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**Remembering Iris Barry**



**The Museum of Modern Art**

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Iris Barry**

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**THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART**

## Contributors

MARGARETA AKERMARK, Consultant for the Film Program of the American Federation of Arts, joined the Museum's Film Library in 1942, and was Associate Director of the Department of Film from 1965 until her retirement in 1978.

MARGARET SCOLARI BARR, noted scholar and teacher, and author of a monograph on Medardo Rosso, is the wife of Alfred H. Barr, Jr., founding Director of The Museum of Modern Art.

SIDNEY L. BERNSTEIN is Chairman of Granada Group Ltd. Among his numerous credits, Lord Bernstein produced *Rope*, *Under Capricorn*, and *I Confess*, directed by Alfred Hitchcock, and with Ivor Montagu founded the London Film Society.

ALISTAIR COOKE, internationally known journalist, broadcaster, and author, has been BBC commentator on the United States since 1937. He wrote and narrated for television *America: A Personal History of the United States*. He has authored many books, including *Douglas Fairbanks: The Making of a Screen Character* (commissioned by Iris Barry for The Museum of Modern Art) and the recently published *The Americans*.

HELEN GREY has been a researcher, writer, and editor for numerous American magazines, as well as director of the Publications Department at Mystic Seaport, Mystic, Connecticut. Miss Grey resides surrounded by "too large a garden" in Dorset, England.

JOHN HOUSEMAN, producer, writer, and director, was a founder, along with Orson Welles, of the Mercury Theater in 1937. During his career in Hollywood Mr. Houseman has produced many major films, such as *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, *The Bad and the Beautiful*, and *Julius Caesar*. As an actor he has appeared in *The Paper Chase* and *Three Days of the Condor*. In addition, Mr. Houseman is the author of *Run-Through* and the recently published *Front and Center*.

ARTHUR KNIGHT, Professor in the Cinema Division of the University of Southern California, has written widely on film in periodicals and for television. His publications include *The Liveliest Art* and *The Hollywood Style*.

JAY LEYDA is Gottesman Professor of Cinema Studies, New York University, and author of major publications on Soviet and Chinese cinema, including *Kino: A History of the Russian and Soviet Film* and *Dianying: An Account of Films and the Film Audience in China*. Professor Leyda is also the author of *The Melville Log* and *The Years and Hours of Emily Dickinson*.

IVOR MONTAGU has served as producer, director, or codirector on numerous British films. Among his directorial credits are two films with Charles Laughton and Elsa Lanchester, *Bluebottles* and *Daydreams*. Mr.

Montagu also is the author of *Film World: A Guide to Cinema* and *With Eisenstein in Hollywood*.

WILLARD VAN DYKE, Professor of Theater Arts at the College of the State University of New York, Purchase, was Director of MoMA's Department of Film from 1965 to 1973. A distinguished photographer and filmmaker, Mr. Van Dyke has to his credit such films as *The River*, *Valley Town*, and *The City*.

EDWARD M. M. WARBURG, Honorary Trustee of The Museum of Modern Art, was the first Treasurer of the Film Library Corporation (now the Department of Film). Mr. Warburg is a member of the Committee on Photography of the Board of Trustees.

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Cover photo of Iris Barry, c. 1940, courtesy George Platt Lynes

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## Foreword

Margareta Akermark

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**T**HE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE Museum of Modern Art is an appropriate time to honor the founder of the Museum's Film Library. Because of my long association with the Department of Film and my friendship with Iris, I have been asked to organize this tribute. Friends and colleagues of hers have contributed reminiscences to the following pages—reminiscences that provide an illuminating record of a remarkable woman. On behalf of the Museum I thank the contributors for sharing their memories with us.

In the summer of 1929, the first Director of the Museum, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., was requested by the founding Trustees to prepare "a plan for the new institution, an outline of its scope and policy." He drew up a report recommending that commercial and industrial art, theater design, film, and photography take their place in the Museum beside painting and sculpture, making the institution multidepartmental, truly representative of the visual arts of the twentieth century. The Trustees rejected most of these proposals, reasoning—wisely, in view of the subsequent depression—that the new Museum would be lucky to weather its first years even if it limited itself to painting and sculpture. Consequently, the "1929 plan" went underground and remained there for two and a half years.

In 1932, in a Museum pamphlet, *The Public as Artist*, Mr. Barr said: "That part of the American public which should appreciate good films and support them has never had a chance to crystallize. People who are well acquainted with modern painting or literature or the theater are amazingly ignorant of modern film. The work and even the names of such masters as Gance, Stiller, Clair, Dupont, Pudovkin, Feyder, Chaplin (as a director),

Eisenstein and other great directors are, one can hazard, practically unknown to the Museum's Board of Trustees, most of whom are interested and very well informed in other modern arts. . . . It may be said without exaggeration that the only great art peculiar to the twentieth century is practically unknown to the American public most capable of appreciating it."

Iris Barry's career may be recapitulated here—in a brief sketch that will be fleshed out by the pieces that follow in this tribute. She was born in Birmingham, the English industrial city, in 1895. Educated there and at the Ursuline Convent in Verviers, Belgium, she became assistant librarian of the School of Oriental Studies at the University of London. She was a founding member of the London Film Society in 1925. As a film critic for the London weekly *The Spectator* and motion-picture editor of the London *Daily Mail* from 1925 to 1930, she was among the first to review the productions of the studios. After coming to the United States, she was librarian of The Museum of Modern Art from 1932 to 1935, then curator and from 1946 director of its Film Library. In 1946 she was elected president of the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF), and in 1949 the French government made her Chevalier of the Légion d'Honneur. She was a prolific writer. Her books included *Splashing into Society*, 1923; *Let's Go to the Movies*, 1925; *Portrait of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, 1927; *The Last Enemy*, 1930; *D.W. Griffith: American Film Master*, 1940. She translated and edited *A History of the Motion Picture* by Bardèche and Brasillach in 1938.

Iris Barry retired in 1951 and spent the remainder of her life in the south of France. She last visited New York as an honored guest of the First New York Film Festival at Lincoln Center in 1962. She died in France in 1969. "Students of film throughout the world have lost their most respected Pioneer," said the London *Times* in a long obituary. Today, as then, none would disagree.



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## **The Belle of Bloomsbury**

Margaret Barr

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AFTER A LONG LEAVE OF ABSENCE, WE got back to New York in the summer of 1933. The first person we saw was Philip Johnson, and the first thing he said to us was that he had put Iris Barry in the Library.

This was Philip's shorthand way of speaking. When we had left in 1932 the Museum had no library; as for Iris Barry, we had never heard of her.

"So much the worse for you!" was Philip's reply. "She is brilliant, she is beautiful, she was the belle of Bloomsbury."

And no wonder, with her sparkling blue eyes, dark hair, and truly Cupid's-bow mouth!

She wrote with the enviable ease of the educated British, and her conversation flowed naturally, putting everyone at ease.

She had some few women friends, but men adored her; she kept them enthralled. René d'Harnoncourt, Jim Soby, and Chick Austin had a special devotion to her and helped her anxiously in her last slow and solitary illness.

She always called our daughter Victoria Nyanza. Thanks to her I chatted with Ezra Pound about Rapallo and met James Joyce, obviously purblind, at a film showing of the Cinémathèque in Paris.

The Museum and the Film Library missed her bitterly.

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### **Unstuffing the Self-Important**

Edward M. M. Warburg

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IRIS CAME TO THE MUSEUM ALREADY a very worldly person. Her days in the making of the London Film Society had exposed her to all forms of avant-gardism. She never lost her historical perspective, and she delighted in unstuffing the self-important and the pom-

pous. All this was secondary to her pursuit of her major objective—to bring the Film into its just position among the Arts. She was pleased to find that the Museum welcomed her objectives; she had discovered long before that the public was pleasantly surprised to learn that their secret sin of having, for so many years, sneaked off to go to the movies now was being dignified as a "cultural experience." She wanted to continue to promote the showing of celluloid landmarks, not for profit but for evaluation, giving a chance to the viewers to contrast and compare and to develop in themselves a set of standards that would serve them in judging other films and, much to their surprise, other art forms. They certainly felt more at home in the film projection rooms than in the galleries of the Museum, where objects were being shown which even the Trustees had not as yet included in their private collections.

Yes, she gave the Film and even Hollywood a new respectability. That wasn't her primary object, but she found this, in any case, very amusing. This glorious sense of fun, this making something worthwhile out of the broken "found objects" of iconoclasm—this was, I think, her talent and certainly her most welcome tax-free contribution to The Museum of Modern Art.

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### **I Think I Fell in Love**

Willard Van Dyke

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WHEN I CAME TO NEW YORK FROM SAN Francisco on my way to Europe in May 1935, the first person I visited was Iris Barry.

The weather was clear and warm, the city stirring with energy and hope. We thought we could see the end of the Great Depression. As I climbed the stairs of a fine old house on West 53rd Street, on my second day in the greatest city in the world, I was determined to somehow find a place in it. Iris was sitting at a

small desk in a room filled from floor to ceiling with 35mm film tins, most of them showing signs of rust. I was quite unprepared to find such a remarkably gracious and attractive woman. Even as brash and self-confident a youngster as I was at the age of twenty-eight (so long ago it seems), I was impressed with her intelligence, her knowledge, her enthusiasm for films and for those who loved them.

I learned that she was in the process of setting up a comprehensive film library for The Museum of Modern Art, the first in America. She had offered safety for the irreplaceable negatives of Hollywood's silent films. The sound movie had clearly supplanted them, and the studios were glad, for the most part, to make room in their vaults for their new talkies. Hollywood has never had much of a sense of history, but more surprisingly very few there have understood the lasting value of the works they have created. Iris understood, and she was ready to undertake a monumental piece of work. Already, with new shipments from Hollywood arriving each day, she had made contact with European archives and instilled enthusiasm for her ideas in countries that had not yet begun to preserve the heritage of their own film productions. She had even begun an exchange program, trading duplicate negatives and prints for foreign masterpieces to enrich the Museum's collection. I sat enthralled as she talked, and I think I fell in love, a little with her as a person, but most certainly with her enthusiasm and warmth of feeling for film.

Before I left she had written letters of introduction for me to John Grierson, the most important person in British documentary films; to Henri Langlois, in Paris; to Sergei Eisenstein, in the Soviet Union; and to several others who might be helpful to me. On that lovely May day I not only met one of the world's most remarkable women, but without my knowing it the rest of my life had been determined.

In the fifties she went to live in southern France. We kept in touch until she died in

1969. In 1965, thirty years after we first met, I had the honor of being appointed director of the program she had started.

I miss her. We all miss her. This world owes her a debt that can never be repaid.

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## **Birmingham Sparrow**

Ivor Montagu

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ABOUT IRIS BARRY'S ACHIEVEMENT there is no dubiety: first film critic on a serious British journal; cofounder of the world's first "film society"; initiator of the first American film archive; inspirer and patron saint of its numerous successors in all lands. She was also, incidentally, a minor poet, a not inconsiderable scholar, a shrewd and lively writer on literature and the arts.... Film criticism in a serious journal, a film society, a film archive—are these not now commonplace, taken for granted in every technically advanced society? It is hard to realize that the now commonplace was not always there, that before it was common it had to be fought for, even before that imagined. That is what the small band of conspirators who gathered in the ground-floor flat of Iris Barry and her husband, Alan Porter, in Guildford Street were doing.... Remember there were absolutely no regular specialized film exhibitions of any kind. Not *any*. No specialized theaters for minority tastes. No film societies. Next to no educational filmshows or projectors in schools....

It is now time to tell about Iris herself. She was a tiny woman, extremely slim. She was always strikingly and fittingly dressed on no money at all. She had a clear, but slightly sallow skin. Her blue eyes were searching and impressive. Her hair was black.... A lesser feminine creature of that day might have settled for an obscure fate. Iris did not.... She came to London and was integrated immediately into a self-criticizing, self-admiring clique

6 that ate together, paired together, quarreled together, and knew not only each other but everybody else. The nucleus was T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Richard Aldington, Herbert Read, and Wyndam Lewis; Irish Republican litterateurs, such as Yeats and Maud Gonne, circled more loosely.

For Iris it was largely a sandwich existence. . . . She tried many things: briefly at the School of Oriental Studies under Harold Ross, and working for Stefansson, the explorer. Sidney Bernstein heard about her from a friend . . . and found that even so early she was interested in the cinema and got her to report on trade shows occasionally for his circuit. But general hard-upness reigned. . . . About now she managed to get a first book published [*Splashing into Society*] . . . It brought in fifty pounds. . . . Now things were turning and widening. Through the Sitwells she had come to know the young postwar batch of Oxford poets and their friends: Alan Porter, Edgell Rickwood, Richard Hughes, Jack Isaacs, Peter Quennell, and others. A little later she met Alan Cameron, eventually one of the prime agitators for formation of the British Film Institute and first chairman of its Film Library selection committee, and his wife, Elizabeth Bowen. It was John Strachey who brought his friends into the *Spectator*, among them Iris for play and book reviews. Then, somehow, he had the brilliant idea that the *Spectator* should try serious film criticism and Iris got the job. Next Alan Porter and Iris got married.

It was as *Spectator* critic . . . that we asked her to join our crusade [for a London film society]. The battle was serious. . . . In the film world only Michael Balcon and George Pearson openly encouraged us. The trade in general objected to us—it was afraid that it might be criticized if anything we showed which it had turned down were liked. The censor objected to us—his own status might diminish. . . . Even part of the press objected. . . . Iris, who had flung herself into the thick of the battle, more than held her own in a tall black

super-poke hat with a wide brim and a wide scarlet ribbon like a witch.

She transferred to the *Daily Mail*, a post of more money and much greater influence. . . . But [later] came a down. Her marriage broke up. Separation from Alan, the sack from the *Mail*. She went to America.

Iris had many friends in U.S.A. but was not the person to parade her difficulties. She had visited Hollywood for the [London *Daily Mail*] but Hollywood is not notable for helping hands. Neither her old friends in the U.S. nor the brilliant new circle she started to acquire knew . . . of the extremities of her situation. She translated, she ghosted, she scraped for reviews, she wrote a dream book . . . but being Iris, she stuck it out on her own, persisted, and climbed back. She got a job with The Museum of Modern Art. Why should not modern arts include the cinema and the Museum an appropriate department? And what was America, originator of many of the greatest masterpieces in this field, doing to preserve them for posterity and make them meanwhile available for study? . . . She found, convinced, and won the angels, among them a Rockefeller. She convinced and won the big film companies, the directors and stars. Lillian Gish tells how D.W. Griffith's trust in her saved the D.W. Griffith Collection. For this success alone all future generations of cineastes owe a debt to her. . . .

The Second [World] War brought entirely new and unexpected activities. Iris, who had never been political, plunged into war work. When the U.S. government called together all the Hollywood greats, whom she had worshipped for so long, the studio producers and directors who had volunteered for war work bade Iris lecture them on documentary. In 1949 the French government made her a Chevalier of the Legion of Honor and said that it was for services to French film. Some close friends, however, have reason to believe that it was connected also with aid she gave to those who escaped from occupied France.

Iris did not have an easy life. For her achievements (the degree to which they have become commonplaces today itself proves the extent of their success), she had to fight every inch of the way. She needed support, but was too proud to ask it, and in choosing others to rely on she did not always choose well. On the other hand she had an unmatched capacity for rousing affection and making devoted friends. Neither here nor in U.S.A. did these forget her. But many she outlived and, except for neighbors and a daily, who loved her, was not without loneliness in the place she chose for retirement: in the south of France, the village of Fayence, Var.

Would the things she contrived to do for the development of cinema have come to pass without her? Of course, sooner or later. But historical chance and her own gifts made it she who in fact pioneered them. For this those of today should honor her. Those who knew her best then cherish their memories.

Abridged, with permission, from *Sight and Sound* (London), Spring 1970. Copyright 1970 by the British Film Institute.

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### **Let's Go to the Pictures**

Jay Leyda

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THAT WAS THE ENGLISH TITLE OF IRIS Barry's collection of her thoughts about films in 1926—but there really should be an exclamation point to express her early enthusiasm for the new-found art. She was among the dedicated few who, in founding the London Film Society, helped to transform English intellectuals' attitude toward the "pictures" from scorn or condescension to attention and excitement. In her writing and her search for Film Society surprises she showed a stubborn refusal to be dazzled by pretentious or over-sold work. She cheered the films that had sparks of the future in them, no matter what their budget or subject. She was the ideal person for a job on this side of the Atlantic

that had not yet been invented.

Another founder of another unprecedented institution was in the throes, fifty years ago, of organizing America's first museum of modern art. Fortunately for all of us, Alfred Barr saw the film as a necessary, if future part of such a museum. Even before the Museum had a building of its own, Alfred was so eager to place photography and film in their rightful places alongside the "accepted fine arts" of "today," that he quietly initiated a Film Department and quietly invited Iris Barry to be its first curator, building its collection and prestige from scratch. She was the right choice.

There must have been some cries of pain at the idea of films in a museum (for the first time!), but Iris's intelligence and sensitivity softened the loudest of those. Audiences in Hartford and Hollywood were tested first, and so successfully that in the second year of the Film Department's existence a big and essential step was taken—to hunt for films in Europe. Alfred prepared the hunt by alerting his friends in European capitals that the new museum wished to acquire the key (and often forgotten) works in the brief past of film history.

I had worked in the Soviet Union for three years, as Eisenstein's student and assistant. When Alfred wrote me of Iris's arrival and mission, he also asked me to remind Eisenstein of their meetings in 1928 (during the troubled editing of *October*). Eisenstein's career had just struck a new snag, with smallpox and a long convalescence during which the scenario of the half-filmed *Bezhin Meadow* had to be largely rewritten. My work on the film was reduced to delivering new sequences and ideas between the semi-immobilized Eisenstein and his collaborator, Isaac Babel, so I was unusually free to arrange Moscow meetings for Iris—whom I now met for the first time—as well as to make her negotiations for films as firm as possible. The Museum acquired a group of Soviet films unknown in the United States: Iris chose one by Kuleshov, one by Room, one by Protazanov, and complete ver-

8 sions of some seen here only in dubious states. (Eisenstein contributed his own copy of *Potemkin*—the last of those printed from the original negative.)

It was a successful visit, and toward its end Iris suggested that I return to New York as her assistant. Our film tastes seemed to coincide, and we enjoyed each other's company. Eisenstein approved of Iris and advised me to accept. There were to be acquisition stops in Berlin and Paris on the way back to New York. My wife had a dance contract to fill in Oslo, and she would then follow us. A friendly foundation began my Museum salary before I left Moscow, bags bulging with Eisenstein's other gifts—documents chiefly related to his North American frustrations. These gifts became the Eisenstein Collection at the Museum.

That first Museum Film Department was a stimulating place to work, and Iris was a stimulating boss. She welcomed the quantity of unexpected problems—technical, critical, diplomatic—not dreamt of when the Department was born. With each unfamiliar acquisition for the archive the customary generalizations of film history were forced to bend a little, and a willingness to view newly—always Iris's habit—became natural to all her staff. Yes, film did belong in The Museum of Modern Art.

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### **It Has All Been Very Interesting**

Arthur Knight

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WHEN IRIS BARRY WROTE HER FULL-length study of the life and times of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, the eighteenth-century poet, essayist, and feminist, she might well have been drafting her own autobiography. Like Lady Mary, Iris quickly earned the esteem of London's literary and artistic cognoscenti. Like Lady Mary, she lived much of her mature life abroad—Lady Mary in Constantinople, Iris in New York. Both were

noted for their encouragement of youthful talents, establishing salons in which new stars could shine. And both spent their declining years in the south of France in the company of a younger man. Iris once told me that she had invented the inscription for Lady Mary's tombstone, as described in the biography: "It has all been very interesting." I can't imagine a better inscription for Iris herself.

My first image of Iris has her seated cross-legged on the floor of the library in the suite of offices occupied by the then-nascent Museum of Modern Art Film Library in the old CBS building at 485 Madison Avenue, back in 1936. On her lap was an enormous volume of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*—which, she informed me, she intended "to read through from A to Zed." I have no reason to doubt that she did just that. Iris often spoke regretfully of the fact that she held no academic degrees; but without question, she was the most successfully self-educated person I have ever known.

I suspect that this lack of degrees accounted in part for her satisfaction when, in 1937, she was able to present, together with her husband, John Abbott, a pioneering course in motion pictures under the aegis of Columbia University Extension. Without a degree, she was teaching at one of the most prestigious educational institutions in the nation! And what a course it was! Certainly, there had never been anything like it before—and for that matter, there have been precious few since. For Iris was able to draw upon the already rich resources of the Film Library's collection to illustrate (often with pertinent film clips rather than entire films) the salient points made by her illustrious guests.

And the guests! For them there was the double honor of being invited to speak before a class sponsored at once by a major university and a major art museum. It was an honor that few could resist; and in the three years that the course was offered, just about every notable producer, director, writer, cameraman, and star who passed through New York

made his or her pit stop at one of Iris's sessions. I can still remember David O. Selznick, fresh from his triumph with *The Prisoner of Zenda*, describing his difficulties finding an actress who not only could act, but could look convincingly virginal as the Princess Flavia. I remember Jimmy Cagney diving under his seat out of embarrassment after watching bits and pieces from some of his early performances. King Vidor described how he used a drumbeat to establish the pace for his doughboys mounting an attack through a forest in *The Big Parade*. Earl Sponable recalled the vicissitudes of the earliest days of sound. Alfred Hitchcock, an old friend of Iris's, made his first American public appearance there.

Iris was remarkable. At a time when it was fashionable to admire a foreign film like Ekk's *Road to Life*, she preferred (and rightly) William Wellman's *Wild Boys of the Road*—and added it to the Museum's collection. She felt (and rightly) that John Ford's *The Informer* was too self-consciously "artistic"; she preferred his "programmers," like *The Lost Patrol*, *The Prisoner of Shark Island*, and *Stagecoach*. She loved the early Disneys, the Astaire-Rogers musicals, the Jimmy Cagney gangsters, and anything with Garbo. She championed "difficult" films like Lang's *You Only Live Once* and (somewhat later) Nicholas Ray's *They Live by Night*. She deplored movies like *Wuthering Heights* where, she used to say, "everything looked as if it had been bought at Sloane's."

I like to think that this was her heritage to us of the next generation—a rejection of snobbism, a searching of the new not only for its own values, but for its linkages with the past. For Iris, the past was always important. It was what you built on, improved on, changed—but never rejected. She taught us that the wheel didn't have to be invented again, but it could be perfected. And she established a library of films that made it possible for us, her successors as film teachers, to demonstrate this to our students beyond refutation.

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## The London Film Society

Sidney L. Bernstein

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IRIS BARRY, ADRIAN BRUNEL, HUGH Miller, Frank Dobson, Ivor Montagu, and myself were all roughly the same age and shared the same enthusiasm for films. We recognized in the medium a new dimension of experience, a new field of expression... We found we had many supporters among eminent people in politics, art, and literature. Our guarantors included Wells, Shaw, Roger Fry, H. F. Rubinstein, J. B. S. Haldane, Lord Ashfield, and Lord Swathling... Unfortunately neither the press nor the film world itself welcomed us... The trade viewed our separatism as a form of criticism of themselves (which it was); the press accused us of subversion.

I think the films we showed influenced filmgoers and producers and improved the standards of the cinema... We encouraged discussion... I don't think that we missed anything new or important that was being produced at that time. We also constantly looked back to seek out what was good and yet had been neglected... Often we arranged for old films to be repaired and conserved, and in this way we were responsible to some extent for establishing the archive movement, of which Iris Barry was an important pioneer with her work for The Museum of Modern Art.

Abridged, with permission, from *The Times* (London), October 23, 1975. Copyright 1975 by The Times (London).

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## Days of Excitement

Helen Grey

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"FIXITY OF PURPOSE AND KEEP AN eye on the right"—advice given me by my English driving instructor on coping with roundabouts—reminds me of Iris's approach



10 to life in general, and in particular, to the Film Library. It had been her dream and was her creation, and she guarded it jealously, keeping a constant lookout for anyone, anything, to help it on its way.

Our first office was in the pink-walled penthouse of the old Museum of Modern Art at 11 West 53, and one famous foot after another climbed the attic stairs—old friends from England on their way to Hollywood (among them the Laughtons and Sidney Bernstein), artists, writers, actors. Iris was a catalyst, and the Film Library offices here, later in the CBS building, and finally, in 1939, back at 11 West 53 in the Museum's new building, were a forum and an information center for followers and practitioners of that newest art form, the motion picture.

One day a quiet, cigar-smoking man came up the stairs, to open up a treasure trove of the early Edison films. Bill Jamison was a Film Library mainstay: he had worked with Edison and knew where to find the Edison and Méliès films, the Muybridge experiments with movement, and the early French Pathé newsreels. Alfred Barr, always a firm supporter and a tower of strength, came up every afternoon to counsel. After we moved to the CBS building on Madison Avenue, Ed Kerns came to run the technical end. This was a painstaking business, as so many of the old films were in bad condition and new prints and negatives had to be made. Iris mapped out the strategy for her first Hollywood visit to persuade producers and stars to place their famous films in the custody of the Film Library. The stars were fascinated to think of themselves as part of an art form, and most of them liked the idea of being "preserved for posterity."

Young film fans flocked to meet Iris and learn at first hand from a founder of the London Film Society about putting film programs together. She saw them all, sympathized and advised; when I complained one day of all the time spent on the starry-eyed young, she replied, "One never knows, my dear,

whom one may meet on the way down."

Iris began writing her program notes, designed to give viewers a sense of the historical perspective, even before we had the programs or films needed. We began collecting stills. John Hay Whitney set up a projection room near Grand Central Station for weekly viewings of films (Alistair Cooke and Gilbert Seldes were regulars at these ) that began to arrive from Hollywood.

We worked in a hive of activity over which Iris presided happily and enthusiastically. Everyone helped everyone else, every day was a new experience in learning. To have been in at the start of such a creation and the fulfillment of a dream is a never-to-be-forgotten experience. Pioneering is hard, but it is also fun and excitement, and Iris thrived on it. The Film Library's early days had a high-pitched quality I've never seen equaled.

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### **A One-Woman Blitz**

John Houseman

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MANY YEARS AGO, IN THE EARLY 1920s, when I was an apprentice grain broker in the City of London, I used to while away the time between trades by perusing the intellectual weeklies—the *New Statesman* and the *Spectator*—which somehow found their way into the squalid reading room of the Corn Exchange. There I came across my first sample of serious film criticism and the name of Iris Barry. Like Pare Lorentz in New York a few years later, she wrote simply but enthusiastically of this new art form of whose growing importance in our lives they were both fully aware.

During my brief forays into Bloomsbury I met her once or twice—this highbrow farmer's daughter who, soon after her arrival in the capital, had been taken up by the contentious, dynamic artist-writer Wyndham Lewis.

Ten years later I met her again, in New York, in the Askew "salon," of which she was

a member in good standing. She had an earthy energy and gaiety that made her stand out in that aesthetic, sophisticated museum crowd. Still obsessed by film, she was now using her strange combination of enthusiasm, courage, taste, and peasant shrewdness to influence, cajole, threaten, and charm a film department out of the millionaires who were so influential at The Museum of Modern Art.

She succeeded beyond her wildest dreams; it was a one-woman blitz carried out with audacity and expertise. And as her maneuvers began to bear fruit, she wielded her brief power with selfless courage. The unique film material she assembled with imagination and shrewdness without the help of (and often in the face of direct opposition from) the Film Industry was not held and hoarded in the Museum's vaults. She shared her treasures, distributing them where she felt they would do the most good. At considerable personal risk she had hundreds of thousands of feet of film reproduced (with no questions asked) and shipped all over the world, where they formed the nucleus of new film institutes that might never have gotten off the ground without her help. Her enthusiasm for film went far beyond the accumulation of archives; throughout the years of her directorship filmmakers young and old, European and American, found MoMA's projection rooms and audiences available for the showing of films that Iris Barry considered original or provocative.

Before and throughout the war she used her position at the Museum to salvage and sustain a number of scholars and filmmakers (Buñuel amongst them) who might otherwise have gone under in those difficult times.

Her health, which had carried her through so many years of hard work and living, began to weaken; it was then that Iris Barry, who would not settle for less than the whole, made her decision to leave her position at the Museum and live abroad.

At the time of her operation, before her decision had been announced, she lent me her apartment for a few days. Every file,

every object, every piece of furniture was neatly inventoried and labeled. I realized then that behind her Bohemian manner, her social brightness, and her farmer's-daughter's freshness and enthusiasm there had always been a will of steel and a methodical, highly organized efficiency that had made it possible for her to achieve those victories for which she will never be forgotten in the world of films.

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### **To Recall Her Pluck**

Alistair Cooke

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SHE WAS A BRASSY LITTLE GIRL IN BIRMINGHAM, England, who shocked her grandmother by spending every spare hour at the movies, when the movies were a thin cut above the poolroom. She shocked the rest of the family when, having spent the First World War in a succession of unladylike jobs (shipping telephone poles for the Post Office, ordering machine guns for the Ministry of Munitions), she made a profession of her vice and became the first woman film critic in England.

In the heyday of the Flapper she was one of the most beguiling of the breed: a small trig brunette with an Eton crop, a pair of skeptical violet eyes, and a belly laugh that responded like a Geiger counter to the presence of a stuffed shirt. She was always long on mockery and short on tact, and when she demanded more money and a trip to Hollywood from *The Daily Mail* she was, as she put it later, "severed rather forcefully." She decided, on her own, to get to the way-station of New York, and for a time she practiced the pathetic routine of a genteel English girl on a casual visit to America who, in fact, was down to the one-room walk-up and whatever snacks the escort can pay for.

But she always landed on her own or somebody else's feet, and first she ran into a



**12** patron in Philip Johnson, a sponsor in Alfred Barr, and a husband in John E. Abbott of Wall Street. These three complemented her vague but grand design, which was somehow to have a private film collection and yet be on hobnobbing terms with the Warner Brothers and the gods and goddesses they employed. Johnson moved her into a 53rd Street brownstone, then masquerading as the young Museum of Modern Art, and set her cadging books from the libraries of bankrupt tycoons which she sold for books on painting. Barr recalled she had been a founder member of the London Film Society and thought she would be "better employed doing something about a film collection," a rather grandiose promise given by the Museum in its original manifesto about which nothing had yet been done. Out of the blue, or a cocktail acquaintanceship, came John Hay Whitney, who put up the money for a preliminary study of what a film collection might be. By now she was married to John Abbott, and the two of them first wangled a fat grant from the Rockefeller Foundation and then, with Whitney's entrée, whisked off to Hollywood and for a year or more explored the tedious mysteries of projectors, staff, storage vaults, raw film stock, copyright, and pierced the more formidable barrier of Hollywood's indifference to its stockpile of old movies and its suspicion of the non-commercial showing of any of them.

There were interminable battles with corporations, lawyers, banks, and all the other keepers of the cash register who awoke with a bang to what was then the pleasing new concept of "residuals."

This was the way the Museum of Modern Art Film Library (now Department) began. Iris Barry was its inventor, crusader, first curator, and subsequently its director. Very few of the fans who drop by to catch the early Fairbanks or *Birth of a Nation* have ever heard of Iris Barry or, I am sure, give a passing thought to the Laocoön coils of stock holdings, proprietorship, and dumb greed through which she had to slash her way toward her

vision of a regular parade of the motion picture's past for you and me on a gray afternoon. But there it is. She died in France three weeks ago, full of years and unquenchable humor. It is a good time to recall her pluck and cunning and energy. For all the hundreds of thousands who now accept the Museum Film Department as an inevitable amenity of New York City, she was their pioneer public servant. She would have laughed herself sick at the thought.

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