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. Essentially brought in to eradicate 'Commies' from Canada's waterfronts, Hal C. Banks embarked upon a 13-year-long reign of terror, violence and corruption - all with the blessing of the Canadian government, business interests, the other international unions, and the RCMP. His gangster tactics of blacklists and vicious beatings extended as far as non-S.I.U. Canadian seamen, and his sweatshop deals with the shipping companies, firmly entrenched Banks and the S.I.U. in 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 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 Organisation 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, the urging of an unnamed Canadian cabinet minister.

Brittain's documentary 'saga' with the right touch of understatement and black humour. In other hands, the material might have become simply another earnest investigation into a sordid underside of Canadian history. But under Brittain's direction, this NFB-CBC production achieves a level of narrative depth that perhaps could only come from someone whose films have often explored the shadowy side of 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 mythical dimensions.