Rule Brittania

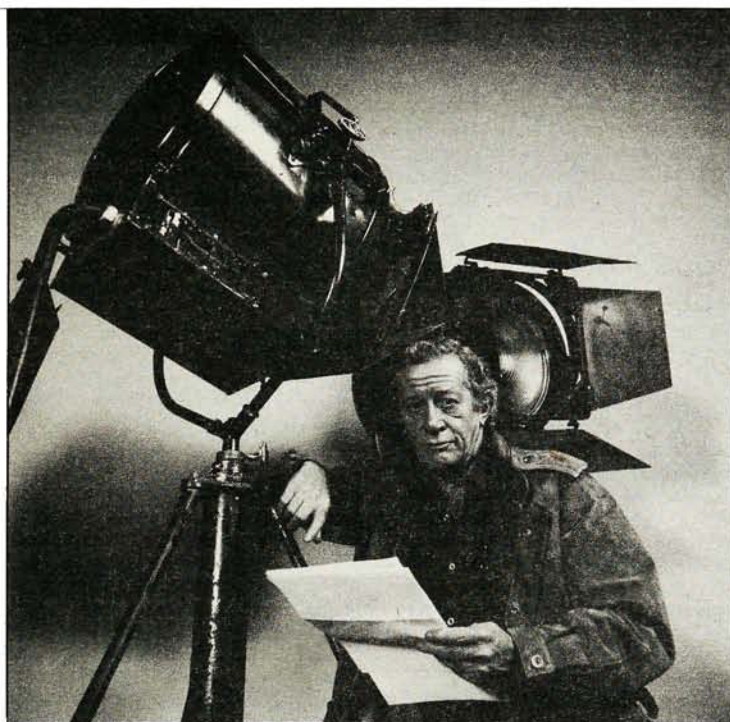


photo: Ron Levine

The filmmaking saga of Don C. Brittain

by Michael Dorland

"I'm a Canadian. There's no getting away from it and I don't want to get away from it – that sense of the mythic nature of its geography. I couldn't live happily anywhere else. My exasperation with the population of this country gives me something to do, because I can attack it. Yet one of the problems is that you become a member of the Establishment whether you want to or not. But if I kick it hard enough, I'll never really get sucked into it. And I'll continue to do that as long as I live."

— Donald C. Brittain

Like Malcolm Lowry, Donald Brittain's secrets too "are of the grave and must be kept, and this is how I sometimes think of myself, as a great explorer who has discovered some extraordinary land from which he can never return... But the name of this land is Hell..." For nearly 30 years now, in documentary after extraordinary documentary, Donald Brittain films have explored the Hells of the human heart – its wars, its concentration camps, its factories, its great and lesser men, and its places, including Lowry's Mexico, Henry Ford's America, Bethune's China, and, perhaps above all, Don Brittain's Canada.

In the following *Cinema Canada* interview, Don Brittain, raconteur, tells something of the saga of Don Brittain, filmmaker. Beyond the documentary, his work has included dramas for CBC-TV, pseudo-documentaries for Hollywood, and assorted disastrous attempts to develop feature film projects. It was not until he was actually shooting *Canada's Sweetheart: The Saga of Hal C. Banks,* the CBC-NFB docudrama that won the best Canadian production award at the 1985 Toronto Festival of Festivals, that Brittain once again felt back in his element. Today Brittain, who has just completed shooting *Earthwatch* the $1.3 million Showscan film for the Canadian Pavilion at Expo '86, for Montreal production house Prisma, is working furiously.

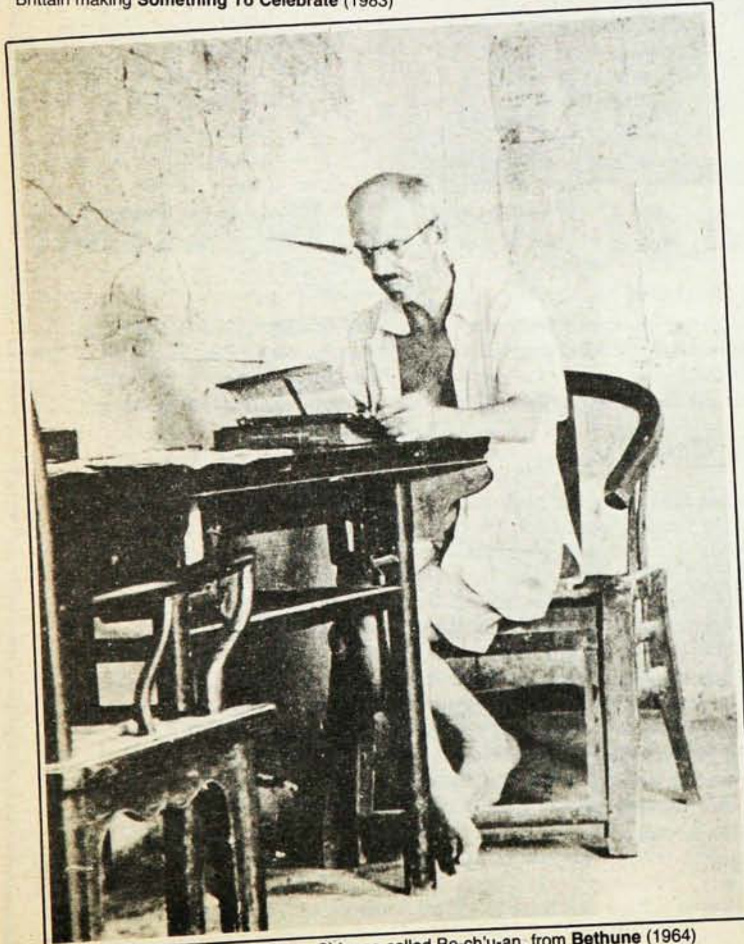
On the one hand, he's continuing a tradition of exploration in media experimentation that he began working in at Expo '67 and in Imax in Japan in the early '70s, while, on the other hand, continuing his documentary explorations of the emblematic figures of the Canadian landscape with two forthcoming dramatic documentaries on Tommy Douglas and on William Lyon Mackenzie King. And, in between, just being Don Brittain, a former Ottawa journalist, pursuing a career that he never intended for himself in a universe of randomness and accident.

The following interview with Brittain by *Cinema Canada* associate editor Michael Dorland took place in an empty executive office at the National Film Board of Canada.

photo: Bruno Engler

Brittain, left, and **Earthwatch** d.o.p. Leo Zourdoumis, near Banff

Brittain making **Something To Celebrate** (1983)


The Canadian whom half-a-billion Chinese called Be-ch'u-an, from **Bethune** (1964)

Cinema Canada: *I would like you to take a broad overview of your experience in documentary principally. I don't know how correct this is, but I get the feeling that, like many Canadian filmmakers, it took you a long time to adjust to the idea of being a Canadian filmmaker, that you had to go through this whole American interlude, and, in a sense, it was not until after that, that you were resigned, so to speak, to working from here.*

Donald Brittain: Well, it's partly true but, at the outset, I had no intention of staying in the business. I was in newspapers and I had run around a bit, but the Film Board was pretty much the only game in town then. There I was in Ottawa working for them and the idea of working anywhere else didn't even cross my mind. Nor did the idea of continuing in this business cross my mind.

Cinema Canada: *When you started at the Board in 1954, it was as a writer?*

Donald Brittain: Yes, I was actually hired as a location manager by Tom Daly. I got a call from Tommy Van Deusen who went on to become Diefenbaker's executive-assistant, and whom I had worked with at the newspaper. He'd taken a job as the first PR man at the Film Board – they never had one – to enable him to write a book on the St. Alban's Raid, and he called me one day. I'd done a couple of film criticisms, really nothing much, but I used to screen films at lunch-time, Film Board films, and they were looking for a newspaper man to go on a small crew in Newfoundland. I was between engagements and had quit the paper after the union struggle; I'd been bumming around in Mexico and the States and I had personal problems. My wife had died the year before. So I was ready to jump ship and I'd never been to Newfoundland.

Don Mulholland was the Louis B. Mayer of the National Film Board – they were still in the John Street sawmill in Ottawa. And he said, we're not hiring any location manager but a guy who can write, so he asked me for a few clippings and liked them, so he hired me. That was how I spent some time on location, learning about camera equipment and so on. Anyway, the thing stretched on for about four months. It was a three men crew: John Spotton, the director Allan Wargon and myself. I think the first day I almost got drowned, and the second day I almost got electrocuted putting up lights. It struck me as an extremely curious business, coming out of a daily newspaper into that. Those were the days when the Film Board ... we took 41 days to do a five-minute segment of the film on Cape Breton Island. That was the speed at which we were operating. It wasn't just that it was cloudy or bright in terms of continuity – the cumulus clouds had to be at the right altitude or we packed it up for the day. So I was quite bemused by this whole operation and as Spotton and the director stopped talking to each other, I had to operate as an interpreter. I was kept busy. It was great training; I did a little sound, and was also assistant-cameraman and assistant editor. We were doing 35 mm black-and-white. We brought a portable moviola down to these very remote places. We used to cut by night and shoot by day, occasionally, and cut by night invariably, and build little trim bins in these hotel-rooms. It was sort of a crash-course and I quit at the end of the month. I was desperate to go to Europe; I'd never been to Europe; I was drawn to Europe, and I had now saved enough money to go. So I went for about six months with the intention of staying – I knew that I could probably get a job in Fleet Street through the Canadian connection. I bummed around; I really bummed around. I spent a lot of time in Tangiers in the bad old days – almost everybody was under sentence of death in some country or other but they were all very good boys, particularly there, because otherwise their lives would not last too long. It was a great adventure.

But I never got to write anything; I was enjoying myself. And I ended up back in London flat-ass broke, really. I'd gone broke in Vienna – this was the last days of the occupation – '54-'55, in the dead of winter, Russian soldiers everywhere. I'd wired desperately for money to be sent to the American Express in Vienna. I walked across town; I had about 20 cents in my pocket after taking a train from Venice. At the American Express, I said you got anything for Donald Brittain? My middle initial is C., and they said Donald L. Brittain from Indianapolis, Ohio? I was just about ready to reach for it – I figured I'll pay him back later with interest, this is a desperate situation. He had 400 bucks. And then they said, wait, there is another one – Donald C. of Ottawa, Canada: 800 bucks. So I had a wonderful time, Harry Lyme time in Vienna. I was enjoying it thoroughly but I didn't know how *mythic* it really was until much later. Anyway, I ended up in London and I did get a job in Fleet Street and I wrote to the Film Board and said if you want me back, I'll come, otherwise I'm staying, and they wired back.

So I took the boat and ended up back in Ottawa and they had changed their mind. I was enraged; there I was once again flat broke. So I yelled and screamed at Mulholland who was a very formidable person. He had a huge blow-up of the Queen set behind his desk and he smoked a cigar; he was a great guy. So I yelled at him, you know, and he gave me a raise; he hired me back and upped me from $65 a week to $70. So I stuck with it. This was the same film. We went back and we started shooting out West now, and that lasted for nine months.

Cinema Canada: *What was the film?*

Donald Brittain: *Canadian Profile*. Spotton won a Canadian Film Award for best cinematography but it was 10 five-minute vignettes. External Affairs wanted something to encourage immigration and it painted a very bleak of Canada; they hated it. Lots of snow, and I was in charge of the money; I was also the budget officer, so we went 100% over the budget. Anyhow, I quit a few times. But I still didn't plan to stay and I came back and started writing scripts which were universally despised. I was on two-week contracts, which kept getting shorter and shorter. The first script, I think, was on Civil Defence – some general wanted to make a film to prove that he could evacuate the island of Montreal in 45 minutes; actually, it was fascinating; and he could too, if every-

body got in their cars and followed a predestined route at exactly 47 miles an hour. He was an extraordinary guy but he was crazy. And I had the Dominion Fire Commissioner who had some mad ideas about fire films. Things weren't working out too well.

There was a place here, which is now the titling department, Corridor W, and when you got sent there, it was Death Row: you sat in a little cubicle and waited for the phone to ring. They fired people a lot, hand over fist, at least one a day, always at five o'clock. All my mates got the bullet and I, for some reason, survived. I once asked Grant Maclean why and he said I wasn't important enough; they never got around to me. So (NFB producer) Peter Jones, a great fellow, he sort of saved my career, and at least kept me in film.

Cinema Canada: *You were saying that you liked Film Board Films. What was it about Film Board films that you liked, and did you have any feelings about films outside the Board?*

Donald Brittain: Aside from growing up going to movies (which I did in the '30s and during the war years, mostly double-bill pictures) – I never got to see *Gone With The Wind* till I joined the Film Board – in terms of films as culture, I saw *The Blue Angel* when I was at Queen's, and it absolutely knocked me flat. Another person who really affected me was Clyde Gilmore, who was Canada's first movie critic. Clyde Gilmore did movie reviews on CBC radio Sunday afternoons just before *Jake and the Kid* and he was a terrific movie critic. We took hand-outs from Famous Players and here was this guy who talked about films *seriously*, like plays. Also I saw *Citizen Kane* and a few other things, I think there was a foreign film club or something. But I had never any intention of going into film.

It was just this phone call when I happened to be out of work – sheer chance – I never would have applied; I didn't consider it my own line of work. I was trying to become a short-story writer.

We actually saw a lot of Film Board films during the war, the *Canada Carries On* stuff, and we were filled with blooming patriotism. It was the only war I felt should have been fought. There were real bad guys on the other side. So it was really great to see this Film Board stuff – Lorne Greene blaring away at us.

In terms of being affected by the product from the Film Board, I saw McLaren films. And I think at that point McLaren was very well-known, I don't think he had gotten his Oscar yet, but he was a celebrity. Anyway, I looked at it – it wasn't my cup of tea, not the kind I would ever make, but it zapped me. And then when I came to the Board, the first day, when I was waiting to find out whether I had a job, they were screening a test-print of *Corral* and I went in the theatre and that really knocked me cold. Once again, not my kind of movie. And *Paul Tomkowicz*, I think, came out that year, a great classic film, and so I began to think that these people were serious; that was deep stuff we were into. And as I was fascinated by it, I was getting to be increasingly interested in film.

Cinema Canada: *On the level of im-*

The writings of Donald Brittain

Memorandum:

There is this one place, still squatting on a Polish swamp. It is Birkenau, and perhaps it even frightened God.

Birkenau, not the work of madmen but a product of Western civilization. It once consumed 12,000 humans a day. Two and a half million in two and a half years, and it probably would have gone on and on and on.

An old German says, we are a cursed generation. Not just us but some of you too. We will take our horrible place in history. Can you just let us quietly live out our time! There is really nothing anyone can do.

On Guard for Thee – A Blanket of Ice:

In the forests of Central Europe during the Cold War, it was always midnight. Never in the history of human espionage has there been such a concentration of treachery. It is said that on any given day, near Berlin there were 37,000 secret agents of various persuasions scurrying past each other bearing little secrets to dark Prussian corners.

A thousand hidden cameras clicked away recording military movements by day and the sexual appetites of unfortunate diplomats by night. Some lives were very short and some deaths were very long. Bodies without fingernails, tongues or testicles were delivered in various ways, each one a little message to some person who would understand.

Henry Ford's America:

Some two million Americans have died in it. Although comparative figures are not readily available, it's estimated that about the same number have been conceived in it. It is therefore fair to say that it brings out the best and the worst in man.

The age of the automobile has been dated from 1926, when it was first reported than Americans had more cars than bathtubs.

But then, you can't go to town in a bathtub.

It is any wonder that the captains and the kings of Detroit have assumed mythic dimensions? Because of them it is argued that the city of Detroit has had as great an influence on 20th-century man as did Rome in the time of Caesar and Athen in the age of Pericles. And they have done it all with a most imperfect machine that they're still trying to get to work properly.

Paperland:

Here he comes now, trying to act like a normal human being. But he is that most despised of human creatures. His activities have brought down upon his shoulders the scorn and outrage of history's multitudes.

He is homo bureaucratis, a bureaucrat, and he lives in a land of paper.

He is the paper-pusher of the world, the administrator, the regulator, the co-ordinator.

He has been compared to the cockroach. Like the cockroach he appears to have no useful function. Like the cockroach he has many enemies. Like the cockroach he has survived all attempts at extermination.

The great Opera House of Vienna is thrown open one night a year so that seven thousand assorted international functionaries can gather in a grand celebration of a system, a way of life.

A public bureaucracy is filled with good intentions and boundless energy. Where its goals are simple, such as putting a man on the moon, or transporting Jews to gas ovens, it works with relentless efficiency. But where the goals are complex and contradictory, it begins to move in never-ending aimless circles. Perhaps we should be grateful. The only thing that saves us from bureaucratic subjugation is the inertia of the bureaucracy itself.

The Champions:

The times had changed.* The old street fighter, Pierre Bourgeault, had been appointed to the Board of Directors of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. The final battleground would not be in the streets.

Neither man entered politics until he was in middle life, but such is their impact that they seem to have been around for ever. Neither man sought power, but it came to them. It is not really a battle between the emotional and the rational man. Both minds are brilliant, both souls are passionate and there is a fine rage in each. Both are glad that at last it is come to this time of confrontation. They are, in a sense, prisoners of each other and this will be their final battle.

* Refers to Trudeau and Levesque on Jan. 1 1977.

On Guard For Thee – The Most Dangerous Spy:

The story unfolded in unlikely places and involved unlikely persons. This is the room in which a strange, old Prime Minister received his night callers and dictated his darkest secrets. This is the man in the green eyeshade, the night editor, who turned away the scoop of a lifetime. There were secret chambers in this building where they stripped Canadian citizens of all their rights. They called it the Department of Justice. This is a secret agent who shadowed the world's first atomic spy and this is where it all began.

At 511 Somerset Street in Ottawa, Apartment 4 is being redecorated for a new tenant. He is on route from Edmonton. The new arrival is a twenty-four year-old Russian cipher clerk, Igor Gouzenko. Most of his fellow passengers are Canadian troops bound for the battlefields of Europe for this is the middle of the Second World War. Gouzenko finds the Canadians very friendly and for good reason. Every week in their movie houses the Canadians are reminded that Communists and capitalists are no longer deadly enemies but fast friends.

The only books and talk shows came from the Russian who started it all.

A familiar creature with a bag over his head, despite the fact that any half-baked assassin could have easily tracked him down if it had seemed of any further importance.

On Guard for Thee – Shadows of a Horseman:

The Mounted Police* were riding away but perhaps the true north strong and free would forever be in the shadows of a horseman. Perhaps those shadows were but a reflection of a darker side of the Canadian spirit. *Perhaps Canadians were a people who would never recognize that when all things are secure, no man is safe.*

* Refers to the Security service responsibilities of the RCMP being transferred to a civilian agency.

Overtime:

His name is Gerald Patrick Ahearne...known far and wide as Tubby. He can't do much about his face. It's 44 years old and it's stopped a few hockey pucks in its time. But he is very careful about what is left of his hair.

Brittain and his **Earthwatch** co-producer, Les productions Prisma's Marcia Couëlle photo: Bruno Massenet

Never A Backward Step (1966): Brittain with Lord Thompson of Fleet

ages or writing, if you can separate them?

Donald Brittain: I couldn't separate it quite frankly, when I looked at *Corral* which had nothing but a guitar, I believe. Mind you, films and documentary in those days were laden with very heavy narration. You needed a writer – a documentary, a 10-minute training film, was treated like a feature film: voice-over, each shot extreme close-up, eyeball, pull back to reveal shot two, and I enjoyed writing them. Having been on location for over a year, going through the agonies of having to make the things, I thought it was great just to sit in an office and write scripts and I'd make them all up in my head, which I really enjoyed, except nobody wanted to turn them into films.

So I couldn't really separate the words from the image; it was a combination. I used to love writing captions on still pictures; I was good at it. So maybe there was a sort of a connection there. I was always a much better feature writer that I was a reporter. And after I'd done a script on the first Canadian infantryman, they were really going to fire me, and I realized I had to become a director. Even at that early stage, even at the Film Board in the moribund '50s, you needed a skill to fall back on, because anybody can say that they are director, but really that was where it was at.

Cinema Canada: *You mean, already there was some kind of emergence of an* auteur *theory?*

Donald Brittain: It wasn't so much an *auteur* theory because you were not permitted too much in the way of an individual style. Now there was a breakthrough being made – Colin Low with *Corral* and Roman Kroitor with *Paul Tomkowicz.* But I had no vision in that direction at this point. I was just trying to learn the craft and pay the rent and I was working essentially for the Armed Forces studio so the latitude for personal expression was extremely limited. I think, I guess, my first sense of style was in narration. I went off and shot a couple of small things for the National Research Council – *Winter Building, It Can Be Done* – things of that nature. I think the National Research Council liked them so I was all right with the Film Board.

One of the things that had really affected me, I think, more than film' was radio. I remember at Queen's, we were very much a bunch of hard-drinking cynics, but everything stopped on Sunday night to listen to the stage series and the CBC Wednesday night culture hour, and there was a style which, I think, rubbed off on me. The sort of stuff that Tommy Tweed and people like that had – a very fine, ironic style which was the antithesis of anything American.

Cinema Canada: *Radio appealed to you as a dramatic form?*

Donald Brittain: Yes, and the other thing I was affected by was still pictures. So, since I can't take stills and radio doesn't pay anymore since nobody is listening, and television had just arrived, maybe that's why I got into it.

Cinema Canada: *What was it about the still?*

Donald Brittain: I don't know, I just love to share at still photographs, particularly ones with people in them, for hours. But I never, as I said, could take very good pictures, so I wasn't going to get into that line of work. Anyway, this seemed to be reasonable; I was at least dealing in pictures, even if they moved, and there was some sound involved. And Stanley Jackson's commentaries had really affected me. He did all this stuff for the Candid Eye series, the only really good stuff that was coming out of the Film Board, and he too had this wry, spare, ironic style. So they did affect me and I did start to develop, I think, a bit of a style in terms of narration which in those days you laid on pretty heavy. In terms of actually directing, I spent the first couple of pictures trying to figure out axes, eyelines and all these things which I found totally mystifying. I pretty well threw myself at the mercy of the cameraman and I was very lucky because the cameramen here were eating young directors for lunch. Guys came in and said, well, we'll put on the 15 millemetre here or dah-dah-dah. They lasted about three-four days... The cameramen were much more highly skilled than most of the directors; they knew what the hell they were doing.

Cinema Canada: *This was the notorious domination of Technical Services?*

Donald Brittain: Yes. And I remember I talked to Henry King who worked for 20th Century-Fox for centuries. *Tol'able David* was his first film and his last film was *Love Is A Many Splendored Thing* – the range was enormous. I was talking about the Dionne Quintuplets film and he told me he did the first Technicolour film with Fox and the first sound film on location and he was telling me what was happening to him when colour came in. He was shooting Sylvia Sidney in some slum and they stuck a red rose on the window-sill and he said: they don't have red roses in these slums and they said: they do now or the Technicolour camera goes. That was it and the soundmen were exactly the same. They all came from radio, so they wore suits and bowler hats.

Well, we had the same thing here. These guys were good but, boy, they were tough. They were on the road all the time; very hard-bitten guys. But I was very fortunate I got John Gunn and Reggie Morris. They were the first two cameraman I worked with and I just threw myself on their mercy and they did, they bailed me out. And I started to learn some things from these guys. But I was out with some tough guys who didn't help me. Okay, Eisenstein, they'd say, point me; that toughens you up a little bit. Anyway, I lived under that reign of terror for a while and, I guess, I made a few small dramas which Mulholland liked and that established me.

They were real turkeys, race prejudice films, but that was my first experience directing actors and sound stage. I was petrified. I was all over the place in terms of style; I still wasn't really taking this operation all that seriously; I thought I'd probably go back to writing but then we moved to Montreal from Ottawa and they paid our way for a month and we stayed at the Ritz as we looked for a hovel in which to live. That appealed to me. There were things that were holding me to it which had abso-

lutely nothing to do with the form itself until I did the *Canada At War Series* and that's when I got immersed in that: stock-shots, doing 13 half-hours, and writing a lot of stuff about ringing, epic events. After that, I think I got sort of into a bit of a style for that type of film.

Cinema Canada: *Compilation films?*
Donald Brittain: Yes, the originals were moldering in the vaults – a million feet of war material – and somebody said, let's do something with it. And they'd labored on it for a couple of years and weren't getting too far, so they asked me to come and supervise the editing, really, and write, and I was into that for about a year-and-a-half. But there again, I didn't do any of the shoot; there was hardly any shooting, a couple of little recreations; it was Peter Jones who put me onto *Canada At War*. That was the first time I started to get my name in the paper – it was heavily reviewed. And then Jones said, okay, now you can go write, direct and produce a film in Europe; 35 mm, no, 16, *colour*. Then he told me what it was about, the working title was *The War Graves* and I spent a year on that fighting the Second World War. I was at the department of Veterans Affairs, and I was dispatched to photograph cemeteries essentially. Then I switched to drama – I did *Fields of Sacrifice* where we dealt with the people in the town and where we didn't have a soundman – there was the cameraman and myself. It was John Diefenbaker himself who was the sponsor, so I didn't have to deal with the bureaucracy. He wanted the film made – he was a veteran of the First War – and anything I wanted, I got. So I immediately went to 35mm, Eastman colour, big time, and we shot this film. It was really the first time I was really into pictures and it worked out; it won my first Film Award.

But in terms of what I wanted to talk about, I then went in and did *Bethune* which was a compilation film, essentially. I was starting to feel my oats in terms of doing tougher subjects, but – to answer the original question you asked – I guess I was fairly fiercely Canadian at that point. And although *Bethune* became international – it's well-known, an award-winner, we had essentially done it for a Canadian audience and that was the first time I took on the bureaucracy. John Kemeny and I made it together, and it was not approved. Actually we just kept doing it in our spare time until it was more or less finished and then they let us finish it. But it was never supposed to be released. It didn't officially exist and the CBC showed up one day and rushed into the theatre to see it and they bought it and put in on the air before anybody knew.

Cinema Canada: *Just to jump back a sec, in* Fields of Sacrifice, *was going to 35 with the intention of a theatrical release? Was there any relation to television?*
Donald Brittain: For theatrical. As a matter of fact, we made three versions: 20, 30 and 40 minutes, which was classroom. And TV did run it for several Remembrance Days, but basically it was a theatrical short.

Cinema Canada: *When you are saying you wanted to start doing tougher subjects, what do you mean?*
Donald Brittain: Well, essentially *Bethune* and *Memorandum*. I did other things; I went to work for *This Hour has Seven Days* for a while as a guest director for three months. I was getting a little more freedom to operate and I was being asked by the CBC who were just starting out in television. And I guess, although I didn't have a television set and I really never watched it, the idea of reaching this big audience did appeal to us and *Bethune* was made to run as a television film.

Cinema Canada: *In an interview that* Cinema Canada *did with you a number of years ago, you talked about how you like the idea of a mass audience.*
Donald Brittain: Well, that was essentially triggered off by the fact that the Film Board distribution department was totally moribund. You'd make a film and it fell into some horrible vacuum. You heard tell of oan audience, if indeed there was one. The theatrical shorts were essentially things like *Yobo Wonder Valley* and you couldn't get much meat into those. The possibility of reaching a half-a-million people in one screening was beyond our wildest dreams. And I was just so fed up making films for film festivals, and screenings inside this building and nothing else, that I was ready to kill to get an audience and this, of course, you can't do. Now, when we made *Bethune*, we didn't know, we didn't have an audience, but it worked out that way and when it did and we saw the impact that it had, we ran it a couple of times in French, a couple of times we shipped to Europe. But there wasn't really a big impact and it was after that that I went to *Seven Days*.

Cinema Canada: *Going to television was again for the audience, not for any sort of specific thing about television?*
Donald Brittain: Strictly the audience. The breakthrough for me was, I guess, *Memorandum* which was one of my better things. As I said, we were pushing it once we got to *Bethune*. I threatened to quit the Film Board and call a press conference. They had put an embargo on its export. We knew that they had to back down; it was too embarrassing that Canadians couldn't make the films they wanted and couldn't export their heroes because the Americans objected that Bethune had belonged to the Communist party. So we weren't being that heroic. And then I got *Memorandum*. In those days that would not have been considered Canadian content at all, so that was something. *Memorandum* was triggered by... It happened in a movie house. I remember being in the front row at the Capitol theatre in Ottawa when we saw the first films from Belsen just at the end of the war, and I'd always wanted to do something about this. So I guess that was the motivation there; this was essentially the subject-matter.

Bethune came along, because among his many admirers was Kemeny. He was an editor and he didn't have enough clout to get it made, and he told me the story which I vaguely knew about. It was like Bob Duncan who brought me *Under the Volcano*. I had never read Lowry.

Cinema Canada: *Had Ted Allen's book*

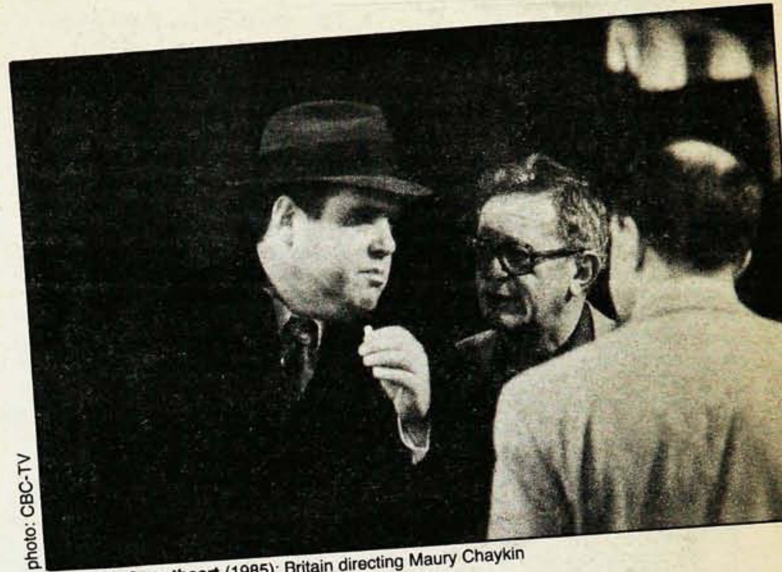


photo: CBC-TV

Canada's Sweetheart (1985): Britain directing Maury Chaykin

photo: NFB

Shooting **Fields of Sacrifice** (1962): Brittain, left, and, cameraman Eugene 'Jeep' Boyko

Memorandum (1965): Brittain, right, and cameraman/editor John Spotton, in Oswiecim, Poland, better known as Auschwitz

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 and replace it with the American-based Seafarer's International Union. Ostensibly brought in to eradicate "Commies" from Canada's waterfronts, Hal C. Banks embarked upon a 13-year-long reign of terror, violence and corruption – with the blessings of the Canadian government, business interests, the other international unions, and the RCMP. His gangster tactics of blacklistings and vicious beatings dealt out to non-S.I.U. Canadian seamen, and his sweetheart deals with the shipping companies, firmly entrenched Banks and the S.I.U. as 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 landed 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 Organization 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, at the urging of an unnamed Canadian cabinet minister.

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

Brittain's technique here is to interweave current interviews with many of the principals who lived through this period, and dramatic reenactments centering around the figure of Banks. Maury Chaykin is a brilliant choice for the starring role: conveying the complex combination of Banks' charm, cunning, ruthlessness, and low-life American naivety. But even more than selecting a fine cast for the dramatic scenes, Brittain has given them the mise-en-scène of early 1950s *film noir*, using cinematic techniques and visual signifiers from this period of Hollywood filmmaking to further engage us in this 'saga'.

At times the dramatic reenactments have the look of a Sam Fuller film: stark and jarringly violent in their lighting, compositions and camera angles, with eerie shadows and a kind of 'seedy' quality to the image. Banks himself has all the trappings of a *film noir* mobster: his affectations of cultivated taste in decor, his 'moll' who cohabits his mirrored boudoir, his predilection for long white Cadillacs, his slightly bizarre obsession with pet fish; even Banks' size suggests the purposeful distortions common in *film noir*. Brittain plays with these elements masterfully and subtly to enhance and illuminate Banks' character, but also to evoke a past era most familiar to us now through its movies. It is a brilliant way to tell this saga, not only because it allows the imagery to speak beyond the voice-over narration, but because it recreates the aura most appropriate to both the time-period and the subject matter.

This stylistic choice also ultimately moves the entire Banks saga into the metaphoric dimension, where it becomes a discourse on far more than 1950s labour history. Already one critic has seen *Canada's Sweetheart* as "a metaphor for American cinema's hold over Canada", a reading somewhat substantiated by the film's *noir* subtext as well as its fly-by-night American anti-hero's domination over the unfolding of events. Clearly, Brittain has created a richly complex and engaging work which deserves extended critical attention, as well as widespread screenings.

If the film can be faulted, it would be for its lack of background into the Canadian Seamen's Union prior to Banks' arrival in Canada. In particular, the film mentions the CSU strikes which had been tying up shipping in Canada and around the world, but does not explain any of the motivations behind the strikes, their connection to opposition to the U.S. Marshall Plan, or the business practices of ship-owners which contributed to the radicalization of the CSU. Without such background, we are left to assume that the only reason for smashing the CSU was its suspected Communist backing. That there were greater political interests at stake – especially U.S. State Department interests – in undermining the CSU might have been more fully elaborated.

Canada's Sweetheart: The Saga Of Hal C. Banks won the Toronto City-TV Award For Excellence in Canadian Production when it was screened at the 1985 Festival of Festivals, and it will surely win other awards for Donald Brittain, whose documentary career has now become a saga of its own.

Joyce Nelson •

CANADA'S SWEETHEART: THE SAGA OF HAL C. BANKS d./narr. Donald Brittain **sc.** Brittain, Richard Nielsen **res.** Richard Nielsen, Geoffrey Ewen **d.o.p.** Andreas Poulsson **eds.** Rita Roy, Richard Todd **mus.** Eldon Rathburn **sd.** Richard Besse **cast. d.** Marsha Chesley **a.d.** Richard Flower **art. d.** Robert Hackborn **cost. des.** Margaret Laurent **p.c./dist.** NFB-CBC **running time:** 120 mins. **l.p.** Maury Chaykin, R. H. Thomson, Gary Reineke, Sean McCann, Colin Fox, Chuck Shamata, Jason Dean, Peter Boretski, Jonathan Welsh, Larry Reynolds, Barry Stevens, Marie-Helene Fontaine, Don McManus.

• Hal Banks tells the SIU brass the Canadians have been put in their place

on Bethune been published?
Donald Brittain: Oh yes, it was one of the things. Kemeny brought me an article in *Macleans*, I think he was using *Macleans* to learn English, but anyway he came upon this article and I read it and I said: oh yes, that's interesting. And then Ted Allen produced the book and we hooked up with Ted Allen who gave us a lot of help; Wilder Penfield too. But aside from the fact, it was a great adventure story. It was the first time I really got involved in film biography and it was a very interesting experience, particularly dealing with dead people. I tend to prefer dealing with dead people; they can't fight back for one thing, and for another the story is complete. Gradually we got to know Bethune. We started out as hero worshippers, then we got to the point where we really disliked the man intensely.

Cinema Canada: *Did it begin because here was an unknown Canadian hero to bring to the attention of the Canadian people?*
Donald Brittain: Yes, though halfway through we decided he wasn't a hero and then we gradually rounded it out. The great moment for me in that film is when we screened it for Bethune's friends, many of whom were very much alive and kicking. The thing I was really worried about was that we used an actor, Michael Caine, who did Bethune's voice and we were afraid that would throw people off if they knew the person – and a lot of the people in the theatre had slept with him too. And they liked the film. But with *Memorandum*, it was just something I felt I wanted to do.

Cinema Canada: *What was it you said was the great moment for you? That you had succeeded in having caught the man?*
Donald Brittain: Yes, because we weren't sure. And there were people there who knew better than us. We knew we had a good film, but it was a sort of a tough thing to balance.

Cinema Canada: *Was doing this successfully a validation of film for you?*
Donald Brittain: Well, one thing it taught me was the impact of film, because if we had written this thing for *Macleans* magazine, it couldn't have had a tenth of the impact it had on the screen, when it ran on television. And I think, then I had a sense of the power of the medium which I found to be a bit scary but I was certainly glad I'd stuck with the business at that point.

Cinema Canada: *How 'scary'?*
Donald Brittain: Well, it goes back to Leni Riefenstahl and the Nazis, and the things that you can do with people in audiences in terms of manipulation. It became easier and easier to play the tricks that I wanted to use, whether I wanted to make the audience laugh or cry or whatever... It seemed to be relatively easy to do.

Cinema Canada: *Once you realized that it did work?*
Donald Brittain: Once I realized it worked, then the responsibility of the person making the film became very real, because these were things which could affect an awful lot of people, and

I know I'm going to sound self-righteous or sanctimonious, but I did essentially feel that films were very expensive, that you only got one or two a year and that what you did with that money and that time...

Cinema Canada: *... because it was public money?*
Donald Brittain: No, it could have been anybody's. It just had to do with the economics of the whole operation. I could write an article for a magazine for 50 bucks and it's costing $150,000 to make these films. And that was one of the reasons we didn't make too many. If you made them right, they were going to have some impact. Though I am increasingly interested in drama, if I was faced with the ultimatum of making one kind of film for the rest of my life, I'd probably choose documentary.

Cinema Canada: *So it was the documentary aspect that had this power – I'm thinking of Lamothe's remark that documentary is diabolical – how do you feel about that? The idea is very interesting in that it throws it all back on to the ethical sense of the filmmaker.*
Donald Brittain: Well, I guess the simple root of it is that the viewer believes it's true. The trick for me was to make documentary as entertaining as Cary Grant. I'm not saying that I've managed to succeed, but at least I worked in that direction, so it's a combination. One of the reasons I was probably happy and lucky I started with *Bethune* was that I had a story. And it was just a matter of trying to tell it right. But, to this day, I know they now have tried to change the name of documentaries several times – "direct cinema" was tried a few years ago – but documentaries did tend to trigger off in almost everybody a deep sense of anticipated boredom. I had a strong desire to make documentaries as entertainment but, at the same time, I was playing around with reality and I had to put that into the mix. I never articulated it at the time but, looking back, I suppose it's an interesting challenge.

Cinema Canada: *What do you understand by entertainment and, related to that, in terms of tricks played on the audience?*
Donald Brittain: Well, I think it's holding an audience's attention and I think that's an awful lot easier in a dramatic form than it is in the documentary. Maybe I started to do it instinctively, but later on I could sort of codify it: I was always one step ahead of the audience and yet have the audience feel that what happened next was absolutely inevitable. To surprise them and to lead them in a direction and then turn a corner on them which was unexpected, and have them enjoy that surprise. You can pull a lot of cheap tricks in film and pyrotechnical filmmakers do, though I don't think they last very long either... and their films are no good because after four or five shots you realize you have a mish-mash of filmmaker clutter and you yawn. So, it's a matter of making, of creating the twists and the turns which surprise, and yet staying true to the subject and avoid being predictable at all costs, for the moment I think an audience can predict what's coming next, you're a dead duck. That's tough to avoid in a documentary; it's tough to avoid in anything.

Cinema Canada: *That unpredictibility is more evident, I think, in your narration of the film where the images are not all that surprising, but then suddenly the words come in and twist it right around. Is that deliberate at the level of the writing?*
Donald Brittain: Generally speaking, I suppose it is. I'm a believer in going with one strength and my strength was that – essentially I'm a writer – and other directors coming out of the other disciplines, actors, editors, cameraman, obviously, they make different kinds of films or they should. I've made a couple of films with no narration. I did one for the Japanese World's Fair, the Imax film, where obviously we were dealing with a Japanese audience and so that all had to be done without narration – that is the reason I went and did it. To figure out how to make Japanese audiences laugh, cry and be horrified, particularly be horrified – and what did it was images of slaughterhouses.

Cinema Canada: *You were saying earlier that if you had to choose between the two, you'd come back to documentary.*
Donald Brittain: But we were talking about narration, right? And how the twists and the turns were largely created by voice, by the narrative line. I had a talent for writing narration and I seem to have a talent for putting it in the right place in connection with the pictures and I think I learned a lot of that from Jackson. The first one I ever did which was CBC Ottawa, a local show, and they hired me from the Film Board. I'd never written one in my life, but they offered me some astronomical sum of money like $300 to write the narration for a film on the Royal Canadian Mint which was going on the air on Monday on the network. This was about '55. So I went over to the television studio as a free-lance, but because I was the National Film Board, I was sort of a classy number. I looked at the film and it was absolutely awful. I remember it panning over metal, so I asked if they had anything in terms of information and they said no. So I said I'd better to go to the Mint, and they said it's closed; they were recording Monday morning and it was Friday afternoon. So I just got out an encyclopedia or two and looked up numismatics and started to write, and I had Leonardo Da Vinci and everybody in there, and it had absolutely no bearing whatsoever on whatever the hell was on the screen. I just wrote a 28-minute essay on money and coinage. And they seemed to like it; it went on the air! But after that, I tried to be a little more sparing and more intelligent. The first thing to do is to get away from describing what's on the screen and I've stuck with it throughout my career, though it became very unfashionable in the '60s. Because it was the only way I knew how to work, I still think that I can add a dimension to a picture by leaving my words in certain places and I think that, in fact, I can take a lot of short-cuts in terms of impressions and depth.

Cinema Canada: *Is that saying something about the limitations of screen images?*
Donald Brittain: I think it does. I think for an example of the film I did on the bureaucracy a few years ago that Ron Blumer did the research on, *Paperland*. If I'd done it the Wiseman style, I suppose it would have had to have run for a week-and-a-half before my points were all made. This film was going to be larded with narration, partly with my office boy's revenge on a couple of producers I'd been working with. But I think we got in some very nice sequences. I wouldn't make a universal sort of statement about this, but essentially I do find that attempting to tell a story strictly in images slows me down, makes the product more pedestrian, even if the images are sensational.

This morning I was looking at the content of the film I made for the world's fair in B.C. It's eight minutes long, it's in ShowScan, Douglas Trumbull special-effect man's invention – 70mm and two-and-a-half times normal speed; incredible images that's going to cost $1.3 million, the most expensive film I've ever made and the shortest, but, boy, it's a knock-out. Now, I wouldn't like to do that as a regular form of work and the world's fair films I've done pay well. Now 15 years after Expo and Osaka, I'm doing my world's fair number again and it'll be 10 or 15 before I do another, but it's a great change of pace; to think only in pictures and, for one thing, I've never shot past so much money.

Cinema Canada: *How does that change the nature of it?*
Donald Brittain: Well, I've told them I need a few lines here and there; I'm doing a prologue while the place is revolving and I'm going to say a few things in English *and* French, which is what happens with world fairs in Canada. Once or twice in the film I'll have little verbal signposts, but it tells essentially simple storylines about discovering a nation from a satellite looking down at it, so it can't be a story with any great depth, certainly not in an intellectual way. But the power of the image on those screens is so enormous.

Cinema Canada: *In* Paperland, *there is that wonderful conjunction where you've got the dancing bureaucrats in the ballroom in Vienna and then this incredible, bitter line about bureaucracy which can handle simple things like sending a man to the moon or transporting Jews to the gas-ovens. The contrast between image and words is overwhelming.*
Donald Brittain: Well, that's what I try to do, and that's one of my better little efforts there. It's to hit them with something out of left field and something from the right.

Cinema Canada: *Which, as a technique, is what makes rock videos interesting. Was it after* Bethune *that you got the call from Preminger?*
Donald Brittain: It was long after, when I got back from Japan. I did *Memorandum*, then I did the Thompson film (*Never A Backward Step*) and then I went on to do the Japanese film (*Tiger Child*), and I came back. I'd actually left the Film Board partly because I was getting so lazy. I'm essentially lazy. I have to have deadlines.

Cinema Canada: *The journalist in you?*
Donald Brittain: I think it goes back to writing and studying for exams, and I was, well, I wouldn't say I was burned out, but *Memorandum* took an awful long time. At that point I had been in the business 10 years in documentary and, on that film, we cut 92 sequences which we never used. We didn't know how to put that thing together – nine months in the cutting room and at times it looked like it wasn't going to work.

Cinema Canada: *How was it coming together?*
Donald Brittain: It was becoming very predictable, at one stage it was becoming confusing, at another stage I began to realize that certain things that you are sure will work at the beginning of the film lay an egg, but if you put it at the end are wonderful, and that you don't have all the answers. With *Volcano*, we went and we screened the thing at 2 1/2-3 hours; it was a serious work of art; *Birth of A Nation*; it was a *disaster*. We knew half-way through that the collective brilliance on everybody's part – the editor, the writer, the lighting – had cancelled everything out. It was overwhelming for about 10 minutes then you began saying, well, what the fuck is this all about? But we took five months to bring that film down. That was another thing about the Board, you had the time.

But to go back to what you were saying about Preminger, that was related to *Bethune*. I was working at Potterton Productions and the secretary was not too advanced; she got a call and she said Mr. Pullinger is calling you from New York – we are getting a lot of big wheels, we were down in New York every week – and so a couple of days later, I called this Pullinger and they answered "Otto Preminger's office." So he said: we must talk.

I checked him out with a couple of friends of mine in Hollywood and they said, be careful, he hires a lot of writers and a lot of them don't get paid, but I was intrigued. And when I met him, he sat there in the hotel-room and he ordered up seven bottles of assorted booze; he spent about four-five hours talking about the old days in Vienna, a great storyteller, and I said, why do you want me? I've never written a feature film in my life. He says if I don't like it, I fire you. He said he wanted me in New York the next week, but basically what he wanted me to do was to get him to China and also I knew about Bethune. And he'd just gone to see the Prime Minister and asked for a couple of million dollars *and* got it. So I said, I don't think I can get you into China. He said, never mind, if we can't go to China, we'll shoot it in British Columbia. This went on and it continued by telephone for some time and gradually settled down and I met him in an elevator in the Dorchester Hotel in London about three years later. I had just stepped in and there he was and I said: Hi, and he did a double take, he'd been through a lot of writers since me, I guess, but then he remembered and he started negotiating again and the negotiations were great fun, the plans he had; nothing came of it. Later on, I went down

FILMOGRAPHY

Work in Progress

Earthwatch
sc. d./p., Prisma Productions and Canadian, Pavillion, Expo 86, Showscan, 8 min.

The Champions: Final Chapter
sc./d./p., CBC/NFB, 120 min.

Mackenzie King
sc./d./p., CBC/NFB, 120 mins.

1985

First Stop China
sc., NFB, 90 min., colour

Canada's Sweetheart: The Saga of Hal C. Banks
sc./d./p., CBC/NFB, 114 min., colour

1984

The Children's Crusade
sc./p./d., CBC/NFB, 56 min., colour

Overtime
sc., NFB, 57 min.

Act of God
sc., Gary Nicols Productions, 57 min., colour

1983

Something to Celebrate
sc./d./p., CBC-NFB, 56 min., colour

The Accident
d., CBC, 105 min., colour

1982

Dream Horse
p./d./sc., CBC-*Fifth Estate*, 30 min., colour

The Honourable Member
d., CBC, 58 min., colour

1981

Running Man
d., CBC, 56 min., colour

Bamboo Lions and Dragons
sc., NFB, 20 min., colour

The Most Dangerous Spy, A Blanket of Ice, Shadows of A Horseman
co-p./d./sc., CBC-NFB (three-part series *On Guard for Thee)*, 58 min. x 3, colour

1980

The Lost Pharaoh: The Search for Akhenaten
d., CBC-NFB, 58 min., colour

Bow and Arrow
sc., NFB, 14 min., colour

1979

Paperland – The Bureaucrat Observed
co-p./co-d./co-sc., CBC-NFB, 58 min., colour

Has Anybody Here Seen Canada?
sc., CBC-NFB in association with the Great Canadian Moving Picture Company, 85 min., colour

The Dionne Quintuplets
p./d., CBC-NFB, 87 min., colour

Whistling Smith
sc., NFB, 27 min., colour

Diplomacy (research outline)
Not produced.

The Presidency (research outline)
Not produced.

1978

The Champions
p./d./sc., NFB, 57 min. colour & b&w (Part I), 55 min., colour & b&w (Part II)

In Search of Bermuda Pirates
co-p./d./sc., Alan Landsburg Productions, 24 min., colour

In Search of the Great Lakes Triangle
co-p./d./sc., Alan Landsburg Productions, 24 min., colour

1977

Secrets of the Bermuda Triangle
co-p./d./sc., Warner Bros., Alan Landsburg Productions, 100 min., colour

The Vacant Lot
p./sc., NFB, 17 min., colour

Small Is Beautiful: Impressions of Fritz Schumacher
d./sc., NFB, 30 min., colour

1976

Henry Ford's America
p./d./sc., CBC-NFB, 56 min., colour

The Sword of the Lord
sc., NFB, 58 min., colour

Volcano: An Inquiry Into the Life and Death of Malcolm Lowry
co-p./co.d./sc., NFB, 100 min., colour

1975

The Summer Before (L'été avant)
d./sc., Crawley Films for the Royal Bank of Canada and COJO, 30 min., colour

The Players
d./sc., NFB and South Australian Film Corporation, 58 min., colour

His Worship, Mr. Montreal
co-p./co-d./sc., NFB, 56 min., colour

1974

King of the Hill
d./sc., NFB, 56 min., colour

Van's Camp
p./co-d./sc., NFB, 27 min., colour

Stress: The World of Hans Selye
co-p./co-d./co-sc., Informedia Productions, 30 min., colour

Scoggie
sc., NFB, 15 min., colour

Arctic Four
sc., NFB, 60 min., colour

Dreamland: A History of Early Canadian Movies
d./sc., The Great Canadian Moving Picture Company with NFB, 86 min.

Thunderbirds in China
co-p./sc., NFB, 57 min., colour

1973-1972

Godsend
co-sc., Not produced.

Grierson
sc., NFB, 57 min., colour

Les Anglais
sc., CBC-TV (CBMT-Montreal), 60 min., colour

The People's Railway
p./sc., Potterton Productions for Canadian National Railways, 60 min., colour

The One Man Band that Went to Wall Street
sc., Potterton Productions for the New York Stock Exchange, 12 min., colour

Starblanket, Catskinner Keen, Cavendish Country
p./d./sc., NFB, (*West* Series) 27 min., colour

1971

Tiki-Tiki
add. dialog., Potterton Productions Inc., 100 min., colour

The Apprentice (Fleur Bleue)
p. Potterton Productions Inc., 100 min., colour

The Noblest of Callings, the Vilest of Trades
co-d./sc., CBC "CBC White Paper", 90 min., colour

Revolution Script (feature)
p., Not produced.

Tito
(Research outline for NFB)
Not produced.

1970

Tiger Child
d./sc., Multi-Screen Corporation for Expo '70 (Fuji Pavilion), 20 min., colour, Imax 70mm & 35mm multi-image

1969-1968

Juggernaut
sc., NFB, 27 min., colour

Madison Avenue
d./sc., NFB, limited shooting.

Granby Election
d./sc., CBC-TV (network), 30 min., B&W

Saul Alinsky Went to War
co-d./sc., NFB, 57 min., B&W

1967

To Be Young
sc., CPR/COMINCO (Expo '67), 20 min., colour

Polar Regions
concept con., Expo '67, 20 min., colour, multi-image

What on Earth!
sc., NFB, 10 min., colour, 35mm

Labyrinth
co-sc., NFB for Expo '67, 40 min., colour, multi-image

African Mosaic (dramatic script)
sc., Not produced.

1966

Never a Backward Step (La Presse et son empire)
co-d./sc., NFB, 57 min., B&W, 16mm

Helicopter Canada
sc., NFB for the Centennial Commission, 50 min., colour

Enrico Fermi
sc., NFB, colour, 16mm

Stravinsky
sc., NFB, 60 min., b&w, 16mm

1965

Memorandum (Pour Mémoire)
co-d./sc., NFB, 58 min., b&w

Ladies and Gentlemen... Mr. Leonard Cohen
co-d./sc., NFB, 44 min., b&w

A Trip Down Memory Lane
p., NFB, 10 min., b&w

Buster Keaton Rides Again
sc., NFB, 55 min., b&w

1964

The Campaigners
p./d. sc., CBC-TV: *This Hour Has Seven Days* 35 min., b&w

Return Reservation
d./sc., NFB, 30 min., b&w

Mosca
p./d./sc., CBC-TV: *This Hour Has Seven Days*, 10 min., b&w

Summerhill School
p./d./sc., CBC/TV: *This Hour Has Seven Days*, Not completed.

1963

Fields of Sacrifice (Champs d'honneur)
p./d./sc., NFB for the Department of Veterans Affairs, 38 min., Eastman Colour

Bethune
co-p./sc., NFB, 59 min., b&w

Economic Policy
Treatment. Not produced.

1962

The City Between
sc., NFB for the Central Mortagage and Housing Corporation, 30 min., colour, 16mm

Canada at War (13-part series)
d./sc., NFB, 13 x 28 min., b&w

1959

The Royal Canadian Mint
sc., CBC-TV (CBOT-Ottawa), 30 min., b&w

Everybody's Prejudiced
d./sc., NFB, 30 min., b&w

Willie Catches On
sc., NFB, 30 min., b&w

1958-1957-1956

DOT
sc., CBC-TV (CBOT-Ottawa), 30 min., b&w

A Day in the Night of Jonathan Mole
d./sc., NFB for the Department of Labour, 29 min., b&w

Tri-Services Review (1958)
sc., NFB for the Department of National Defence, 60 min., b&w

The Blessing of the Fleet
loc. man., NFB, 5 min., b&w

Setting Fires for Science
d./sc., NFB for the National Research Council, 15 min., colour

Winter Construction, It Can Be Done
d./sc., NFB for the National Research Council, 15 min., colour

Sight Unseen
sc., NFB/DND, 25 min., b&w, 16mm

A Matter of Time
sc., CBC-TV (CBOT-Ottawa), 29 min., b&w

Survival in the Summer Bush
sc., NFB/DND, 30 min., b&w

Survival in the Winter Bush
sc., NFB/DND, 30 min., b&w, 16mm

Survival in the Summer Arctic
sc., NFB/DND, 30 min., b&w

Survival in the Winter Arctic
sc., NFB/DND, 30 min., b&w

A Matter of Survival
sc., NFB/DND, 30 min., b&w

The Silver Chain
sc., CBC-TV (CBOT-Ottawa), 29 min., b&w

Canadian Infantryman
sc., NFB/DND, 30 min., colour, 35mm

Tri-Services review (1957)
sc., NFB/DND, 60 min., (1956-1957) b&w

Fishing with Ketch
sc., Carling Breweries, 30 min., colour

Signal Corps
sc., NFB/DND, 20 min., b&w

Rural Values, Prejudice Series, Salmo Salar (Atlantic Salmon) **Sea Lamprey, Natural Disasters**
Scripts not produced.

1955-1954

Canadian Profile
loc. man., NFB, 60 min., b&w

Salt Cod
loc. man., NFB (*Eyewitness* Series), 5 min., b&w

In addition, Brittain's films have garnered him 93 different awards and nominations for awards at cinematographic festivals and celebrations from Australia to Venice, and between 1977-1982 eight retrospectives of his work were held across this continent from Los Angeles to Cambridge, Mass., and in Canada in Halifax, Montreal, Ottawa and Toronto.

and did a special, distributed by Warner Bros., a feature.

Cinema Canada: *This is the* Secrets of the Bermuda Triangle *film?*
Donald Brittain: Yeah, later it was running in the Imperial Theatre in Toronto while I was there shooting a film and I didn't even go to see it myself. It was horrible, but I got paid extremely well. I was asked to go down – that was the first time I had spent time in Los Angeles – and all I wanted to go was get out.

Cinema Canada: *And the reason you got into that whole thing was for the money?*
Donald Brittain: Only. It was Patrick Watson who called me – actually, it was Alan Landsburg who'd done *A Storm In Summer,* and *In Search of the Loch Ness Monster* – and he and I did a few of those, pseudo-documentaries, and they were great fun.

Cinema Canada: *You were doing the writing?*
Donald Brittain: Well, what they told me was they'd approached Watson, because Watson had worked with Cousteau. They'd worked with Cousteau and Watson couldn't do it and he recommended me and so I talked to him. I was just going to England, I was doing a film on Fritz Schumacher, the *Small Is Beautiful* film, and I was about to start *The Champions* on Trudeau and Lévesque – the research had been done. So I had some time. And they said, can you come down, this film has to be finished, tested and out on August 12 – this was June the first. Bermuda Triangle, documentary-style, small crew, voice-over, we got all kinds of old ships and stuff, interview some people, and the money was really good, ten times what I make here.

So, anyway, I went to England, I left Doug Kiefer, the cameraman, as co-director for the last few days of shooting, and I got down there. There was no script; and it was no longer a simple documentary; it was now under approval from Universal; there was about 50 people, there were special effects men, stuntmen, helicopters, underwater men, and there was no script and it started shooting in two weeks. I had a team of researchers, *Time*-magazine-style, so I wrote the script. I wrote enough of it that we got started and we did it. It was all totally insane. We arrived with this massive crew and then I raced out to the Fort Lauderdale model agency to audition – this was dialogue, the whole *schmear.* Then I'd race back to the hotel and write something for the scenes the next day. Then I'd go out to do some shooting on an old freighter turned into a World War I battleship. We got to the dock. The Teamsters were striking the boat and they tell me to go back to the motel and make a deal with the Teamsters who had beat up all the extras, and start shooting. Anyway, it was an absolutely monumental undertaking, but I managed to retain my sense of humour through it all. I knew it was going to be over – by August the 12th. It had to be. We got back to Los Angeles and we cut this turkey, shot it all over San Diego and Texas – they'd fly in the Confederate airforce, and we re-created the Second World War. I didn't have much control, there was an executive in charge of production who basically was controlling the traffic, but I also wrote scripts by night. I earned my money, I'll tell you!

That's where I drank the diesel fuel on the set in Key West by accident. I almost got blind, at least there was some fear I would go blind. We'd been working all day in Key West, it was about 110 degrees; they were shooting a ghost story ostensibly set in 1812, and all the black slaves showed up in polyester shorts.

We were drinking Gatorade all day. I went back – it was my birthday, I went back to the hotel, had a drink, it was

supper-break and when we came back afterward, I picked up my Gatorade bottle – we were shooting by torchlight – and I got quite a bit of diesel fuel down my gullet before I realized I had made a mistake. I tell you, boy, did they ever treat me good after that because they could see the lawsuits: "Director Loses Eyesight On Set." They rushed me to the hospital and tried to pump my stomach. The soundman saved my life actually. Someone suggested I make myself vomit and I was about to do that when he rushed up – they're well-organized – he had a first-aid book and consumption of diesel fuel was actually listed: under no circumstances induce vomitting which leads to death, because the fumes get in the lungs. So he really saved my bacon.

At the hospital, they were going to pump my stomach and the doctor stopped them and then looked at my eyeballs. They thought I was Spanish because everybody else there was – but they talked English, and I heard them say I might go blind. It wasn't too good a moment. They kept me overnight and I went back to the hotel, had a drink and changed my shirt – it was full of diesel fuel – and sort of looked at myself in the mirror and said: This may be it. Anyway, the next day, I wasn't blind so I went back to the set. And pressed on and went on the wagon and stopped smoking. We got it in and my worst moment was screening it for Ted Ashley, I think, who was the chairman at Warner Bros., and this was a dismal motion picture. And the first thing they do down there is they put in all the title sequence – the whole title is finished – so there's my name on this huge screen and I'm the director and the co-producer – I don't even know what the budget is. There's already an instant book out based on the film and there's lawsuits: 27 guys have written Bermuda Triangle books and they are all suing for a million dollars. Mr. Ashley sat through most of it. I cringed, and he made a few remarks about a few weaknesses here and there in the plot which I agreed with instantly. Landsburg was very angry with me: he said, in this town, you never admit you're wrong. It's the greatest thing since sliced bread and you just stick with that.

Anyway, I was ready to go. Boy, I could tell you. But we did finish it and I staggered out. But the idea of sitting stuck in that town, in *that* industry, where there is just so much money around, it's so tempting, and I was offered other jobs and saw what happened to people, and I didn't want it to happen to me. So I made a firm decision, I should never, ever – I'm happy to make the films for them – but I'll never move down there.

Cinema Canada: *Was it in that context that you met Sterling Hayden?*
Donald Brittain: No, that happened actually before that. We had a script which I wrote based on Harry Oakes in northern Ontario and I love northern Ontario. It's a great setting for a movie and this was sort of a high-bred piece of fiction based partly on Sir Harry Oakes and partly on stock-scam operations. It had its moments but it wasn't a good script. At any rate, we had the money for it. I figured Hayden was the only guy who could play this lead character who was hoaky, drunk, who made his millions in the north, and in Nassau built golf courses down there so he could bulldoze them, an extremely flamboyant person, but the money people wanted Lorne Greene who was the last person I wanted.

I was learning how to operate down there and I went down and brought Greene a copy of the script, shipped it over to him, thank you very much. *Bonanza* had just ended and he said he was certainly going to read it. I knew he wouldn't do it, the money wasn't good enough, only 60,000 bucks to play the lead, and I knew that he had a television series coming up, so I knew he was just going through the motions. I got a hold of Hayden's agent who was a great old pirate – lived next door to Liberace and was married to Cole of California bathing suits. So we had lunch, and he went back to read the script and he called me and he says, I don't like this script much, but if you can work on it, you and he will get along, but I don't know where he is – he's an agent. They found him and he called back and said, all right, Hayden's in London, living on a barge. He likes it there.

So I flew to London and I spent a week with him. And he was very nice. I gave him the script; he was living out of his little sailor bag; and I gave it to him in the morning. He called me back in the afternoon and he said OK, I've read it, I know you want to hear from me on it. He didn't tell me he didn't like it; he said there were a couple of things. We went through the script and I said, I agree with you, you know, we can work on it. It was exactly the same situation we had with *Hal Banks*; we had big problems; I had the money; I wanted to go, but the money people wanted more development, although in this case I never got the chance to write the development because, in fact, Hayden said, basically, he didn't want to spend six weeks or two months in Ontario. He had just bought himself a little Super 8 camera and he was into documentaries and he had seen one or two I'd made. We spent the last four days while he talked me into – you know, he *hated* making movies in Hollywood to begin with, so he tried to convince me that documentary was the only way to go. I wouldn't go to heaven if I did not return to that "genre". And he was on the wagon and I wasn't – he was smoking some very strong stuff – and I was reeling. I thought I could hold my liquor – he also drank four-and-a-half bottles of wine – he was on the wagon. I mean, this guy outclassed me. I really got to like him, we became friends and, in the end, I sort of staggered out. It was a small part and he would have taken it, but I had already given it to Jean Duceppe in Montreal. I was in a posi-

tion to hand over $60,000 – Hayden's agent said, not only that, he needs the money, he wants to buy another boat. But Hayden wouldn't take the $60,000 and he did need the money. So, I sort of staggered onto an airplane and came back – and found the money had vanished anyway.

Cinema Canada: *Do you think Hayden was right about you and documentary?*

Donald Brittain: Well, I go back to what I said earlier: if I had to choose, I think essentially, I probably would choose documentary and it may partly be an ego thing because I think really good documentaries are going to have a longer shelf-life than most feature films. I think feature films will always be looked at, but largely as curiosities. But I think the really fine documentary films are increasingly important in terms of audiences, if somebody manages to preserve them.

Cinema Canada: *How do you see the state of documentary in this country at present and the prospects?*

Donald Brittain: It's hard for me to say because I've been very lucky. I started with the Film Board, so I had a built-in producer. Any time I've gone outside, I already had the offer so I didn't have to raise the money and I'm no good at raising money, and I know what terrible things people in the private sector have to go through to get a picture made. So, I guess, I have a rather rose-coloured view. I'm always certain to be able to work on documentary films. I'm fortunate to be in a privileged position where I didn't have to go and scrounge up the bread.

And I've worked around the world – a lot in Australia, in Europe and Japan. When I go to the Media Club in Sydney, there are 16 people coming around looking for jobs in Canada. And it's the same in the States, where they think that because they see the best of Canadian documentary on PBS, this is the land of documentary glory – and I'm forced to disabuse them of that notion. I think it's about the same it's always been. I think the fact that the CBC does run some has made a difference, because most countries are afraid to handle them. CBC runs a lot of prime time stuff in the Sunday afternoon slot, but it's only helped a few people. At least, there is that outlet. And there is the tradition of documentary here, and it's valid. There are a lot of theories about why that's the case, I don't know whether I agree with any of them. I think essentially because John Grierson showed up in Ottawa one day – it could have been Otto Preminger – because Mackenzie King would have gone for anybody. He understood the power of the medium.

So I think it's just a curious happenstance, but there it was, and partly because nobody had made a feature film in those days anyway, nobody knew how; there were no possibilities.

My first brush with feature films was when they came up with Gene Tierney to make *The Gouzenko Story* while I was at the paper. They shot on location in Ottawa, and all of a sudden Ottawa had a gigantic nightclub about twice the size of the Copacabana. All they had in reality was lady-and-escort taverns. But that was feature films. And a few were also being made here in Montreal. But there was just no other outlet and there was this documentary thing.

Cinema Canada: *Do you think that happenstance aspect is characteristic of filmmaking in Canada? Documentary develops by accident and, well, that becomes a tradition, and features films, again, are accidents?*

Donald Brittain: I think so. I don't know about the feature film which is something of a separate case, but I would say hardly anything is planned. I mean it's an accident that I'm in this business. I think that's less true of a number of filmmakers today, there are too many film schools. But the Film Board when I joined it was made of chemists; the first director in design did window displays at Eaton's; school teachers; and others from all kinds of walks of life, none of which had anything to do with film. And I think it was true for a long time.

Cinema Canada: *Do you think it is still true that it develops in this completely unplanned way and it's pretty likely to continue not being terribly planned?*

Donald Brittain: Well, when the CFDC first started there was some plan which I did not agree with. I have to say that Michael Spencer, who's a personal friend of mine – he never let his friendship stand in the way of messing up my career – had a terrible battle to get that money to establish that operation, but I think they had to sell their soul to the devil. They started this industry-seeding operation...

Cinema Canada: *That was based on a de-centralization of Hollywood production...*

Donald Brittain: Yes, and I thought it was ridiculous. I always thought that feature film in this country – this goes against the conventional wisdom, but I think it's true. I was in Australia when they were starting up with feature film in '73, I think, and if you went on the set and talked to some of those guys – I really admired their guts – they were great. They make a lot of a lousy films too, but at least they have something going. I mean if the CFDC had been set up as a cultural agency, I think that would have ensured that the Canadian feature film would have been something of value. I think it could have worked, instead of leading to that disaster scam-period.

Cinema Canada: *Do you think there is a way out of that?*

Donald Brittain: Well, I think the way out... I talked recently to a couple of Hollywood producers. The closest I ever came to doing a big-budget feature was when Orion called me and once again I was in Europe and they said we've got a script and would you like to direct it? It was written by Dore Schary's daughter, a best-seller autobiographical novel about a drug-ridden daughter of a famous actor and a drunken, alcoholic professor of mathematics who was a gambler – they had Shirley McLaine and Allan Bates. I met with Orion and they seemed to like me, but they said you've got to get cleared by Bates – it's in the contract and MacLaine owns the property. I thought Maclean was a little old for this role but when they explained to me that she owns it, that settled that question. And I think Bates is a great film actor, but the story was not as tight a story as I would have done. It was a good script. But it was a real Beverly Hills film, chases and all kinds of things which I'm not terribly interested in; the characters were interesting and I had this great actor and actress. I was doing *Paperland* as a matter of fact, and we were – I was in Vienna and they called me and said Bates is in Budapest doing *Nijinski* and he wants to meet you. There I was with my little six-men crew and my little 16mm camera and Bates with a cast of thousands, beautiful costumes, and he was really very friendly. We got along very well, so I got his stamp of approval. And MacLaine and I connected when I was down in Hollywood. They called me again and brought me down there, PBC was then involved, and they were showing me the boards and asking things like does the schedule suit you? But I had started to learn enough about Hollywood: on face value we were starting to shoot in three weeks. In reality, I figured there was about a 30% chance of the film ever being made. As I walked out, one lady from Orion, originally a literary agent and not a Hollywood type, said: Don't hold your breath.

What I had there, I knew right off the bat, was the same thing I had when I was doing *The Bermuda Triangle,* at somewhat a higher level. I think it's the same thing that Jewison talked about.

He was brought down to do Doris Day movies; he got to do one scene the way he wanted and the rest he did like Doris Day wanted it made or the producer in the studio wanted it made. And directors like Henry King have gone for decades working for Darryl Zanuck – some pretty good, some not so good. I just don't like working that way. I don't ever want to work that way and the more money there is, the less freedom you've got.

Essentially I'm not interested – unless I've got some control – I'm not interested in big budgets. Once you get into big budgets, the money comes in on the dailies and they are objecting about somebody blinking an eye for shot 27B, take four. Quite frankly, I just don't want to do that. I'd rather go back to the newspaper business. So the short answer is, I think, that the lower the budget to make something good for, the more freedom you've got. It's that simple.

Cinema Canada: *Is that something that should be the case in terms of Canadian filmmaking – that is,* not *to be an industrial kind of operation? You were saying that if the CFDC had been a cultural agency, something lasting might come of it.*

Donald Brittain: I think that a number of very good motion pictures could come out of it. I don't think that it would ever create a huge industry in this country. I just don't think that's in the cards but I think really a dozen films, half of which are good and maybe one or two are really international, could have come out of that and the right sort of people would have stayed involved. It's the whole business of the directors-oriented thing in Australia.

But I still think that the basic confusion has always been that you really have to define film *either* as an industry *or* as an art form. Every person from the technical end – the director of photography, he's into big budgets and lots of lights, it's terrific for him – so all the technical end is more industry-oriented and the producers are industry-oriented. They want to make money; I don't blame them. But it's very rare that you can combine this with the art form. ●

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