

## Mark Slade / STRATHYRE: A DREAM OF NORA'S GARDEN

*For it seems that everything  
is keeping us a secret.*

*Rilke*

STRATHYRE is a film fable. Two grandmothers, one mutely through her collection of old snapshots, the other in a voice vibrant as new-turned sod, tell how two young men, each named Colin, go into rolling cattle country in search of their grandfathers.

They go in a bright orange and cream Volkswagen bus.

An autumn sky streaks liquid amber shadows on all old things in the landscape, on old wood, on weeds, on enduring hillsides. But despite the fact that the two Colins are looking here for traces of their past, it is not old men they seek. Rather, if they can track them down, they want to find the two grandfathers still in their prime.

The two Colins are really looking for a couple of young men like themselves in their mid-twenties, men whose sap is running, whose future seems to lie ahead. In an interesting way, STRATHYRE is a film in which two young men seek themselves.

But to accomplish their quest a thick rind of years must be unpeeled to reveal the ghostly life within. First the two grandfathers must be dug out of sixty-one years of memory. Tempered in centuries of Celtic contradictions — moral vigour, steadfast good-humour, austere, even proud, independence — the Colins' forbears will be chronicled at the single most triumphant moment of their lives: when they and the world are one.

Firmly in control, these settlers are confident fate will play no tricks on them. As pioneers, there can be no doubt they will ride and master this wild and mountainous country with the same ease they keep in check the young animal within them. In another era, in other circumstances, the two Colins carry their seed. In addition, of course, they are heirs to the bewildering moment when all controls snap — when the countryside retreats back into wilderness.

I find it interesting to see film, a medium of the instant present which totally lacks a past tense, transforming the past into a current dream. History is reconstructed in such a way that many of the more troublesome aspects of change are permanently suspended. The amalgam of past and present is made very comfortable. Apparently aware of this the film-maker starts the narration with 'once upon a time. . . .'

In the Volkswagen bus with them is Ann.

Wife of one of the grandsons, Ann seems to be shut out from the male quest. She seems out of place as though asking herself what she is doing on this search in the hills for traces of Scottish blood. In a curious way Ann reminds me of those unenlightened Australian women, who, upon stumbling by mistake into a hornets' nest of ancestral male secrets, are put to death.

But her Australian counterpart had to be killed for discovering a raw truth: that the secret power of all male ritual is based on a dream. Secret power is the power of illusion. Naturally a woman caught seeing through the secret shatters the dream, unmans it.

In STRATHYRE, however, no known truths are threatened. Almost imperceptibly, almost unbelievably, Ann teases the dream back into flesh with her ingenuous question: Where was Nora's garden?

The Colin who answers her seems a bit excited. Down there, he says, waving his arm: down there where it was swampy. Remember that picture? The one of Colin ploughing?

Ann is a true Anna after all. Apart from this single question and a rare monosyllable she is as silent as Enid, the old lady who makes the snapshots available. She helps to give the film the same kind of presence that, later on, when the film is screened, the audience will also contribute to it. Ann's hair flows golden into the tall autumn grasses, blends there, shining.

Also there's a dog. Two men, a girl and a dog in an orange and cream Volkswagen bus, almost new, trying to evoke our suppressed past. STRATHYRE throws this past like a net over the present. The viewer, caught in a net of beautiful images, painstakingly arranged, is allowed to discover a sense in which the two aspects of reality, past and present, flesh and dream, continuity and discontinuity, coincide. But there's a penalty for coming together like this. The third reality that emerges is more abstract than either reality that it replaces. The new myth that is born is difficult to grasp.

One of the Colins puts on the past, dresses up in it. Is he putting us on, too? Nora, in the narration, tells how Colin Ritchie's grandfather left behind a fabulous pair of white chaps. You could, she explains, get them in black or brown. But his were white. They looked 'very distinguished.' Chaps were full-length fur leggings without a seat worn by cowpunchers in cold weather. The two Colins succeed in tracking them down. As Colin Ritchie gets into them we become acutely aware of how glibly media allow us to slide in and out of tense. Past and present merge the way sand and cement are mixed for mortar.

Meanwhile Nora stands in her garden in Inverness. She plucks a dead rose that is going to seed. Framed in straight cropped snow white hair a smile escapes from her very pink face. Compared to Nora's fragile hair the fur chaps look quite yellow.

A strong wind blowing across Lake Okanagan tugs at the few remaining leaves. The two Colins, Ann and the dog approach a family of strangers to claim the legendary chaps. Colin Ritchie carries a bundle of photograph albums. There are photos showing his grandfather Dick and his grandmother Enid taking turns to pose in these wonderful fur leggings. These pictures were taken close to the log house built by the other Colin's grandfather — also called Colin.

You can't help noticing how good cameras were in the first decade of the century. I suppose these were among the first grandfathers to record for an indefinite future snapshots that warp them in reversible time. It is still difficult to grasp how their linear, unidirectional time becomes our omnidirectional film time. On the other hand, their omnidirectional, living space is now our unidirectional, dead, two-dimensional film space. Perspectives shift. Our senses try to catch up.

Earlier Colin Ritchie has said that the fur chaps are his only tangible link with his grandfather. Now as he puts them on he says, "This is the only thing — material possession — of my grandfather, that my father never saw . . . that I never saw." And he climbs back into history. He muses about how it's fifty-one years to the day since that photo was taken. I believe he means sixty-one years to the day. But who will miss that decade? Laughing, he adds: "This is a great chunk of the odyssey, anyway."

The other Colin laughs with him, an outrageous laugh, the laugh of a mad puppeteer who knows which string he's going to pull next. He is the film's director, Colin Browne, grandson of Nora and Colin.

As the Volkswagen bus heads north the wind follows. They ask directions. First at a little country store and then from a lady wearing a kerchief on a windy hill. All around them land slopes out to the edge of the sky. There the stillness of ranch land joins tufts of racing cloud. On most of this landscape with its softly bending contours generations of settlers have left few human marks.

Slowly the Volkswagen bus moves up and across a cattle trail. It is caught a moment on a frowning horizon before it dips. Then we see the steep roof and amber scorched logs of the homestead built by Colin Browne's grandparents at the turn of the century. The homestead is snugly rooted in a marshy hollow of bare aspen. Here the wind has taken nearly every leaf from the trees.

Down from the Chilcotin and along the Okanagan valley there must be enough abandoned log relics to furnish a flourishing ghost town. Most cameramen looking at one of these ruins would size it up pretty quickly, in about three shots. Not Karl Spreitz, cameraman for STRATHYRE. For Karl Spreitz, Nora and Colin's decaying place is an overflowing treasure chest of images. His camera is everywhere, approaching and alighting with the circling grace of a great bird.

Again Colin Ritchie carries a photo album. Colin Browne runs on ahead. The latter leans into a gaping black window, reaches out and tears a bit of mouldy green burlap off the wall. "Yes; this is it," he announces triumphantly. "See, here's the green burlap they put on the wall!"

Next they explore the house. Nora, voice over, describes how well Colin Browne's grandfather planned it. This is where layers of time meet in new, fresh and magical distributions of space. A contrived perspective, multiguous but integrated, begins to unfold.

Images of 'now' and 'then' flit in and out of consciousness. They invariably combine as an untouchable 'now'. And it is characteristic of the 'now' to be always timeless. For example, in quick succession we see three people standing inside the house, right in the crease of the time warp, while simultaneously the room they stand in is intercut with images of the way it looked sixty years ago.

They look around the kitchen and family room. Through the window on the autumn hillside change endures, framed, for the time being, in shards of glass and a few tatters of Nora's curtain. Then instantly we see this room with the table laid, comfortable kitchen chairs, their legs and backs turned on a lathe. Then Colin Browne speculates about where the piano might have been.

Nora tells about her old cook stove, the best thing she ever cooked on. And sure enough, collapsed in a corner, are the recognizable remains of iron and nickel that once swelled its makers and owners with pride on account of its extravagant rococo trim and unequalled efficiency. Now time has squashed it.

The fact is established that this is the room with the rocking chair; the room where Colin Ritchie's grandparents became engaged, while, as Nora says, Colin Browne's grandparents 'very sensibly went off to bed.' The two Colins stand in awe. Out of frame somewhere the dog is inaugurating yet another reality, forever mysterious.

Up in the attic, which once served as Enid's bedroom, the group of three is caught in a lattice of sunlight and shadow. Sunlight comes through chinks in the roof. Cedar shakes have been worn by weather to a jagged fringe, leaving the building vulnerable to the acid work of destruction. But right now a lattice joins the three people horizontally in bars of light and slices across them vertically in bands of shadow. Or it may be vice versa; I can't be sure. In any case this is the traditional icon of how the axis of the past cuts across the axis of the present. The two axes, as usual, form a cross, a grid of handy co-ordinates.

Now the camera allows us to view in close-up the joints of the logs. The logs join one another like knuckles of two giant hands clasped together. It will take a lot of weather and time to part them. From a reverse angle we also see the Colins at a double attic window. Across one of these openings a single board is nailed. Ann, after some hesitation, finds a place at the window a little behind the film director, Colin Browne. There's a pause as they all look down at us.

And it's shortly after this shot that Ann tries to locate Nora's garden. And we discover that it existed where it was 'all kind of swampy.' The three of them are sitting outside against a wall of the log house. No sooner has Colin Ritchie wondered where Nora put out her washing than we flash back sixty years to see Nora down in the

swamp scrubbing. Colin Ritchie says her washing would dry fast in this wind. It is a beautiful juxtaposition of images which seems to fall together as much by chance as by design.

Soon they are exploring the near distance. Decency prevents them from identifying the biffy where these ancestors discharged their animal wastes. But they do linger close by at the low rock entrance to a root cellar. A brief inventory of the crops stored there is made: potatoes, turnips. . . .

In the very same space that Enid took a snap of her future husband wearing the fur chaps, Ann takes a picture of her husband, Colin Ritchie. But if the corresponding picture of Ann is taken it doesn't appear in the film. A lightning image of Dick wearing the chaps fills the interval, an attempt, of course, to make the time as identical as the space, trying, in fact, to make past and present intersect *exactly*. This is as though the film-maker wanted to hold the film together in a lasting time-space matrix similar to the lattice of sunlight and shadow.

There's a bit of the funeral here as well as the fable. Certainly if the two young men are seeking themselves (whatever that might mean) then what Colin Browne is trying to discover in Nora's garden puts him on the same track as Rilke in the 3rd Elegy:

*. . . not one, one coming  
but the countless ones teeming; not a  
single child, but the fathers who rest  
in our depths, like the ruins of  
mountains;  
but the dry riverbed of foremothers;  
but the whole silent landscape under  
the clear or cloudy destiny: . . .*

The fact that past and present are a poor fit for the two Colins is borne out in their attempt to bring together the spine of an antiquated piece of machinery with the triangle of struts that it once made conjunction with. One of them comments that it is twisted beyond repair. Neither one knows what, if anything, the strange implement was used for. Like amateur paleontologists, they try in vain to reconstruct the limbs of an extinct giant insect.

Besides, by peering deep into the time warp you can see that the first in a series of great wars has begun. Colin Ritchie's grandfather is killed, his body thrown with other flesh into the River Tigris. Colin Ritchie carries his seed. The white fur chaps are churinga, sacred relics to be touched on occasion by succeeding generations as they decipher a code written in junkyards of geodesic domes, fallen A-Frames and abandoned solar panels wrapped in a black plastic in an odorless sea of gray styrofoam.

Colin Browne's grandfather is wounded. In his mind a dream of killing drains away a tithe of meaning. He returns to his homestead to find not only time but space changed. The scale is changed. Those huge logs with their big knuckles have shrunk, closed in on him. Everything that he had done that seemed big, expansive, courageous, now seems small. His head scrapes the ceiling of the kitchen (Enid's temporary floor). Once the landscape submitted eagerly to human handling. Now it withdraws to the horizon. Or advances implacably over Nora's garden. For this soldier, too, it was hard to make past and present fit. Colin Browne carries his seed.

To imagine that a flood of images will arrest the erosion of a present forever exposed to the attacks of the past may seem paradoxical. We live in a world different from when Emerson could say the hours should be instructed by the ages and the ages explained by the hours: rather the one is hellbent on devouring the other. That is when past and present most closely co-incide: when they are least differentiated.

Film places its net of co-ordinates over the hours and the ages, brings them together in a contemporary system. In this respect film and Nora's garden are both intent on survival programmes of reclamation. In STRATHYRE (and in any garden) we notice that an exquisitely delicate balance holds the amber resonance from falling into decay and stench. Nora lives it. The film dreams it.

What the two Colins seem to have inherited from the two grandfathers is a society much too immediate to tolerate much past. A society that has no history, only events. Its memory is instantly banked in a kind of electronic syrup. Film's preoccupation with events, with the current scene, necessarily arouses primitive sensibilities.

In this discussion of STRATHYRE I believe we are dealing with what we need to recognize as a savage organization of society. I have therefore had before me these words of Levi-Strauss:

*The characteristic feature of the savage mind is its timelessness; its object is to grasp the world as both a synchronic and a diachronic totality and the knowledge which it draws therefrom is like that afforded of a room by mirrors fixed on opposite walls, which reflect each other (as well as objects in the intervening space) although without being strictly parallel. A multitude of images form simultaneously. . . .*

*In this sense savage thought can be defined as analogical thought.*

C. Levi-Strauss, *Savage Mind* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1966), p. 263.

Originally referring to wild woodland, later the word savage was applied to ferocious animals. Later still, savage was used almost exclusively to assign whole societies to their proper place on a cultural scale that optimistically placed the civilization of England at the top and everyone else somewhere lower. Englishmen calling the Scots savage is the earliest recorded pejorative use of the word. In *LOVE'S LABOUR'S LOST*, Shakespeare compares someone to a "rude and savage man of Inde." [IV (iii)]

The word continues to tease. That is because we continue to entertain the most inflated conceits about the superiority of our own culture over cultures sharply different from ours. So I am saying here that one thing we learn from a film like *STRATHYRE* is that moving image media, compelled to adopt primitive time-space structures and analogical, mythic procedures, effectively close the gap between cultures said to be at the highest stage of development and cultures said to be at the lowest or more savage stage. Lower and more savage than what? And I believe it is easier to identify this interesting process in a modest film like *STRATHYRE* than in a great *tour de force* like *APOCALYPSE NOW*. In the latter, adrenalin drenches us in the sap of our wildest beginnings: judgment is defeated.

In his use of film Colin Browne eliminates the time gap between himself and his immediate ancestors. He erases time, creates co-existent lives in a coalescent landscape. Whereas costume history films in drag mock the present with a travesty, STRATHYRE makes history a current event. That is what history was for all savage societies: a chamber of interlocking mirror images, existing in the now (synchronic) or not at all. But the timelessness with which film charges the seized moment should not be confused with eternity. In eternity, presumably, the tightening of spaces or intervals does not go beyond acceleration to total elimination. Rather time-space ratios of perfect harmony and balance are established, space and time making out in a mood of reckless ecstasy. In eternity boundaries and limits are neither here nor there.

Given our kind of potential with timelessness, however, plus our savage capacity "to grasp the world as both a synchronic and diachronic totality," a serious imbalance prevails. Analogical processes are soon whipped into digital processes. Quite manic. Timelessness in current history creates the geography of the fifty-minute hour, a relatively bleak landscape, spaced-out, strung-out, up-tight.

Of course, this point of flip comes only when all the cultural wires are stripped. At this point, in savage society, it is common to insist on the insulating effects of ritual, protocol and decency (i.e., art), as well as unassailable connections through common blood to very remote ancestors. These are also the qualities Colin Browne attempts to recover in his film. But for savages the past is represented by a great deal more than a grandfather: their media are mythic, a fabled refuge from a reality all our grandfathers find perplexing.

Apart from this I believe I have located the grandparents' old piano. In an old shed beyond Nora's garden. Its ghostly strains are being played almost honky-tonk by Tom Durrie all the way through the film. The reason Tom Durrie hits the keys in such a playful way is to ensure that no one will ever take Colin Browne's film STRATHYRE as seriously as I do here.

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March a daughter of Major Stuckey, of  
tenant Ritchie, who was only 24 years of  
Canada when war was declared and re  
e and obtained a commission from the C  
ing Corps.

## LOCAL OFFICER KILLED IN MESOPOTAMIA.

the list of casualties issued this morning  
ars among the killed the name of Lieut  
. Ritchie, 3rd Norfolk Regiment (attach  
alion). He was the second son of Mr. and  
itchie, of Overstrand, and married as re  
larch a daughter of Major Stuckey, of  
tenant Ritchie, who was only 24 years of  
Canada when war was declared and re  
e and obtained a commission from the C  
ing Corps.







MACKENZIE — Colin Rae aged 86 years in hospital, Inverness, Scotland. He leaves his wife Nora, 3 daughters, Margaret, Inverness; Kythe, Victoria; Christine, Australia. He was pre-deceased by daughter Molly, Victoria, 1972.

RITCHIE.—On Feb. 22, 1975, suddenly at his home in Reigate, Capt. R. DUNCAN RITCHIE, C.B.E., M.V.O., Royal Navy (Retired), aged 59 years, the greatly loved husband of Diana Teresa (Terry), dear father of Colin, Graham and Clare, grandfather of Jonathan, Duncan and only son of Mrs E. K. Ritchie, of Crowborough. Funeral private. No letters or flowers, please, but if desired donations for King George's Fund for Sailors, may be sent to The Northover Funeral Home, Reigate.

RITCHIE.—On April 18, 1975, peacefully, ENID RITCHIE, of Crowborough, Sussex, widow of Richard Ayres (Dick) and mother of the late Richard Duncan, captain, R.N. Funeral service at Tunbridge Wells Crematorium on Thursday, April 24, at 3 p.m.

In memory of those who are gone before, & the happy years shared long ago at Strathgyle Ranch as I plough on at age 81.

Nina C. Mackenzie

Oct: 18<sup>th</sup> 1975