

to be a writer: write!

Anne Cameron's career has been studded with breakthroughs, awards and acclaim. But the plot of this success story has not always run smoothly. Anne talks about what it takes to face success alone and most of all, what it takes to continue writing.

by Jim Erickson

Given a chance, Anne Cameron better known as Cam, will relate the story of Bonny Prince Charlie, the Grahams and her family the Camerons, the castles and the kings, who fought whom, how many died, and where they are buried. In ten minutes she can take you from fourteenth century Scotland to the early twentieth century coal mines of Nanaimo, accounting for her family most of the way.

Cam was born, raised and educated in Nanaimo. Except for a few years of "getting away to find herself," she has always lived on Vancouver Island - currently in Harewood, part of Nanaimo. What was once an area of small farms where coal miners scratched out an existence above and below the ground is now an area rezoned for apartments, condominiums and houses that all look alike. Cam's is of an older vintage - before rezoning. Until a couple of months ago she cooked on oil and burned wood in a Franklin Stove for heat. In and around these four green walls exist a collection of kids, cats, dogs and plants, all coming and going as things of such nature do. Only the plants and Cam are relatively stationary: she at her typewriter and they in whatever receptacle she has plopped them into. Bookshelves line every wall in the living room, every shelf is full to overflowing, and the overflow goes into boxes and bags on the floor. Her input of the written word is matched only by her output.

"I always wanted to be a *writer!* I knew from my working-class upbringing that I had to have a job to survive, but it seemed as if there was nothing but dreary jobs available for women.

"I didn't write much when the kids were little because I didn't have to write. I was totally into being their mother and every doubt I had was answered by cuddles and jammy kisses. It was about the time the youngest started kindergarten and our adopted daughter died that all the horrors came crawling out of the closet: cuddles didn't answer the questions anymore, and the kids had so well learned my 'independence lessons' they didn't 'need' me. Too, the shock and grief of the baby dying shook every value and answer I thought I had. Having worked with and seen firsthand the psychiatrists

and psychologists, I had no faith in them at all - still have no faith in them. So I started to find answers inside myself."

At first the answers took the form of poetry: making the written word say what she was hearing inside herself and in the world around her. Also, at that time, she and Jacques Hubert (who is part Indian) were involved with the Non Status Indian Organization. She became obsessed with the Indian culture and concerned with the plight of Canadian Natives living in white man's society. Firsthand experiences with bigotry and discrimination compelled her to make some sort of statement. The result was *Windigo*, a collection of dramatic poems.

"Windigo: The white man's dictionary defines Windigo as a cannibalistic spirit who roamed the earth in search of prey. The Indians say that Windigo didn't exist before the white man came."

Hagan Beggs mounted a production of *Windigo* at the Matsqui Penitentiary, using native inmates as actors. It won first prize in the B.C. Centennial Play Competition.

In the summer of 1972, with the big success and a desire to do more dramatic writing, Cam scraped the money together to spend ten weeks at the Banff School of Fine Arts. There, gasping for air at 7000 feet, she worked with George Ryga.

"Ryga made me stop grinning that shithouse grin and apologizing by my tone of voice when I said, 'I'm a poet'. He hammered into me the supreme law of How To Be A Writer: WRITE! He told me the only way I would ever be satisfied with what I was writing would be if I reached down into my guts and told the truth. He didn't tell me a whole hell of a lot that I didn't already know, but he made me know it. To say I loved that guy would be a supreme understatement. He also told me to go back to what I had grown up with, find my identity and that's what I'm doing."

The next two years were spent almost totally submerged in Indian culture. As a founding member of the Tillicum Theatre, a theatre group of young Native Canadians, Cam put most of her efforts into creating pieces for their productions. She adapted many legends for the stage and wrote *The Twin Sinks of Allen Sammy*, a one-act play depicting the reality of a young Indian couple living off the reserve. The Tillicum Theatre provided the contact and confidence of the Indian People. She "kept her mouth shut and her eyes and ears open" and tried to transfer to paper what she was observing.

"What I do is listen with my inner ear to the music... the songs, the feelings; then I get the old people to tell me, in their own words, what the song is saying, why it is sung, who sang it. Then I try to catch the sense of it and put it into English without hammering it into false, externally imposed, European rhyme or rhythm structure."

The heron stands on a rock, watching
the night walk on water,
in a secret place an old man
prays, holding warm the memory of
a good woman gone too soon.

In a secret place an old man
prays, waiting for the snow.
In a secret place an old man
prays, thankful for the sun,
in a secret place an old man
prays

on the wharf
talking while the young men listen.



In the summer of 1973, Canadian film director Daryl Duke was looking for young Indians for his television film *I Heard The Owl Call My Name*. Cam and Jacques rounded up the members of the Tillicum Theatre and sat them on their living room floor along with the kids, cats, dogs and plants, and everyone auditioned. Three or four of the young people were cast. When the production started Jacques, because of his contacts with the Indians, was asked to help. Cam stayed by her typewriter and finished a film script on Maquinna, Chief of the Nootka when Captain Cook first landed at Friendly Cove. She handed it to Daryl. He liked it and asked for more.

Daryl "took the greenness" out of Cam's writing. He would tell her he had the rights to such and such a book and ask for a script. She would do one and he would criticize it. He showed her how scripts should look physically when submit-

ting them. Eventually some development money was found for a few of the things she did; for the first time, she was making money by her writing. "It felt good. For the first time people began to believe what I always knew; I was a writer."

She wrote *You'll Understand When You're Older* in the summer of 1974. The play draws from her immediate past; the places, events and people are from her back yard. It is "a sensitive study of the change of values." Maggy MacDonald, ten years old, is trying to cope with her changing self, a war in Europe, why boys can fight and girls can't, and why she can't live with her mother, who is living with, but not married to, a man not Maggy's father. "Here Lass, the part you don't understand now will make sense later."

A production of *You'll Understand When You're Older* was mounted by the Tillicum Theatre in early 1975. "The director cast from the streets. He found Hugh singing country and western songs in a bar, and Grandpa on a half-built sailboat in the Nanaimo Harbor." The play won the Best Original Play award in the BCDA Upper Island Play Festival.

By then Cam was living in Tahsis, a small mill town on the west coast of Vancouver Island. Husband Jacques was managing a trucking company, while she and a friend owned and operated a small delivery service. "We'd meet the boat in the middle of the night, rain pissin' down our necks, and deliver beer to the pub and the liquor store. The cases weren't so bad but the kegs were a bitch." Under the clatter of rain on the trailerhouse roof she completed *Rites of Passage*.

And success came, with *Rites...* winning the New Play Centre's Women's Year Play Award.

Having the courage to face success alone, Cam separated from her husband Jacques, whom she once referred to as "my best friend." She explains "His ego couldn't tolerate my success — the independence it brought me. He became lonely and threatened because he couldn't understand what I wanted to do and didn't understand the dues you have to pay to create.

"There are times in women's lives when we pass, almost predictably, through an empty land devoid of guidelines or signposts. We have to learn to venture out of the nest, then build our own, and finally to live in a nest once crowded, now private. We have to learn to leave our parents and, even harder, to allow our children to leave us. We have to learn to live alone, learn to have courage to fail. Hardest of all, we have to learn who we are."

Rites of Passage borrows Maggy the daughter, Beth the mother, and Bess the grandmother from *You'll Understand When You're Older*. The emphasis is taken away from Maggy to give the three equal billing. While *You'll Understand...* is about the confusion of growing up, *Rites of Passage* recognizes the reality of each woman in her specific environment. Cam takes the haunting black images of the coal mine and twists them into cries for womanhood. Maggy says, after relating a story of the blind pit-ponies; "Sometimes I feel I'm being bitten, bitten until there won't be anything left of me but my eyes... Just my eyes, all dried up, not even tears left..." Beth, the mother, tells the story of her dad's coal scars, then asks; "But who sees my scars? Who knows the dark hole I cut for myself and crawled into? Who knows what I've seen in the blackness behind my closed eyelids?" The play is a study of the inequities of today's society, the injustices of yesterday's, and the hope for tomorrow's.

Response to *Rites of Passage* was positive but outside of the New Play Centre's production, there was relatively little

action. Cam was still living in Tahsis, where only her typing competed with the rain on "that goddam aluminum can". A friend, passing through Toronto dropped a copy of *Rites...* on the desk of Peter Lower, then a story editor for CBC-TV drama. A few days later Cam received a phone call from Toronto which told her they were very interested, made some suggestions, said a check was in the mail, and asked for a second draft. She whipped off the second draft, plus a first draft of **Dreamspeaker**. The CBC brought her out to Toronto to do some more work on *Rites...*, suggesting she do this and that and omit such and such. "I said fine, that sounds like an interesting story but it doesn't have a whole hell-of-a-lot to do with Maggy MacDonald or *Rites of Passage*. Find somebody else to write yours for you." She took all four of her rewrites home, quite sure her career with the CBC was over before it began.

"Some people say I'm hard to work with, some are scared of me. Christ! I'm petrified of them all but I won't be buried."

Ralph Thomas was looking for material to fill his *For the Record* series. He liked **Dreamspeaker**. Claude Jutra liked and wanted to direct it. They brought Cam out to work on that script. This time they came up with a shooting script and while everybody and everything was in Montreal for the Olympics, a small crew shot **Dreamspeaker** on the west coast.

"I never believed I would see it. Even when it was in the can I wouldn't believe it would make it to the screen."

"**Dreamspeaker**", says Tony Reif of Vancouver's Pacific Cinematheque, "is really a fable about the golden age, the lost time before the world became an object and people merely manipulators and manipulated. Reasonableness, action based on rational induction, on observed cause and effect — this is what the film attacks as the product of our alienated and alienating consciousness. To live in this world, love between people is essential, because everything is felt so much more deeply. Without love, says **Dreamspeaker**, we will perish."

When Cam wrote **Dreamspeaker**, a native Indian boy was living with them. She became outraged at the "bureaucratic bullshit" that created this confused, complex, often violent person: "They take a ten-year-old boy from Alert Bay who has just seen his alcoholic mother choke to death on her own puke, put him in a foster home in Vancouver and expect him to stay? It's two different realities."

She was also experiencing the mystifying behavior of her own children. Why do the moments of absolute non-communication exist between the parent and child? Can love be the panacea? It seems it was so in the "golden age"; can it be so in today's society?

Her next major project was **A Matter of Choice**, another *For the Record* film. It is the account of a rape and its immediate psychological after effects. The rapist is not the notorious half crazed, greasy hunchback hiding in the bushes; he is the more common but seldom prosecuted 'friend', the one who invites a woman up to his apartment for a drink, gets carried away, thinks the woman is "playing hard to get" and violently rapes her. The film is an ingenious stab at the inadequacies of modern rape laws and how women can and should get them to work for them. Again Cam draws from that which is closest to her.

"I've a fourteen-year-old daughter.—I have the natural mother instinct to protect her. I wanted to show her and all women that there are alternatives. We shouldn't complacently sit by and let something like rape happen to us — physically or mentally."

8/Cinema Canada

The reaction to **A Matter of Choice** was fascinating. Most women, as expected, reacted very favorably. An astounding number related similar experiences but said they were too ashamed to take action — weren't sure they could do anything. The men, however, reacted with confusion. Many "couldn't relate to it", some excused it as a bad production, some refused to watch it. "Just goes to show the attitude of a lot of men towards women."

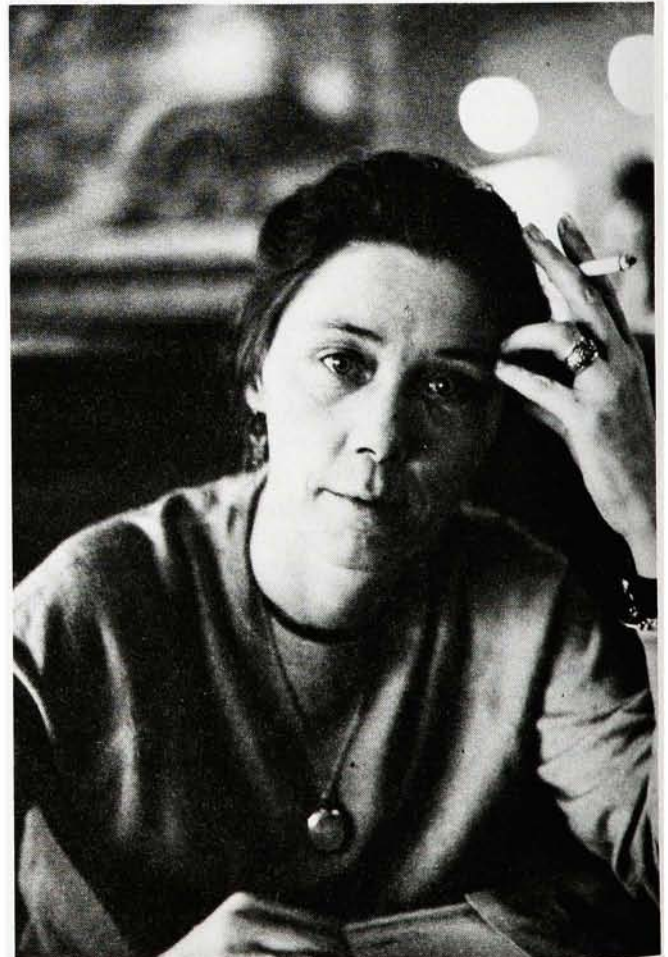
However, says Peter Lower, "It and **Dreamspeaker** set a standard by which future television drama will be judged." We have yet to see **Fred Quilt**, Cam's dramatization of the Fred Quilt trial which will probably never be aired, and **They're Drying Up the Streets**, the film on child exploitation.

Cam's writing is continuous whether it is a film script, poetry, the novel she works on now and then, or one of the seven-page letters she will dash off to a friend. Her writing has been labeled Indian activist, feminist, even spiritualist. Her strongest images have always been feminine, and her fascination for the Northwest Coast Indian culture is probably due to its strong matriarchal traditions. Whatever, she doesn't limit herself to any one cause and she hates the thought of being labeled — of being a "guru" for a movement.

"Look what we did to Ryga. We put him on a hilltop and then, when we'd molded our hero, we had to start throwing rocks at him because his feet were mortal and not godlike."

"I am a writer who happens to be a feminist."

She writes from her guts and if her guts happen to be feminine, well, that's that, it's her truth. □



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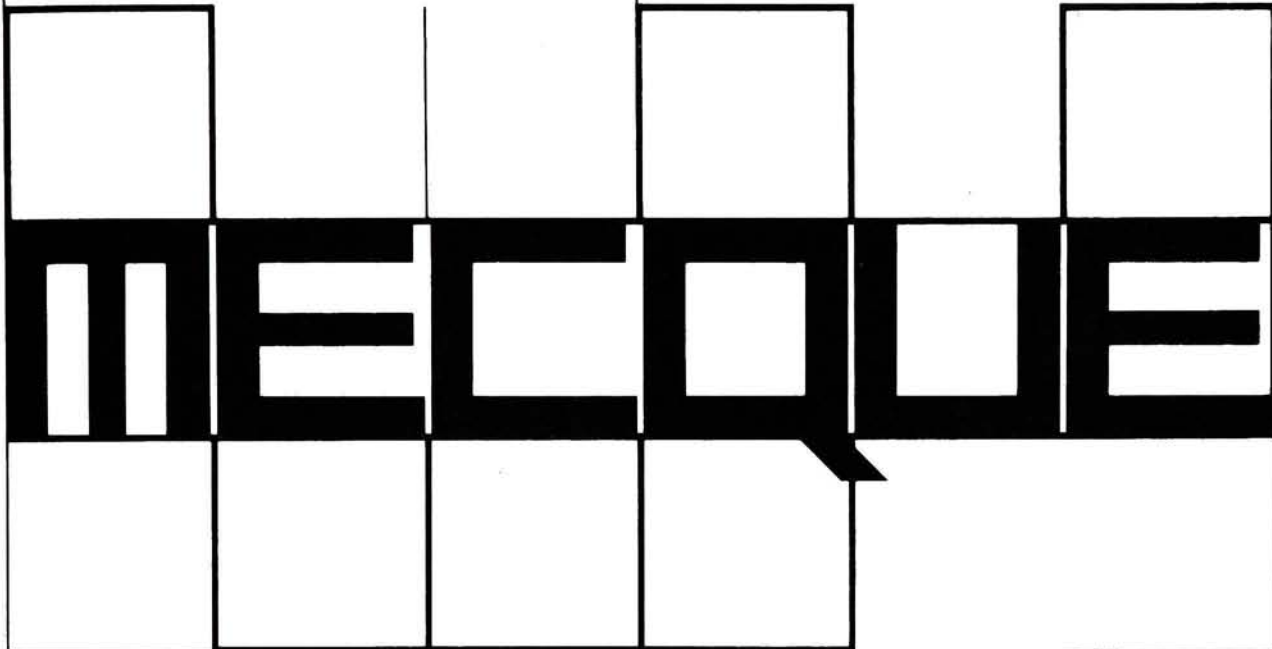
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