

Hollywood History

By ALEX BARRIS

It has long been widely accepted as true that no self-respecting Hollywood film producer would ever let a mere fact stand in the way of a good story. Hence, we have had more than half a century of "historical" movies that were about as reliable as the campaign promises of politicians.

That a refutation of such a belief should come along now is something of a surprise. That it should come from a respected English writer (and a good one) is an even greater surprise.

The book is *The Hollywood History Of The World*, by George MacDonald Fraser (Penguin Books Canada, 268 pages, illustrated, \$29.95). Mr. Fraser has

previously written fiction (the Flashman novels) and such screenplays as *The Three Musketeers*, *The Four Musketeers*, *The Prince and the Pauper* and *Casanova*.

He is not, of course, blind to Hollywood's shortcomings in dealing with history. Indeed, much of the fun of the book is the wit with which he points up some of the more outrageous distortions of fact in numerous historical movies. He is also fair enough to use "Hollywood" as a generic term referring to the film industries of the English-speaking world.

Fraser takes great delight in reminding us of some of the bits of deathless dialogue that Hollywood scripters have put into the mouths of historical figures - from "War, war! That's all you think about, Dick Plantagenet," to "Take a letter. Mark Antony, the Senate, Rome..."

But he also argues, fairly persuasively, that while Hollywood has the reputation for always get-

ting it wrong, what is overlooked is the "astonishing amount of history Hollywood has got right."

He sticks to this position, "although films have sometimes blundered and distorted and falsified, have botched great themes and belittled great men and women, have trivialised and caricatured and cheapened, have piled anachronism on solecism on downright lie - still, at their best, they have given a picture of the ages more vivid and memorable than anything in Tacitus or Gibbon or Macaulay, and to an infinitely wider audience."

WRONG BROTHER

His writing is so graceful that one is inclined to forgive him his very few errors - such as the reference to Buddy Baer (playing a gladiator in *Quo Vadis?*) as someone "who in his boxing days once knocked down Joe Louis." Fraser is thinking of Buddy's brother, Max Baer; Buddy was once a wrestler.

Fraser presents his case in seven

sections, which he defines as "ages." The first is *The Ancient World*, which plunges us promptly into the world of sumptuous biblical epics, including the work of Cecil B. DeMille.

The second section deals with *Knights and Barbarians*, ranging from Richard the Lionhearted to Attila the Hun, with sidelong glances at El Cid, Robin Hood and Joan of Arc.

Succeeding "ages" are headed *Tudors and Sea Dogs*; *Romance and Royalty*; *Rule, Britannia*; *New World, Old West*; and *The Violent Century*, by which he means the current one.

Fraser is a self-confessed movie enthusiast. He even admits to a "lifelong addiction" to films that deal, one way or another, with history. Who else but such an addict would go to the trouble of listing the various actors who have portrayed Nero or Billy the Kid or Catherine the Great?

But Fraser is a clever enough writer to have his cake, even as he

eats it. While delightedly calling up images of some of the more ludicrous Hollywood blunders, he still holds to his overall view that, despite the excesses he so enjoys describing to us, the record of historical films is probably no worse than that of many published historians.

At times, Fraser's British blood shows. In discussing some movies that dealt with the time of the American revolution, for instance, he says that Hollywood was not concerned with "examining the difference between political independence and the fine emotional blanket word 'freedom' - which seems a curious, almost insulting term to use about the aspirations of the colonial Americans, who enjoyed a greater measure of real freedom before 1776 than their British cousins, or indeed any other people in the world, before or since."

-Alex Barris is a Toronto-area author and film and music commentator.



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