

***By Her Own Design:
Margaret Perry's
Nova Scotia Film Bureau Archive
(1945-1969)***

A Guide for Postsecondary Education

**Nova Scotia Archives, Archive/Counter-Archive
Educational Guide**



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Overview

Recommended Levels of Study

Undergraduate; Graduate

Subject Areas

Film Studies; Women and Film; Regional Film;
Documentary Film; Canadian Film; Canadian Studies;
Atlantic Canada Studies

About the Collection

Until recently, little attention has been paid to Margaret Perry's so-called "government films," which have been dismissed, often without being seen, on charges of their "anti-modern" depictions of Nova Scotia. And yet, Perry's films are significant for their creative depictions of a place and time about which limited film records remain and as a cinematic testament to the career of a trail-blazing and visionary filmmaker.

Archive/Counter-Archive's restoration project is committed to creating access to as well as framing and contextualizing Perry's films and supporting material in order to invite contemporary readings in the context of women's labour and cinema, regional records and artworks, as well as the progressive and contentious discourses they contain.

About the Guide

This guide reintroduces and reframes Margaret Perry and the contribution of her films. It includes important contextual information about Perry and her films, a list of five films suggested for classroom viewing, film synopses, and discussion questions oriented toward a range of thematic areas. It also suggests supplementary films and resources to complement the gaps present in Perry's work.

We recommend previewing the films before you screen them for your students and reading the contextualizing information provided in this guide, which will help you frame Perry's work as both an

incredibly rich and only partial representation of Nova Scotian history. Please note that Perry's *Craftsmen at Work* (at 13:06 min) contains a reference to the local residential school. We recommend informing your students that this content is part of the film before you watch it with them and utilizing the supplementary films and resources suggested in the guide to offer students a critical framing of Perry's work as historical text.

As part of the project, *Archive/Counter-Archive* has produced a number of educational guides. All A/CA guides are available digitally for free at counterarchive.ca



About Margaret Perry



Margaret Perry is one of Canada's most important, most prolific, yet least-known woman filmmakers and early film bureaucrats. Born in New Brunswick in 1905, Perry turned to professional photography and filmmaking at the age of 32, shortly after the death of her husband Stanley Perry in a motor vehicle accident in 1936. She was a few months pregnant when her husband died, leaving her having to find a way to support herself and her child. Early photographs taken by Perry tell us about her sense of framing and the development of her early visual aesthetic (VanderBurgh, 2019). These photographs are also revealing in that what she chose to photograph at that time was, in fact, quite similar to what she would later depict in her later promotional films: hunting, fishing, landscapes, and close-ups of people and natural objects.

While she was deepening her interest in photography, Perry also took a correspondence film course and applied to be a projectionist for one of the National Film Board's (NFB) rural circuits in New Brunswick during World War II. Every month, she would receive a shipment of short films, which she projected in community halls and church basements throughout the region. She also began to make films of her own.



Perry's films caught the eye of local M.P. and film enthusiast Leonard O'Brien who mentioned her to John Grierson, Director of the National Film Board. In 1942, Perry was hired by Grierson and went to Ottawa to work as one of the NFB's first women cinematographers and as the only NFB employee from Atlantic Canada at the time. There, she worked on several projects related to the region as an editor, producer, director, and performed a variety of other roles until she was invited to start up the province of Nova Scotia's Film Bureau in 1945.

Perry then moved to Halifax where she acted as Director of the Nova Scotia Film Bureau from 1945 to 1969. During that time, she made over 50 promotional films for the provincial government. These films depicted Nova Scotia as a tourist destination, an industrial and agricultural centre, and a complex site of cultural heritage. Until 1959, she was the Bureau's only employee and often wrote, directed, shot, and edited the films she produced herself.





About Margaret Perry's Films

Margaret Perry's films are complex artefacts which merit careful reflection. On the one hand, they depict Perry's own vision of Nova Scotia and her distinct artistic voice. Indeed, she managed to carefully craft a representation of Nova Scotia which not only fit the standards imposed on her by the Bureau, but that also strongly featured her visual style as well as her thoughts on the province's relationship to modernity and tradition. On the other hand, this vision is also heavily tainted by the sociocultural limitations of her time, thus contributing to a homogenous portrayal of Nova Scotia and its local communities that almost exclusively features white settlers.



The Nova Scotia Film Bureau

Perry's films were commissioned by the Nova Scotia Information Service, a department initially established in 1924 as the Nova Scotia Publicity Bureau with a mandate to "tell the world about Nova Scotia" (VanderBurgh, 2019). This type of publicity, as the Nova Scotia Archives underline, became an important means of promoting Nova Scotia tourism during the 1930s and 1940s (Nova Scotia Archives, 2000). Until the mid-1940s, the Bureau's promotional films were produced mostly by American companies, but in 1945 the Nova Scotia Information Service launched their own in-house production unit, the Nova Scotia Film Bureau. Made in conjunction with various Nova Scotia government departments, the Nova Scotia Film

Bureau productions focused on subjects related to tourism, agriculture, industry, and heritage.

These developments set a precedent for the rest of the country. In her first Annual Report, Perry, who had been named Director of the Nova Scotia Film Bureau in 1945, observed that

the production of Nova Scotia films is an entirely new development of this Bureau. It is designed to satisfy the photographic requirements of each Department of the Nova Scotia government. The trend all over Canada is that each Province will eventually have its own Board for the production of films to fit its own particular needs: tourist, agriculture, education, etc., but as yet this is the first province in Canada which has made a start in this direction (Nova Scotia Archives, 2000).

During her 24 years at the helm of the Bureau, Perry oversaw the production and direction of over 50 films. Yet, because not much is known about her work as a filmmaker, Perry's films have been dismissed, "often without having been seen, as promoting folksy, anti-modern depictions of Nova Scotia that were intended to attract out-of-province tourism and business partnerships" (VanderBurgh, 2022). However, upon closer examination, Perry's collection offers rich insights into her cinematographic mastery, the history of film in the province, as well as into how the province was attempting to portray itself in a postwar world.





A Changing Nova Scotian Culture

Nova Scotia's vision of itself, as articulated in these government films, is of "Perry's own design" (VanderBurgh, 2019). Perry wrote, directed, shot, and edited these films, and her distinctive and colourful images of Nova Scotia, shot on Kodachrome and Ektachrome 16mm film stock, were often recorded in perilous conditions. Thus, these images are significant for their creative depictions of a place and time about which limited film records remain. As a result, these government films, VanderBurgh (2019) contends, should be approached as auteur-driven artworks that reflect a unique perspective on the dramatic changes facing Nova Scotia in the mid-20th century.

Perry's films remarkably capture Nova Scotia's struggle to define and maintain its identity in the face of social, economic, and technological progress. The films' promotion of tourism through the depiction of scenic—presumably "untouched"—landscapes, combined with their simultaneous praise of modern development via images that exalt technological advancement, results in what Darrell Varga (2010) sees as "a consistent and interesting tension within the films." Even when Perry's films seem to depict the more traditional aspects of Nova Scotian culture still alive in the mid-20th century, for example, in her film *Craftsmen at Work* (1945), they do so in a way that seems to invite reflection on the social changes occurring at the time and since.



Commenting on the rich and constant interplay between past and future, and between tradition and progress, VanderBurgh highlights Perry's strategic and metaphorical use of roads throughout her body of work to represent the complexities of Nova Scotia's drive toward modernization and links with the past. She writes:

Road imagery features prominently in her films as literal and figurative representations of development and connection. Imagery of highways, bridges, and causeway-building document actual changes to Nova Scotia infrastructure that Perry uses to convey significance and broader figurative understandings of Nova Scotia's newfound postwar connectedness to its own regions, to the rest of Canada and to the world (VanderBurgh, 2022).

Roads to Reading (1958) and *Marine Highway* (1957) are particularly salient examples of how Perry's films depict roads as facilitating new and efficient ways of travelling, transporting goods, and circulating information. However, a certain kind of melancholy also emerges from Perry's vision of progress, resulting in fascinating yet conflicting images of development.





Social Difference in Perry's Films

In calling for a feminist revisitation of nontheatrical film genres, film scholar Marsha Gordon argues that many women filmmakers were able to thrive and have careers in nontheatrical film—partly because nontheatrical media itself is, as Gordon posits, “a marginalized category” (Gordon, 1998). Yet, because nontheatrical film is often positioned as being less important than theatrical film, these women filmmakers and their work unfortunately tend to be ignored and forgotten. When reading Perry's films through a feminist lens, it is evident that they are endowed with a distinct gaze which is indisputably her own. *Craftsmen at Work* (1945), for instance, mostly depicts the labour of craftswomen, which Perry documents with incredible minutia and care. In fact, in many of Perry's films, the work of (white) women takes centre stage. From the fisherwomen of *Battling “Blue-Fins”* (1947) to the librarians portrayed in *Roads to Reading* (1958) and the folk songs of Helen Creighton that structure *Marine Highway* (1957), it is clear that Perry made a conscious choice to foreground rural women with whom she likely felt a kind of kinship.



Yet, Perry's films are also highly selective in terms of who they choose to represent. As Varga (2010) notes, her films are “time capsules of social attitudes and everyday life at the time of their creation—

clothing, cars, buildings, and the ever-changing landscape, together producing an ‘idea’ of Nova Scotia that reflects the time of their production and reveals as much by what is left out of the picture as by what is inside the frame.”

Left of out of the picture, for instance, are the many African Nova Scotian communities located across the province. Nova Scotia's rich Black presence is all but entirely erased from the films, save for the occasional and fleeting glimpses of Black individuals.

Watching Perry's films, the viewer is given no indication of the history of enslaved peoples, of Black loyalists and Jamaican immigrants, or of Black settlements such as Africville that constitute the history of Nova Scotia.



Indigenous peoples, too, are largely absent from Perry's films—although, as Varga (2010) notes, they are sometimes evoked in sinister ways. For example, in *Craftsmen at Work*, the history of residential schooling and genocide by the Canadian state is glossed over, as the narrator observes that children from the local “Indian school” in Shubenacadie have been digging out fresh clay for local crafts makers and workers.

To a large extent, then, the portrayal of First Nations—or rather, the lack thereof—in Perry's films



follows the racist impulses that have driven Canada's history and ongoing practices of settler colonialism, enacted here through the erasure of Indigenous cultures. The films also depict Indigenous peoples as figures of the past, denying their continuing existence in Nova Scotia. As Adrian Willsher argues, in Perry's films, "the Mi'kmaq become history, become a people who have no present living culture at mid-century and are often remembered only in monuments or exist in the present only for the the continued exploitation of their interesting appearance" (1996, quoted in Varga, 2010).

The emphasis in Perry's films on land development and exploitation, as depicted through the building of roads and unregulated extractive activities such as fishing and hunting, further normalizes settler colonialism in the province.



Even in what Perry considered to be the best film of her career, *Glooscap Country* (1961), a picturesque re-telling of the Mi'kmaq creation story, Indigenous peoples are nowhere to be seen; nor is the story of Glooscap told by a Mi'kmaq narrator. Willsher notes that government bureaucrats, upon viewing the film, were actually more preoccupied with the absence of representations of progress than with the absence of First Nations, asking: "Where are the roads?" (1996, quoted in Varga 2010). Perry's body of

work thus reveals much about the context in which these films were made, and about Canada's process of identity-making through the enactment of colonial and genocidal policies.

Therefore, it is critical that Perry's work be carefully framed, and viewed in conjunction with works that offer Black and Indigenous perspectives. In order to facilitate this, the guide includes a list of recommended films and readings that will be helpful in supplementing and rectifying the gaps present in Perry's work. Of particular interest are the works of two other women filmmakers from Nova Scotia, Sylvia D. Hamilton and Catherine Anne Martin, whose ground-breaking cinematic works provide critical historical perspectives on the Atlantic Region.

Our hope is that in animating the collection of Perry's films at the Nova Scotia Archives by complicating it, viewers will reframe these films as both filmmaker-driven cinematic and artistic works that should not be dismissed merely on the basis that they are government films. These films should also be viewed as visual records of life in the region at a certain point in time, which contain both progressive and problematic discourses that need to be put in conversation with the work of other filmmakers of the region, as well as with understudied histories.





Suggested Films for Classroom Viewing

Five films are suggested for classroom screening. These films, which are listed below in chronological order, reflect Margaret Perry's aesthetics, the preoccupations of the Nova Scotia Film Bureau, and the complexity of her body of work. *Craftsmen at Work*, one of Perry's earliest films, depicts the creative labour of women (and, to a lesser extent, men) and the rich history of crafts making in the province. *Battling "Blue-Fins"* follows groups of fishermen during a day of tuna fishing in Wedgeport, portraying the sea as a unique character in its own right and a witness to economic as well as social progress. *Marine Highway* and *Roads to Reading* strive to reconcile the tensions between modernity and progress, past and future, in Nova Scotia's postwar context. Finally, *Glooscap Country* retells the Mi'kmaq creation story through narration and beautiful wildlife and landscape shots.

All films are available online via the Nova Scotia Archives at the following link:

<https://archives.novascotia.ca/perry/>

Total run time: 01:18:41

"Part of her pitch for what made Nova Scotia great was the fact that it had this tension between modernization and holding on to its traditions and its history at the same time"

Jennifer VanderBurgh, CBC interview, 2022.



Craftsmen at Work (1945)

Directed and produced by: Margaret Perry;
Nova Scotia Department of Industry and Publicity
for the Handcrafts and Home Industry Division

Length: 00:15:27

Synopsis: “Craftsmen of this province interpret what they see about them through their crafts,” announces the narrator at the beginning of *Craftsmen at Work*. The film follows a variety of Nova Scotia-based craftspeople—weavers, rugmakers, potters, wood-carvers—who display their talent and work. The film beautifully captures the performance of traditions such as natural dyeing, spinning and weaving with angora furs, and sword dances. Folk songs accompany this documentary’s arresting images of crafts and their creators, and of the nature that surrounds and inspires them. [Please note: there is a brief mention of the local residential school at 13:06].



Battling “Blue-Fins” (1947)

Directed and produced by: Margaret Perry;
Nova Scotia Department of Industry and Publicity

Length: 00:21:38

Synopsis: *Battling “Blue-Fins”* features a day of tuna sport fishing at Wedgeport, a small fishing village near Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, settled by the Acadian French. The film tells us about the transition from commercial to leisure tuna fishing in that part of Nova Scotia, a transition which led sports enthusiasts from all over the world to flock to Wedgeport in the Summer to catch bluefins. Perry leads us into the deep and adventurous waters of Wedgeport where she follows small groups of fishermen from dusk to dawn. This was Perry’s first major production in Nova Scotia, which won an award at the Sestriere Film Festival (Rome) in addition to being Perry’s favourite early film. The film helped draw international attention to local culture and maritime life (Varga 2010).





Marine Highway (1957)

Directed and produced by: Margaret Perry;
Nova Scotia Information Service for the Nova Scotia
Travel Bureau, Department of Trade and Industry

Length: 00:13:06

Synopsis: The film takes the viewers along Highway 7, a road that stretches for 129 miles along Nova Scotia's eastern shore from Dartmouth to Sherbrooke and connects areas of work and leisure. The film includes footage of Canadian folklorist Helen Creighton recording folksongs, local artists at work, and recreational activities in the area. The documentary also heavily features car and road imagery, and the railway, oil refineries, and naval air stations, too, make appearances in the film—all testaments of Dartmouth's drive to modernity and industrial progress.

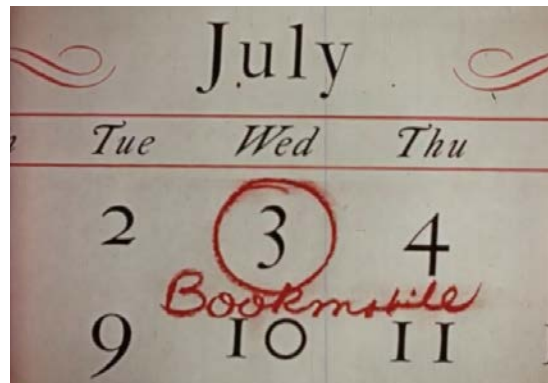


Roads to Reading (1958)

Directed and produced by: Margaret Perry;
Nova Scotia Information Service for the Nova Scotia
Travel Bureau, Department of Trade and Industry for
the Nova Scotia Provincial Library

Length: 00:14:37

Synopsis: *Roads to Reading* captures the excitement surrounding the bookmobile, a library on wheels that brings literature to rural and remote areas of Nova Scotia—thereby “widening the reach of human communications through the printed word.” Perry follows the vehicle’s route across Nova Scotia, documenting the locals’ interaction with the bookmobile. The film also delves into how regional and branch library systems have developed and operate in the province, documenting the labour of committed and passionate librarians.



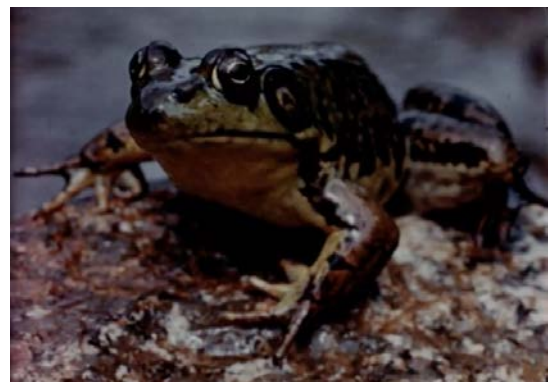


***Glooscap Country* (1961)**

Directed and produced by: Margaret Perry;
Nova Scotia Information Service, Department of
Trade and Industry

Length: 00:13:53

Synopsis: The story of the Mi'kmaq creator, Glooscap, is told using the Cape Blomidon and Cape Split areas for the setting. The film tells of Glooscap arrival to Acadia, where he watched over the Mi'kmaq people, shaped landscapes, and controlled the elements. In retelling this story, Perry weaves hundreds of images of nature together, as landscapes and animals takes centre stage in lieu of people. The soundtrack of the film, both eerie and magical, complement Perry's carefully crafted montages to create a poetic homage to Glooscap's creation. *Glooscap Country* is the favourite film of Margaret Perry's career, winning several awards. A display window in downtown Halifax is dedicated to Perry's achievements and honours related to the film.





Additional Pedagogical Resources

Films of Sylvia D. Hamilton

Sylvia D. Hamilton is a Nova Scotian filmmaker and writer who is known for her award-winning documentary films as well as her publications, public presentations, and extensive volunteer work with artistic, social, and cultural organizations at the local and national levels. Her work explores the history, contributions, and experiences of African Canadians.

Sylvia D. Hamilton & Claire Prieto, *Black Mother Black Daughter* (1989, 29 min)
https://www.nfb.ca/film/black_mother_black_daughter/

Sylvia D. Hamilton, *Speak It! From the Heart of Nova Scotia* (1992, 28 min)
https://www.nfb.ca/film/speak_it_from_heart_of_black_nova_scotia/

Sylvia D. Hamilton, *The Little Black Schoolhouse* (2007, 60 min)
<https://vimeo.com/ondemand/littleblackschoolhouse>

Films of Catherine Anne Martin

Catherine Anne Martin is a member of the Millbrook First Nation, Truro, NS. She is an independent international award-winning film producer and director, a writer, facilitator, communications consultant, community activist, teacher, drummer, and the first Mi'kmaw filmmaker from the Atlantic region.

Catherine Anne Martin & Kimberlee McTaggart, *Kwa'nu'te': Micmac and Maliseet Artists* (1991, 41 min)
https://www.nfb.ca/film/kwanute_micmac_and_maliseet_artists/

Catherine Anne Martin, *Mi'kmaq Family (Migmaoei Otjiosog)* (1995, 32 min)
https://www.nfb.ca/film/mikmaq_family_migmaoei_otjiosog/

Nova Scotia Digital Archives

The Nova Scotia Archives offer a wealth of resources that enable students to learn more about the history of Nova Scotia from a variety of perspectives.

Looking Back, Moving Forward: Documenting the Heritage of African Nova Scotians
<https://archives.novascotia.ca/african-heritage/settlement/>

Gone but Never Forgotten: Bob Brooks' Photographic Portrait of Africville in the 1960s
<https://archives.novascotia.ca/africville/>

Mi'kmaq Holdings Resource Guide
<https://archives.novascotia.ca/mikmaq/>

'The Way We Were': Nova Scotia in Film, 1917-1950
<https://archives.novascotia.ca/nsfilm>



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Discussion Questions

THEME: TRADITION, MODERNITY, PROGRESS

1. What is the role of tradition in Perry's films? How is it contrasted to modernity and progress? Is there an ambivalence about progress in her work? If so, how is this ambivalence represented?
2. Throughout the five films, how do Margaret Perry's filmmaking techniques oscillate between tradition and modernity, and between classic documentary and (proto)experimental film? Consider the following: narrating techniques, montage, film stock, soundtrack, pace.



3. In *Roads to Reading* and *Marine Highway*, how are roads used as metaphorical and literal representations of development and connection? How does the use of movement (e.g. shots from moving vehicles) contribute to representing a vision of a modern Nova Scotia? Give specific examples.
4. Which traditions are celebrated in *Craftsmen at Work* and which ones may be absent? Compare and contrast this film to Catherine Anne Martin & Kimberlee McTaggart's *Kwa'nu'te': Micmac and Maliseet Artists*.



THEME: GENDER ON FILM

1. How are women represented in Margaret Perry's work? Do you think this is a deliberate choice on the part of the filmmaker? How do her films operate through a feminist/female gaze?
2. In what ways are women represented as knowledge keepers and knowledge "distributors" in *Roads to Reading* and *Craftsmen at Work*? How do Margaret Perry's films also contribute to the circulation of knowledge?



3. Marsha Gordon asserts that "Nontheatrical media is a strategic object of study that can be used to reconceptualize and expand our understanding of feminist film and media history—indeed, gender histories more broadly" (Gordon 1998, 129). How do Margaret Perry's films, as well as their reactivation through projects like Archive/Counter-Archive, work to challenge prevailing notions of moving image history and gender histories?



4. *Battling "Blue-Fins"* is an intimate portrayal of tuna fishing. How does Margaret Perry manage to craft a poetic representation of the sport that combines economic progress with social progress? In what ways is *Battling "Blue-Fins"* representative of Margaret Perry's own aesthetics?



3. In what ways are Margaret Perry's films, being funded through the National Film Bureau, implicated in replicating narrow view of Nova Scotia and creating a selective regional heritage?

4. Margaret Perry makes extensive use of montages throughout her body of work. How do these montages, which one could argue resemble a quilt, contribute to the creation of a regional aesthetics?



THEME: COMMUNICATION, COMMUNITY, CULTURE

1. In *Roads to Reading*, how do the bookmobile and local libraries connect communities and contribute to the formation of a common local/regional culture? In what ways does the bookmobile predate our current information and communications systems?
2. The film's narrator in *Roads to Reading* proudly declares that "No longer barred by distance, the doors of knowledge are open to all." Yet, which communities are left out of the library systems and are omitted from the film? Which kinds of knowledge are discarded/not circulated?





Guide Credits

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Archive/Counter-Archive (A/CA): Activating Canada's Moving Image Heritage is a seven-year research-creation project led by Janine Marchessault and funded by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Partnership Grant. Comprising four universities, numerous community partners, memory institutions, and policy advocates, the project is dedicated to activating and remediating audiovisual heritage created by Indigenous Peoples (First Nations, Métis, Inuit), the Black community and People of Colour, women, LGBT2Q+ and immigrant communities, and to fostering a community and network dedicated to creating best practices and cultural policies (counterarchive.ca).

The Nova Scotia Archives acquires, preserves, and makes accessible Government of Nova Scotia and private-sector records of provincial significance.

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