A eulogy for Donald Brittain

BY WILLIAM WEINTRAUB

How fortunate we are to have known Donald Brittain. How unfortunate we are not to have him with us a while longer. But if his life was too short, it was still a life fulfilled, a life abundant. And it was long enough for him to create a legacy that is beyond compare.

Memorial Hall, 1700 York St., The Champignons - the list is astonishingly long. And in his house, up on Clarke Avenue, a shelf groans under the weight of the Erogs, the Genies, the Emmys, the Nellies - a little forest of statuettes with odd names. And on the walls, more awards and certificates and parchments from Edinburgh, Venice, Sydney, Leipzig, New York, Sofia, San Francisco.

This recognition was for films that resound with intimations of immortality. People will want to see them decades from now, even centuries from now. They will be remembered.

But today, on this occasion, I think our memories are more of the man than of his work. And what an extraordinary man was Donald Brittain. Wise, compassionate, complicated, exasperating, funny, melancholy, irritating, contrary, surprising, endlessly entertaining, brilliant, generous - and beloved by such a legion of friends and colleagues.

But above all - extraordinary. Donald seemed incapable of doing anything in an ordinary way. He was not striving for effect; it was just that he had never mastered the ordinary way. For him, the shortest distance between two points could never be a straight line, a boring line.

His clothes, for instance. Can't you see him now, shuffling down those forbidding corridors of the Film Board in that resplendent brown baseball jacket? The corrugated trousers are clinging desperately to the hipbones. People are following him. Are they anxious to see if the uncertain suspension of the trousers will finally collapse? No, they are following him because they want to talk to him. Everybody wanted to talk to Don.

His clothes. Do you remember those strange, shirt-like garments he used to wear in the '70s? What would you call them? Abbreviated caftans (Mu-mus)? He had them made for him by some little old dressmaker. They weren't exactly fashion, but by George they had style. Donald always had style, in everything he did.

That fact started dawnning on us one day in 1963, in the Film Board's Theatre 6, when we watched the cutting copy of a film called Fields of Sacrifice. Donald had arrived at the NFB, at the old sawmill on John Street, in Ottawa, nine years earlier. He was an unemployed journalist who...
thought he might try his hand at writing for films.

In the years that followed, he learned his craft and paid his dues, making all those seemingly useless films like Survival in the Arctic and Setting Fires for Science. Now they've sent him to Europe to make a film about the graves of Canadian soldiers who had died in two wars. It was another useful film, another film that nobody else wanted to make. But Donald astonished us. He came back with a masterpiece. His first masterpiece.

Up till then old Don had been just one of the boys—working hard, making good films and telling lies in the towns. But now we began to suspect that we had a poet in our midst. But of course we were too polite to tell him that.

How the man could write! Is there any one of us who can't hear that voice right now? The cadence, the drone, the rasp, the music, the words. The words. What writer has not envied the way he could find that word, that precisely right word, the word that would stick, that would chill, that would glow in the dark. He would sit at his raspheaded typewriter at three o'clock in the morning, enveloped in a mistake of cigarette smoke, waiting for the word. And it would come to him.

As we all know, the words were very important to his films. It was the words that led an American critic to write that “Donald Brittain purges the documentary of its usual sluggishness and timidity.”

Don refused to let anything he was ever involved in to be boring. And nowhere was this more evident than at the poker table. The most dramatic hands were surely those where old Don had a lot at stake. He could take an agonizingly long time making up his mind whether he should bet or fold. And he would muller away at length, making us privy to the convoluted thought processes that he was bringing to bear on his dilemma. It could be highly irritating. But how we're going to miss that divine irritation. How diminished that poker table is going to be, from now on— if we ever have the heart to resume it.

Don was fascinated by time. As I got into his car with him one day, I wondered why he didn't just stop when he was driving to the Film Board via the Cote des Neiges route, and he had to know exactly how long it would take. Yesterday, he had taken the Victoria Avenue route and he had timed that. In fact he had been timing the two routes all week.

But mind you, we still arrived at the Film Board an hour late for his appointment. Why?

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