**Reminiscences of Richard (Ricky) Leacock**

On September 1, 1939 the army of Nazi Germany invaded Poland and World War II began. Several weeks later, I matriculated as a Freshman in Harvard. Our class and a few subsequent classes contained students who were refugees from Europe, or students who happened to be in the USA at the time and were stranded here, or whose parents sent them to the States to get them out of harm's way. But more than students, the USA received many, many European scientists whose work in the years following 1935 contributed greatly to the country's emerging as an absolute powerhouse in science.

There was talk of a German invasion of Britain, of the possible transfer of the British government to Canada. High ranking British officials carried suicide pills to avoid being captured. Children were removed from the vulnerable parts of England. The evacuation of the British armies from Dunkirk and the Battle of England were only a few months away.

In late September 1939 or perhaps early October, the freshman class gathered in the Freshman Union building (where we took our meals) to hear an initializing talk by Archibald MacLeish, poet and newly appointed Librarian of Congress. The room was crowded. I sat on the floor among fellow students. I recall only one thing that MacLeish said:

"The lights are going out all over Europe"

I used to think that this was original to MacLeish ; but no, I later learned that it was spoken by British Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey on the Eve of World War I.

MacLeish went on (with his quotation from Grey)

"We shall not see them lit again in our lifetime”

I shuddered. In my lifetime? Perhaps the whole class shuddered. Though the USA was not in the war at that time, I'm sure we all knew that war was inevitable. I turned to the student on my right and said something like "Will we survive this ?" and his answer was something like "Who knows ?" This was my first encounter with Richard (Ricky )Leacock and it led to a steadfast friendship over the years.

Fast forward sixty eight years to Saturday, June 2, 2007. We were still alive. Ricky, living in Paris, came to Providence, to receive an Honorary Doctor of Fine Arts degree from the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD). Hadassah and I went to the Graduation ceremony where we met Ricky and his long time partner and colleague Valerie Lalonde.



Ricky and Valerie

Standing with him for a few moments as the faculty and the students lined up before marching in, we embraced, and then Ricky turned to John Terry, the Dean of Fine Arts, and told Terry a story that I myself have repeated many times:

"This lady (pointing to Hadassah) got an A in Mathematical Logic. Phil got a B and I got a C. " [ In a course given by logician/philosopher Willard V.O.Quine.]

It's interesting what gets tucked away in one's memory cells, what doesn't, and the words by which Person A characterizes Person B. But let me return to Fall, 1939.

I lived in Thayer Hall with my roommate Peter Simon; Ricky lived in Hollis Hall across the Yard by himself. Though we had no classes together, we saw each other frequently. We often compared notes on mathematics problems. Every once in a while I would get a food package from my father. It usually contained a can of my favorite sardines and some crackers. I would take the package over to Ricky's room and he would brew tea. This was my introduction to Earl Grey tea.

In those early months, I learned many things about Ricky; how, born in London, he grew up in the Canary Islands on his father's banana plantation; how at a very early age, he had got into filmmaking. How he had already filmed in the Canary Islands and in the Galapagos; how he got to know the famous documentary filmmaker Robert Flaherty (*Nanook of the North*, 1922). How as a young boy he went to the famous (or infamous) experimental school Dartington Hall, that was connected in some ways to the philosopher Bertrand Russell and his second wife Dora Black. How he believed in Russian communism. (He gave that up years later after the truths about Stalin came out. My early skepticism about most things kept me from that belief. )

During the Spring of 1940, we freshmen had to arrange to move as sophomores out of Harvard Yard and into one of the "Houses" along the river. Our friendship was sufficiently firm that we thought of rooming together. But that didn't work out. Ricky got into Eliot House, and I into Dunster House where I roomed for one year with Adam Yarmolinsky.

In the Summer of 1940, I lived with my parents in Washington Heights, Manhattan, New York. That summer I had no summer job. Ricky was living in Greenwich Village. We met off and on. Sometime during that summer, my freshman roommate Peter Simon ,who had won a prize for a brilliant essay on the poetry of Robert Burns, died tragically. Ricky and I went to his funeral service and to his burial.

I had many meals with Ricky at Eliot House. What did we talk about? Courses, students, professors, politics, the coming war. The USA declared war on Japan on December 8, 1941 and on Germany several days later. The boys were given draft cards by the local draft boards. Ration cards were handed out. The country was put on a wartime basis that lasted until the military actions in Japan and in Europe were over. Plans for the future? No way. There was a strange feeling that everything was "on hold." Correspondingly, there was a feeling of *carpe diem*; gather ye rosebuds while ye may for, in a sense, the future did not exist.

In the Fall of 1941, I met Hadassah Finkelstein and around that time Ricky met Eleanor ("Happy") Burke, both of whom lived in Barnard Hall at Radcliffe. I was married on January 2, 1944. Ricky married Happy but I don't remember when. I recall they were married in a church in Lower Manhattan which surprised me, given their agnosticism. I attended their wedding reception at which affair I met Happy's father, Kenneth Burke, a very influential philosopher of literature and one of the first to stress the relevance of symbol making (semiotics).

I don't recall ever having seen Happy (1922-1987) after that reception. She was a marxist, a feminist and a cultural anthropologist who taught at CCNY. She did field work and wrote many books.



Eleanor Burke Leacock

Ricky volunteered for the Army and served as an army combat photographer -- in Alaska, among other places. He wrote to us from Alaska that his hands froze while manipulating his camera.

I, having been deferred until graduation in 1943, was drafted into the US Air Force in Richmond , Virginia, and placed on reserve status. I was assigned to Langley Field, (Hampton) Virginia, where I served as an aerodynamicist at the NACA laboratories (predecessor of NASA.) My first published paper was a NACA Technical Report in 1946.

Peace being restored, Ricky and I each went our different ways; he to become a pioneer of documentaries and cinéma vérité, and I to graduate school at Harvard to become, first of all, a government mathematician at the National Bureau of Standards in Washington and later a professor of mathematics at Brown University in Providence.

Shortly after World War II, Ricky was engaged as camera man by Robert Flaherty for the film *The Louisiana Story* (1948). Filmed in the bayous of Louisiana, it tells a story of a little boy and his pet raccoon and how the life of the family had been altered by the intrusion of the drilling of oil rigs. A musical score was written by Vergil Thompson. We saw it in the Exeter Theater in Downtown Boston , which at that time was the outlet for "art films."

During these years of professional engagement, we saw each other only infrequently; several times in Cambridge where from 1969-88 he was head of the film department at MIT. Once or twice , when he ran summer programs in film making at Hampshire College in Amherst, Mass. We suggested a student to him and drove up to see how the student was doing. From time to time, when Ricky had some other business in Providence, he would come to our house and give us copies of his films. I would reciprocate with some of my writings. Thus we acquired

*Lulu in Berlin,* a 50 minute conversation with Louise Brooks when Louise was 67. Louise reminisced about her work in Germany under the film director G.W. Pabst.

*Hooray! We're Fifty 1943-1993.* A record of our 50th Harvard Reunion.

*Les Ouefs a la Coque de Richard Leacock*. A lighthearted and humorous view of life in Paris.

A few words on these first two films. Louise Brooks (1906-1985) was an absolutely gorgeous, sexy, extremely intelligent and outspoken Hollywood actress who made a smash reputation in the German film *Die Buschse der Pandora* (1929) also known as *Pandora's Box* and *Lulu* (from the name of the heroine.) A tragic story based on the German novel by Frank Wedekind, in a certain way the film epitomized the collapse of morals during the pre-Hitler Weimar Republic. At a very young age, though she was going strong, Louise threw over Hollywood and I think that this was one reason why Ricky was attracted to her.



Louise Brooks, c. 1928

The documentary *Hooray! We're Fifty 1943-1993*, I believe was commissioned by the Harvard Alumni Magazine, to capture our 50th Reunion. The Magazine was displeased and rejected the film as being much too satirical and not sufficiently rah-rah. However Hadassah pointed out to me that one scene catches beautifully the essence of reunions. In it, old crew members, now in their 70's, lift a racing shell onto the waters of the Charles River and row downstream.

About ten years ago, Ricky sent us copies of letters he had written years before to Happy when she was in New York and he was on location in the Bayous filming *The Louisiana Story*. One of the eye opening revelations in the letters is that Robert Flaherty was a filmic genius but a total bore. Hadassah told me that she learned from Quentin Andersons *Encounter,* that the famous painter Claude Monet was also a terrible bore, and I know from my mathematical experiences that the qualities of genius and of boredom can easily be yoked together. But I shan't name names.



Robert Flaherty

A few years ago, we visited Ricky and Valerie in their apartment in Paris where he cooked us a splendid fish dinner and where we met a number of his film associates.



**Ricky Leacock, c. 1989**

On the afternoon of Saturday, June 2, 2007, there was a garden party for Ricky and Valerie which Hadassah and I attended. Guests included RISD faculty, former students of Ricky, and one of his granddaughters. We learned that he was working on autobiographical material that included both text and clips from his films.

At one point he turned to me and said:

"You know, Phil, I believe that with one exception all my dreams have been fulfilled."

"What was the exception?" I asked.

"I hoped to live long enough to see Hollywood go bankrupt."

This was a not unanticipated comment from a man whose filmographic vision has been sharply, narrowly, and one might even say spartanly, focused on documenting life as it actually is lived. But in its way his vision was highly romantic.