

# A eulogy for Donald Brittain

BY WILLIAM WEINTRAUB

**W**illiam Weintraub is a novelist, scriptwriter, former NFB Producer. Although he never worked with Donald Brittain, who died July 21, his friendship with the filmmaker spanned a period of over 30 years. Brittain's wife, Brigitta, asked Weintraub to deliver the eulogy at her husband's funeral, which took place at Montreal's Christ Church Cathedral on July 26. The text of Weintraub's eulogy follows.



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

*Memorandum, Bethune, Volcano, The Champions* – the list is astonishingly long. And in his house, up on Clarke Avenue, a shelf groans under the weight of the Etrogs, the Genies, the Emmys, the Nellies – a little forest of statuettes with odd names. And on the walls, more awards and certificates and parchments from Edinburgh, Venice, Sydney, Leipzig, New York, Sofia, San Francisco.

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

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

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

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

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

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

thought he might try his hand at writing for films.

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

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

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

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

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

Don was fascinated by time. As I got into his car with him one day, I wondered why he clicked on his stopwatch. Don explained that he was driving to the Film Board via the Cote des Neiges route, and he had to know exactly how long it would take. Yesterday, he had taken the Victoria Avenue route and he had timed that. In fact he had been timing the two routes all week.

But mind you, we still arrived at the Film Board an hour late for his appointment. Why? We had been detained on Clarke Avenue for the completion of a task. For some obscure reason, Donald had produced a list of all the production people at the Film Board, and he wanted us to assign a military rank to each one of them. Which cameraman was a captain, which gaffer was a sergeant, which administrator was a major, who were the colonels, and who were the

brigadiers? It was important for Donald to have things like that worked out with precision.

Life was an endless game for Donald, but he was not a frivolous man. His films were laced with humor and irony, but they were very serious films. They were concerned with the fate of the planet, with the abuse of power, with the folly and corruption of politics, with genocide, with the abuse of the weak by the strong.

And his films were concerned with Canada, the country he loved so much, the country that exasperated him so much, the country he always came back to. As much as any man, Donald Brittain held up a mirror, so his country could see itself – its truth, its beauty, its sordidness, its glory.

Donald wrote a little – not enough – about how he made his films. "A documentary crew," he once wrote, "is like a small band of adventurers, thrown together in desperate enterprise, totally reliant on each other for survival, charged with the job of bringing something back alive, and thus hopefully illuminate some corner of the human spirit."

A colleague of his put it somewhat differently: "It was like going out on a trapeze, without a net. You had to remember that he never dropped you before."

Don always chose the path of risk. It was part of his inability to settle for the obvious. His working methods were also those of greatest risk. Deadlines loomed, and little seemed to be getting done. Fear would start to invade the cutting room. But Don would reassure his colleagues. "I function best," he once said, "in an advanced state of panic."

Brutally long hours, weekends, vacations postponed – but his colleagues loved it, and they came back for more. Because if Donald worked them like slaves, he himself was the hardest-working of them all.

He respected his crews; he genuinely wanted their suggestions and criticisms; he gave them generous credit for everything they did. Everybody wanted to work with Don Brittain. There was so much he could teach you. And, above all, it was such great, agonizing fun. What loyalty he inspired! And what loyalty he gave back in return.

Don Brittain's talent came to fruition in that dumb and dreary decade called the '60s, when so many of our young filmmakers were ideologues, always ready to jump onto the next trendy bandwagon. The bandwagon is always the refuge of the untalented. But Donald was different. His films were about people, not slogans. As one critic said, "He makes the common person great, the famous person common."

He made films about many famous people, and I wonder what kind of a film he would have made about Donald Code Brittain. There would probably have been too much horse-racing in it for my own taste. There might even have been some documentary ambiguity in it, to make it

appear that the expensive horse Don once bought had won more than that one solitary race.

The Ottawa Rough Riders would have been it in, with their greatest fan, Don Brittain, cheering them on, perhaps because they were the losingest team in human history. And there would have been the young Don making a brilliant play in the touch football game behind the Film Board. And Don as the captain of a basketball team called The Sprockets, playing illegally on the NFB soundstage.

There would have been lots of golf in this award-winning epic. A young actor, fresh-faced and bright-eyed, would have the role of teen-age Don, playing with his father at the Royal Ottawa Golf Club. And there would be yesterday's Don, played by himself, playing on the Dunany course, up in Lachute, with his son, Christopher. And here we would see documentary truth, with Christopher patiently showing his father how to do it. "Just relax, Dad, and swing easy." And Don would show himself in close-up, smiling and proud that he could learn from his son. And proud that he could learn from his beloved daughter, Jennifer, who knows a lot about horses, and about Canada.

And there would be his wife, Brigitta, pillar of strength, shelter in the storm, rescuer from the chaos that he loved to create – beloved centre of his life.

Brigitta, Christopher, Jennifer – there would be a lot of good stuff about them, in that film. And there would be cleverly-cut, cameo appearances by a lot of you out there, his friends. He'd be down there in the Film Board basement, in the pit, at four in the morning, hunched over the Steenbeck, enveloped in a cloud of smoke, trying to crowd as many of you as possible into that film that he ought to have made.

As for the narration, he might consider once again using those lines from his *Bethune*.

*An artist enters eagerly into the life of man, of all men.*

*He becomes all men in himself.*

*The function of the artist is to disturb.*

*His duty is to arouse the sleeper, to shake the complacent pillars of the world.*

*He reminds the world of its dark ancestry, shows the world its present, and points the way to its new birth.*

*He makes uneasy the static, the set and the still.*

Don, I wish you were still here... But you are. And always will be. ●

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