Pedagogy

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An Epic Production: Videotaping the *Chanson de Roland*

Any undergraduate lecture-course on the *Chanson de Roland* and the Old French epic contains within it a basic problem: before the detailed work of discussing genre and text, should one devote valuable introductory time to a résumé of the actual plot? If the lecturer takes the plot for granted, he or she is treating in rather cavalier fashion one of world literature's most celebrated and dramatic stories; and yet if a brief synopsis is attempted, there is the automatic risk of reducing the greatest of epics to the level of banality, with all nuances and complex patterns lost from the crucial outset We came to the conclusion that one way to preserve the spirit of the original, and to involve the student audience in the text — both in class at the beginning of a lecture-course and subsequently as a revision aid — might be to retell the *Roland* in some detail on videotape, making extensive use of manuscript illuminations. This would be the first time, to our knowledge, that the *Roland* had been made the subject of a teaching-aid of this kind; if successful, the resulting tape (of about 30 minutes' duration) would be added to the established series produced by the French Department and the Audio-Visual Centre at the University of Hull, *Hull French Tapes*, which already included two more "traditional" medieval items: full-scale productions (in the original) of *Pathelin* and *La Farce du Cuvier*.[1]

The first task was to find the visual material. The standard work on the iconography of the *Chanson de Roland* is, of course, *La Légende de Roland dans l'art du moyen âge* by Rita Lejeune-

[1] Other programs include Sartre's *Huis clos* and the early Molière farces *La Jalousie du Barbouillé* and *Le Médecin volant*. For further information, see M S. Poole, ed., *Molière: the provincial farces* (Hull French Texts, 1983); and A. Hindley ed., *La Farce du Cuvier* (Hull French Texts, 1979).

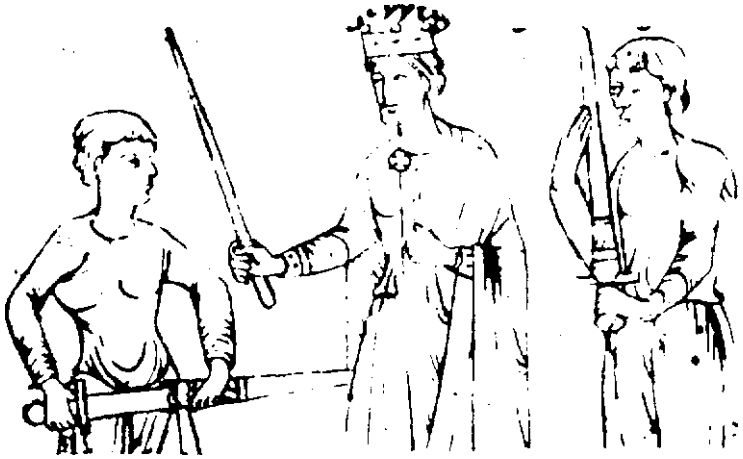
Dehousse and Jacques Stiennon,[2] and at first sight this might appear to offer a ready-made checklist of pictures, taking in as it does so much from so many artistic media and from so many countries and centuries. However, most of the plates illustrate the later accretions of the legend; and of those that positively deal with the essential story of Charlemagne, Roland, Oliver, Ganelon and Roncevaux, plate after plate had to be rejected as quite unsuitable for videotape presentation — either because the detail was too poor, or because accepting these examples would have meant accepting a too-sudden clash of continuity and an uncomfortable shift from manuscript illustration to sculpture to stained-glass. In the end we had to put Lejeune and Stiennon to one side, with regret, having found in the two volumes just three sources to which we might turn for convincing "copy." The first of these consisted of the series of late twelfth-century line-drawings in the Middle High German *Ruolantes Liet* MS Pal. germ.112 in the Heidelberg Universitätsbibliothek.[3] These drawings accompany the text very notably at the point where the traitor-to-be Ganelon departs on the dangerous mission to the Saracen king Marsile, and have the great merit of clarity and of possessing a "consecutive-frame" quality that lends itself well to the cameras. As the whole episode of Ganelon's mission is dramatically very self-contained, the formal difference between the line-drawings and any other material would be of no disadvantage.

The second suitable piece came from MSS 9066-9068 of the Bibliothèque Royale in Brussels, the *Chroniques et Conquestes de Charlemaine,* superbly illustrated in grisaille by Jean Tavernier around 1460.[4] Here we found good sequences depicting the aftermath of the battle of Roncevaux and some of the final scenes: the entry into Saragossa and the death of Marsile, the combat

[2] 2 vols. (Brussels: Arcade, 1966). The work has also been published in English as *The Legend of Roland in the Middle Ages* (London: Phaidon, 1971).

[3] *La Légende de Roland,* vol. 1, pp. 111-38, and vol. 2, plates 84-125.

[4] *La Légende de Roland,* vol. 1, pp. 330-39, plate LVII, and vol. 2, plates 391-420.



Ganelon confronts Marsilie: *Ruolantes Liet*, Heidelberg, Universitätsbibliotek MS Pal. germ. 112, fol.29v *(La Légende de Roland*, t.2, plate 97). Camera script, shot 29.

The Frankish army prepares to leave for France: *Maciejowski Bible*, fol.20v *(Old Testament Miniatures*, plate 133: "The Israelites fetch the Ark of the Covenant to encourage them in battle"). Camera script, shot 34.

between Thierry d'Anjou and Pinabel, and the execution of Ganelon. From the technical point of view, each of these illustrations offered the added attraction of a multiple-scene setting that would enable the camera to pan from one detail to another.

Finally, two further German manuscripts, of the Stricker's *Karl der Grosse* , one dating from the late thirteenth century and the other from the early fourteenth century (Saint Gall, Stadtbibliothek MS 302; and Berlin, Deutsche Staatsbibliothek MS Germ. fol. 623),[5] provided some crucial illustrations of Charlemagne's dreams and his battle with Baligant, and of the equally vital and precise scenes of Roland with the olifant and of the death of Aude. For all the rest of the plot, however, we had to look elsewhere. The problem was that we had no other sources of illustration available that specifically portrayed the *Chanson de Roland;* and so we began to look for a manuscript containing a very large number of scenes of which sufficient might be taken out of the original context and related to the action of the *Roland.*

After some searching it became clear that the best source for our purpose was the celebrated and much-travelled *Maciejowski Bible,* the 13th-century *Old Testament* once part of the Phillipps Collection and now MS 638 of the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York.[6] This work contains over 200 large illuminations in superb French court style, covering the period from the Creation to the death of David, and in particular doing full justice to the Children of Israel's battles with sundry Philistines, Midianites and Amalekites. In the hands of the six or seven artists who worked on the *Bible,* the Old Testament has been triumphantly translated to thirteenth-century Europe: court-scenes are invested with feudal power and glory; and combat is truly epic, with horses and warriors, arms and armor, victors and corpses being portrayed in highly realistic and often

[5] *La Légende de Roland,* vol. 1, pp. 226-38, plates XXIV-XXVII, and vol. 2, plates 200-209.

[6] *Old Testament Miniatures: a Medieval Picture Book with 283 Paintings from the Creation to the Story of David,* Introduction and Legends by Sidney C. Cockerell, Preface by John Plummer (London: Phaidon Press, 1969).

Charlemagne's dreams: *Maciejowski Bible,* fol.5v *(Old Testament Miniatures,* plate 36: "Pharaoh's dreams of the cattle and the corn"). Camera script, shot 36.

gruesome detail. Very often, indeed, the original image of Israelite versus Philistine has been re-conceived in the clearest medieval terms as one of Christian Crusaders defeating Saracens: and it was this quality above all that enabled us to make our own re-creation from *Bible historiée* to Roncevaux.

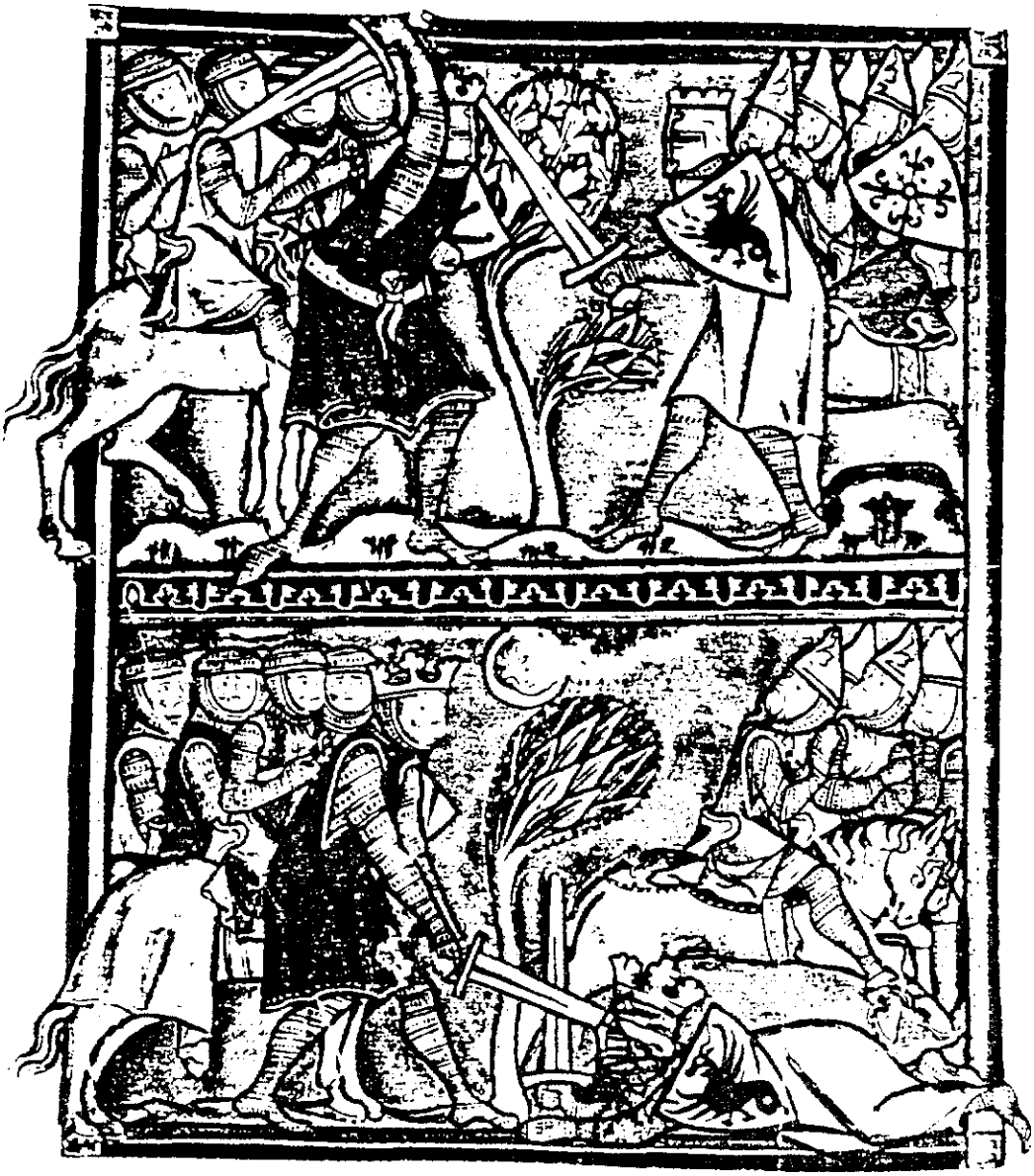
Our first task was to go through the folios of the *Maciejowski Bible,* establishing a careful card-index of general scenes, of individual figures and of particular hand- and body-gestures, the traditional medieval iconographical symbols of attitudes and emotions. We then proceeded to establish our own detailed *analyse* of the action of the *Roland;* and when this was complete, we were in a position to sift through our cards, gradually selecting particular items that might be related to a given episode, and coding the cards accordingly. The matching of Old Testament characters with those of the Old French Epic became a fascinating task: Pharaoh and Saul in imperious mood blended into a perfect Charlemagne; David and Jonathan took on the mantels of Roland and Oliver; and Samuel became a surprisingly appropriate Turpin.[7] As we compared, matched and coded, we became very aware that we were automatically following in the footsteps of the *Roland* poet himself: as he had done first, we were going back to the Old Testament for inspiration in the portrayal of character.[8]

When we had succeeded in building up our card-catalogue and drawing from the *Bible* scenes to portray the whole story of the *Roland,* we had to check continuity; repeat-images were carefully noted, and dramatic confrontations had to be supported by figures facing to left and right towards each other; where this did not

[7] See, for example, *Old Testament Miniatures,* plates 36 (fol.5v) and 56/57 (fol.8r): Pharaoh; 178 (fol.29r) and 183 (fol.30r): Saul; 184 (fol.30r): David and Jonathan; 180 (fol.29v): slaughter by David of two hundred Philistines; 159 (fol.25r): Samuel.

[8] The extent of the debt of the Oxford *Roland* poet to the Bible and to the Old Testament in particular, has been clearly indicated by modern scholarship, notably by Gerard J. Brault in his analytical edition of the *Song of Roland, 2* vols., (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1978).

Charlemagne requests a volunteer to command the rearguard / Roland confronts Ganelon: *Maciejowski Bible*, fol.30r *(Old Testament Miniatures*, plates 183-184: "Saul bids Jonathan and his servants to slay David" / "Jonathan warns David"), Camera script, shots 39, 40 and 41.



Charlemagne fights and slays Baligant: *Karl der Grosse,* Saint-Gall, Stadtbibliothek MS 302, fol.662r *(La Légende de Roland* , t 1 plate XXVI). Camera script, shots 93 and 94.

The Entry into Saragossa: *Les Chroniques et Conquestes de Charlemaine,* Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale, MS 9068, fol.37v *(La Légende de Roland, 12,* plate 417). Camera script, shot 95.

actually occur in the manuscript, we would need to have the image reversed in our final reproduction for the cameras. The same care was taken with battle-scenes.

At the end of the process, one or two gaps remained; but these we were able to fill with individual scenes taken from other manuscript sources. For Ganelon's trial scene, where we needed some form of "courtroom authenticity," we had recourse to the detailed illustration on fol.2r of the *Actes du Procès de Robert d'Artois* (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS f.lat. 18437);[9] and for the *merveillus turment* of storm and earthquake heralding in France the tragedy of Roncevaux (Laisse CX) we turned to a suitable scene of the Destruction of Sodom in another *Bible historiée*, in the John Rylands Library of the University of Manchester;[10] and for Charlemagne's dream of fire, thunderbolts and swarming *Serpenz e guivres, dragun e averser* (Laisse CLXXXV), it seemed appropriate to choose an Apocalypse illustration: fols. 34v and 35r from the *Cloisters Apocalypse* in the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art.[11]

As an overall commentary it may be stressed that although the manuscripts from which we chose our illustrations represented different centuries and varied in style and form, in the end there was no great apparent sense of clash, since there was very little abrupt transition. The early line-drawings fill one complete "scene," the later grisailles another; while the great *Maceijowski Bible* illuminations form a unifying constant. As Hull University AVC did not have full color facility, no stained-glass examples were used (hence the absence of Chartres); and the enforced use of black and

9 See P. D'Ancona and E. Aeschlimann, *The Art of Illumination,* (London: Phaidon, 1969), plate 92.

[10] The John Rylands University of Manchester Library, MS Fr.5. fol. 19v.

[11] See *The Cloisters Apocalypse: an early fourteenth-century manuscript in facsimile* (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1971).

white has one clear advantage: there is no brutal contrast between the *Bible's* color and the monochrome line or grisaille originals of other manuscripts.

Having arranged our visual material and after seeking and obtaining copyright permission to use it, the main technical concern was then to decide how best to transfer that material to the screen. For a still picture to create an illusion, it needs to be large enough for the camera to be able to explore it without falling off the edge or coming up against the frame; and in the battle scenes especially, we wanted the camera to carry the viewer into the picture, bringing it alive by dollying in and panning across it. For such a technique to achieve its best effect, however, the prints have to be at least 18 by 24 inches, and with a production consisting of over 100 shots, such a method would clearly have been well beyond our modest budget. Our solution to this problem was therefore to use, not prints, but slides, projected onto a standard-size screen with a studio camera to pick up the image. As our script envisaged a three-camera production (two with zooms and one with a fixed lens) three such screens were erected in the studio, each served by an automatic carrousel slide-projector controlled by the cameraman. The fourth vision-source was the telecine (TK) used mainly for static scenes, credits, and quick cuts and enabling the pressure to be taken off the projectors at certain points during the recording. Though somewhat "Heath-Robinson" in appearance, this set-up proved an eminently workable arrangement with a number of advantages: it was cost-effective in that it permitted the use of transparencies from the French Department's existing collection; it had the practical advantage of allowing certain images to be reversed to heighten the dramatic effect (in the case of the confrontation of Roland and Ganelon, for example); and above all it gave the cameraman a much larger area over which to track without the difficult problem of focusing when a subject is too close to the lens. Plates were used on a very few occasions only: as a background to opening and closing credits; where the definition in an original source was poor (e.g. Roland slaying the pagan with his olifant - Laisse CLXX); or when a key episode in the story (e.g. Turpin's blessing of the French troops before Roncevaux — Laisses LXXXIX-XC) required —

Ganelon's Trial: *Actes du Procès de Robert d'Artois*, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS f.lat. 18437, fol.2r *(The Art of Illumination,* plate 92). Camera script, shot 100.

uniquely — a montage of two separate manuscript elements to form one composition.

Before the recording in the TV studio, a camera-script had to be devised which took into account the main technical requirements of two zoom cameras (numbered 1 and 2), one fixed-lens camera (no. 3), three slide-projectors with screens, and TK. For this, having written our summary of the action of the *Roland*, we naturally relied heavily on the expertise of our AV Centre Director to match visuals with text in a script that followed the standard conventions. Sample pages of this script are reproduced as an Appendix, and it should be noted that the somewhat bald résumé is enlivened by short extracts from the original text. This commentary was recorded in advance, with the excerpts in Old French done in a different studio so as to provide a contrasting tonal quality. Then, using the sound commentary as a basis, the pictures, together with one or two snippets of music at appropriate climactic points, were added in the TV studio over a day and a half of discontinuous recording.

Though what we were doing was uncharted territory to many of us involved, most of the problems envisaged turned out to be unfounded in the event Despite the fact that the cameramen were dealing with an unfamiliar subject, were required to operate both TV camera and slide-projector, and moreover did not have the movements of actors to guide them, the necessary precision was achieved with relatively little difficulty. In particular, problems of focusing with a second-generation image and with slides mounted on frames of varying thickness, were much less acute than we had anticipated. The only serious interruption of our endeavors was caused by a fire-warning in the studio which resulted in the production being suspended half way through the first day— an Act of God, complete with *fous e flambes,* that seemed by no means inappropriate given the subject of the program! However, these proved not to be epic omens of ill-fortune: indeed everything went very smoothly, with the finished product amply rewarding the many hours of preparation that had gone into it. The production also enabled us to appreciate from yet one more viewpoint the epic text's

superb general construction and particular sense of character-opposition. As we turned poem into shooting-script, and shooting-script into completed video, we saw the narrative of the *Roland* adapting itself effortlessly to the most modern of formats: the visual techniques of mixing, cutting, panning and zooming are another medium's analogues to the stylistic patterns of the chanson de geste. It is a tribute to the universal qualities of the *Chanson de Roland* that it stands the test of such a translation.

In the short time that the program has been available, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that it is used regularly by students, especially for revision purposes; it has also proved a useful introduction to the Middle Ages for students coming new to the subject. The techniques employed, particularly the use of transparencies rather than expensive prints, open up new possibilities for the departmental slide holdings which can be used to make programs on certain parts of the syllabus for private study use in the library as well as for class presentation. The potential in the field of art programs is obvious, particularly where color is available. Such a facility was not, alas, at hand when the *Roland* program was made, but circumstances have now changed, and we expect soon to attempt a remake that may well bring about changes in our selection of the visual material. We hope, too, to make further programs in the medieval field, with *Le Charroi de Nîmes* and Villon — both texts on the syllabus — high on the list, to add to the series of *Hull French Tapes*. Programs are available on 1-inch Ampex LB, HB, VHB, Philips N1500 VCR and Sony U-Matic. We shall be pleased to supply any further information to anyone who cares to get in touch with us at the Department of French, the University, Hull, HU6 7RX, GB.[12]

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[12] We should like to express our appreciation to the staff of the Gulbenkian Audio-Visual Centre at the University of Hull and to thank its Director Michael Bowen for his encouragement and help in the making of this program. We also wish to thank the following for permission to use their copyright material: Professor Rita Lejeune and Professor Jacques Stiennon, The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York and Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, Phaidon Press.

APPENDIX: Sample Camera Script

VTR CLOCK ON 3.

1. FU TK / AVC opener. — Q MUSIC.

2. Mix TK / Dept. of French.

3. 1. / Slide 1. Aisle of Cathedral. Super TK. Chanson de Roland FO TK. Zoom in to tight shot. — MUSIC FADES.

4. 2. / Cap. 1. Crusader. MCS legs. Pan R to hold MCS head and shoulders. Hold shot as cap. turns.

Q TAPE It is 778.

5. 1. / Slide 2. CS King on horse L. wider to hold slide.

Charlemagne, Emperor of the Franks, is bringing to a close a long and successful campaign against the Saracens in Spain; he is poised to crown his triumphs with the capture of Sarragossa, the one eager fortress still holding out against him.

6. 2. / Slide 3. CS King L. Pan diagonally R to hold boy bottom R. Zoom out to hold complete slide.

The King of Sarragosse, Marsilie, sees defeat staring him in the face. He calls a last desperate council of his lords. To buy time they agree to send messengers to

(3 next)

Cont'd./...

Gr 2.

provoke the Saracen king into violence, and so he presents Charlemagne's words of truce in a deliberately arrogant and contemptuous manner.

"Se cest' acorde ne vulez otrier,
Pris e liez serez par poested,
Al siege ad Ais en serez amenet,
Par jugement serez iloec finet,
La murrez vus a hunte e a viltet.'"

29. 1. Slide 24. 2/s L. Zoom out to whole slide.

Marsilie reacts with fury and makes to cut down the messenger. In mortal danger Ganelon bravely grips his sword hilt, and, with his back to a tree, prepares to

30. 2. Slide 25. ? Pan R to L. (CU's).

sell his life dearly. But Blancandrin hastily interrupts, calms the two adversaries, and assures Marsilie of Ganelon's promised cooperation. It is agreed that Roland should die in an ambush, together with the rearguard of

31. TK Slide 26. Whole frame.

Charlemagne's army. Ganelon swears on Christian and pagan relics to send

32. 1. Slide 27. MCS, back lower R Zoom back to hold whole frame.

Roland to his fate, and leaves Marsilie's court laden with gifts and blood-money.

(PAUSE) ? MUSIC

3. Mix to TK. Slide 28. Whole frame.

Back in Charlemagne's camp, Ganelon reports that Marsilie has accepted the

(TK next)

Cont'd./...

On TK

conditions of the truce and that hostilities

34. TK
Slide 29. Whole frame.
are thus at an end. The Frankish army prepares to leave for France - but all

35. TK
Slide 30. Whole frame.
the while the pagans are preparing for

36. 2.
Slide 31A. Whole frame zoom in to CS head.
37. 1.
Slide 31B. 4/s R. frame.
battle. That night Charlemagne dreams two disturbing and ominous dreams: in the first, Ganelon rushes upon him,

38. 2.
Slide 31C. MCS L frame. Pan R to 3/s + animals.
seizes his lance and shatters it to pieces; in the second, a wild boar mauls his right hand and a leopard leaps to attack him, to be in turn assailed by a greyhound that springs swiftly to

39. 1.
Slide 32. CS King. Pan R to hold group L.
Charlemagne's defence. The next day, Charlemagne requests a volunteer for the perilous task of leading the rearguard

40. TK
Slide 33. MCS Ganelon. (Reversed). Looking L.
through the mountains. This is the moment that Ganelon has been waiting for: just as Roland had blurted out his name for the mission to the pagan king, so now he puts forward Roland's name to command the rearguard.

"Kar me jugez ki ert en la rereguarde.'
Guenes respunt. 'Rollant, cist miens
filastre
N'avez baron de si grant vasselage.'"

41. TK
Slide 34. MCS Roland Looking R.

Cont'd./...

(2 next)