

Milestone Film presents The Adventure Classic by the Makers of KING KONG  
MERIAN C. COOPER, ERNEST B. SCHOEDSACK and MARGUERITE HARRISON'S

# GRASS

A NATION'S BATTLE FOR LIFE



A Milestone Film Release • PO Box 128 • Harrington Park, NJ 07640

Phone: (201) 767-3117 • Fax: (201) 767-3035

Email: [milefilms@aol.com](mailto:milefilms@aol.com) • [www.milestonefilms.com](http://www.milestonefilms.com)



**CREDITS:**

Produced and Directed by .....Merian C. Cooper, Ernest B. Schoedsack  
and Marguerite Harrison  
Presented by .....Adolph Zukor and Jesse L. Lasky  
Photographed & Edited by .....Ernest B. Schoedsack and Merian C. Cooper  
Titles by .....Terry Ramsay

NEW MUSIC COMPOSED AND PERFORMED BY GHOLAM HOSSAIN JANATI-ATAIE,  
KAVOUS SHIRZADIAN & AMIR ALI VAHABZADEGAN  
Produced by Richard Einhorn

United States. 1925. Silent. Black and White.  
Shot on location in Asia Minor including Angora and Persia (Iran)  
35mm. 1:33. Suggested running speed: 22fps. 70 minutes.  
Theatrical Premiere on June 21, 1926.

GRASS: A NATION'S BATTLE FOR LIFE is a Milestone Release 1992.

**CAST:**

Merian C. Cooper  
Ernest B. Schoedsack  
Marguerite Harrison  
Haidar Khan (chief of the Bakhtiari tribe)  
Lufta (son of Haidar Khan)

and the 50,000 people and 500,000 animals of the Bakhtiari tribe.



## SYNOPSIS:

Marguerite Harrison, Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack travel through Asia Minor to reach a tribe of nomads in Iran known as the Bakhtiari. They follow the tribesmen on their 48-day trek across deserts, rivers and mountains to reach summer pasture for their flocks. There are hardships and conquests for the 50,000 tribesmen leading their 500,000 animals across the treacherous land. First is fording the raging waters of the Karun River by floating on rafts buoyed by inflated goatskins. Back and forth they go in the frigid waters as some animals drown. Hardest of all is the ascending in bare feet of an almost perpendicular mountain only to face the even more towering Zardeh Kuh, pathless and covered with deep snow. Finally they descend to their goal — a fertile and grassy valley.

## BACKGROUND:

From the early days of the cinema, the travelogue was a popular audience attraction. After 1910, this category expanded to include exploration films such as Herbert Ponting's *WITH SCOTT TO THE ANTARCTIC* (1913); documentary reconstructions, like Edward S. Curtis' film on the Kwakiutl tribe, *IN THE LAND OF THE HEAD HUNTERS* (1914); and adventure epics, like Lowell Thomas' career-making blockbuster, *WITH LAWRENCE IN ARABIA* (1919).

With the end of World War I, great increases in mechanical inventions and new prosperity, the Golden Age of photographic exploration dawned. The success of Robert J. Flaherty's *NANOOK OF THE NORTH*, the enormous popularity of Martin and Osa Johnson's Pacific Island and African films, and the new light-weight cameras (especially Carl Akeley's brilliant invention which bore his name) pointed the way for the adventure films of Admiral Byrd's polar explorations, William Beebe's undersea voyages, Roy Chapman Andrews' discovery of dinosaur eggs in the Gobi Desert and Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack's expeditions to Persia and Siam.

The films were inexpensive to produce, featured real life-and-death situations, and returned solid profits at the box office. Many of these films — including *NANOOK*, Cooper and Schoedsack's *CHANG* and Murnau's *TABU* — were never meant to be seen as, nor were considered to be, what today we call “documentaries.” Curtis and Flaherty showed the way for adventure films that would show a realism—an inner truth—that would go beyond the surface facts to present something more meaningful and poetic. As Flaherty wrote, “I am not going to make films about what the white man has made of primitive peoples. What I want to show is the former majesty and character of these people, while it is still possible—before the white man has destroyed not only their character, but the people as well.”

It was the heyday of the hero, and these adventurer-filmmakers steered the country's imagination away from war and toward exotic lands and strange customs while becoming heroes themselves for their daring and artistry. Many of these films were box office hits and the *New York Times* regularly chose them for its “Ten Best Films of the Year” list. *CHANG*, in the first year of the Academy Awards, was one of three films nominated for “Artistic Quality of Production,” along with *SUNRISE* and *THE CIRCUS*. It must have been a heady experience for Cooper and Schoedsack to be placed in the company of F. W. Murnau (who, with Flaherty, would later direct *TABU*) and Charlie Chaplin.

With *THE JAZZ SINGER* (1928) came the need for the heavier and bulkier sound cameras and motion pictures became studio-bound for the most part. The transition to talking films was fast and furious—by the end of 1929 some 8,700 movie theaters were equipped to show “talkies.” *TABU*, which was released with a “synchronized” music score, was one of the last major films to be shot “silent” and one of the last great

adventure-exploration films for thirty years, until the rise of television, Jacques Cousteau and the National Geographic specials.



#### PRODUCTION HISTORY:

*The motto of Cooper-Schoedsack Productions:  
“The Three Ds: Keep it Distant, Difficult and Dangerous.”*

On their way back from a disastrous expedition with Captain Edward Salisbury on the *Wisdom II*, Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack decided they could do better. The two men had heard of the great film *NANOOK OF THE NORTH* that had just opened and thought they would do the same for the nomadic Asian tribes — specifically the Kurds who had the reputation for magnificent costumes and local scenery. Cooper went back to New York where he loaned \$5,000 dollars from his family. While searching for more funds in the city, he ran into Marguerite Harrison and she joined them in search of adventure. In 1925, they released *GRASS*, a remarkable documentary of the migration of the Bakhtiari tribe of Persia, involving at least fifty thousand people and half a million animals over an impossible terrain. Cooper traveled with the film on the college lecture circuit to limited response before Paramount executive Jesse Lasky saw it at a private dinner party. The studio acquired *GRASS* and released it to critical acclaim and great profit. Lasky, a former adventurer and Klondike prospector, had long been enthusiastic about “exploration” films and was instrumental in Paramount’s distribution of such classics as *TABU*, *WITH BYRD TO THE SOUTH POLE* and *THE SILENT ENEMY*. The success of *GRASS* led the filmmakers to then Siam to film *CHANG*.

#### MERIAN COLDWELL COOPER (October 24, 1893 - April 21, 1973)

Born in Florida and educated at Annapolis and the school of hard knocks, Merian C. Cooper’s life was the stuff of the adventure books he loved as a child. By the age of six he had determined to become an explorer. After leaving the Naval Academy, at the school’s request, Cooper joined the Merchant Marine and later

worked as a journalist. Eager to fight in Europe, he enlisted in the National Guard, finally making it to Europe in the final months of the war as a fighter pilot. Shot down in a dogfight and severely burned, he celebrated the Armistice in a German POW camp. After the war he was assigned to a US relief mission in Poland, where he met refugees of the Russian civil war. His future collaborator, Ernest B. Schoedsack, described their first meeting in 1918 Vienna: "I was at the Franz Josef Railroad Station. Down a platform came this Yank in a dirty uniform, wearing one French boot and one German one. It was Coop. He was just out of German prison and he wanted to get to Warsaw. He had once been kicked out of the Naval Academy and had sold his sword. Now he'd found the guy who had it and he'd bought it back." Cooper helped form the Kosciusko division of the Polish air force and fought against the Red Army. Shot down, he was sent to Siberia where he managed to escape from prison camp and traveled 26 days on foot to Latvia. Imprisoned there as a suspected Communist, he was rescued by a US relief mission and sent home.

Back in New York, Cooper wrote about his adventures for the daily newspapers and spent his evenings studying at the American Geographical Society. In 1922, he joined Captain Edward Salisbury's voyage around the world. When the expedition's cameraman jumped ship after a bad storm, Cooper suggested Schoedsack as his replacement. In North Africa, the team worked on a documentary about Ethiopian leader Ras Tafari (later Haile Selassie), but most of the footage was lost in a fire. After leaving Salisbury's ill-fated expedition, Cooper and Schoedsack decided to work together on a film about the migration of the Bakhtiari tribe of Persia. The film was GRASS, a tremendous hit. They followed this success with the even more popular CHANG. Their next film, THE FOUR FEATHERS (1929) was set in North Africa. Cooper then turned his attention to his other passion, aviation. He helped found Western and Pan American Airways. Cooper and Schoedsack joined forces again (along with Schoedsack's wife, screenwriter Ruth Rose) to produce the spectacular KING KONG (1933). The character of Denham (played by Robert Armstrong) in KING KONG is modeled after its creator, Merian Cooper. In 1933 Cooper married actress Dorothy Jordan and succeeded David O. Selznick as vice-president in charge of production at RKO. There he supervised or produced LITTLE WOMEN, FLYING DOWN TO RIO and Ernest Schoedsack's THE MOST DANGEROUS GAME, SON OF KONG and THE LAST DAYS OF POMPEII. He was one of the first to see the potential of Technicolor and later convinced Selznick to use the process for GONE WITH THE WIND. During World War II, Cooper served as chief of staff of General Chennault in China, rising to the rank of brigadier general in the air force reserve. In 1946, Cooper formed an independent production company with John Ford and supervised the production of Ford's THE FUGITIVE (1947), FORT APACHE (1948), SHE WORE A YELLOW RIBBON (1949), WAGONMASTER (1950), and THE SEARCHERS (1956). He also produced Schoedsack's MIGHTY JOE YOUNG (1949). In 1952 he coproduced and codirected (with Lowell Thomas) THIS IS CINERAMA, which grossed over \$30 million in the US alone. That same year the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences honored him for "his many innovations and contributions to the art of the motion picture."

Cooper died of cancer at age 79, only hours after the death of Robert Armstrong, the man who portrayed the explorer-filmmaker in his most famous creation.

**ERNEST BEAUMONT SCHOEDSACK**  
(June 8, 1893 - December 23, 1979)

The self-described, "strong, silent type," Ernest B. Schoedsack was the perfect complement and foil for his long-time collaborator and friend, Merian C. Cooper. They were a Mutt and Jeff pairing, with Schoedsack a thin, quiet 6'5" and Cooper a short, outgoing and fast-talking dynamo. Where Cooper was interested in the business and publicity end of film production, Schoedsack was the master technician, whose spectacular camera work and daring set-ups made their films critical as well as financial successes. At the same time they

had much in common—sharing a wanderlust and a fascination with the way people lived around the world and the courage and determination to record it on film.

Born in Council Bluffs, Iowa, Schoedsack ran away from home at twelve and headed for California. By the time he was seventeen he was working as a cameraman for Mack Sennett. When World War I began, Schoedsack enlisted in the Photographic Department of the Signal Corps and was sent to France. He filmed many major battles and became a captain in a Red Cross photographic unit. At the end of the war, he stayed on in Europe as a freelance newsreel cameraman. Schoedsack met Cooper in Vienna in 1918 (see Schoedsack's quote in Cooper bio). In Poland, he filmed the Polish-Russian campaign and generally "did everything from convoying supplies across a rather hostile Germany to driving ambulances ... even going down to the Black Sea to bring Polish refugees back from the Russian oil fields." For Schoedsack, the high point of his "adventure" was during the Polish retreat from Kiev: "I was the last to get across the great Dnieper bridge and the excited Poles blew it up on my heels, but I did get a chance to turn around and get the thing coming down — with a motion picture camera." Reunited with Cooper when he joined Edward Salisbury's journalistic crew, Schoedsack filmed the future Haile Selassie in Addis Abbaba and left the expedition with Cooper when the ship lost its keel. The two traveled together from Ethiopia to Paris and had "plenty of time to talk things over about our future plans."

They decided to record the migration of the Bakhtiari tribe of Persia. After filming GRASS, Cooper went to Hollywood to negotiate the distribution for the film while Schoedsack raised money for the team as a cameraman for the New York Zoological Society's trip to the Galapagos Islands, headed by William Beebe. Another expedition member, Ruth Rose, later became Schoedsack's wife and author of the screenplay for KING KONG. GRASS was the first of Schoedsack and Cooper's collaborations – they joined forces again to make CHANG, THE FOUR FEATHERS, KING KONG, THE MOST DANGEROUS GAME, SON OF KONG, THE LAST DAYS OF POMPEII and MIGHTY JOE YOUNG. On his own, Schoedsack directed RANGO, BLIND ADVENTURE, LONG LOST FATHER, TROUBLE IN MOROCCO, OUTLAWS OF THE ORIENT, DR. CYCLOPS and an uncredited prologue to Cooper's THIS IS CINERAMA.

During World War II Schoedsack served in the Air Force. While testing equipment in a tank at Edwards Air Force Base, a shell exploded nearby and his head hit the bottom of the tank turret, detaching the eye retina. Subsequent operations couldn't repair the damage and Schoedsack was virtually blind for the last 35 years of his life.

A footnote to movie history: Schoedsack and Cooper's most famous screen appearance was as the chief observer and flight commander of the plane that finally downs King Kong from atop the Empire State Building, under Schoedsack's direction. This bit of casting was inspired by Cooper's comment: "We should kill the sonofabitch ourselves!"

**MARGUERITE ELTON BAKER HARRISON**  
(October 1879 – July 16, 1967)

Marguerite Elton Baker Harrison was born into a wealthy and respected Baltimore family. Her father, Bernard N. Baker, founded the famed Atlantic Transport Lines for transatlantic travelling. Her childhood was like a fairy tale — the best schools, meetings with the world's most famous people, and even a presentation at the English court. But even then, she felt stifled by society's strict conventions. While still very young, she disappointed her family by becoming engaged to Thomas Bullitt Harrison — a young man of exceptional quality but lacking the influential and powerful ancestors the Bakers had hoped for. Still, the wedding in 1901 was one of the most lavish ever seen in Baltimore, including two reverends, a bishop, ten

bridesmaids and ten groomsmen. By the next year, she had given birth to a son, and there was fourteen years of happy married life that followed. But in 1915, Thomas Bullitt Harrison died, leaving her in debt of nearly \$70,000. She made two vows that year. First, to repay her husband's debt which at the time she was not legally bound. And second, never to be so attached to anyone again.

On what must of been a whim, but accompanied by references from some of the most notable citizens of the city, Marguerite applied for a job at the almost entirely male enclave, The Baltimore Sun. She became an accomplished journalist, but a desire for adventure soon overtook her. With America's entry into World War I, Marguerite chose to apply to the Military Intelligence Department (MID) and asked to serve her country. It was an astonishing decision that would lead her to international notoriety. She was thirty nine years old at the time.

At a salary of \$250 a month (and the same for expenses), Marguerite Harrison became a spy for the United States. Only her family and her managing editor at the Sun knew this. When Armistice was declared, the government decided to send her to unoccupied Germany, under cover as the Sun's special correspondent. After the peace treaty was signed in 1919, she went back to Baltimore, once again writing for the newspaper. But her boredom soon made her think of more adventures and with Russia in the midst of Civil War, she volunteered to MID.

Once again, Marguerite went as a reporter for the Baltimore Sun and found herself waiting in Poland for further orders. It was there at a Red Cross dance where she first met Captain Merian C. Cooper, then a member of the famed Polish Kosciusko Squadron — a unit of American flyers there to help the Poles against the Russians. They shared a few dances and casual conversation, and the next day, Cooper returned to his squadron. Little did either one know how their lives would intertwine those next few years.

With no official orders to enter Russia and time wasting away, Marguerite decided to take the obvious route. She, and a Russian Jew by the name of Dr. Anna Karlin as her companion, simply walked across the barbed-wire entanglements into Russian territory. Picked up by Soviet patrols, she ended up a few weeks later in Moscow. In spite of her illegal entrance, the authorities decided she could remain in Moscow for two weeks, and then after that, a month. She quickly fell in love with Russian culture and social events. During this time, she worked with the Red Cross to supply packages of food and clothing to American prisoners. One, she discovered, was Cooper, who had been shot down near Kiev. Cooper claimed later on that her assistance saved his life.

Then, one day, even though she had not actively written any reports or made contact with MID, she was arrested as a spy. She spent ten months in a Bolshevik prison where conditions were horrendous. Back home, however, her imprisonment had become an international incident. Through the efforts of the Sun and some personal friends, she was released from prison and soon found herself on a train to Berlin. At the station, Cooper was waiting to greet her — he had escaped a Soviet prison and walked back, through Latvia into Poland. On her return to the States, she quit MID and devoted herself to writing about her experiences. *Marooned in Moscow* became a big hit and this started her career as an author and speaker.

But her wanderlust continued and she soon was exploring mainland China. On a trip to this country's Far Eastern Republic, she found it had been taken over by Soviet soldiers the night before. She was arrested again and taken to Moscow. There was put in prison for ten weeks while awaiting trial. Luck, however, was on her side. An American Relief Administration officer happened to spot her one day and knew who she was. Due to America's current relief efforts for the Soviet population, her release was quickly arranged. Marguerite arrived home in March of 1923. Her book on her Chinese and Soviet exploits, entitled *Red Bear or Yellow Dragon* came out the following year.

Only a few months later, however, her desire for still *more* adventure took over. It was in New York where she once again met up with Cooper. Having a common interest in foreign exploration, they decided to make a travel film that would show *real* danger and courage. They invited Ernest B. Schoedsack to be their cameramen and the partnership for GRASS was formed.

Details of their remarkable journey can be found in her autobiography, *There's Always Tomorrow* (1935). On her return from Persia, she found herself completely annoyed at the newspaper reporters' trivial and insulting questions about her life such as what kind of lipstick she used in the Gobi Desert and did she fall in love with a sheik. There was little interest in what she had actually experienced and learned. So in 1925, Marguerite Harrison helped form with three other female explorers, the Society of Woman Geographers. It is still an influential and important organization that has spread worldwide, and has included some of the most distinguished women of this century.

In 1926, Marguerite married an English actor by the name of Arthur Middleton Blake and moved to Hollywood to help his career. Her marriage seemed to stall her interest in wandering the earth, and she settled down to continue her writing and lectures. After Blake's death in 1949, she returned to Baltimore. At the age of seventy-eight, she still found herself traveling by freight boat to South America and later covered Africa, Australia and post-World War II Berlin. There, she even enjoyed a last daring adventure using a ploy she had used years before. Marguerite traveled through forbidden Communist East Berlin by simply walking through the lines. She died at the age of eighty-eight, on July 16, 1967. Her ashes were scattered out to sea.

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## Milestone Film & Video

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ADOLPH ZUKOR AND JESSE L. LASKY  
PRESENT

# GRASS



Presented by  
MERIAN COOPER  
ERNEST SHOESACK  
MARGUERITE HARRISON  
and  
RICHARD T. CARVER

a  
Paramount  
Picture

