

Canada's Sweetheart: The Saga of Hal C. Banks

It's impossible to imagine any director but Donald Brittain doing justice to the subject matter of *Canada's Sweetheart: The Saga of Hal C. Banks*. Brittain's ironic tone and sensibility here are perfect for dealing with the sordid figure of Banks himself, as well as with this particularly ignoble episode in recent Canadian history.

Canada's Sweetheart traces the Canadian career of an American convicted felon and union strongarm invited into Canada by the St-Laurent cabinet in 1949 to crush the Canadian Seamen's Union and replace it with the American-based Seafarer's International Union. Ostensibly brought in to eradicate "Commies" from Canada's waterfronts, Hal C. Banks embarked upon a 13-year-long reign of terror, violence and corruption — with the blessings of the Canadian government, business interests, the other international unions, and the RCMP. His gangster tactics of blacklistings and vicious beatings dealt out to non-S.I.U. Canadian seamen, and his sweetheart deals with the shipping companies, firmly entrenched Banks and the S.I.U. as the 'Canadian' way. Destroying the careers of some 6,000 Canadian seamen in the process, Banks became the darling of the Canadian Establishment of the 1950s: granted landed immigrant status despite his criminal record; an Honorary Doctor of Law degree from McGill; and named by the federal government in 1954 as Canada's representative to the International Labour Organization in Switzerland.

The film follows Banks' career up to 1962 when the Norris Commission hearings began to uncover the sordid operations conducted through his office. Characteristically, Banks jumped bail and escaped across the border, protected from extradition by none other than U.S. Secretary of State Dean Rusk himself, at the urging of an unnamed Canadian cabinet minister.

Brittain's documents this 'saga' with the right touch of understatement and black humour. In other hands, the material might have become simply another earnest investigation into the seamy underside of Canadian history. But under Brittain's direction, this NFB-CBC co-production achieves a level of narrative depth that perhaps could only come from someone whose films have so often explored the shadow-side of humanity and human affairs. This is not to say that Brittain's tone here is jaded; rather, it is the voice of a man undaunted by the material: unsurprised by its shocks and horrors and revelations and, therefore, capable of shaping it into a work that achieves mythic dimensions.

Brittain's technique here is to interweave current interviews with many of the principals who lived through this period, and dramatic reenactments centering around the figure of Banks. Maury Chaykin is a brilliant choice for the starring role: conveying the complex combination of Banks' charm, cunning, ruthlessness, and low-life American naivety. But even more than selecting a fine cast for the dramatic scenes, Brittain has given them the mise-en-scène of early 1950s *film noir*, using cinematic techniques and visual signifiers from this period of Hollywood filmmaking to further engage us in this 'saga'.

At times the dramatic reenactments have the look of a Sam Fuller film: stark and jarringly violent in their lighting, compositions and camera angles, with eerie shadows and a kind of 'seedy' quality to the image. Banks himself has all the trappings of a *film noir* mobster: his affectations of cultivated taste in decor, his 'moll' who cohabits his mirrored boudoir, his predilection for long white Cadillacs, his slightly bizarre obsession with pet fish; even Banks' size suggests the purposeful distortions common in *film noir*. Brittain plays with these elements masterfully and subtly to enhance and illuminate Banks' character, but also to evoke a past era most familiar to us now through its movies. It is a brilliant way to tell this saga, not only because it allows the imagery to speak beyond the voice-over narration, but because it recreates the aura most appropriate to both the time-period and the subject matter.

This stylistic choice also ultimately moves the entire Banks saga into the metaphoric dimension, where it becomes a discourse on far more than 1950s labour history. Already one critic has seen *Canada's Sweetheart* as "a metaphor for American cinema's hold over Canada", a reading somewhat substantiated by the film's *noir* subtext as well as its

fly-by-night American anti-hero's domination over the unfolding of events. Clearly, Brittain has created a richly complex and engaging work which deserves extended critical attention, as well as widespread screenings.

If the film can be faulted, it would be for its lack of background into the Canadian Seamen's Union prior to Banks' arrival in Canada. In particular, the film mentions the CSU strikes which had been tying up shipping in Canada and around the world, but does not explain any of the motivations behind the strikes, their connection to opposition to the U.S. Marshall Plan, or the business practices of ship-owners which contributed to the radicalization of the CSU. Without such background, we are left to assume that the only reason for smashing the CSU was its suspected Communist backing. That there were greater political interests at stake — especially U.S. State Department interests — in undermining the CSU might have been more fully elaborated.

Canada's Sweetheart: The Saga of Hal C. Banks won the Toronto City-TV Award For Excellence in Canadian Production when it was screened at the 1985 Festival of Festivals, and it will surely win other awards for Donald Brittain, whose documentary career has now become a saga of its own.

Joyce Nelson •

CANADA'S SWEETHEART: THE SAGA OF HAL C. BANKS d.narr. Donald Brittain sc. Brittain, Richard Nielsen res. Richard Nielsen, Geoffrey Ewen d.o.p. Andreas Poulsen eds. Rita Roy, Richard Todd mus. Eldon Rathburn sd. Richard Besse cast. d. Marsha Chesley a.d. Richard Flower art. d. Robert Hackborn cost. des. Margaret Laurent p.c./dist. NFB-CBC running time: 120 mins. l.p. Maury Chaykin, R. H. Thomson, Gary Reineck, Sean McCann, Colin Fox, Chuck Shamata, Jason Dean, Peter Boretzki, Jonathan Welsh, Larry Reynolds, Barry Stevens, Marie-Helene Fontaine, Don McManus.

• Hal Banks tells the SIU brass the Canadians have been put in their place



on Bethune been published?

Donald Brittain: Oh yes, it was one of the things. Kemeny brought me an article in *Macleans*, I think he was using *Macleans* to learn English, but anyway he came upon this article and I read it and I said: oh yes, that's interesting. And then Ted Allen produced the book and we hooked up with Ted Allen who gave us a lot of help, Wilder Penfield too. But aside from the fact, it was a great adventure story. It was the first time I really got involved in film biography and it was a very interesting experience, particularly dealing with dead people. I tend to prefer dealing with dead people; they can't fight back for one thing, and for another the story is complete. Gradually we got to know Bethune. We started out as hero worshippers, then we got to the point where we really disliked the man intensely.

Cinema Canada: Did it begin because here was an unknown Canadian hero to bring to the attention of the Canadian people?

Donald Brittain: Yes, though halfway through we decided he wasn't a hero and then we gradually rounded it out. The great moment for me in that film is when we screened it for Bethune's friends, many of whom were very much alive and kicking. The thing I was really worried about was that we used an actor, Michael Caine, who did Bethune's voice and we were afraid that would throw people off if they knew the person — and a lot of the people in the theatre had slept with him too. And they liked the film. But with *Memorandum*, it was just something I felt I wanted to do.

Cinema Canada: What was it you said was the great moment for you? That you had succeeded in having caught the man?

Donald Brittain: Yes, because we weren't sure. And there were people there who knew better than us. We knew we had a good film, but it was a sort of a tough thing to balance.

Cinema Canada: Was doing this successfully a validation of film for you?

Donald Brittain: Well, one thing it taught me was the impact of film, because if we had written this thing for *Macleans* magazine, it couldn't have had a tenth of the impact it had on the screen, when it ran on television. And I think, then I had a sense of the power of the medium which I found to be a bit scary but I was certainly glad I'd stuck with the business at that point.

Cinema Canada: How 'scary'?

Donald Brittain: Well, it goes back to Leni Riefenstahl and the Nazis, and the things that you can do with people in audiences in terms of manipulation. It became easier and easier to play the tricks that I wanted to use, whether I wanted to make the audience laugh or cry or whatever... It seemed to be relatively easy to do.

Cinema Canada: Once you realized that it did work?

Donald Brittain: Once I realized it worked, then the responsibility of the person making the film became very real, because these were things which could affect an awful lot of people, and