

Edward Curtis (1868-1952)
A pioneer of the documentary form.

In 2001, the American Public Broadcasting Service showed a documentary called *Coming to Light* about Edward Sheriff Curtis, a Seattle based photographer famous in his day for his images of American Indians. In the course of it, an older Hopi man recalls carrying water and cameras for Curtis when he was working on the Hopi reservation. “I was the water boy, the Gunga Din of Hopi Land,” he says. How in the world could such a cultural exchange have come about? The documentary does not pick up on it; it is content to hint at worlds that are stranger than fiction.

In the years before World War I, Curtis was among the best-known photographers in America. Slim and active, a self made man with a sixth grade education, his preferred self portrait, taken when he was 31, showed a man with sharp eyes, a rough mustache and goatee beneath a wide brimmed hat, with one side turned up, faintly resembling a settler in colonial Africa. His work earned him the respect of two Presidents. Theodore Roosevelt valued him both personally and professionally; William Howard Taft honored him by appearing at one of his public performances. At the peak of his fame, he could fill Carnegie Hall and the New York Hippodrome, which boasted of being the largest auditorium in the world, for a performance of music, magic lantern slides and motion pictures. After the war, however, his name rapidly dropped out of public notice and for decades his work was forgotten. Yet in his heyday he was the first to think seriously about the audio-visual form we call documentary and to give it that name.

* * * * *

Curtis was born in 1868 in Wisconsin, but his family soon moved to Minnesota where he spent his school years. When a teenager he taught himself photography and got his first job in a photographic company as a dark room assistant. In 1887-8 his family moved again to Port Orchard, across Puget Sound from Seattle, in Washington Territory. Shortly after, his father died and Curtis left for Seattle, where he married and settled the rest of his family with him in a photographic business. Technically skilled and personable, he soon made a name for himself as a portrait artist. Then a chance encounter on the slopes of Mount Rainier brought him into the orbit of powerful figures in American political and scientific circles, which led to his being invited in 1898 to accompany the Harriman Expedition to Alaska as official photographer.ⁱ

His experiences in Alaska and the new contacts he made drew Curtis into what became the central mission of his life, an ethnographic and photographic study of the native peoples of North America. This ambitious project, which he called *The North American Indian*, occupied him for the next thirty years and ended with the production of a set of twenty volumes of text and photographs, each one published when it was ready and accompanied by a special portfolio of photogravure prints. The first appeared in 1907, the last in 1930. But the cost of production was so high only wealthy individuals and learned institutions could be expected to subscribe to it. In the beginning, each subscription cost \$3000, but the price rose through the years to \$4500. At least 200 sets are known to have been sold, but the total number could not be more than 300.ⁱⁱ

Curtis had powerful backing. Theodore Roosevelt was an early supporter. After meeting Curtis for the first time, and liking the portrait Curtis took of him (it was admired by Jacob Riis), Roosevelt invited him to take photographs at his daughter's wedding. Roosevelt shared Curtis's interest in trying to make visual records of Indian customs and beliefs while there was still time. In 1905, when Curtis was looking for backers of *The North American Indian*, the President wrote to him:

"I regard the work you have done as one of the most valuable works which any American can now do. Your photographs stand by themselves, both in their wonderful artistic merit and in their value as historical documents. I know of no others which begin to approach them in either respect. You are now making a record of the lives of the Indians of our country which in another decade can not be made at all...The Indian, as an Indian, is on the point of perishing, and when he has become a United States citizen, though it will be a much better thing for him and for the rest of the country, he will lose completely his value as a living historical document."ⁱⁱⁱ

Strange though it seems to us to describe a living person as a historical document, Curtis applied this idea to all his photographic and motion picture work. Following Roosevelt's lead, he described that work as "documentary".

Fortunately for Curtis, J.P. Morgan also liked his photographs and he agreed to fund an initial five years of field work at \$15,000 a year in return for delivery of 25 sets of *The North American Indian*. Curtis opened an office/showroom on Fifth Avenue in New York to handle publicity and sales of subscriptions, but as the work dragged on he found himself constantly in need of more money. Morgan agreed to a further grant of \$60,000 on condition that his officers take financial control of the project, which was renamed "The North American Indian Incorporated." While Curtis's studio in Seattle, managed by family members and others, was reasonably profitable, his work on *The North American Indian* was a constant drain on it. Forced to take out additional loans, he was obliged in the end to give up his own copyrights.

To raise money and promote subscriptions, Curtis took to the lecture circuit. He had much to offer. His approach to photography was called pictorialism, a style that reflected mood and the emotional impression the subject made on the observer. Curtis's images, and the lectures based on them, spoke of nostalgia for a way of life that was destined to pass away. They evoked in his audience, as one writer has well put it, "a kind of hushed awe before a more 'primitive' existence."^{iv} In his most famous photograph, the one which might be said to have launched his entire North American Indian project, half a dozen Navaho Indians ride in single file away from the camera toward the dark mass of a hillside. The setting sun catches parts of their clothing and throws long shadows of men and horses on the ground. Curtis called it *The Vanishing Race* describing it as "an evening scene suggesting the thought of the race, already robbed of its tribal strength, its primitive faith, stripped of its pagan dress, going into the darkness of the unknown future."^v

Curtis's lectures were multimedia performances. He had been using a motion picture camera since 1904 to record Indian tribal customs that white men were rarely

privileged to witness, let alone photograph.^{vi} These were mostly dance ceremonies, but included some other scenes of men posing as war or hunting parties. Curtis spoke with imaginative sympathy of Indian customs and beliefs and he could tell a good story from his own experiences with the Indians he studied and photographed. On one such occasion, for instance, the Hopi initiated him into their Snake Dance. The ceremony required that the first snake to be found would be wound round the initiate's neck. We can suppose that the Indians were testing Curtis and because he stood up well to the test they allowed him to take his motion picture images. Describing "the gentle, smiling, liquid voiced Hopi," for whom the Snake Dance was their "greatest religious rite," Curtis added "I yet have in mind a very vivid picture of that rattle-snake wound around my neck, its head extending far enough forward that I could clearly see its apparently angry expression."^{vii}

Curtis had several motion picture clips which he turned to throughout his lectures; but it was his still photographs that carried the day with audiences because of the visual effects he obtained with colored slides in the stereopticon, a form of magic lantern. His descriptions of these read indeed like a film scenario:

" 'The Kutenai of the Lakes,' a musical scene of unusual beauty. It opens with a firelit camp upon the shore, changing to a closer view of the women entering the lodges. Then we see canoes and canoe life at dawn; the rush gatherer, the hunter upon the still waters, a sunny shore scene, and the farewell of the lovers. Across the waters appears a canoe laden with happy, carefree youths, and again, farther away, a woman with steady stroke of the paddle, homeward bound. The series closes with a far distant glimpse of a canoe against the setting sun."^{viii}

As this example shows, music also was integral to Curtis's presentation. In their field work, Curtis and his co-workers made phonographic recordings of Indian songs and chants – several thousands wax rolls, all told, by the end of the project – which were sent to musicians for transcription so that the scores could be printed in the relevant volume of *The North American Indian*. Curtis made a special arrangement with the Boston composer, Henry F. Gilbert, to undertake this transcription work because of the composer's well-known interest in American black and other folk music. When he planned the 1911-12 lecture tour Curtis put Gilbert under contract to produce more than twenty Indian-themed compositions to accompany each visual segment of the lectures. The contract also called for Gilbert to hire and manage a small orchestra to play his music throughout the east coast tour.^{ix}

Gilbert's contribution turned out to be a major attraction in its own right which Curtis's publicity material exploited as "barbaric to a degree and wonderfully full of color," phrases that press reports picked up when writing of its "weird appeal." Curtis pressed Gilbert to compose a kind of overture or prelude. The lecture had become a musical show, which Curtis variously called "The Indian Picture Opera," "The Picture Musicale," or "Picture Musical Entertainment." The Columbia Record Company even put extracts from "Edward S. Curtis's Indian Picture Opera" into its catalogue, though without offering the composer any credit for them.^x

It is hard to judge whether the tour justified the trouble and expense it took to manage. It seems to have run from November 1911 through January 1912. Newspaper reports were universally favorable. Performances in Manhattan in November, at Carnegie Hall and The New York Hippodrome (6th Avenue, 43 & 44 Streets), were so successful another was scheduled for the Hudson Theatre, close to Times Square, on January 18 1912. Total audiences at these three locations could have amounted to some 8000 people. In Brooklyn, Curtis won over skeptical academics; in Boston there were two performances on different days, December 8 and 11, both at Jordan Hall; in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, two on one day, January 27, 1912, at 2:15 pm and 8:15, in Reading, Pennsylvania, he held some 1,000 people “spellbound” for two hours, according to local reports. Late in January the tour neared its end at the Belasco theatre in Washington DC with an imposing audience of diplomats, judges and politicians that included President Taft himself.^{xi}

But even as he planned to continue his “picture musicale” performance in Seattle and other cities on the west coast over the winter of 1912-13, Curtis was moving ahead on another idea. Realizing the mass-market potential of the motion picture industry – “the greatest single influence in our country today” – he began to think seriously of making full-length films about Indians. His idea was to correct with proper factual accounts of Indian life and culture and accurate details of clothing and other distinguishing objects the fictional travesties that were then beginning to appear as a distinctive western film genre. Always overly optimistic, he proposed an output of one a year for ten years. For his first essay in this form Curtis chose one particular tribe, the Kwakiutl people of the Pacific North-West, whom he was then studying for his next volume of *The North American Indian*. Located mostly along the coast of British Columbia, the Kwakiutl had long been in contact with white people. Although the Canadian government banned some of their cultural practices, the people remembered enough of their old ways for Curtis to be able, with their collaboration, to reconstruct them. Shooting locations in the north of Vancouver Island were within comfortable reach of Seattle.^{xii}

Ever ready to embrace new ways and undaunted by the hurdles ahead, Curtis formed the Continental Film Company at some point in 1912, with himself as President and Treasurer. Apparently he had no difficulty finding investors as preparations for the film continued in earnest throughout 1913. Curtis began shooting in May 1914 and continued through June and July.

Curtis’s script was set at the time when Captain Vancouver first appeared off the coast where the Kwakiutl people lived, given as 1792. “The picture treats the natives as seen by him at that time,” read its opening. It called for the Kwakiutl to dress as they would have done then and enact a drama of love, magic and intertribal fighting in which clothes, ornaments, buildings, dances and make believe head-hunting would illustrate their customs and beliefs at that earlier time. Most of these items had to be specially made by local Kwakiutl people, from whom Curtis also enlisted his extras and principal actors. Mock frontage to a wooden village was erected, which doubled as a set for different scenes of the story. Curtis even rented a dead whale from a whaling factory for one scene. Originally the script included scenes in which Vancouver and his men appeared on shore, but evidently Curtis cut them when he began shooting. Late in the year the film, now called *In the Land of the Head Hunters*, was ready to be shown to the public. In December 1914 screenings took place in New York and Seattle. The

Continental Film Company had by then become the Seattle Film Company, and the name of another company, the World Film Corporation, also appeared on handbills, perhaps the outcome of Curtis's plans for nation-wide distribution.

In the Land of the Head Hunters was warmly received. Vachel Lindsay called it "a supreme art achievement;" W. Stephen Bush, critic for *The Moving Picture World*, wrote: "this production sets a new mark in artistic handling of films in which educational values mingle with dramatic interest... It is not a feature for the nickelodeon or the cheap house, but it ought to be welcomed by the better class of houses that are looking for an occasional departure from the regular attractions and that want to give their patrons a special treat."^{xiii} Curtis himself wrote that the film was "a compromise between what I would like to make, if I was in a position to say 'the public be damned', and what I think the public will support."^{xiv} It's a sentiment that's been shared by countless documentary makers since then. And in fact W. Stephen Bush's comment about the film not being for the cheap houses was prescient. Almost immediately, *In the Land of the Head Hunters* dropped out of sight. For the next half century it disappeared from the consciousness of documentary filmmakers until, in the years 1967 to 1974, the ethnographers Bill Holm and George Irving Quimby from the University of Washington recovered portions of it. With careful restoration work they were able to return it to circulation, albeit in a truncated form and with a new title, *In the Land of the War Canoes*. Their book, *Edward Curtis in the Land of the War Canoes*, published in 1980, is a model documentary study of a pioneer documentary subject.

By then, the first histories of the documentary had appeared, establishing a canon of films and filmmakers in which Curtis had no place. Yet Curtis was undoubtedly the first person to use the term "documentary" about such a project, and for this as much as for the project itself he deserves recognition.

He began using the term in the years 1911-12 when advertising his lectures and the "documental value" of his photographs. "They show," he wrote, "what the artist with the camera can do in rendering a record of a people - a record which not only gives a documentary story, but also the atmosphere and soul of the primitive life."^{xv} At the same time he was also writing his prospectus for the Continental Film Company. Here we find him in three successive paragraphs emphasizing its "documentary" nature. He was outlining a program for a special genre that would strike a balance between dramatic entertainment and educational integrity. Curtis explicitly identified his film as belonging to this new genre. The treatment summed it up in its opening sentence: *A documentary picture of the Kwakiutl tribes, the natives of Vancouver Island*. In the prospectus he wrote:

"The questions (sic) might be raised as to whether the documentary material would not lack the thrilling interest of the fake picture. It is the opinion of Mr. Curtis that the real life of the Indian contains the parallel emotions to furnish all necessary plots and give the pictures all the heart interest needed."

In other words, by focusing on the human interest aspects of a subject and giving it a strong narrative structure, you can make an enthralling nonfiction film that will do as well at the box office as a fictional feature.

“All pictures made,” Curtis went on, “should be classed among the educational and should be preserved as a part of the documentary material of the country.” (Documentaries, Curtis might have said, have historical value in their own right.)

And finally:

“In making such pictures, the greatest care must be exercised that the thought conveyed be true to the subject, that the ceremony be correctly rendered, and above all, that the costumes be correct. It must be admitted that the making of such a series of pictures would be the most difficult thing attempted in motion photography, but it can be done, and will be one of the most valuable documentary works which can be taken up at this time.”^{xvi}

That Curtis’s film was an imaginary story from the past in which local people acted in staged roles wearing specially made costumes on a make-believe set was not thought at the time to contradict its documentary, that is its informational or educational value. “Every Participant an Indian and Every Incident True to Native Life” proclaimed the program handbill for the film’s screening in Seattle.^{xvii} Curtis was making a claim for the documentary genre that not everyone would accept. Asking people to *be* themselves while appearing in front of a camera is asking them to *play* themselves, and it has become a standard documentary practice – indeed, it can hardly be avoided. As Joris Ivens would later put it: “Staging begins when you say to the man, ‘Don’t look at the camera’.”^{xviii} Curtis, however, was going one stage further. He was asking his Kwakiutl “actors” (he paid them fees for their performances) to play roles from a reconstructed past, some as heroes and lovers, some as villains, but mostly in community activities. To be educational the film had to be entertaining. For many documentary makers re-enactment crosses a line between documentary and fictional drama, and leads to what is sometimes called docu-drama or drama-documentary, but for as many others it has become an increasingly common practice.

Curtis certainly convinced himself and those who supported him that his life’s work, *The North American Indian*, was a genuine documentary project and that in pursuing it he was performing a public service that deserved public support. It was “the real cause” that drove his constant search for money, always more money, whether in lecturing or film making or marketing his own photographs. What he and his supporters were combating was not the matter of artificial sets and specially made costumes but the emerging genre of fictional “westerns” produced by the commercial motion picture industry. They regarded these as inauthentic fantasies harmful to the memory of the Indians’ history, a foretaste of the conflict that would arise later between Hollywood producers and the documentary movement in general. Regular pictures, Curtis wrote in his prospectus, “go to the junk pile” after six months; they cater to the “tastes of the masses or those who are looking for amusement only.” Whereas his own picture “will be of the greatest historical importance – something of permanent educational and historical value.” Though these statements belong to a prospectus written to attract investors in his

film, and contain their own contradiction as to the purpose of documentaries, they anticipate arguments that documentary makers would have to make in the future when it was their turn to solicit grants to fund their projects and airtime to screen them.^{xix}

Despite the careful restoration work that gave us back *In the Land of the Head Hunters* in the form of *In the Land of the War Canoes*, it's hard for modern audiences to connect with Curtis's film. Step printing enabling it to be projected at today's standard speed of 24 frames a second has made it easier to view, but it is difficult to imagine that Curtis's fictional story could seriously have competed with other kinds of cinematic fictions that were appearing at the same time. The praise of critics notwithstanding, the film could surely be expected to hold the attention only of those with a special interest in the subject. But Curtis was proud of his script, which he published in 1915 in a short book with the same title, no doubt hoping to cash in on the film's release. It is written in an old fashioned style like a Victorian translation of an ancient saga, not without its own charm, but hardly one with wide popular appeal: "Around the wooded headland came the victory-reeking war fleet."^{xx} There are some striking scenes in the restored version, in which young Kwakiutl actors pretend to conjure up spirits in a fire, come storming toward a beach in heavy war canoes with a huge bear-man in the bows, and stage celebratory dances dressed in a wonderful array of masks and animal skins. But one senses that what is true for modern audiences was probably true also in 1915 when Curtis hoped for national distribution and a good return on his investment; the film's style was already out of date and could not have appealed to a wide public. 1914 was the year that Charlie Chaplin's tramp burst upon the screen, a force that helped create Hollywood and soon made him the most celebrated figure in the world. Who would choose to see a crude Kwakiutl saga when Chaplin was on offer?

* * * * *

In due course, Curtis's entire documentary project - his working methods and the published results - texts, still photographs and motion pictures alike - came under scrutiny from ethnographers and from Indians themselves. The questions raised by these critics and the answers given by Curtis's defenders belong to ongoing debates about the authenticity of visual documents. The ethnographers who restored Curtis's film, themselves experts in the field, have praised his work among the Kwakiutl as "solid ethnography, dramatically written and spectacularly illustrated."^{xxi}

As far as is known Curtis made no further attempt at producing documentary films about Indians. The box office failure of *In the Land of the Head Hunters* seems to have disillusioned him about nonfiction features. Resilient as always, he came up with plans for a scenic tour of the United States on which he would take both still photographs and motion pictures, the former destined for *Leslie's Weekly*, the latter eventually finding their way onto William Randolph Hearst's International Film Service where they were shown in short segments as "Curtis Scenics." His marriage had long since failed. A bitter divorce left the Seattle studio in his wife's hands together with many of his glass plate negatives. Curtis by then was living in Los Angeles and after the divorce his eldest daughter, Beth, who had been running the Seattle studio, moved it also to Los Angeles. Here the reconstituted Curtis studio found customers among the Hollywood community while Curtis himself sought work both as a stills photographer and as a movie

cameraman. His name is connected with *Tarzan* and other movies including Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* (1923). Still hustling his important contacts for favors of one kind or another, and ever desperate for money, he sold the master print and negatives of *In the Land of the Head Hunters* to the American Museum of Natural History for \$1500.^{xxii} He toiled on through the 1920s to complete *The North American Indian*, publishing the twelfth volume, on the Hopi, in 1922 and the twentieth and final volume on the Inuits of Alaska in 1930. To find the material for this volume his daughter Beth financed a boat trip to an Inuit community on the island of Nunivak, which they recorded, home movie style, with a 16-millimeter camera. But by then no one was interested in Curtis's work and with his life's mission over, he suffered a deep depression. What seems to have been his last connection with the film world was in 1936 when, as a final irony, he had some role in de Mille's *The Plainsman*. He spent the last decades of his life in obscurity, in Colorado and California, where he worked on his own gold mining claim. He died in 1952 in Los Angeles in his daughter's home, leaving a trail of unpaid debts behind him.^{xxiii}

* * * * *

The documentary *Coming to Light*, completed by Anne Makepeace in 2000, opens with an account of how a treasure trove of Curtis's photogravures, prints and copperplates hand-etched from his glass negatives was discovered in 1972 in the basement of a Boston bookstore. They had rested there for forty years after being sold "for practically nothing" soon after the completion of *The North American Indian*. Their reappearance was a revelation, restoring Curtis's reputation as an artist with the camera, sending the price of his photographs soaring and prompting interest in his other work, notably the restored version of *In the Land of the Head Hunters*. In retrospect, it can be seen that the projects that culminated in the publication of the final volume of *The North American Indian* - comprehensive photographic studies, "picture musical entertainment" and motion picture film - constitute an instructive case study of pioneer documentary work. Many of the challenges Curtis faced have remained the same for documentary makers from his day to ours; questions of funding, for example; of what would come to be called "re-enactment" or staging; and of how far to make concessions toward a lay public wanting to be entertained. Curtis died just as the new medium of television provided new challenges and new opportunities for documentary makers. It is unlikely that *Coming to Light* will be the last attempt to give dramatic portrayal to his life and work.^{xxiv}

In making her documentary, Anne Makepeace faced many of the same problems that challenged Curtis - how to win the trust of the native Americans that appeared in it and present Curtis's work fairly in a modern idiom, which involved its own forms of reconstruction and staging. But she had the advantage of being able to show his photographs in a vivid cinematic form that is typical of the modern documentary but unthought of in 1914. Makepeace's camera moves across images as an eye that scans a landscape, closes in on a detail or a face, pulls out from the detail to show its place in a wider scene, presents full face portraits that look at us with stunning intensity, and dissolves from today's brightly colored scenes of activity into static pictures whose sepia tone evokes time long ago. Curtis knew how to achieve an emotional effect with music in

a lecture setting, but *In the Land of the Head Hunters* was a silent movie. *Coming to Light* also relies on music and in addition draws on the descendants of the men and women he photographed who speak in synchronous sound about the images he left them: a Crow Indian talks lovingly about a photograph of an Indian woman with a load of firewood on her back; it reminds him of his grandmother who carried wood in exactly the same way. On the other hand, a member of the Hopi tribe objects to the very existence of one of Curtis's photographs; he calls it a sacrilege. Another speaker points out that war parties never dressed as Curtis depicts them nor did they all ride out on horses to steal horses. "You don't drive a car to steal a car. It's just that simple." Kwakiutl men and women laugh at the liberties Curtis took in making *In the Land of the Head Hunters*, but one of them speaks proudly of the handsome teenager he sees on the screen playing the hero whom he knew only as a father, and another identifies feelingly with the young girl playing the princess in the movie who was her mother. Thus *Coming to Light* adds another layer to the documentary record as Native Americans in the year 2000 travel to that sepia toned past, one both familiar and exotic to them, as it has been preserved through the nostalgic lens of an outsider; a past that includes for one Hopi senior an unexpected allusion to one of Rudyard Kipling's most famous poems, written in 1890 at the height of British rule in that other India known as the Raj.

* * * * *

ⁱ Holm, Bill and George Irving Quimby *Edward S. Curtis in the Land of the War Canoes*, University of Washington Press, Seattle 1980; Gidley, Mick *Edward S. Curtis and the North American Indian, Incorporated*, Cambridge University Press 1998, first paperback edition 2000

ⁱⁱ Holm 13

ⁱⁱⁱ University Archives, University of Washington Libraries, Seattle

^{iv} Gidley 276

^v University Archives, Boston lecture program

^{vi} Gidley 235

^{vii} Gidley 227

^{viii} University Archives, Boston lecture program

^{ix} Gidley 203ff

^x Gidley 208

^{xi} University Archives; Holm 27; Gidley 207

^{xii} In this and what follows Holm and Quimby's study, *Edward Curtis in the Land of the War Canoes* is an essential guide. The authors state that Curtis began thinking about a documentary film in 1910. His comment about the influence of motion pictures is on page 114.

^{xiii} Lindsay and Bush in Holm 13 and 14 respectively

^{xiv} Gidley 240

^{xv} University Archives, Harrisburg program

^{xvi} Holm 113 for the foregoing three statements

^{xvii} University Archives, Moore Theater handbill

^{xviii} Ivens, Joris *The Camera and I*, International Publishers, New York 1969, 228

^{xix} Holm 113

^{xx} Curtis himself called it “the declamatory style of the tribal bards” (Holm 36). Gidley has noted Curtis’s debt to Longfellow’s *Hiawatha* (232) The book, amply illustrated with still photographs from the film, was originally published in 1915 by the World Book Company of Yonkers-on-Hudson, New York. An unabridged paperback edition was published by Tamarack Press in 1975

^{xxi} Holm 36

^{xxii} Gidley 244

^{xxiii} Gidley 245-249 for “Curtis’s Later Movie Work;” Holm 111-112 for Curtis’s family disputes and death

^{xxiv} Flury & Company’s studio in Seattle now represents Curtis’s work in the United States. That his Indian photographs are still popular with the American public can be judged by the reproductions of his most famous images that are regularly offered for sale in *The New York Times* and other quality newspapers.