

IN MEMORIAM – NORMAN McLAREN

On January 26, 1987 Norman McLaren died in Montreal, and Canada lost her most honoured and innovative filmmaker, the Picasso of modern film, an extraordinary artist and a wonderful compassionate person. Few Canadians are known internationally as well as Norman McLaren and no Canadians have moved and enthused millions of people all over the world as did Norman McLaren.

Norman McLaren, filmmaker and artist, came to Canada in 1941. He was born in Stirling, Scotland (April 1914). It was in 1936 that John Grierson, the famous father of documentary films and founder of the National Film Board of Canada, met Norman McLaren at a Scottish Animation Film Festival in Glasgow. Norman produced an imaginative film called *Colour Cocktail*. Grierson, who was himself born near Stirling, invited N. McLaren to come to London to work at the British General Post Office (GPO) film unit. John Grierson went on to Canada where he created the National Film Board of Canada (1939). He was anxious to bring young talented filmmakers to Ottawa and so he did. In 1941 he persuaded Norman McLaren who was then working in New York to come to Ottawa to produce animation films. Grierson saw to it that Norman was given a lot of freedom to develop his animation techniques. McLaren's genius enriched Canadian filmmaking over a span of 40 years.

Luckily for us and for the NFB Norman McLaren stayed in Canada, although he took on UNESCO assignments in China in 1949 and in India in 1952. The rest of the time he stayed at the NFB producing at least one film a year for well over 40 years.

This is not the place to list or describe all his beautiful films, but let us just remember such titles as *Chants populaires* (1944-46), *Begone Dull Care* (1949), *Neighbours* (1952), *Blinkety Blank* (1955), *Il était une chaise (Chairy Tale)* (1956), *Le merle* (1958), *Pas de deux* (1967), *Narcissus* (1983). His most celebrated film is no doubt, *Neighbours* (1952) – a political fable on the futility of using violence to resolve conflict. This extraordinary film uses a technique referred to as a "pixillation," a stop-motion technique using actors moved around in fixed, rehearsed positions. The film was awarded an Oscar and has moved millions of people all over the world and continues to do so 35 years after its creation. Its peace message is as universal and as powerful today as ever.

What is so extraordinary about McLaren's films is that no two of them are alike – in every new film project he has seen a new challenge and a new opportunity for innovation in techniques. His films demonstrate an array of visual forms of expression.

Norman McLaren started making films without a camera by painting or scratching on the raw film; he has used cut-outs and artwork in charming and puzzling ways; he did use photography, but in new ingenious ways through stop motion, slow motion and superimposition. McLaren was always a believer in low budget film making. He once said: "I think that the less money there is for a film the more imagination there has to be. A small budget, limited technical means, and an urgent deadline often act as a catalyst and help to impose the artistic consistency and unity which is an essential part of a well made work."

It has been said by some that aesthetics and techniques became more important to him than content. I believe this is not at all true. What is so extraordinary about his films is that every one of them carries a message, builds a bridge to the other side that takes the viewer over to an unknown world. All his films represent bridges between people and carry universal messages of understanding between peoples.

What is so unique about his films is the fact that through images, weird as well as wonderful, they create understanding between people in our society – with widely varying cultural and psychological make-ups, between people in our Quebec, in our Canada, in our North American continent, in our entire World. Visuals do have a special way of communicating, but Norman McLaren's visuals have a truly universal appeal thanks to his unique talent – yes indeed his genius.

It is interesting to note what a special appeal his films have. They stir audiences all over the world, audiences of all ages and all language groups. I have had occasion myself to use his films with students in Denmark, in Mexico and now in Canada. At McGill University – without exception students are deeply moved and enthused by his films produced 20, 30 years ago or more. His films never seem to age or outdate, and they never will. Norman will live through his films for generations to come.

I have personally had the great fortune to know Norman McLaren for many, many years as we both worked at the NFB in different capacities as producers. I am one of the many who were and

still are inspired by his talent and enthusiasm, but no less by his humanity, his modesty, his humility vis à vis humans. The fact is that Norman McLaren gained fame all over the world like no other Canadian filmmaker, thanks to his exceptionally creative use of animation films to carry messages. Yet, he never seemed to lose his sense of modesty and deep respect for human problems. All his films explore, in many intriguing ways, man's universal behaviour, dreams and problems. Millions of people in all parts of the world see his films. It is not too much to say that the world has been enriched by his art, and that his art through the film medium has reached untold millions.

Norman McLaren was made a companion of the Order of Canada and elected member of the Order of Quebec. He was also elected to the Royal Society of Design in Britain and as well received a number of honorary doctorates. His films won over 200 awards and in 1985, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences staged a special tribute to McLaren. In 1986 McGill University presented him with a Peace Award at the International Conference on Peace and Security in Montreal "to acknowledge your life commitment to social responsibility in the cause of peace and justice."

Norman McLaren's love for peace and joy of life will continue to live among us, as his films touch us all and reach out to millions.

Hans Moller
McGill University

Hans Moller, Research and Development Librarian, McGill University, presented the special Peace Award to Norman McLaren at the International Conference on Peace and Security.

In one other way Norman McLaren's memory will live on. Each year a student of the Faculty of Education at McGill University will receive an award in his name. *Editors*