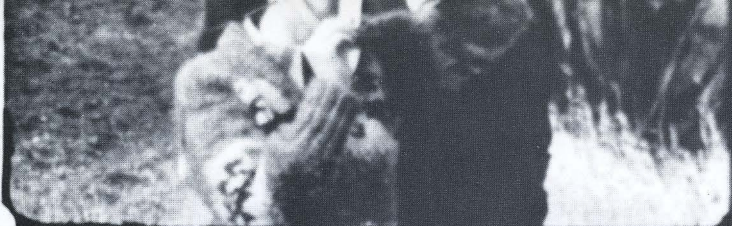




*At that time, there was a great cry for young men to go West, particularly where there was a family of sons. I said the general thing was for the oldest one to go into the Army, the second into the Navy, and the third into the Church. And then, if there was nothing left, the younger ones went West. And that's probably what Dick Ritchie did, as he was actually the third son.*

*During the years Colin was there, when one thinks back now, he built the house, and the stable, and the granary, and the bunkhouse, and so on — the chicken house — and fenced the place, and had cropped at least three years of wheat, and oats chiefly, and so on, and had grown pigs which were fattened for market — for a bachelor's establishment, if Colin had continued without a wife and three children, he no doubt could have made a living there!*





*When Dick Ritchie arrived, ah, he came straight down from the North, he left some of his things behind. Amongst them were his chaps, the lovely, white furry ones that the men wear for riding in the cold weather — you can get them in either black or brown . . . — but his were white and really very distinguished-looking ones. And they were going to be no good for taking back to England, so before they left we took a photograph of him, and Enid, and Enid by herself, wearing the chaps. And when he left to go overseas, he left the chaps with Brook to look after, until he came back from the war, in his care.*

*We were so far, so utterly remote on a ranch south of Kamloops in British Columbia, the war meant nothing to me, and, really, nothing to him. At that time, there was no question of saying I must go and join up at once or anything like that; we went on with our daily life on the ranch, you see. And it was only some weeks later — later — my mother wrote to me, and she said I suppose Colin will be going shortly to join up. It never entered my head that he should go! At that time, I never considered our life on the ranch would come to an end with the war, or anticipate the results of war, but by the time we had left and realized the children were growing up, we knew we couldn't go back to that — we'd have to go forward to some other type of life.*

*And for Enid, of course, it was complete . . . , she was desolate. I think in her heart she would have loved to come, her and Dick, to return and make their home in a ranch life.*

*There's no sense of that freedom anymore, even, I think, in any country in the world. And there, really, you were free to do as you liked, to come and go as you liked. . . . I consider it was an ideal place, and if I was young still I'd head for that life again.*



# The Strathgrye Alphabet

(with apologies to Charles Stuart Calverley-)

A is the Acreage he's trying to handle,  
B is the Bed which starts all the scandal;  
C are the Chores taking most of the day,  
D is the Dinking which suffers delay;  
E stands for Evid the attic adorning,  
F are the Fowls which she feeds right mornning  
G is the Garden in which he works late,  
H is Humidity taken at eight;  
I is the Interest running up on one note,  
J is the Joy when another he'd float.  
K is the Kitchen - a most tidy room,  
L is the Larder - "must finish it soon".  
M stands for Margaret as quiet as a mouse,  
N stands for Nora who's mending the house.  
O is the Omnibus in use when its cold,  
P stands for Percy whom love's got hold:







