



DONALD BRITTAIN

Ronald Blumer & Susan Schouten

GREEN STRIPE AND COMMON SENSE

Documentary film makers in general do not tend to be household names, but even among the inner circle of those familiar with this genre, the name Donald Brittain is surprisingly unknown. While there are magazine articles and book chapters appearing on Richard Leacock, the Maysles, Allan King, Fred Wiseman and other such documentary luminaries, nothing has been written on Donald Brittain. What's strange is that here is a man who has not only made more films than most of the others (for example, in 1966 he worked on seven major films), but during his career has managed to pick up an astonishing number of awards. The list reads like a film festival atlas; Grand Prize at Leipzig, major awards at Melbourne, San Francisco, New York, Venice and the American Film Festival; twice nominated for an Academy Award, and three times winner of the Mulholland Award as the Best Canadian Director. Many of the classics of the National Film Board in the last ten years, the films we tend to remember, are the work of this one man. In addition to his own films, he is frequently called in as a 'film doctor,' often uncredited, to salvage a film that others have made a mess of. Not surprisingly, though his public image is virtually non-existent, he is known and respected by those in the business.

"I had heard a lot about Don before coming to the Board," says Les Rose, a rookie in the growing league of Brittain apprentices who inhabit the damp basement editing rooms of the NFB several floors below the bureaucrats. "Before I met him, I imagined him as some immense impressive character. He was the master at whose feet all of us could sit and learn. And then this guy walked into the room with scotch stains all over his jacket, his shirt hanging out, his hair ruffled and his glasses crookedly falling off his nose and I said to myself, 'my god, is this supposed to be the giant of documentary films?'"

Brittain has spent all but five years of his career making movies for the National Film Board. A large number of his films have been on television and although not many people know his name, most Canadians have seen and remember at least one of his films.

One of the most remarkable of these, *Memorandum*, was made in 1966. Described by one reviewer as a film that yells innuendos and screams its quietness, the film is an account of a

reunion of Jewish survivors of the Nazi death camps, twenty years later. Bosley Crowther, who rarely ever mentions documentaries, gave it a glowing review in the New York Times and it won Brittain five prizes, an Academy Award nomination and 'The Lion of St. Mark,' grand prize at the Venice Film Festival. Equally honoured was the film *Fields of Sacrifice* commissioned three years earlier by the Department of Veteran Affairs on the rather unpromising subject of "showing Canadians, young and old, how well the graves of our war dead in Europe are being maintained." Brittain took this subject, one which everyone at the Board had been trying to avoid and in the words of NFB executive producer Tom Daly, "turned it into a film that everyone wished they had made."

It is his epics that are best remembered but most Don Brittain films are just about people. His portrait of Leonard Cohen won the American Film Festival in 1966 and captured the poet's wit and love of life with an impressively deft lightness. He puts us into the swimming pool of a considerably heavier subject, Lord Thomson of Fleet, a real life Mr. Magoo "who owns more newspapers than any other man in the world." Called *Never a Backward Step* it is again a profoundly telling portrait and again the prizes. But Brittain's most exceptional film must be *Bethune*. "Six-hundred million Chinese know his name" and in 1964 Brittain introduced him to his fellow Canadians and got himself a job offer from Otto Preminger.

After a brief romance with multi-screen filmmaking here and in Japan and a stab at feature film production, "making a bunch of deals by the pool in Beverly Hills, all of which fell through," Brittain has returned as a freelancer to the National Film Board. Like some prodigious chess master, denied his game for the last couple of years, he has returned to documentary with a vengeance; ten productions last year, five more coming up.

Cigarette dangling unlit from his mouth, Brittain himself comes on as a character from some 1930's movie; the unkempt sardonic newspaper man with an off-handed sense of humour, a good taste for whiskey (Usher's Green Stripe, "a real bargain at \$9.80 a bottle") and a passion for baseball. At work, he battles with his material often late into the night, but his sense



John Spotton CSC and Brittain Shooting "Memorandum"

of drama and fun surrounds him with young and enthusiastic apprentices who look up to him as "The Veteran" and consider him their best friend.

Brittain is a very unusual filmmaker in many ways. He started his career twenty years ago and made his name on films that most other film makers would not want to touch, sponsored documentaries by government agencies such as the Department of Labour and the Dominion Fire Commissioner. He was able to turn mediocre subjects into great films because of a basic originality; his ability to set things on their head and see old material with a fresh perspective. He seems to have the knack of approaching each new film with a total openness and he is not impeded, as are so many others, by a preconceived ideology. The result is a sort of courage vis-à-vis the subject and he is not afraid to show what is happening, warts and all.

One unique aspect of Brittain's professional character is a strong desire to work with other people on a project, double teaming or sometimes even triple teaming a film. He loves the excitement and energy of people working together. Although, he long ago hung up "old number 6" at Ottawa's Glebe Collegiate, the cutting room has just become another locker room complete with camaraderie and towel-snapping repartee. It is in this informal but "serious business" atmosphere that Brittain conducts his one man film school. For the less experienced film maker, he is the ideal collaborator - "He asks you what *you* want to do and how can *we* do it."

In terms of technique, Brittain is an unusual filmmaker partly because of his extraordinary use of commentary. For many in the medium, film is seen as a visual form of expression and narration is regarded as somewhere between a cop-out and a mortal sin. Brittain sees film as an emotional medium and he is not afraid to use narration, sometimes very strong narration, to orchestrate this emotion. His writing style has that property of which other writers are so jealous, the ability to be profound in mono-syllables. His editing style is equally to the point. He seems to be able to pull the right shots and telling moments out of a large mass of material and structure them to their maximum impact. In the words of one of his editors, "when Brittain gets finished with a film, there is practically blood dripping off the Steenbeck." Many people come to films as equipment freaks; they worry about cameras, lenses, moviolas and timing lights. Others are in film because they are interested in social causes and political ideology. Somehow, 'people' are often at the very bottom of the list even though they are the raw material of most documentaries. Brittain hardly knows one end of a camera from another and he is not a crusader but he genuinely likes people, their strength and heroism, but also their frailties and eccentricities. Marrin Canell, presently researching a film with Brittain tells about his love of details. "He sent me out to see someone lately and he wanted to know if the guy's teeth were loose or if he drank. When he deals with people, he wants to know their stature, their physical being and if you can get into their mental and moral state, even better." Essentially, it is this love of human detail - the gossip - that distinguishes Brittain as a filmmaker and makes every film he touches consummately interesting.

"I feel that the Film Board is a privileged place to work. Most people here don't appreciate it. They should all be sent into the outside world for a year to see what it's like."

"I'm not particularly interested in making films for converted people on subjects which they adore. I love making films for a mass audience. To hit most people and hold their interest is not that easy to do and most people consider documentary dreary by definition. It has to do with being honest with the subject, but it also has to do with making all the curves. The moment the audience can predict what is going to happen next, you're dead. You've got to fool them, but you've got to fool them in the right way.

I think film, essentially is not intellectual, but a totally emotional thing. Even the most straightforward documentary is all emotion if it's to be good. That's what makes it work. The pacing, the trying to find something that the audience doesn't expect but which is inevitable the moment you turn the corner. It's done with subtle things, it's the tone of someone's voice combined with a certain visual set up against something that went before. All these things make a moment work in a film and you can't just put a formula in a computer, you have to sit there in the editing room, month after month and figure it out.

I learned film making from watching other National Film Board films. I was impressed with Stanley Jackson's commentaries and the work of Unit B. Kroitor, Koenig and Daly, these were men I really respected. A film like *Lonely Boy* knocked me out when I first saw it, it showed me what could be done with film. But these guys, they worked! I think that they used to sleep in the hallways at night. Maybe I started to feel guilty because in the early sixties I seemed to be spending most of my time playing football during working hours with the guys in distribution. You see a film like *Lonely Boy* and you say to yourself, "shit, I wouldn't mind making something half decent."

"When you are out there shooting, you are collecting raw material and that's all. In editing, the fewer your preconceptions towards this material the better. You've got to let the material work on you."

Death Row

When I came to the Film Board in 1954, I was hired as a writer, but I started out as a location manager to learn the trade. Now at this time, I had hardly been out of Ottawa. As foreign correspondent for the *Ottawa Journal* (or the *New York Times* of the North as the management liked to call it) you were lucky if you made it as far as Smith Falls or Pembroke. I had never been on a commercial airline before and suddenly I found myself supposedly in charge of organizing things, furiously driving to Sydney to meet a plane that would be taking us to some outport of Newfoundland. Allan Wargon was the hot shot director of the film, who came straight from the design department at Eaton's. A very heavy Jew. As we were driving at night, he read to me to keep me awake and he had two books; one was the Old Testament and the other was Eisenstein on Film. I was driving along and thinking to myself, "what the fuck have I gotten myself into."

When we arrived, I found myself assistant everything, soundman, PR, assistant cameraman and so on. We sat around in the wilderness for forty-one days waiting for the cloud formations to be just right or some nonsense like that. At nights they had me building trim bins out of wood and at four in the morning, they would send me out with this wind-up tape recorder to get the chirp of the Cape Breton cricket. All this for sixty-five dollars a week.

I came back from location managing and started researching and writing scripts on various subjects. Everyone seemed to hate them and no films ever got made. I kept hearing that they were going to fire me so I kept a low profile. There was this place where you were sent, corridor "W" in the back of the third floor. The smell of death hung over me when they informed me that my office was being moved upstairs. Seventy-five bucks a week, and I knew my days were numbered.

Peter Jones, new director of the sponsored film unit gave me a chance not only to write, but also direct two films: *Setting Fires for Science* and *Winter Building, It Can Be Done*. He told me to get out of town and shoot them and if they were any good then maybe I'd have a job when I came back. I made these two movies and they were pretty bad, but the sponsor liked them, so word went back to the brass and I was saved.

I Make Good Movies Because I Can Spell

At this time there was a million feet of war footage sitting in a vault in Ottawa. They kept saying that someone had to put this stuff together but no one would touch it except this guy Stanley Clish. Well he touched it and then they asked me to come and write it and be editorial supervisor. Thirteen films and a year and a half later, I had become a war expert; me who had never seen a shot fired in anger. The *Canada at War* series was a utilitarian job, it had to be done and I got a great deal of credit for doing it.

Bethune was never officially approved by the Film Board. Throughout the making of the film, they were very lukewarm because of its political implications. We had this one guy Brown, the only Canadian who had been with Bethune in China and he was dying of cancer so we managed to get permission to film the guy. We got other interviews together and I worked on it on and off for one year. I sweated blood to put that film together and I remember the day it was finished. I walked home and stayed under the covers for twenty-four hours, my nerves were shot and I was completely wiped out. The same thing had happened in the *Canada at War* series. I would go to the CBC sound archives and I would listen to war material for ten hours at a stretch. When I came out of there, I didn't know where I was. With Bethune, I was so totally involved, that I thought I knew the guy personally.

All in the Connections

Around this time, I was breaking out of scripted filmmaking. I was getting fed up with my endless research that never seemed to get turned into film. Shooting equipment had gotten lighter, easier to use and less lighting was required. Also, by this time, I was getting a track record and could sell a film with just a treatment. Instead of a detailed script, I began to work on a sort of gut instinct of what the film was going to be all about. *Memorandum* for example, started with two ideas, the banality of evil thing and the fact that some Jews from Canada were going back over there. That was all I had. We just went and shot anything that looked like it would work in any way shape or form, we started to make connections on the spot. *Memorandum* took nine months to cut and when we finished we were left with ninety-two edited sequences we never used.

To make a good documentary, you have to have the time and you have to have the flexibility. A lot of guys go in rigid, "I'm the director, I'm in charge and I'm going to overpower the material." That's a terrible mistake. When you are out there shooting, you are collecting raw material and that's all. In editing, the fewer your preconceptions towards this raw material the better. You've got to let the material work on you.

Editing for me is positioning. A sequence which was dead in one position, becomes fresh in another. The splices are where its happening and its all in the connections. All of a sudden, you realize that you are getting from one place to another in the right way. In editing I look for intent and emotion and the ability to perceive emotion is what separates a good filmmaker from a traffic director.



Arthur Hammond, Donald Brittain and Lord Thompson

"There was this place where you were sent, corridor "W" in the back of the third floor. The smell of death hung over me when they informed me that my office was being moved upstairs. Seventy five bucks a week, and I knew my days were numbered."

Hired Gun

I feel that the Film Board is a privileged place to work. Most people here don't appreciate it. They should all be sent into the outside world for a year to see what it's like. Ideally they should fire half the staff and start dealing with freelancers but they can't. They are locked in a box and freelancers are regarded as a threat.

Film Board recruiting has been poor. When I came back from Japan in 1970 I really felt that the creative lifespan of this place was over. The management may have been at fault but that was not the only problem. There are a lot of people around who have brilliant minds but are very mediocre filmmakers. Some of them are wasting their lives here and it's tragic that somebody at some point didn't come along and say "forget it." Kroitor and I used to sit around at meetings and play this game. Of the seventy-five people around us, how many people would you hire if you were setting up your own company? Maybe a dozen; and the rest just shouldn't be here. I am hard on the Film Board simply because it's such a fantastic place that it should be getting 100 per cent from everyone here, not its present 30 per cent. I myself am not on staff because I am essentially a very lazy person. If I got into a situation here where I could do nothing, I would do it. Greed is a great spur to creativity.

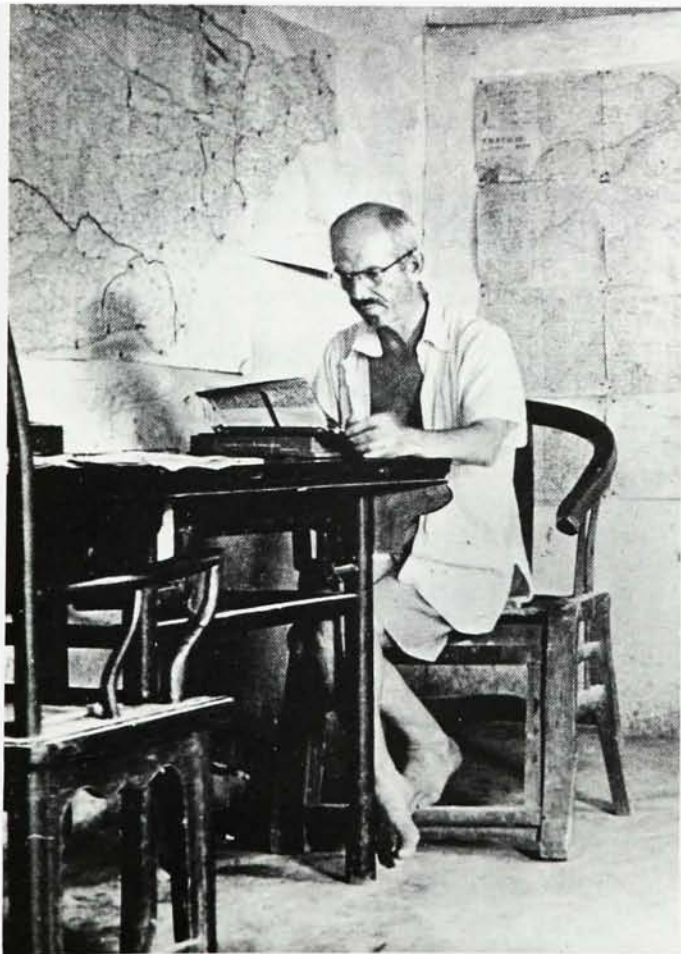
Without my hook-up with the National Film Board, I could never have done what I did. Nowhere else could I have gotten the time or the freedom. Aside from those passing moments of suicidal despair I am really very content with what I am doing. I think of myself in a sense as a hired gun, but I must rely on others to give me the right cause.

Born in Ottawa in 1928, journalist for the *Ottawa Journal*, 1951 to 1954. Joined NFB in 1954. Brittain wrote the commentary for the following films, *The One Man Band That Went To Wall Street*, *Stravinsky*, *What On Earth*, *The Railrodder*, *Labyrinth*, *Helicopter Canada*, and others. He produced Arthur Lipsett's *A Trip Down Memory Lane* (1965) and *Fleur Bleu* by Larry Kent (1972).

- 1958 *Setting Fires For Science*, 20 min.
- Winter Construction, It Can Be Done*, 15 min.
- 1960 *A Day In The Night Of Jonathan Mole*, 29 min.
- 1962 *Canada at War*, a series of thirteen films, 29 min. each
- 1963 *Fields of Sacrifice*, 38 min.
- 1964 *The Campaigners* for the CBC, 35 min.
- Bethune*, with John Kemeny, 60 min.
- 1965 *Mosca*, for the CBC, 10 min.
- 1966 *Ladies & Gentlemen, Mr. Leonard Cohen*, 41 min.
- Memorandum*, with John Spotton, 58 min.
- 1967 *Never A Backward Step*, with Arthur Hammond and John Spotton, 57 min.
- 1968 *Saul Alinsky Went to War*, with Peter Pearson, 57 min.
- Juggernaut*, with Eugene Boyko, 28 min.
- 1970 *Tiger Child*, with Roman Kroitor & Kiichi Ichikawa, for Multi-Screen Corp., 20 min.
- 1971 *The Noblest of Callings, the Vilest of Trades*, with Cameron Graham for the CBC, 90 min.
- 1973 *The People's Railroad*, with John Spotton for Potterton Productions, 60 min.
- Grierson*, 60 min.
- 1974 *In the West* series, *Catskiner Keen*, *Cavendish Country*, *Starblanket*, with John Kramer. *Van's Camp* with Les Rose, 29 min. each.
- Dreamland*, (an early history of Canadian cinema) with John Kramer and Kirwan Cox, 90 min.
- King of the Hill*, with Marrin Canell, 90 min.
- Thunderbirds In China*, with Les Rose, in progress.
- Stratford In Australia*, with John Kramer and Judith Potterton, in progress.



Filming "Memorandum"



Dr. Norman Bethune

An artist enters eagerly into the life of man,
of all men.
He becomes all men in himself.
The function of the artist is to disturb.
His duty is to arouse the sleeper,
to shake the complacent pillars of the world.
He reminds the world of its dark ancestry,
shows the world its present,
and points the way to its new birth.
He makes uneasy the static, the set and the still.
(From the soundtrack of Bethune, 1964.)

"He considered himself a judge of the bootleg whiskey that might be brought to us. He considered that it was not a fit whiskey unless it could be drunk like milk. He prided himself that he could remember the taste of both — good whiskey and milk."
(from an interview in Bethune, 1964.)

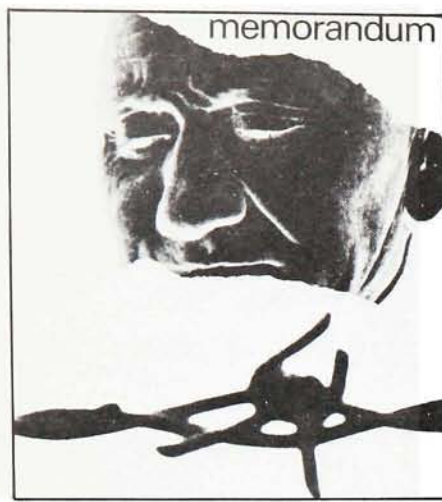
It was well said that there is a rich man's tuberculosis and a poor man's tuberculosis. The rich man recovers; the poor man dies. This succinctly expresses the close embrace of economics and pathology.
(from the soundtrack of Bethune, 1964.)

"Madrid. We were heavily bombed today. About 12 noon. Standing in a doorway as these huge machines flew slowly overhead each one heavily loaded with bombs, I glanced up and down the street. A hush fell over the city, it was a hunted animal crouched down in the grass, quiet and apprehensive. There is no escape, so be still. In the silence of the streets the songs of the birds became startling clear in the bright winter air.

If the building you happen to be in is hit, you will be killed or wounded. If it is not hit, you will not be killed or wounded. One place is as good as another.

After the bombs fall, and you can see them falling like great black pears, there is a thunderous roar. From heaps of huddled clothes on the cobblestones, blood begins to flow. These were once live women and children. . . ."

(from the soundtrack of Bethune, 1964.)



This is one of the more popular sights at the camp. The gallows where the Poles hanged the camp commandant, Rudolph Hess, after the war.

His father meant him to be a priest. "I has to pray and go to church endlessly," he said later, "and do penance for the slightest misdeed."

They worked for the SS office of Economy and Administration. Many were family men. They would go home in the evening and make love to their wives.

Heinrich Himmler was proud of them. He said once – "To have stuck it out and remained decent fellows. This is a page of glory never to be written."

Here they come now: seventeen of them, Late of the Auschwitz administration. Some killed with gas and needle and club. And some with the pointing of a finger.

Mulka, the adjutant, who kept track of things, and then went into the export trade.

Capesius the druggist, who helped in 8000 murders, but said he was always polite.

Doctor Klehr who punctured hearts with a needle and Bédnarek who interrupted torture for prayer and Wilhelm Boger, who beat men's testicles until they died.

Breitwieser, the camp disinfectant officer, was accused of dropping the first gas capsule, but the evidence is conflicting.

Shobert, the Gestapo representative: "I killed no one personally," he tells the court, and they let him go.

They rejoin the German crowd. And who will ever know who murdered by memorandum, who did the filing and the typing from nine o'clock to five, with an hour off for lunch.

And if it could happen in the fairyland of Hansel and Gretel, and the Pied Piper of Hamelin, could it not happen anywhere?

And could it not happen anywhere, if it could happen in the cultured land of Bach, Beethoven and Schiller?

And how could it happen in a land of churches? There were some martyrs it's true – but where were the other servants of Christ?

And where were the scholars of Heidelberg? And how could it all have started in the happy land of Bavaria? In this, the Hofbrau House of Munich, Adolph Hitler first laid out his program to the world. But why should that darken the festive summer night? A third of them are tourists, a third were too young, and the other third is sick and tired of the whole business.

(from Donald Brittain's commentary for Memorandum, 1966.)

The ruins of Italy speak of them . . .
The poppies of Flanders stand for them . . .
They still echo across Vimy ridge
The flatlands of the Dutch can hear them . . .
They are ghosts on the shores of France
They haunt the sea of Normandy,
They have left their scars on the soil of Picardy,
They are remembered by the sand . . .
They live in the minds of old men who still travel
the roads of the Somme;
They are the dead
The Canadian dead of the two wars.
A hundred thousand of them.

(From Brittain's narration for Fields of Sacrifice 1963.)

The Commonwealth Memorial at Runnymede
On it, along with the others, the names of three thousand
Canadian airmen
who disappeared forever in the sky.

Memories over the gentle green heart of England . . .
Memories in the searing brown heart of Sicily.

Canadians moved through this cruel and alien land
once in a burning July.

The old people remember,
They had been starving and they were fed
And they heard stirring sounds of strange music
And they will tell the children.

An episode to be passed down
Now a part of the Sicilian legend of death
A part of the ancient land of blood.

(From Brittain's narration for Fields of Sacrifice 1963.)

Chewing tobacco is part of the baseball ritual.
In the old days everyone did it
whether they liked it or not.

Today there are only eighty-six major league managers, players
and umpires who chew tobacco . . .
and most of them mix it with bubble gum to kill the taste.

The ivy covered walls of Wriggle Field in Chicago have presented
problems.

When Lou Nabokov, the mad Russian, played center field, he
refused

to go near the wall for fear he might be allergic to the vine.
As this limited his effectiveness as an outfielder,
the manager tried to alleviate Nabokov's fear by tearing down
a portion of the vine and eating it.
Nabokov was unconvinced and continued to ignore long fly balls.

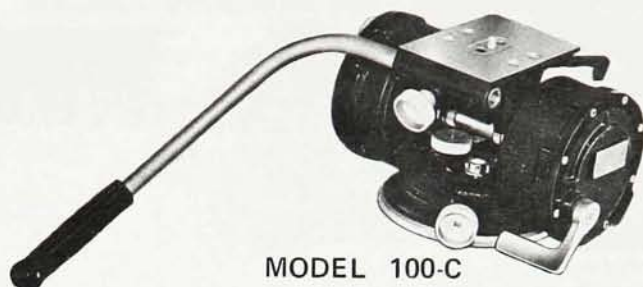
(From Brittain's narration for Ferguson Jenkins, King of the Hill,
1974) ●





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