



Ernest Ouimet (centre in hat) – one of Canada's Film Pioneers

DREAMLAND

À. Ibranyi-Kiss

Dreamland – A History of Canadian Movies 1895 - 1939 is a feature-length documentary essentially produced by Kirwan Cox (more about that in the interview), written and directed by Don Brittain.

Don Brittain is one of Canada's great documentary filmmakers (please refer to "Green Stripe and Common Sense" written by Ronald Blumer and Susan Schouten in Issue No. 15 for an in-depth article on Brittain) and Kirwan Cox, whose "Opinion" column regularly appears in Cinema Canada, is otherwise well-known as the enfant terrible of Canada's Film Activists.

The following interview was recorded well into the early morning hours in a hotel room filled with smoke, beer and the famous bottle of Green Stripe. Brittain and Cox were obviously enjoying each other's company as well as the candor born during months of long hours spent working together. (One special note for undertakers – the soundtrack for this interview is riddled with spontaneous laughter.)

How did the idea for "Dreamland" originate?

Cox: It all began because my students at Seneca College didn't believe anything had happened in film in Canada before the National Film Board, and I said to those fuckers, I said, "I'll show you!" That must have been in 1970-1971.

Then I phoned up Peter Morris and said, "Hey! I've got a great idea! Why not make a documentary using a lot of old footage about what happened before the National Film Board began?" And he said, "Well, that's a great idea but do you realise the problems you'd have doing that? The films don't exist anymore, no-one knows where they are, etc., etc."

So I said, OK, and got the Canada Council interested, which allowed the film to get off the ground because it was with the Canada Council money that the research was done. I shouldn't say this – but the whole film was supposed to be done on Canada Council money. Don Brittain was originally called and told it was going to be an unbelievable project of selflessness. For a mere fee that he was so embarrassed about that I promised I would never admit, he was willing to do it. Of course, he could only work weekends from 6 to 10, but he was doing it for that unbelievably low fee!

Do you often get involved in schemes like that?

Brittain: There aren't that many schemes, you know . . . I was just interested from an historical point of view and from a filmmaker's point of view. I actually started on this as a sort of hobby and I wanted to work on it so that I could see all the material. It's impossible to avoid if you want to do it, but I always thought we were going to put this stuff together and show it at universities for students of cinema to look at. So I said I'd help. Then some time passed and Kirwan said there were money problems and then he came back some time later and had sold it to Knowlton Nash at the CBC . . .

How did that come about?

Cox: The research used up all the film production money, so I went to the National Film Board and said, "Boy, are you ever lucky! There's this tremendous project which has all the research done and you don't have to do any of it and it all stops when the National Film Board begins so there is no conflict of myth. You have your history and this is all pre-You. How can you possibly be so lucky, and why don't you do it?" And Gerry Graham and André Lamy and, I guess, Sydney Newman said, "Sure. Why not?" So they put in a lot of money. Very shortly thereafter I went to the CBC (much to the confusion of the National Film Board and the Canada Council) and suddenly Mr. Brittain's fee went up to his normal commercial rate, which is unspeakably high. Then the film was sort of getting itself together when it ran out of money again and I went back to the National Film Board and said, "You don't know how lucky you are! There's all this fantastic footage which you helped pay for and we can't finish it unless you come through with some more money. And they came through."

Brittain: What Cox really did was keep all the balls in the air. Which is the sign of a great producer. I used to get phone calls from the Canada Council, from the CBC, from the Film Board and they were all sort of wondering. . . . At the point when they were wondering, I knew that Cox was doing a good job.

Does the CFI get credit as well?

Cox: The CFI's credit was Peter Morris and he got a very small fee for his work. It was produced by The Great Canadian Motion Picture Company *in association with* the National Film Board of Canada *with the cooperation of* the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation *with the immense and generous help of* the Canada Council and *under the watchful gaze of* the Canadian Film Institute and 95 other film museums. . . . And everybody is happy.

How exactly did the finances work out?

Cox: Well, O.K., I'll tell you the finances because they have an important aspect to them – which is, that you cannot make a film with this much research involved cheaply. The \$16,000 from the Canada Council went for research. That took a year. Then the NFB went in for \$32,000 in two steps. That was all in-house money – lab work – that wasn't cash. And the CBC bought the film for \$25,000 and they bought it as an hour. Then it was stretched to an hour and a half and they didn't up their price, so they got a better deal finally. Everybody got a good deal because the Canada Council got a more professional film than their budget could have possibly gotten. The National Film Board spent internal costs but no money. The NFB was very selfless.

Brittain: Great labour of love, anyway.

Cox: Essentially that's what it was. No-one was in it for the dough.

Brittain: Except me . . .

Cox: With the possible exception of Don Brittain. So it all ended up becoming a \$75,000 hour and a half documentary with the spin-off of a book, a lot of films preserved, and a lot of records that never existed before. It was about a 2-year project.

Brittain: That's nothing – the average National Film Board hour film is over \$100,000. I really think the value is incredible.

Well, Don couldn't have cost all that much, then . . .

Cox: (outraged) Are you kidding? Of that \$75,000 he got . . .

Brittain: I got 50 . . .

Cox: Most of which he donated to an old sailor's home for filmmakers who some day will have to be treated . . .

So the research alone cost \$16,000 . . .

Cox: It wasn't simply poring over the books. The first job was looking through all the old film magazines, which was very tedious, and which Barbara Sears did most of. The time was coming where it would have been past retrieving. A lot of people were and are dying. A lot of material we snatched luckily from wierd places. We sent a letter to the editor of all the newspapers in the country saying, "If you've got anything related to Canadian film, please write back." A lot of people wrote back and said, "Uncle Harry was crazy – he has all these old cans of film in his attic and can we make a million dollars, now that you mention it?" And we wrote back saying, "No, you can't make a million dollars but you have the privilege of donating your can of Uncle Harry's film . . ." Things like that, and that was a very time-consuming process.

The second job was concurrent, to try and find the film and preserve it. A lot of film never got into the final documentary but was preserved from nitrate to acetate, transferred from 35mm to 16mm and placed in the Canadian Film Institute. I think that's as much the project as the final film – that the original material now exists in the public domain and the research is all in a filing cabinet in the CFI.

The next stage was getting the copyright cleared to use the material – THAT was difficult. Partly because somebody's sister owned the rights and she was holding out for a million dollars or no-one knew who belongs to the rights.

Brittain: I think the most difficult part was Cox' part. With any historical story, it's an incredible hassle that most people are not prepared to go through. When we made that film on Norman Bethune years ago, it was the same thing. We got 5 people claiming they had the rights to the film shot in the Spanish Civil War. We finally had to go to the Department of Justice to make a decision as to who had the rights so we could pay them. I'm still being sued over that one – *personally*. Every two years I have to go to the Department of Justice and deny everything!

Cox: The worst part is when the government has the rights. The Ontario Motion Picture Bureau was under a certain

department. It dissolved in 1934 – who has the rights to their films? The department under which it existed doesn't exist anymore. The Ontario government doesn't know and no-one wanted to make the decision. The Attorney General finally had to make the decision in legalese which had to be approved and then it took 6 months to get that. Once the legal copyright had been cleared there was a major search and a major bluff and trips to Los Angeles and London and Washington to get the film in Don's hands. It was very difficult. The editing room was rented, the Steenbeck purring away and where were the movies? This guy promised it or that person refused to send it or the soundtrack was mislaid and it was very complex. Most of the material had never been gotten together in one place at one time before.

Had you known a lot of that information before?

Brittain: No. I knew very little. It was interesting because the researchers, Barbara and Peter, gave us all this information which I didn't know before. I had never heard of Ernie Shipman before . . . I knew about ASN and Roy Tash, to me, is a big guy. I remember Roy Tash. I shot something of him over 20 years ago when I did the Lord Thompson film, and he was still shooting. Tash was a very important part of it when they had only four or five people in all of Canada.

And there was Vincent Barron's voice, which was the Big Canadian Voice in the 30's and 40's. He was a great newsreel guy. He was my basic inspiration! When I was an usher at the Regent Theatre in Ottawa, every week I would hear Vincent Barron and that's what I wanted to do. That's all we had in those days. I would have loved to get that guy in to hear some of his commentary but the voice tracks have all been wiped out – which is very unfortunate. And Tash has some great stories, but there didn't seem to be room in this picture to show newsreel as a separate work of art. That was a structural problem. I think that was underplayed a little bit, and the hockey stuff.

I did one thing for that film, I was the only Canadian who worked on the film!

Cox: What about Kramer?

Brittain: He's a German! He came here when he was eight years old, which was about eight years ago, you know? And there's Cox, he's an American, and Morris and Barbara Sears are from England. There were a couple of gaps. It was a very minor thing, but it's quite natural. Any contribution I made to the content of the film was what was happening in the 30's that I remember from going to the movies. They never heard of the Dionne quintuplets, for example, which I remember as a kid from newsreels. But the other stuff I didn't know and the research was fantastic!

Was the main purpose of the film to inform or entertain?

Brittain: The purpose was to get the visual information together, because nobody is going to do it twice. Somebody eventually has to do it. Just like the *Canada at War* series years ago, the only purpose was that we had millions of feet of film and somebody had to put it together so that it wasn't a complete loss. So the film didn't start out to entertain but to get the historical information, put the film together, put a commentary which had the correct information and make a definitive work – so you have a responsibility for the accuracy. We had Morris and Cox and Barbara Sears insisting on accuracy, but what Kramer and I tried to do was push towards the entertainment aspects. Then the historians would say, "Well, that's very nice, but it's not true!"

How did you go about writing the narration?

Brittain: We were given all this information and then we boiled it down to about a couple of hours. There's nothing I wrote that didn't come from what I had been given, I can't take credit for it. The commentary is the longest narration I ever wrote in my life. It goes on and on. I was very bored to have that voice-over but there was no other way of doing it because

there was just so much information. Hundreds of pages. You know, Pratley once, in a very nasty mood, wrote a review in which he said the Host Voice of the National Film Board groans out once again and that was 10 years ago!

Structurally, it's very easy to do funny tricks with sound film, to get your laughs and that's it. But that's a temptation we avoided, for the large part, to get the information through. We really gave up a lot of entertainment value. There was a compromise in a sense because I think the film is about 15 minutes too long. We always felt it was an hour and a quarter, a little short at an hour and a little long at an hour and a half. But that's a reasonable compromise.

Cox: There were two ways of doing the film. One was to try and make it as accurate as possible and the other was to make it as entertaining as possible. Morris and myself wanted it to be entertaining but wanted it to be a definitive history of that period and Don wanted it to be definitive but alive, his talent is very alive. It's a difficult problem trying to balance those two in a historical documentary. Unfortunately, because it is a definitive work, any inaccuracies in it . . .

Brittain: Will go on forever.

Cox: Exactly.

Brittain: There is one flaw in it. We neglected to include the first introduction of a person whose name later appears and you don't know who the hell it is. But my argument is that without it, it wouldn't be a flawed masterpiece.

Getting back to "Dreamland" . . . what's going to happen to it now?

Cox: It's on network CBC in October, and then it will be distributed by the National Film Board. There's one aspect of the film that confuses a lot of people – it's a non-profit film. The CBC obtained television rights and the National Film Board has the world-wide educational 16mm market rights up to \$35,000 (because we went over-budget) to pay them back. After that, all income goes to the Canadian Film Institute specifically earmarked for the preservation of Canadian film. So it is a kind of cycle that the film based on trying to retrieve Canadian film will, if everybody buys a print and everybody rents it, help in the future to save Canadian films.

What did you gain from this experience?

Cox: The one point about the film was that it wasn't a question of me battering down doors and constantly arm-twisting but it was also all the people who really wanted to help. There were a lot of people who really wanted the film to be done and they tried very hard and sometimes their worst enemy was me, and they still seemed to overcome that. Gerry Graham was the main coordinator at the Film Board and he has an interest in historical stuff, and Knowlton Nash at the CBC is another man who tried very hard. The funny thing about the CBC was that at the same time I was negotiating with them for this contract, I was also involved with the Committee on Television. It was always amusing and it's much to their credit that the CBC, or parts of it, were able to accept being criticised by somebody and at the same time hand that same motherfucker a contract.

Brittain: I think also that aside from the brass of the Film Board, I'd include the lab people. They really busted their ass, too. It was a labour of love. People like Peter and Kit and Clyde were making sure that the stuff was being processed and looked after nicely. That was a very special operation and I'd really like it if you gave them a plug. They get the same amount of money anyway, they're civil servants, and they went out of their way. There was a sense of preservation among the lab people . . .

What do you hope to accomplish through "Dreamland"?

Cox: I hope the film will get people who are really interested to see the complete films, like *The Viking*, or *Rhapsody in Two Languages* and also get people who are interested in other

parts of the country to begin to piece together the nation. Because the nation is, of course, the myth as well as the reality. In *Dreamland*, the important thing is that the battles being fought then are being fought now on a different scale – except it was worse then. Essentially, the ideas of being taken over by American enterprise, being subverted by government indifference and ignored by Canadian audiences. . . . Being an imported Canadian, I'm very much aware of the American sense of place, and how much this sense of place has to be made in Canada. And if you don't know where you came from, I find it a helluva time to know where you're going.

Brittain: You know, the end of the film is pretty sad. The last thing is Rita Hayworth appearing in a film in Victoria B.C. where they set up some phony thing for the Commonwealth quota quickies. It's really pathetic. That was the Canadian film industry, with Sparling in Montreal and Badgley and a couple of bureaucrats in Ottawa. A bunch of very lonely guys doing their best trying to keep it all together, and there was nothing to keep together until the 30's. There was some reference that the War is coming and Grierson's coming and Canada's going to become very well known to the world as documentary filmmakers. The Film Board is world famous for documentary films. They're not world famous for anything else, rightly or wrongly, but at least it's there. But up to that point there was nothing. Very, very depressing.

What was the major impact of the film for yourself?

Brittain: If there's any message it's around that whole chunk on *Famous Players*. It's an exciting part. I think that's important, I loved that part. The basic impact for me is that we think it's bad today, but things were grotesque then. Everyone always thinks the National Film Board always existed and whoever wanted to make movies seemed to be in it. But when you think about how really bleak it was when the Board *wasn't*. . . . That's what I got out of the film, that it was really rough. But it's not an effort to propagandize or promote. I mean, I like the fact that *Famous Players* is ripped up a bit and the bureaucrats are ripped up a bit, but its importance is really a part of something bigger. It's the same kind of thing John Hirsch is trying to do – to come up with three or four historical dramas which are not just the usual bunch of politicians standing around talking in the House of Commons wearing frock coats – Hirsch wants to get into Canadian myth-making. It's partly a reaction against the American Bicentennial and it's really very much part of the same thing, particularly among English Canadians.

You know, Kramer noticed in the editing (and hopefully you will get Kramer in this piece because he did fantastic editing) but Kramer noticed there was nothing about Quebec. I called up Morris and Kirwan and they said there wasn't any filmmaking in Quebec then. Once it was historically accurate, we went ahead. It never occurred to me that that might be true!

It's got to do with things like the Canadian Film Awards giving up because Quebec wouldn't take part – that's very bad. Very bad. Why the hell are we sitting around waiting for biculturalism to happen when we have our own thing, whatever it is? It's got nothing to do with being anti-Quebec, except it happens to be ours and we're giving it all up!

Cox: If that's true, why don't you live in Toronto instead of Montreal?

Brittain: Yeah, but I don't like Toronto. I live in Montreal because I don't think Montreal is a Canadian city – I could be living in Vienna. Although I'm sort of a separatist, I've argued the point that Montreal has to stay an open city. I think most of my French friends *grudgingly* have to admit that at least Montreal is created by Jews and Scots and French and therefore it's legitimately an open city. The rest of Quebec is French and the rest of Canada is English.

Cox: If Quebec separates, Montreal can separate from Quebec and then Westmount can separate from Montreal. . . .

Brittain: That's right! But it's true. . . . It's very depressing and hard to handle and a very disturbing problem. That's what I'm talking about even with the Film Awards – which is sort of symbolic. I was never a great fan of the Awards, but to give it up because Quebec doesn't want to come in is ridiculous.

I was at the meetings a couple of years ago when they were talking about moving to Montreal and I told them, "Forget it! Just go and do your show, these people aren't interested. What is their interest in a Canadian Film Awards show which extolls the beauties of the bicultural society? What the hell – they're ALL separatists! Every man, even Jutra who is pretty mild, is separatist." Anyway, they went ahead and it was a disaster. They should have known long before! Let's go ahead, call it the English Canadian Etrog or whatever – I don't care! But you've got something and you'd better hold it together! But they spent so much time and energy just trying to make sure that Jutra's going to have a tuxedo that psychic exhaustion set it, and the English people looked ridiculous. It's so pathetic that they come crawling, and everybody starts to be embarrassed. Why should I be embarrassed about being an English-speaking Canadian? Apologizing for my existence?

I think English Canadian filmmakers have really got to get tough and not just sit down and be polite and make sure they have bilingual translations at all conferences. It's destroying them! The French guys don't want it and the English guys don't want it and the only ones who want it are the politicians. I get along real well with Gilles Carle and those guys. We don't have problems – there are political issues but basically the money's being split up. The English guys should try to make sure they get their share of the money. They've got to get out there and start being proud of themselves – of what little they have to be proud of. . . . So why not get down to the job? And then we could respect each other. . . . □



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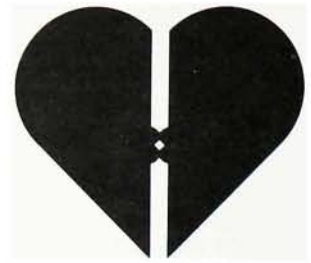
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