

Tropical Nights (1920)

PRODUCTION COMPANY: Robert C. Bruce Scenics. DISTRIBUTION COMPANY: Educational Films Corporation of America. DIRECTOR: Robert C. Bruce. RUNNING TIME: 12 minutes.

Tropical Nights belongs to a genre of films generally classified as “travel and scenics,” and its production marks an important effort in the history of American cinema to make short films viable in the face of the prominence of feature-length films. Its maker, Robert C. Bruce, and the production company, Educational Films Corporation, would lead the effort, and this title was part of a set of films that Bruce shot for the first time outside North America. Bruce had been working with Educational since almost its inception in 1915. His films, offered under the title “Scenics Beautiful,” had proved to be among the most marketable among the company’s catalog.¹ To understand the significance of Bruce’s work at the time *Tropical Nights* was made, a familiarity with the company’s activities in that year proves illuminating.

Education Films Corporation and the Theatrical Short Subject

In 1920, Educational set out to expand operations to open its own nationwide exchanges to distribute a catalog of exclusively short subjects. According to a report, this was the first instance of “national specialization in short subjects ever offered by a film organization.”² Opening its own exchanges was only one of the steps for Educational in a year of acquisition of brands and distribution deals both nationally and internationally. To expand the range of its catalog, it had acquired the C.L. Chester Comedies and the Chester Scenics.³ Despite the increased presence of comedies, travelogue films would remain its priority and distinguishing product. Its most

1. *Moving Picture World*, “Bruce Returns from Cuba and Jamaica with New ‘Scenic Beautiful’ Series,” May 8, 1920.

2. *Moving Picture World*, “Educational Exchanges to Be Operating in Twenty-one Key Cities about June 1,” May 22, 1920.

3. *Moving Picture World*, “Educational Says ‘Four Times Foiled’ Set New Record for Prerelease Showing,” April 3, 1920.

significant distribution deal came when it acquired the rights to distribute the films for the National Geographic Society.⁴ It also reached out to several “official and semi-public bodies” to release their films theatrically.⁵ Complementing the diversification of product domestically, Educational acquired a film distribution company in England to release its films throughout Europe.⁶

All this activity clarifies the *theatrical* scale of the company’s operations and thus the market orientation of Bruce’s productions. The company at this point was seeking to exploit the demand for short films on the theatrical circuit as opposed to renting out films solely to educational and community organizations. This was simultaneous with a debate in the business about the significance of the short film to the process of creating new movie audiences.⁷ It is in this industrial context that one can begin to understand the work of Robert C. Bruce.

The Bruce Scenics and the Travelogue

The significance of the specific cinematic ambitions of Bruce’s films is best highlighted by comparing him with another famous member of the profession, Burton Holmes, who connected cinema to the longer tradition of the illustrated travel lectures. Travel films at the turn of the century extended the use of slides used by travel lecturers in the 19th century. Until around 1910, they continued to serve an illustrative purpose for the lectures. As lecturers became more involved in the production process of their films, they increasingly introduced the individuality

4. *Moving Picture World*, “E.W. Hammons to Distribute Films for National Geographic Society,” April 10, 1920.

5. *Moving Picture World*, “Educational Will Release Scenic Films of New York Conservation Committee,” May 16, 1920.

6. *Moving Picture World*, “Rowson Sees Growing Demand in England for Educational Scenics and Comedies,” April 17, 1920.

7. *Moving Picture World*, “Short Subjects and Long,” April 3, 1920. On the importance of the short films to the formation of regular movie audiences, *Moving Picture World* declared: “Practically no motion picture house of any pretension fails to include in its program two to three hundred feet of news, comedy and scenic films. The scenics have been responsible for the conversion into picturegoers of many who in the beginning never would have entered a theater to see a dramatic production.”

that they also invested in their performance. When these films began to gain circulation beyond what they could manage in performance, travel films started to acquire a presence of their own. This is not to say that the lecture film disappeared. Burton Holmes started out using slides and continued his career as a travel film lecturer until around 1950, and the travel lecture film continues to have a presence in North America.⁸ It is significant, however, that in the years when the careers of Holmes and Bruce overlapped, both men commanded distinct identities. In the teens and twenties, Holmes continued to be identified primarily as “photographer and lecturer” or “globetrotter, lecturer, and author,” even though it was acknowledged that he made his first film as early as 1897 and later worked with Paramount to produce his travel series.⁹ Bruce, as distinct from Holmes, represents a successful attempt to create a travel film identity based solely on the screen. The title card of *Tropical Nights* announces him as the producer of this “West Indian scenic.” The assertion of ownership is emphasized throughout by the use of the initials “RCB” on all the intertitle cards, much like D.W. Griffith had done for his feature-length films. Bruce was hailed in the press as being “the only scenic artist in the world who actually cuts and titles his own pictures.”¹⁰

Tropical Nights meets the general thematic expectations of a travel film in offering scenes from a place that most audience members were not likely to visit. What is exceptional is the meticulousness of production values. Though lacking a narrative in the strict sense, the scenes of the island are held together by a diurnal frame. The poetic aspirations of the intertitles put in place a commentary that does not anticipate the need for a lecturer to create the effect it seeks.

8. Jeffrey Ruoff, “Around the World in Eighty Minutes: The Travel Lecture Film,” *Visual Anthropology* 15, no. 1 (1999): 91–114.

9. *Moving Picture World*, “Holmes Leaves for Three Months’ Tour of Near East, Turkey, Spain and Bohemia,” May 22, 1920.

10. The Screen, *Charleston Daily Mail*, December 5, 1920.

The film has been colored carefully to retain the impressions of changing light from daylight, through dusk and night, and finally to dawn. The use of the toning process to highlight shadows also creates the typically contrasting features of a tropical landscape. The toning process colors the black parts of a monochrome image, which in this film tend to be tree trunks and shadows. Coloring processes would be a crucial marketing mechanism for the nondramatic film. For example, Special Pictures Corporation patented its color process, Artcolor, for use in scenics such as *God's Country* (1920).¹¹ Even though the coloring processes were far from “natural,” their use in nondramatic films suggested little doubt about their value. The embracing of color by producers of nondramatic films can be contrasted with the debates in *American Cinematographer* on the use of even a hypothetically perfect color process for dramatic films. Cinematographers writing for the magazine often thought that color would add little to enhance the drama of a film's narrative.¹²

A panorama is the shot that fetches a travel film its most commonly prized scenes. The breadth of vision is generally used to offer the audience the ideal vantage point for appreciating the significance of the scenic subject.¹³ *Tropical Nights*, however, starts from closer shots before opening out on the landscape. It shows a preference for close views of gnarled trunks, thickets of leaves, and the deep shade. The manner of the film's incorporation of people is significant for reasons other than the obvious suggestion of the traveler's civilizational superiority. The overall impression is of a landscape unencumbered by a significant human presence. When the intertitles acknowledge the natives, they are just so many objects in the frame; they are often only dots in

11. Advertisement, *Moving Picture World*, April 3, 1920.

12. Philip E. Rosen, “Believes Color Will Not Aid Dramatic Cinematography,” *American Cinematographer* 3, no. 10 (January 1923): 4. For a counterview, see J.A. Ball, “The Advent of Color Photography,” *American Cinematographer* 4, no. 5 (August 1923): 4.

13. For a discussion of the importance of the panoramic view to travel films, see Tom Gunning, “The Whole World Within Reach: Travel Images Without Borders,” in *Virtual Images: Cinema and Travel*, ed. Jeffrey Ruoff (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 25–41.

the picture and always on water. The person on land who is afforded the view of the landscape is the Western traveler. This identity is significant because it splits the mode of identification available to the audience. So far, the images offered up to the audience have been available to the audience directly. The introduction of the figure of the traveler, a civilizational equal of the audience, to whom the same view is available unmediated by technology, creates a potential for the film to work as a means of creating aspiration among the audience members.

There might also have been a more-specific narrative frame in which this film was available to the audiences of the time. Bruce's scenics were notable for aspiring to dramatic narratives. His films were invariably marketed as travel and scenic films because the expectation was that the narrative was no more than a means for furnishing views. But it was reported in the *Moving Picture World* that for some of the films Bruce shot in Cuba and Jamaica, including *Tropical Nights*, he would be using the figure of a shipwrecked sailor who, after exploring the tropical islands, would choose to remain rather than leave when help arrives.¹⁴ The Western traveler in *Tropical Nights* may have been a part of that trope, but it is not certain whether Bruce intended to use it across his films. Nevertheless, this report demonstrates that the travel film as Bruce conceived it could be seen as belonging to the history of the stabilization of the narrative film as a staple of cinema. Yet the aesthetic as seen in *Tropical Nights* aspires to an idea of the poetic, something that is explicit in an earlier Bruce film, *The Tides of Yesterday* (1918), which was based on a poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.¹⁵

Remarks made about two other films made by Bruce might help us think of the ideal mechanism by which travel films mediated audience experience. A statement about Bruce's *Water Trails*

14. *Moving Picture World*, "Robert C. Bruce Completes First Series Taken by Him Outside of North America," June 5, 1920.

15. *New York Times*, "Miss Bates Makes Her Screen Debut," July 29, 1918.

(1922), another Caribbean scenic, put out in *Educational Screen* by the film's distributor, states, "Fortunate we, to be able to take this journey while staying comfortably at home."¹⁶ A *New York Times* notice of *My Country* (1922), from when it was held over for a second week at a New York theater, supplementing *Nanook of the North* (1922), states, "Mr. Bruce's country is the Far Northwest, and as he revels in it many will envy him his possession of it."¹⁷ Thus, this disruption of a sense of unmediated access through the use of a most strategically placed anonymous tourist in a film such as *Tropical Nights* illustrates the manner in which travel film could appeal to its viewers, one that relies on a transition from a sense of privilege to a sense of aspiration.

In celebrating the achievement of American films, a film critic for the *Manchester Guardian* adds an appreciative note about Bruce's films, praising their impressionist qualities. Indeed, his films from this time are cited in several publications as contributing to the idea of film as art. The *Guardian* critic writes:

These short, impressionistic pictures have cut away all that is inessential, all that is popular or merely pretty. We wait for that little more to spoil the beauty—America has taught us to expect that little more—and it never comes.¹⁸

This quotation shows that within two years of national and international expansion Educational had succeeded in gaining acceptance of its short subjects in England, and Bruce had gained international recognition as an artist. He thus inverts the process of bringing foreign views to a domestic audience, making travel film an exportable commodity. The final evidence of the consummation of aspirations that had been launched in 1920 comes from the *New York Times's*

16. Film Catalogue, *Educational Screen* 1, no. 1 (January 1922): 23.

17. The Screen, *New York Times*, June 12, 1922.

18. Quoted in "James W. Dean's Film Reviews," *Ogden Standard Examiner*, October 22, 1922.

praise of Bruce's overtly narrative films.¹⁹ The reviewer remarks that Bruce "used to make scenic pictures" that, though beautiful and welcome, lacked "the vitality which, it was felt, the action of a story or episode could give them without impairing their sterling scenic quality." In praising *Wilderness Tales* (1922), part of a series called *And Women Must Weep*, the *New York Times* reviewer writes:

It is an emphatic success. There is scenery in the picture, magnificent inspiring views of the sea and seaside, and also a tense dramatic episode which, it would seem, must break through the most artificial human crust and touch responsive heart-chords.²⁰

Over the next decade, however, short subjects would not sustain the appeal on the theatrical circuit that Educational tried to build. With the increasing dominance of the feature film after the silent era, Bruce would return to his initial role as a cinematographer; he helmed Paramount's first Technicolor feature, *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine* (1936). By contrast, the coming of sound did not lead the other prominent figure mentioned here, Burton Holmes, to abandon his vocation as a travel lecturer. Bruce and Holmes perhaps represent two divergent ways in which film could offer an experience of travel, one centered on the screen and the other through personal testimony about the visuals.

— Feroz Hassan

19. The Screen, *New York Times*, February 20, 1922.

20. Ibid.