



THE LITTLE KIDNAPPERS, first released in 1953, is a September, 2014 LVCA dvd donation to the Hugh Stoupe Memorial Library of the Heritage United Methodist Church of Ligonier, Pennsylvania. Below is Kino Ken's review of that film.

Great Britain 1953 black-and-white live action feature drama 93 minutes
Group Film Productions Limited Distributed by the J. Arthur Rank Organization.
Producers: Sergei Nolbandov and Leslie Parkyn

12 of a possible 20 points

*** of a possible *****

Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance

(j) designates juvenile performer

Points:

- | | |
|---|---------------------------------|
| 2 | Direction: Philip Leacock* |
| 0 | Editing: John Trumper |
| 1 | Cinematography: Eric Cross |
| | Stills Photographer: Ian Jeayes |
| 1 | Lighting |
| 2 | Screenplay: Neil Paterson |
| 0 | Music: Bruce Montgomery |
| 1 | Art Director: Edward Carrick |
| | Set Dresser: Vernon Dixon |
| | Dress Designer: Joan Ellacott |
| | Make-Up: Geoffrey Rodway* |

2 Sound: Sydney Wiles*, Gordon McCallum* (Sound Recordists)
2 Acting
1 Creativity
12 total points

Cast: Duncan Macrae* (Grandfather, Jim MacKenzie), Vincent Winter* (j)
(Davy MacKenzie, age 5), Jon Whitely (j) (Harry MacKenzie, age 8),
Jean Anderson* (Grandma Mackenzie), Theodore Bikel (Doctor Willem Bloem),
Adrienne Corri (Aunt Kirsty), Christopher Beeny (j) (Jan Hooft, Jr.), Jameson Clark
(Tom Cameron), Howard Connell (Archibald Jenkins), John Rae (Andrew McCleod),
Jack Stewart (Dominie, schoolmaster), James Sutherland (Arron McNab),
Francis De Wolff (Jan Hooft, Sr.), Eric Woodburn (Sam Howie), Alex McCrindle
(The Minister), Anthony Michael Heathcote (j) (Baby Girl Hooft)

Filmed along the scenic coast of Scotland, though set in Canada's Nova Scotia, THE LITTLE KIDNAPPERS takes viewers back to the early years of the twentieth century, when the aftermath of the Boer War in South Africa left scars on both British and Dutch families. For the MacKenzies, the fighting resulted in loss of a father in military service and death of a daughter-in-law from disease, possibly exacerbated by grief for a killed spouse. Consequently two small sons are relocated from Winnipeg, Manitoba to the backwoods of their grandparent's hardscrabble farm adjoining the tidewater of Nova Scotia. Accustomed to modern furnishings, stylish clothes, and pampered pets, the boys discover to their chagrin that MacKenzie Farm offers nothing but a recalcitrant goat and chickens with no interest in becoming playmates. Grandfather Jim is a patriarch of the old school: cold, consumed by regret for estrangement from his son, nursing a grudge against prospering Dutch neighbors. Since Boer settlers who killed his son were also Dutch, all of that descent are perceived as enemies. This bias is forcefully conveyed to grandchildren, though only Harry seems to wholeheartedly adopt it. As a result, a schoolyard tussle with Jan Hooft, Jr., a Dutch youth and classmate Harry's own age, lands both boys in hot water. Hypocritically, Grandfather whales Harry for acting on a prejudiced conviction. Yet the boy was only executing the elder MacKenzie's generic hatred.

Both youngsters, Harry and Davy, are determined to get themselves some pet. Preferably a dog. This brings them into direct conflict with their guardian, who sees only expense and no utility in such an outlay. Money is difficult for these Mackenzies to acquire. With added expense of feeding and clothing two descendants not yet old enough to contribute due share of labor to the family, no adult favors further spending for another hungry freeloader.

What Grandfather and his wife most value is the land they own. Being illiterate, Jim hasn't taken the trouble to duly register with the land office a hill overlooking his cabin. Consequently, that property has been claimed by the neighboring Hooft family, who did fill out required paperwork to obtain it. While local law supports the Hooft claim, Jim MacKenzie refuses to honor the court's order. He threatens to shoot on sight anybody seen trespassing on disputed upland, actually carrying out his pledge one day when Harry and young Jan engage in a renewal of hostilities there. Sending a bullet whizzing past their faces results in unanticipated ending of childish mutual belligerence, hardly what Jim desires. It makes what follows doubly heartbreaking.

Further escalating conflict, the MacKenzie family's daughter loves another Dutchman, Doctor Willem Bloem, a divorced childless exile from his homeland. Kirsty's attachment to this melancholy older man is discouraged by both her parents, but not extinguished. When Davy is injured one day in a fall while attempting to hurl a large stone at Bloem fishing below, the physician, unaware of being an intended target, hastens to bandage the boy's bleeding leg. Then he carries him home, where a relieved Kirsty expresses gratitude the rest of her family choose not to confess. This incident allows the young woman to later visit Bloem's homestead, offering as excuse a wish for medical confirmation of her nephew's healed limb. Davy's observable agility notwithstanding, the medic does as requested. Of greater interest to his restless patient is a friendly dog discovered on the grounds. Harry remains aloof at a distance, refusing blatant fraternization with a MacKenzie foe. Their elders come to a misunderstanding, causing Kirsty to beat an unhappy retreat back to her home. That foreshortens Davy's entertaining gambols with Bloem's pet.

Harry, increasingly isolated, and ever stymied in his plan for obtaining a dog, scouts the area in search of an alternative. What he eventually finds is an

apparently abandoned infant. Very well. That can take the place of a mutt. So the boy makes a rough shelter for it, schemes to fetch goat milk for nourishment, then eventually initiates Davy into a conspiracy of silence. They can share responsibility for the baby.

For a day, everything seems satisfactory. Their companion, being fed and changed, the latter task done exclusively by Harry, is reasonably content.

But the Hooft family, discovering its youngest member has vanished, is panicked. Enlisting assistance from friends and concerned neighbors, they begin a sweeping search of the area. The MacKenzies are not willing initially to join in this effort. What concern of theirs is the fate of a Dutch child?

When Harry, devotedly attending to self-imposed duty, plays truant from school for two days, the dominie sets off after classes to determine his whereabouts. Jim's assumption his grandson has been duly present at the schoolhouse is challenged by their community's vexed schoolmaster. So Grandfather sends Davy to fetch his absent brother in order to explain these mysterious absences. Reluctantly, elder sibling transfers childcare responsibility to younger. He returns to the MacKenzie homestead. There, the boy lamely admits awol status. His dominie wishes to bring the culprit immediately back to the school for manual discipline. Jim forbids it. He will handle obligatory whipping himself. That proves impossible. For his grandson refuses to clarify his previous whereabouts and activities, landing himself a trip to the woodshed until such time as he elects full confession.

With Harry under unofficial house arrest, his assignments fall to an overwhelmed Davy. The five-year-old must brave darkness and impending storm to stand vigil over a now twice-deserted infant. Realizing despairingly the younger MacKenzie is not up to these requirements, Harry has a change of heart and unburdens himself to Grandfather. The older MacKenzie is led to an impromptu nursery, picks up its wailing inhabitant, then carries it safely back to his home. There he cannot resist verbal warfare with waiting Willem. Despite the man's protests of love for Kirsty, the young woman accuses her defender of lying, ultimately running off into the dark to escape further tension. Possibly contemplating suicide, she darts in front of horses belonging to the search party seeking a missing Hooft, getting trampled and losing consciousness. Sobered

riders return Kirsty to the MacKenzies, taking their leave as soon as socially acceptable. Willem begins treatment for the traumatized victim, ordering enforced bed rest. Being assured his aunt is in no danger of death, Harry's ordered to prepare for sleeping.

Night sends no relief for MacKenzie woes, though. For the justice of the peace has been rounded up. Not content with recovery and restoration of lost child to its parents, he arrives all too soon with reinforcing posse to take kidnapper Harry MacKenzie into custody. Charges are being pressed and legal protocol must be followed. If the admitted culprit is found guilty, death by hanging is prescribed as a fit penalty.

What will befall Harry? Will another MacKenzie tragedy overshadow the first? Watch the conclusion of *THE LITTLE KIDNAPPERS* and hope for the best.

Slow pacing and leapfrogging editing leave too much action nebulous, somewhat offsetting superior photography. Leacock's film does succeed in drawing viewers into a more unrushed past, one where religious prohibitions often short-circuited rational judgments about tolerance and child upbringing. From a modern standpoint, Jim's inflexibility, inability to show love for offspring, and bullying treatment of wife and daughter are inexcusably aggravating to watch. Yet this kind of conduct was by no means uncommon in the time period portrayed. Duncan Macrae, abetted ably by makeup magic from Geoffrey Rodway is convincing in both tone and manner as Jim MacKenzie, powerfully transmitting to audiences the insular psychological and physical world of that rugged pioneer. As his spouse, Jean Anderson matches his evocation of plain, honest poverty eroded into stoic determination by harsh experience, resisting stony soil and rebuffs from war and weather. Theirs is a family locked into mourning, strangled by the past, with little hope for a better future. Into such bleakness comes a possibility for change, improvement, outpouring of trammelled affections. Depicting in her evolution just that kind of transformational outreach, Adrienne Corri's Kirsty readily wins viewer sympathy for a character caught in a crossfire between two generations with different outlooks and divergent dreams. Not so successful is Theodore Bikel's Doctor Bloem, who really doesn't act like someone enraptured by his nominal beloved. He seems too much motivated by social duty, too little inspired by uncalculated love. As canine-obsessed orphans, Jon Whitely

and Vincent Winter employ wonderfully precise diction. Persuasive performances demand much more, however. Being younger and less experienced, Vincent is sometimes hesitant in line delivery, apt to take a breath in the wrong spot, occasionally responding extemporaneously to a babe's fumblings at his face or companionable overtures from a tail-wagger. Even so, he exhibits a wider range of facial expressions than his senior partner, attempting to at least look natural, regardless of whether he truly understands the transpiring drama. Jon Whitely is not as unaffected, supplying minimal changes of intonation and volume. Worse, he appears to possess only two facial expressions in his repertory: alert attentiveness and dawning smiles. That restricted capability for external projection of emotions produces at moments incongruous impassivity or suppressed joy, both undercutting credibility as a sensitive, intelligent, hopeful child.

Perhaps as compensation, Bruce Montgomery's completely overstated score insists on foreshadowing each scene with oppressive emotional explicitness. Too often characters must plunge themselves into a setting they had no part in creating, causing a forced tone to prevail rather than gradual revelation of personality and viewpoint.

Though there's little glamor in its rugged Nova Scotia background, the story is enhanced by costumes and carpentry strictly adhering to place and time. Clothes and rooms do look satisfyingly lived in and worn, not just hastily adopted for a scene shoot.

Outdoor lighting is adequate, interiors a trifle underlit, though not to an annoying extent.

Crisp sound recording of both dialect and ambient noises is evidenced throughout the film, a tribute to the craftsmanship of Sidney Wiles and Gordon McCallum.

Given the double curse of child and animal actors, Philip Leacock does a commendable job of keeping juveniles emotionally locked into scenes, irrespective of whether supporting players were predictable humans or variable beasts. His expertise with children can also be seen to great advantage in

HAND IN HAND, made about seven years later, with equal dramatic effectiveness, also available to borrow from the Hugh Stouppe Memorial Library of the Heritage United Methodist Church in Ligonier, Pennsylvania.

Recommended viewing for families willing to accept black-and-white photography, THE LITTLE KIDNAPPERS is a moving foray into customs and settings of the past. Both its boy actors were awarded honorary juvenile Oscars as a tribute to sustained achievement, though Whitely hardly in retrospect seems meriting one. Recommended for lovers of family drama and Scottish scenery. Suitable for mature children ages nine and up.