

THE MOVIE PAGE

FILM CLIPS *Also opening today*

'Coming to Light: Edward S. Curtis and the North American Indians'



Documentary. Directed by Anne Makepeace. (Not rated. 85 minutes. At the Roxie.)

Documentarian Anne Makepeace's "Coming to Light: Edward S. Curtis and the North American Indians" is a riveting portrait of one of America's most famous photographers, a man whose warts were not always visible to his fans.

But there's more than biography to this exceptional film, made as a Public Broadcasting Service documentary and due to air on PBS later this year. It is being given a theatrical run as well, owing in part to its unusual scope.

Makepeace not only shapes a robust portrait but also adds the reverberations of Curtis' historic, though occasionally misguided, work. In short, "Coming to Light" looks at the artist and asks how his vision of native cultures affected the cultures themselves. It's a tack that adds depth and meaning beyond biography.

Curtis (1868-1952) turned away



A Hopi boy in "Coming to Light."

from photographing high society in his hometown of Seattle to documenting the most marginalized members of society, the American Indians. He saw extraordinary humanity threatened with extinction and wanted to capture the people he called "the beautiful" in their diverse lives all over the United States.

The ambitious, charismatic Curtis spent three decades compiling the largest photographic and sound record of Indians ever assembled. Famous as an adventuring artist, he even tried his hand at commercial moviemaking and worked for a time in Hollywood. But he died in relative obscurity and poverty.

Most of his work is contained in the 20-volume "The North American Indian," devoted to the major

tribes. Curtis' devotion to his work was so all-consuming that he essentially deserted his family, frittered away his money and risked his life in far-flung and dangerous expeditions. Makepeace's film, however, goes well beyond the man.

In telling the story of Curtis she also glimpses the tragic story of cultural devastation and explores the surprising impact Curtis' art wound up having on today's Indians, some of whom learned about their traditions through his unusually vivid record of their tribal forebears, fashions, art and customs.

The film becomes an thoughtful exploration of powerful ideas about the relationship between an artist and his subjects.

— Peter Stack