



# UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

**University of Calgary**

**PRISM: University of Calgary's Digital Repository**

---

University of Calgary Press

University of Calgary Press Open Access Books

---

2007

## Filming politics: communism and the portrayal of the working class at the National Film Board of Canada, 1939-1946

Khouri, Malek

University of Calgary Press

---

Khouri, M. "Filming politics: communism and the portrayal of the working class at the National Film Board of Canada, 1939-1946". Series: Cinemas off centre series; 1912-3094: No. 1. University of Calgary Press, Calgary, Alberta, 2007.

<http://hdl.handle.net/1880/49340>

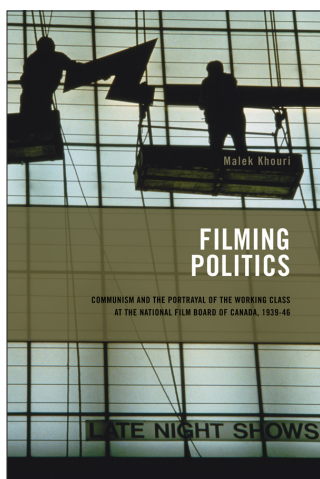
book

---

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>

Attribution Non-Commercial No Derivatives 3.0 Unported

Downloaded from PRISM: <https://prism.ucalgary.ca>



## FILMING POLITICS: COMMUNISM AND THE PORTRAYAL OF THE WORKING CLASS AT THE NATIONAL FILM BOARD OF CANADA, 1939-46

by Malek Khouri

ISBN 978-1-55238-670-5

**THIS BOOK IS AN OPEN ACCESS E-BOOK.** It is an electronic version of a book that can be purchased in physical form through any bookseller or on-line retailer, or from our distributors. Please support this open access publication by requesting that your university purchase a print copy of this book, or by purchasing a copy yourself. If you have any questions, please contact us at [ucpress@ucalgary.ca](mailto:ucpress@ucalgary.ca)

**Cover Art:** The artwork on the cover of this book is not open access and falls under traditional copyright provisions; it cannot be reproduced in any way without written permission of the artists and their agents. The cover can be displayed as a complete cover image for the purposes of publicizing this work, but the artwork cannot be extracted from the context of the cover of this specific work without breaching the artist's copyright.

**COPYRIGHT NOTICE:** This open-access work is published under a Creative Commons licence.

This means that you are free to copy, distribute, display or perform the work as long as you clearly attribute the work to its authors and publisher, that you do not use this work for any commercial gain in any form, and that you in no way alter, transform, or build on the work outside of its use in normal academic scholarship without our express permission. If you want to reuse or distribute the work, you must inform its new audience of the licence terms of this work. For more information, see details of the Creative Commons licence at: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>

### UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE YOU **MAY**:

- read and store this document free of charge;
- distribute it for personal use free of charge;
- print sections of the work for personal use;
- read or perform parts of the work in a context where no financial transactions take place.

### UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE YOU **MAY NOT**:

- gain financially from the work in any way;
- sell the work or seek monies in relation to the distribution of the work;
- use the work in any commercial activity of any kind;
- profit a third party indirectly via use or distribution of the work;
- distribute in or through a commercial body (with the exception of academic usage within educational institutions such as schools and universities);
- reproduce, distribute, or store the cover image outside of its function as a cover of this work;
- alter or build on the work outside of normal academic scholarship.



## 5 OUT OF THE DEPRESSION AND INTO THE WAR: NFB FILMS BETWEEN 1939 AND 1941

In this chapter I discuss the body of NFB films produced between 1939 and 1941. I demonstrate how this body of films engaged counter-hegemonic impulses that complemented Popular Front policies initiated by the Communist Party. This is a transitional period in the history of the National Film Board of Canada, which begins with the establishment of the Board and ends with the disbanding of the Canadian Government Motion Picture Bureau and the transfer of its property and staff to the control of the NFB. This period also coincides with the early phase of World War II just prior to the attack on the Soviet Union and the consequent launching of political and military partnership in the fight against fascism in Europe between the Soviets and western powers.

Linkages between the battle against fascism and forwarding an alternate approximation of democracy in NFB films reflected the view of a significant section of Canadian society. Coming out of the Great Depression, a sizable group of Canadians (specifically those who came from working-class backgrounds) had their own social, economic, and political vision of what constituted a fair, just, and democratic social order, and of why fighting fascism was important for Canada and for working-class Canadians.

By the end of the 1930s and with the full implementation of Popular Front policy, a large number of labour organizations (particularly those with close ties to the Communist Party) and their rank-and-file membership were now stressing a more moderate approach to labour politics. This resulted in a less sectarian view on achieving a socialist transformation that in effect adopted consensus-building concepts such as collective social responsibility, public control of national resources, and a more centralized approach to managing the development/production and distribution of Canadian society's goods and resources. This also involved emphasizing an alternative to the classical capitalist emphasis on the role of the individual, free enterprise,

competition, and the separation between the roles of management and labour. In essence, the new Popular Front approach clearly aimed at social and political elements that were outside of socialist and working-class sections of society, and as such had a clear ideological counter-hegemonic relevance. It also had the potential of becoming part of a mass-based sensible philosophy that represented an alternative to hegemonic commonsensical philosophy.

Clearly, all the proposals that were introduced in NFB films were not, as such, socialist proposals. And despite the fact that they were originally and largely promoted by socialists and communists and their supporters, the counter-hegemonic significance of these proposals stemmed from their projection as ideas that made good sense and appealed to significant segments of society. In this regard, NFB films provided a critical venue for the promotion and further popularization of such proposals and views.

## UNEMPLOYMENT AND COLLECTIVE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

In March 1939, the Canadian government introduced a legislation to establish the National Film Board of Canada. Earlier in the year, filmmaker Stuart Legg had begun producing two films for the Government's Motion Picture Bureau (CGMPB). When Grierson took charge as the NFB's Film Commissioner in October (shortly after the war broke out in Europe) he hired Legg to organize theatrical documentary production. Ultimately, this prompted a process which eventually led to the 1941 dissolution of the CGMPB and the incorporation of its staff and facilities into the NFB. As a result, some of the films produced between 1939 and 1941 bore the mark of the Motion Picture Bureau, but all of them later became the property of the NFB. The transfer of power between the two agencies had its political significance: it eventually led to a pronounced integration of Popular Front discourse in NFB films. Coinciding with Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, the full transfer of power from the CGMPB to the NFB also ushered in the emergence of the Board's counter-hegemonic approach on the role of labour in the war and to ideas about building an alternative post-war society.

Many films produced between 1939 and 1941 were subcontracted to outside producers. The CGMPB/NFB network produced a total of 66 films, all of which were documentary and mainly dealt with mobilizing support for the war. Many films produced in 1939, however, focused on unemployment and the effects of the Great Depression on working people. Stuart Legg's 1939 films *The Case of Charlie Gordon* and

*Youth is Tomorrow* marked an important shift in Canadian cinema. Legg did what no other filmmaker had dared to do until then. He walked into the slums of the working-class coal town of Glace Bay and came out with a story about everything that was not talked about before in Canadian films: the hopes and fears of unemployed youth.

In *Youth is Tomorrow*, Legg praises and argues for a more involved role by the government in dealing with the problem of unemployment. After describing how the Great Depression years of the 1930s marked an increase in the unemployment of young people in particular, Legg points out the benefits of programs such as the Youth Training Plan. He reminds us of the positive role played by this program in providing training and apprenticeship for Canadian youth in agriculture, industry and home economics and in combating the problem of unemployment. The film introduces the program as an effective and viable tool in pursuing a socially responsible and organizationally more collective approach to dealing with the issue of youth unemployment.

In *Charlie Gordon*, Legg presents a fictionalized account of a young unemployed worker. As in *Youth is Tomorrow*, the film introduces the issue of unemployment as a social problem and responsibility. It also links success in the task of finding jobs to the level of commitment to social collective planning and the involvement of the government. As it advocates coordinating the effort between unemployed workers, government and local business communities, the film inadvertently links the problem of unemployment to the lack of cooperation between these groups. Shot mostly from the point of view of an unemployed worker, the film takes this worker's own frustrated perspective as he stands in the line to get the local boss's approval to employ him. The film subtly stresses the consequences of business's inability to see beyond its immediate and narrow interests, and urges it to adopt a more socially responsible attitude. The alternative is introduced in the context of the government's initiation and implementation of a program to coordinate between different social groups to meet the needs of the entire community. In essence, both films put forward a substitute to the commonsensical idea of free labour competition and provide new options for dealing with the problem of unemployment. As such, they offer an alternative to forcing surplus unemployed workers to compete with each other over a shrinking job pool, a situation which usually also results in lowering labour wages.

Among the demands put forward by labour unions during the Depression was introducing government programs that provide work and apprenticeship for the unemployed. This demand was at the heart of what the On-to-Ottawa Trek campaign in 1935 advocated. It also represented the essence of how labour contemplated solutions for the unemployment crisis. Clearly, this solution was in total and sharp contradiction to the plan implemented by the R.B. Bennett government. This plan basically forced

single unemployed men away from their own communities and into Work Relief Camps that were under military control and located in isolated areas throughout the country.

Both of Legg's films address the problem of unemployment in the context of maintaining a connection between unemployed workers and their communities. They point out the benefits and the feasibility of preserving existing communities as an element of social and moral strength as well as a viable economic alternative to the chaos of dislocation and forced labour. The films stress the need to develop the work skills of the unemployed rather than subjecting them to hard labour. As such they propose that government-sponsored vocational training programs contribute to building a stronger economy and a stronger communities.

*Charlie Gordon* also advocates coordinating efforts between the government and small business. Finding solutions to unemployment through the partnership between workers, small business and government became one of the features of the Popular Front policy of inter-class cooperation at the time of war. This policy contrasted the all-or-nothing and class-against-class approaches towards capitalism advocated in the 1920s and the early 1930s by communists and their allies within the labour movement. As we will see later, the Front's policy would later expand to include proposing the creation of labour-management committees as an alternative to unilateral control by capitalist management.

The importance of Legg's work, however, goes beyond its interest in the concerns of workers and the unemployed. As Canada was stepping away from the Depression, Legg advocated a consensual interventionist government approach in planning and coordinating the social and economic resources of the country. He also supported finding ways to utilize these resources for the benefit of the entire society. This particular theme would be given more prominence and would be presented with increased urgency in subsequent NFB war films.

The 1940 film *Industrial Workers of Central Canada* (Donald Fraser) describes how the area around the St. Lawrence River and the Great Lakes became the most populated area in the country, and how it came to include the bulk of Canadian industrial labour. As it delineates the operations of large industrial plants, the film demonstrates how the level of skill, organization, and efficiency of the working class contributes to the wealth and development of the entire country.

Other NFB films of this period accentuated the positive role of government in relieving the post-Depression conditions among Canadian farmers and agricultural workers. In light of intense grassroots pressure from farmers and farm workers, the government created the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration that provided

government support to farmers. The new government agency provided technical know-how for dealing with problems of conserving moisture, development of new methods of farming, and conversion of sub-marginal land to other uses.

In *Heritage* (1939), J. Booth Scott argues that after years of intensive drought coupled with the disastrous fall in prices during the Depression, many prairie farmers were forced to board up their homes and seek work elsewhere. He describes the conditions of farmers who chose to stay back as they tried to carry on their farm work but were often incapable of securing enough money to make a fresh start. *Heritage* celebrates the government's interventionist approach and points out its success in helping farmers avoid the disastrous effect of unplanned farming. It also offers a glimpse of the benefits of cooperation between federal and regional governments. But as Blaine Allan points out, the film's approach was not totally out of sync with the general direction of Canadian politics during that period:

*Heritage* was a product of the Liberal era of Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King, but the economic and physical crises that it outlines certainly had a place on the cabinet agenda of his predecessor, R.B. Bennett. Whether Bennett and his Conservatives would have approved the film remains an open question, but in late 1934 his economic and political sentiments were markedly moving in a direction consistent with the government intervention outlined in the film.<sup>1</sup>

The film certainly ignores the more complex questions behind the state of despair suffered by farmers during the Depression. Nevertheless, it effectively and favourably introduces the notion of collective public involvement as a sensible solution to some of the problems faced by agricultural workers. *Heritage* concerns itself not simply with the "anxieties experienced in one part of the country," but also with the potential "beneficent role the Dominion government wished to present itself as playing in addressing those problems."<sup>2</sup> Another film, *Farmers of the Prairies* (1940, no assigned director) similarly explores how the intervention of the government helps farmers deal with their problems. As in the case of *Heritage*, the film argues that there are major benefits to be gained from having the government involved in creating agricultural aid programs and in introducing new scientific research and irrigation strategies.

## GENDER AND RACIAL EQUALITY

I pointed out earlier that for the first time in any Canadian labour organization, the Workers Unity League (WUL) implemented in its 1931 constitution the idea of gender and racial equality. The League entrenched a rule which officially accepted all wage workers, “regardless of [their] race, creed, color, sex, craft or political affiliations,” as full members of the union.<sup>3</sup> A similar policy was adopted in all WUL’s affiliates, including those set up for unemployed workers. The WUL’s approach represented one of the earliest attempts to introduce anti-racist and anti-sexist rules as working principles within the Canadian labour movement.

In cinema, and since its early inception, films that advocated working-class views (most of which were produced in the United States before the consolidation of the control of capital in the 1920s and the emergence of the studio system) also tended to promote unity between workers who came from diverse oppressed groups of wage earners. As Steven Ross suggests, American working-class filmmakers of the pre-Hollywood era (i.e., before the early 1920s) saw benefit in using film to bring together workers “whose religion, ethnicity, language, race, and gender differed but whose basic problems were the same.”<sup>4</sup>

In Canada, Legg’s film *Charlie Gordon* was the first to refer to the reality of gender and racial difference within the labour and working-class movement. Almost subdued by today’s standards, and even though it addressed the problem of unemployment mainly as a male problem, the film nevertheless chooses to conclude with a call for solidarity and unity between working men and women. This unity, the film argues, is fundamental to helping move society on the road to future prosperity. The film also includes an indication of solidarity between black and white workers. In one instance, and as the camera pans across the faces of workers in an unemployment line, we catch a glimpse of a black worker surrounded by the predominantly white group of fellow workers. The scene infers a brief but nevertheless important visual message of unity between workers of different racial backgrounds. *Charlie Gordon*’s reference to gender and race equality was, however, the first to be recorded in NFB films, and perhaps in Canadian film history (to my knowledge none of the films that remain in the archives of the NFB and other provincial government agencies contain a similar reference). Trivial as it may appear today – even in comparison to the explicit constitutional clauses adopted seven years earlier by the communist-led labour groups such as the WUL – this filmic citation of gender, race and class unity remains an important indicator of the general ideological direction that the NFB was enhancing at the time.



## WORKERS IN THE FISHING INDUSTRY

Another group of NFB films specifically deals with the topic of East Coast fisheries. Legg's *Toilers of the Grand Banks* (1940) depicts the hard work of people in the fishing industry. It shows how "the sunlight, striking through the shallow water stimulates the growth of marine plants in the sea bed, providing food and breeding ground for fish." The film's main theme, however, is the epic of toiling itself "which stands behind the success of Canada's fishing economy." The film draws a detailed picture of the work performed by the fishermen and the shipyard workers on the Canadian east coast. It maintains a thematic dialectic that is similar to the one introduced by Grierson in his British period film *Drifters* (1929), which also depicts fishery workers. Both films capture images of fishermen as they combat and triumph over natural elements. Yet while Grierson relies on editing as his main way of delineating the epic magnitude of toiling, Legg, on the other hand, incorporates a different stylistic approach. He uses strong and uninterrupted camera shots, first showing fishermen building schooners in local shipyards and next as they take them to the fishing grounds where they transfer to dories and haul in the cod as they ride the heavy ocean sweep. Connection between the two aspects of the work performed by fishermen is referred to in the context of a camera work intent on literally connecting the two complex and hard phases of fishing in the Atlantic.

In *People of Blue Rocks* (1941, producers Douglas Sinclair and Edward Buckman), the fishermen of Lunenburg, Nova Scotia are depicted while they make their living from the sea. The film tells the story of a father and son from the village of Blue Rock who both work in the inshore fishery. The village has a close-knit community life; its social centres are the store and church. First, young people gather at the store, and afterwards the whole community congregates in the church hall for a chowder supper and auction for a church fund. The film basically celebrates the work and the community in this rugged region of Nova Scotia, and praises their ability to sustain and enrich the lives of people. Collective work, the film reiterates, is integral to carrying on and enriching the cultural heritage of the community. The themes of work stability (and implicitly rejecting the notion of contingency labour) and the responsibility of the government in maintaining and encouraging community development are presented as crucial for elements for a thriving economic future for Atlantic Canadians. Unlike how later Canadian feature films of the 1970s such as *Goin' Down the Road*, 1980s (*John and the Missus*), and 1990s (*Margaret's Museum* and *The Hanging Garden*), for example, variously portrayed the destruction of traditional east coast industries as an inevitable result of "modernization,"<sup>5</sup> early NFB films offered an alternate understanding of what

the notions of progress and economic growth entailed. They focused on sustaining communities as the basis for economic and social enrichment.

## THE “PHONY WAR”

The outbreak of war in Europe in September 1939 radically affected the political agenda of the government and consequently altered the NFB’s priorities as originally set out by Grierson. With the ascendance of Hitler to power in Germany, the establishment of a fascist government in Italy, and the rise of Japanese militarism in Asia, the world moved steadily towards war. In the first acts of hostility, Hitler remilitarized the Rhineland in violation of the Versailles Treaty, Japan had invaded Manchuria and was extending its war into China, and Mussolini had already occupied Ethiopia. With the *Canada Carries On* series the NFB initiated its first major film program to be solely produced by the NFB in the 1939–41 period when the NFB itself was still considered a non-production agency. The goal of the program was to provide Canadians with information and to encourage their support and participation in the war effort. However, there were some important differences between how NFB films dealt with the subject of war before and after June 1941 (i.e., before and after the Soviet Union was invaded by Germany), particularly in how they characterized the war, and how they conceived of the role of the working class in the battle against fascism. The outbreak of hostilities in Europe created great political anxiety in the country and had a major impact on the politics of labour and socialism in Canada.

Before the outbreak of the war, a major campaign by labour and the left warned of the possible outbreak of a second world war. It also cautioned against the danger of the appeasement policies pursued at the time by the Neville Chamberlain government of Britain. For communists, Chamberlain’s policy was seen as an attempt to aid Hitler in his preparation for a major push against the Soviet Union. Accordingly, communists and their allies within the labour movement called for the creation of a system of collective security to stop fascism in Europe and prevent a second world war.<sup>6</sup> During the same period, the Soviet Union introduced several appeals to western powers at the League of Nations to join it in establishing “a system of multilateral alliances for defence against Nazi Germany.” Those appeals, however, were rejected.<sup>7</sup>

Subsequent separate political manoeuvres on the part of western powers and the Soviet Union eventually ended in the signing of the Munich agreement between Hitler and Britain’s Chamberlain and France’s Daladier in September 1938. In response and

in August 1939, a non-aggression pact between the Soviet Union and Germany was signed. Hitler invaded Poland in September 1, 1939, two days after which Britain and France declared war on Germany. Canada declared war on September 10.

The unfolding of those events created a major crisis within the labour and communist movements around the world, including in Canada. After years of leading the fight against fascism and building alliances in support of anti-fascists in Spain, these movements found themselves in a dangerously awkward situation. The position taken by leader of the Canadian Communist Party reflected this confusion. As he could not rationalize Stalin's signing of a Friendship Treaty with Germany, Tim Buck simply called for the immediate mobilization of forces to defeat fascism and its "reactionary friends at home:"

Our immediate tasks are clear. In collaboration with anti-fascist forces everywhere and in the interests of the international working class, we will strive to combine with the military defeat of Hitler in the field of the battle, the political defeat of his reactionary friends at home, turning this war into a just anti-fascist war and the conclusion of an early democratic peace.<sup>8</sup>

Officially, the party considered the war an inter-imperialist struggle between two sections of monopoly capitalism, both of which "made scandalous profits while the burden of the war in terms of lives and livelihood was borne by the workers and farmers."<sup>9</sup> What was clear here is that the party was trying to put the best face on an impossible situation. The government and the right-wing establishment were quick to take advantage of the events and to use the problematic party position as an excuse to launch a fierce campaign against the left and the trade union movement.

For almost two years before the Soviet Union was invaded by Germany, the Communist Party of Canada and its supporters in the labour movement remained politically confused and disillusioned. The bitter reality was that they saw the battle against fascism, a battle that they had mobilized in support of for almost a decade, was now being fought without them on board. The situation also brought factional disputes to the cultural left as well. The situation affected the party on all levels. As Scott Forsyth suggests:<sup>10</sup>

The unexpected announcement of the Soviet non-aggression pact with Germany and then the beginning of the war disorients many in the Party. It is denounced as yet another Soviet-directed shift in Party strategy by opponents and the Party's liberal sympathizers rapidly disappear with the Party's hard anti-

war, anti-imperialist line; for example, the Toronto Theatre of Action dissolves in political disagreement and confusion. Soon, the Party is declared illegal again and over one hundred Party leaders and members are interned. Even the language associations are attacked and the Ukrainian Farmer Labour Temples all over the country expropriated.<sup>11</sup>

For its part, the Canadian government saw an opportunity to curtail communist activity within the labour movement. A few months after the declaration of war the government decided to ban the party, and several of its labour activists were jailed.<sup>12</sup>

The confusion over the position of the Soviet Union had its negative impact on many Popular Front supporters and gave an excuse to anti-communist groups and politicians to isolate the left within the labour and mass movements. However, militant organizing among workers and the support that had been built since the mid-1930s remained almost intact.<sup>13</sup> While the party suffered the effects of the Stalin-Hitler Treaty fiasco in a major way, the core of the links that it had developed over the years seem to have been sustained.

During the 1940 election the Communist Party was able to get one of its supporters elected to the House of Commons. Dorise Nielsen won a seat in a rural Saskatchewan riding and became the only woman to be elected to the House during these elections.<sup>14</sup> Because of the official ban on the party, however, Nielsen had to run under an independent left coalition ticket. During her tenure as an MP she concentrated on three issues, all of which echoed the political priorities of the Communist Party of Canada at the time. Those included opposing conscription, defending civil liberties and freeing of communists and labour leaders, and finally the advocacy of a “new political organization which would defend the interest of the Canadian people.”<sup>15</sup> In Europe, communist parties were already organizing underground resistance to Hitler in the countries occupied by Germany, particularly in France and Yugoslavia, as well as in Hungary, which while not occupied by the Nazis until October 1944 was nevertheless governed by a quasi-fascist regime which was sending its troops to fight alongside the Germans in the Soviet Union.

Moments of political uncertainty, however, usually inform a sense of ideological stagnation and hesitancy. Within the NFB, the clearest sign of the political confusion of the left in dealing with the issue of war was manifest in the tame political tone of the films produced during the early phase of the war. Another element that might have contributed to this restrained tone in early NFB filmic depictions of the war, and particularly in relation to the role of workers within it, can be traced to the fact that most those films were still being officially produced under the auspices of the Motion

Picture Bureau. As we saw earlier, the conservative administration of CGMPB was not particularly keen on promoting a leftist interpretation of the struggle against fascism, nor on discussing what working-class Canadians thought of it, for that matter.

Early NFB war films were mostly subdued in their assessment of the war in Europe. While they clearly supported the war against Germany, the films hardly alluded to the war's significance for workers, its implications for building a new social and political order, or its impact on the battle for democracy. All these ideas would only begin to emerge when the Soviet Union later entered the war. All in all, NFB early war films were largely descriptive in their evaluation of the events. Even as they showed the involvement of working-class people in the fight against Germany, the films' discourse projected a passive tone in regard to the social significance of the war against fascism. They also utilized a largely patriotic and nationalist tone, which emphasized Canada's mobilization for the war but in the context of an ambivalent characterization of Hitler's Germany, which simply pointed out the danger that "stemmed from Nazi designs against the British Empire."

Stuart Legg's first film in the *Canada Carries On* series, *Atlantic Patrol* (1940), described the work of Canadian seamen staffing the war-supply ships as they departed from eastern Canadian ports. The film concentrated on Hitler's military plans and warned Canadians of the goal of these designs and the danger they posed to the welfare of the British Commonwealth. *Fight for Liberty* (1940, producers James Beveridge and Stanley Hawes) depicted Nazi advances in Europe, the invasion of Greece and Egypt, Italy's African defeat, the Syrian campaign, etc. Stanley Hawes's *On Guard for Thee* (1940) presented a historical depiction of Canada's involvement in various war efforts, including the assault on Vimy Ridge in World War I. On one level, all these films stressed the German threat to the territorial and national integrity of Canada as Britain's partner. In one example, and even as it made some reference to the industrialization of Canada in the early twentieth century, Hawes's film was muted as to the role of workers in contributing to this massive economic process.

On another level, and in contrast to the emphasis on the collective role of workers in mobilizing for the war clearly manifest in later board films, the pre-1942 films mainly concentrated on discussing the role of the individual rather than on the social collective action. In *Wings of Youth* (1940, Raymond Spottiswoode) in particular, the war against Germany is portrayed as a struggle led by heroic individuals who are fighting to defend their individual rights and the integrity of the British Commonwealth. The film describes Canada's contribution in building airfields and producing machines and equipment for the Commonwealth's air training scheme. As it renders the role of air force pilots, *Wings* considers individual responsibility as the main ingredient for

winning the war. The last scene of the film leaves us with the image of a Royal Air Force pilot and Lorne Greene's voice summing up what the war against Germany is all about. After pointing out that "for every pilot there must be more than 20 men on the ground for maintenance," Green reminds us that this is after all a "battle for individual rights fought by individual skills."

*Call for Volunteers* (1941, Radford Crawley) tackles the role of women in the war by describing the activity of a volunteer group in Winnipeg. The film suggests that women's participation in jobs such as canning fruit for the troops, raising money for mobile canteens, working in children's clinics, etc., "shows how they could help not only in the war effort but also in laying sound foundation for the peace to follow." But the film has no qualms about presenting the role played by women in the war as being temporary, and as one that is only necessitated by the specific urgency of the war and the need to supplement shortages in manpower. To push its point further the film stresses that the voluntary work done by women does not require skilled training, effectively implying that women are not capable of doing better than this kind of work. Towards the end, the film contrasts the images of men working in factories with those of women working in day care centres, further prescribing the role of women's labour as provisional both to the war effort and to the peace that will follow.

Another feature of early NFB films is their emphasis on the technological advances of modern warfare. In *Battle of Brains* (1941, Stanley Hawes), achieving a higher level of mechanization of the warfare machine is considered as a determining element in winning the war. The film describes the main difference between World War II and World War I as one that relates to the level of technological progress. It also contrasts the new "mobile" tactics and weaponry compared with the "immobile" nature of earlier trench warfare. In the same breadth, *Battle of Brains* accentuates Canadian scientists' contribution to the development of the war machinery.

Similar emphasis on the role of technology is found in films such as the 1940 series *News Round-Up* and the 1940 film *Front of Steel* (John McDougall), both dealing with the development of the Canadian steel industry and the production of Bren guns, ambulances, transport trucks and submarine chasers. *Strategy of Metals* (1941, Raymond Spottiswoode) describes the end result of the manufacturing of crankshafts, tanks and planes.

War machinery and technological progress in all these films is portrayed as the equivalent to and the measure of modernist superiority without which no national integrity can be maintained or defended. The tone of the films and their accent on machinery and on elite scientists echoes views advanced in Nazi and pro-fascist artistic adulations of war machines as high art.<sup>16</sup> All in all, the discourse of the films depicts the

war as one concerning national pride, individual bravery, and technological excellence. While subsequent NFB war films would incorporate images and comments about the role of workers in generating quality weapons to fight fascism and end its instigation of war, earlier films seemed to look at war as part of an inevitable and natural exercise in world history and in conduct between nations. One exception to such views, however, is found in Stuart Legg's *Churchill's Island* (1940), the film that won the NFB's first Oscar®.

Legg's film offers a multi-layered political assessment of how the battle of autumn 1940 was won and in the process opens itself to a socially informed approximation of the war. *Island* explores the interrelationship between various forces that contributed to Britain's defence: the Royal Air Force, the Navy, the coastal defences, the mechanized cavalry, the merchant seamen, and Britain's "tough, unbending civilian army." The film makes a brave effort to point out the critical role of workers "who were in the first place the ones who prepared Britain for facing up to the challenge of war." A critical component of the film is its exceptional and innovative sync sound interviews with ordinary soldiers, workers and women, which factors into the film's class orientation. The film shows images of workers in factories and farmers in the fields by way of celebrating the work of the "men and women who in the time of peace made Britain strong." Nevertheless, *Island* remains restrained in its characterization of the war against fascism and the connection between its social and the political dynamics. Legg's cinematic delineation of the war would radically change later and so would other NFB films. Subsequent films would portray events as part of "a peoples' war for democracy and peace," after which workers would be able to harvest the fruits of their effort and the peace that they helped bring about. As militant Canadian labour and the communist left re-forged their anti-fascist Popular Front in 1942, the films produced by the NFB shifted into a new gear. Its films would become more clearly integrated to a discursive formation which was essentially part of the labouring of Canadian culture.

By 1942, the NFB's discourse on the battle against Hitler began to argue that if nations could win the war as a measure of their ability to share and organize their military, economic and social resources, then the same collective and cooperative method could and should be applied to building a peaceful and prosperous future for humanity in the post-war era. Within the same parameters, workers as depicted in NFB films would be portrayed in conjunction with promoting ideas about collective production and sharing of resources and utilizing these resources for the benefit of the majority of society.

