Documentary Expression and Thirties America. By William Stott. Pp. xii + 361, preface, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973. $12.50.

Reviewed by Gerald D. Warshaver

William Stott's book is a study of the documentary as a literary genre and as a social movement of the period of the last Great Depression. He deals with the documentary in film, photograph, writing, broadcast, and art. Stott (p. 62) summarizes the philosophy of the documentary genre thusly:

> documentary treats the actual unimagined experience of individuals belonging to a group generally of low economic and social standing in the society (lower than the audience for whom the report is made) and treats this experience in such a way as to render it vivid, 'human,' and -most often- poignant to the audience.

The documentary genre uses two methods as a means of persuasion. The direct method presents evidence and lets it work upon the audience if it will. "Facts"--photographs, description, writing that records the experience of the subject, often in his own words--give the outsider a face to face experience, and say, "Here are the facts, what are you going to do about it?" Although Jacob Riis, a police reporter, took up photography in the late 1880's in order to bring direct proof of the need for slum reform to the concerned public, the people of the progressive period remained a "people of the book." Up to the thirties, the most influential use of the direct method was that of the muckraking article, such as written by Linclon Steffens, Ida Tarbell, and Samuel Hopkins Adams. However, in the thirties, the camera came into prominence as the chief means of direct persuasion.

The second method, which is the main strategy of today's "new journalism," gives the facts indirectly through the vicarious experience of an eyewitness. In regard to the 1930's, Stott feels that no other time so prized the Whitmanian "I" and the stance of <u>being there</u> as a criterion of authenticity. The technique of participant reporting, in which the events are filtered through the narrator's emotions, is analyzed as it was used in the radical reportage of John Spivak, John Dos Passos, Malcom Cowley, Mary Heaton Vorse, and others, such as the reporters sympathetic to the Spanish Loyalists, like Ernest Hemingway, Martha Gelhorn, Herbert Matthews, and Dorothy Parker. Since Stott wishes to give a full picture of the documentary in the thirties, and early forties, it is curious that in his discussions of the literary nature of the genre he makes no mention of the documentary's similarity to the ballad. Likewise, although ample

space is given to the vicarious method as found in radical reportage and in the numerous "conservative" "I've seen America" (and it's o.k.) books of the prewar period, Stott makes no mention of figures like Woody Guthrie, who not only wrote and sang documentaries but presented himself as the epitome of the thirties authentic eyewitness.

"The dustiest of the dust bowlers" manifested, both in his narrative songs and his persona, that tendency in the American character that Philip Rahv called "the cult of experience" and that William Stott finds so crucial to the documentary stance of the thirties. The fact that, as Stott notes (p. 25), "thirties social documentary in general is now as dead as the sermons of the Social Gospel" is all the more reason to analyze the "folk" music component of the documentary expression of the thirties. As the folk music revival of the 1950's demonstrated, Guthrie and his means of vicarious narrative provided one of the few examples of thirties documentary that was able to survive as a potent creation apart from the social context of the period.

The second tendency of documentary, the indirect or vicarious method, is understood by Stott to have been influenced by the pulp confession literature of the twenties. Thus, he finds that vicarious documentary uses the same "I am the man, I suffer'd, I was there" formula as the confession magazines. Although Stott does not mention it, the use of the author's vicarious "I" in documentary reportage was a significant characteristic of the journalism of the 1890's. Stephen Crane, Josiah Flynt, Lillian Bettengill, and Owen Kildare, to name a few, experimented in misery in order to document social conditions. Stott is probably correct in noting that the pulp confessions influenced the style of thirties vicarious documentary. However, in order to be adequately understood, the vicarious method itself must be seen as a significant development of the fin de siecle sensibliity.

In the second part of the book, Stott examines the motive common to all the documentary works of the thirties, namely, the attempt to portray the texture of reality, to dramatize the "authentic," and to clarify the essential stuff of America. The WPA art, Edward R. Murrow's broadcasts from London in the Blita, Roosevelt's use of the concrete and human experience to illustrate a point in his speeches, Martha Graham's American Document ballet, and the American Guide Series of the Federal Writers Project, are all understood as having the same motivations.

Of interest to regional folklorists is Stott's praise of the Guide Series as the finest monument of the WPA. He finds that the guides revealed an America of nuances, of subtle cultural wealth, and documented "raw cultural reality." He quotes with approval the

order given to the director of the Minnesota Guide who ridiculed the idea that one state or region was romantically different from any other. From Washington came the order to Minnesota: "You say you have no folklore other than Indian and Paul Bunyan. We advise that you interview prisoners in the penitentiary" (p. 112).

Stott analyzes the nonfiction documentary writing of the thirties in terms of its form and the techniques used to approach and describe the lived experience of the "common man." The three basic documentary techniques of direct quotation (informant narrative), case study, and firsthand or participant observation are critically examined as they appear in the social science writing of the decade and in the radical and liberal reportage of the day. "Worker" and other informant narratives, the "I've seen America" firsthand reportage, and books that used photographs and text to move the emotions of the public are also studied.

Folklorists will be gratified to find that in the chapter on "Informant Narrative," B. A. Botkin, editor of the slave narratives of the Federal Writers Project is compared to W.T. Couch, editor of These Are Our Lives: As Told by the People and Written by Members of the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration in North Carolina, Tennessee, and Georgia (Chapel Hill, 1939). Both men had an immense body of material to edit. Stott finds that unlike Couch, who had no philosophy, Botkin's folkloristic principles allowed him to detect any narrative that hinted at being retouched or showed signs of the writer's prejudices and sympathies. Unlike Couch's work, Stott finds Botkin's Lay My Burden Down (Chicago, 1945) sucessful in bringing the reader face to face with an informant. Stott's commendation for Botkin's principles of editorship might well stand this generation of folklorists in good stead come the W.P. A. of the seventies.

Alfred Kazin has evaluated the text and photographic "documentary book" in his On Native Grounds (New York, 1942). John Grierson (Grierson on Documentary, London, 1966) has written on documentary film. A. William Bluem has also surveyed documentary in several media, including televison (Documentary and American Television: Form, Function, Method, New York, 1965). Tom Wolfe has recently added to the critical literature on the development of documentary in our own time (Esquire, Dec., 1972, pp.152-59, 272-80). However, William Stott's Documentary Expression and Thirties America is the first work to analyze documentary as a genre. Because Stott provides a full critical exposition of the literary categories and the techniques of documentary, we are able to gain a better understanding of the generic context in and against which the "documentary book" Let Us Now Praise Famous Men (Boston, 1960) was made. As William Stott demonstrates, the work of James Agee and Walker Evans was not only the culmination of the documentary expression of the thirties but was also the work that transcended and showed the genre up.

Stott analyzes James Agee's text, method of composition, and social and moral philosophy in order to explain Agee's writing rose above the nice condescension and demeaning conventional sentiments of the rest of the documentary expressions of his day. As important as his comments on Agee's text are the issues that Stott raises in regard to the achievement of Walker Evans that make his book so edifying.

Since the morality of photography is separable from the intentions of the photographer, appeals to scientific, philanthropic, or reformist intention become irrelevant when an individual, caught by the camera, is deprived of his full human complexity and is used as an illustration of a problem, or worse yet, as arresting "material." The sin becomes greater when "simple people," as Agee called the tenant farmers of his book, are exploited. The poor, like the young, are very visible. As Stott remarks (pp. 274, 275) the Gudgers and the Rickettses live lives that are wholly exposed. "What one sees, looking at them and the things they touch, is an incapacity to dissemble. . .George's shoes are shoes for work--they have no other pretension." Their disguises are thin and transparent because they lack the middle class means and purposes of deception. "Their lives, though not bare, are uncovered to view and, in them, the essentials of the human condition." Stott shows us how Walker Evans' work demonstrates a respect for his subjects and their vulnerable situation, and how Evans lets his subjects compose themselves before the unknowable audience behind the camera and retain and transmit their human dignity.

Evans' taste and concern for the worth of his subjects is contrasted to the dramatic emotionalism and smart exploitation of the more highly praised and popular documentary photographers of the thirties, such as Margaret Bourke-White.

Documentary Expression and Thirties America is more than a literary and historical analysis of the past. Stott, I believe, like Agee and Evans has gone beyond the bounds of his genre. His book, permeated as it is with the question of morality, challenges its readers to weigh themselves against the best efforts of the thirties. Folklore, which uses documentary techniques to study the same class of individuals who were the subject of the thirties documentary, requires aesthetic openess, moral sensitivity, and even religious introspection, if the cruel and beautiful lives of the people whom we "document" is to be understood.