# SEEING & BELIEVING

## *The Man Who Might Have Been* & the politics of Canadian innocence

Images courtesy of the National Film Board

### By Tom McSorley

From our perspective, here in the midst of the final entropic spasms of the 20th century, it is difficult to imagine a world in which former Prime Minister Lester B.Pearson could be described as "the most dangerous man alive." The very idea is laughable. Yet in the paranoiac anti–communist maelstrom on the 1950s, an American newspaper characterized the future Nobel Peace Prize laureate as precisely that.

From an American perspective, the reasons are simple: this Canadian renegade, then the Minister for External Affairs, resisted allowing the ferocious and destructive U. S. government's communist witch hunts to bleed across the border, employed avowedly left–leaning intellectuals in the Department of External Affairs, and actively pursued an independent foreign policy for Canada in the postwar period. Through the shrill, hysterical prism of the 1950s, how one saw defined totally what one was actually looking at, obliterating all contradiction, subtlety and individuality under the weight of a hyperventilating Cold War ideology of us–against–them. Under these conditions and to a certain frame of mind, Pearson must have seemed like Stalin himself. Seeing is believing, after all; or, in the Cold War context, vice versa.

It is against this epistemological backdrop of how perceptions are shaped that an absorbing National Film Board documentary explores the career of one of Pearson's most accomplished colleagues, Herbert Norman. *The Man Who Might Have Been: An Inquiry Into the Life and Death of Herbert Norman,* chronicles the life of an unassuming Canadian scholar and diplomat who walked into the fire of one of the 20th century's most incendiary ideological conflicts and was slowly, fatally scorched. In this Cold War context, he was seen, like Pearson, to be "dangerous." *The Man Who Might Have Been* (which kicks off a new CBC–TV Thursday night arts/documentary series on Oct. 7, at 8 p.m.) examines Herbert Norman as well as the prism through which he was himself observed during his short but quietly spectacular life. Perhaps "lives" is more precise, as he was a renowned scholar of Japanese history, a close advisor of General Douglas MacArthur while the Allies' occupation government ruled postwar Japan, and a prominent diplomat who helped negotiate an end to the Suez Crisis in Egypt (when England and France briefly invaded Egypt in 1956 in an aborted attempt to prevent it from nationalizing the Suez Canal). While rather disappointing in its conventional construction, the film is a worthy and long overdue illumination of what can only be described as brilliant, enigmatic, even

**Herbert Norman**

# SEEING

troubled Canadian life. Why haven't we heard of this guy? Beyond that obvious query, the film inspires searching questions about Canada's role in international affairs, then and now, about the Canadian tendency to self–aggrandizing postures of innocence, and about how knowledge is constructed and executed in ideological terms.

First the life, and quite a life it is. Born in Nagano, Japan, in 1909 to Canadian Methodist missionaries, Herbert Norman assimilated himself as much as possible into Japanese society during his childhood. After shuttling between Japan and Canada in his youth, he returned to Canada in 1928 to study at Victoria College at the University of Toronto before moving on to Cambridge University in 1933. In the midst of the Depression and the rise of fascism in Europe, Norman grew interested in and passionate about the humanist ideals articulated in communist philosophy, but never actually formally joined the Party. Awarded a scholarship by the Rockefeller Foundation to study Japanese history at Harvard University, Norman befriended Tsuru Shigeto, a highly regarded leftist economics student from Japan. Meanwhile, the Spanish Civil War ran its course, and, as Herbert Norman took a job as Japanese language officer at External Affairs in Ottawa, the Second World War erupted in 1939.

Herbert Norman and Abdel Nasser, 1956

Sent to Japan to work as a diplomat during the war, Herbert was placed under house arrest by the Japanese after they attacked Pearl Harbor, but later served as an adviser in the reconstruction of Japan in the late 1940s. It was while working with the Americans that his past communist activities began to be investigated, chiefly by General Charles Willoughby, described by MacArthur as "my lovable fascist." Recalled from Japan in 1950 by a Canadian government under increasing pressure from the United States, Norman was subjected to a gruelling RCMP investigation into his past affiliations, but was cleared. Angered by U.S. interference in Canadian domestic affairs, Pearson then appointed him head of the American and Far Eastern Division at External Affairs, but American allegations of Norman's communist leanings persisted, made more pressing by Chairman Mao's ascension in China and the war in Korea. He was soon named as a communist by a Professor Karl Wittfogel before the United States Senate Subcommittee on Internal Security. Consequently, a second RCMP interrogation took place in 1952, and it took a further toll on Norman, who worried that he was becoming an embarrassment to his minister.

Sensing the hysteria will eventually blow over, Pearson protected Norman again by sending him to New Zealand for three years as high commissioner. Early in 1956, Norman was appointed Ambassador to Egypt, just as it nationalized the Suez Canal and brought the region to the brink of war. In this intense cauldron of Cold War realpolitik and emergent post–colonial nationalism, Norman negotiated directly with the charismatic and volatile Egyptian president, Nasser. Meanwhile, the Washington communist witch hunters, themselves astonished that the Canadian government made this man an ambassador in a sensitive geopolitical region, gathered for another attack on Norman's past. Haunted and depressed at the prospect of still more persecution and embarrassment to Canada, Herbert Norman commited suicide by jumping off the roof of a hotel in Cairo, April 4, 1957.

It's an extraordinary story. Not only because of Norman's stoic and, as some have argued, Japanese approach to ending his situation by killing himself, but also because of the examination of the emergence of Canada, under Pearson and through diplomats like Herbert Norman, as a "middle" power in international postwar politics. As the film stitches these thematic strands together, it becomes clear that Canada's political heritage as a European colony was collapsing into its political destiny as an American one. The fissures created by the shift are arguably most deep and vivid during the 1950s. So, while Pearson's strength and conviction would attempt to chart a more independent course for Canada, the United States would answer with Cold War logic, the domino theory and anti–communist paranoia. In a political reality out of Canada's control, innocent or not–so–innocent flirtations with communism, even by a studious Canadian like Herbert Norman, could not be permitted in the Cold War's ideological endgame. Maintaining his innocence, Norman recognized his fate and, like the Japanese Bushido figure he admired as a boy, hurled himself into the void. Of course, the story of Herbert Norman begs a compelling, unanswerable question: what would Pearson have done if Norman had remained alive?

Oddly appropriate for its largely forgotten and bookish subject, the film was inspired by an important but largely forgotten Canadian book. NFB producer Gerry Flahive (*Project Grizzly*) first encountered the figure of Herbert Norman in a book by Charles Taylor entitled *Six Journeys: A Canadian Pattern*, published in 1977. The book consists of six biographical sketches of "unusual Canadians whose lives have, with varying degrees of prominence and distinction, influenced world affairs." "I was intrigued immediately by this remarkable man," says Flahive, "and put it forward as a possible project for the Board when I moved from the

# BELIEVING

marketing side of things into production. To me, the quiet and amazing story of Norman's life was a way of examining Canada's role in international affairs in a now somewhat forgotten 'golden age' at the Department of External Affairs. Norman was around when there was a genuine belief that Canada had an important role to play in the world. Also, what fascinated me about his story was that it confronts the idea that an individual's political beliefs can change or are not acted upon; that idea was unimaginable to those who hounded Herbert Norman."

Flahive was surprised at Canadian historical ignorance of Norman's impressive contributions to our nation's foreign policy, but he was more surprised by an utterly unexpected telephone call during preproduction. "It was two months before we went into production," Flahive recalls, "when an ad agency here in Toronto called and calmly informed me that the president of Toyota Canada, Mr. Yoshio Yakatani, wants to give the NFB money for the film about Herbert Norman. Apparently, Mr. Yakatani was planning to commission his own film about Norman, so impressed was he at this Canadian's published works on Japanese politics, history and culture. Norman's books on Japanese history and culture, widely read and respected in the immediate postwar period, are still available in Japanese editions, though they're long out of print here. This is the president of Toyota Canada telling me this: I was stunned! It really was no strings attached funding, and Mr. Yakatani, whose training is actually in literary studies, put us in touch with some important contacts in Japan and even offered Toyota's help in setting up the film's Web site, www.herbertnorman.com. It's just further proof, I guess, of Herbert Norman's quite remarkable passage through the world in general and through Japan in particular."

Having assembled a veritable mountain of information about Norman's life, including an 800–page FBI file, Flahive hired John Kramer to write and direct the film. Kramer, a former NFBer and now independent filmmaker, had worked with the fabled Donald Brittain on *Volcano: An Inquiry Into the Life and Death of Malcolm Lowry*, a title consciously echoed in the Norman film. Embroidering the many still photographs of Norman with interviews with those who knew him and period news footage, Kramer's script is a dense and dramatic narrative of one Canadian's incredible engagement in and experience of the tumultuous first half of our convulsive century.

Strangely, and perhaps fittingly, no moving images of Herbert Norman exist anywhere, so the filmmakers opted for some modest reconstructions of Norman walking in and out of libraries and institutions and interrogation rooms. Sadly, these sequences are often banal and cry out for expansion. Actor Greg Ellwand is certainly a convincing Norman (he even looks like him), but he is underutilized in what amounts to a series of rather unimaginative dramatic reconstructions of critical moments in Norman's life. Moreover, Norman's personal depressions and solitary nature, highly influenced by Japanese mystical philosophy, could have been elaborated upon. Given the undeniable intelligence but achingly conventional form and earnest tone of this version, one is inevitably tempted to speculate, with more money or perhaps with Donald Brittain himself at the helm, about the film that might have been.

Despite its cinematic shortcomings, *The Man Who Might Have Been* delivers a subtle, quietly forceful argument about the nature of knowledge and its formation, the value of supple, individualized expressions of collectively shared ideas, and the dangers of thought motivated strictly by narrow political objectives and ideologies. Indeed, as Norman's writings and diplomatic work demonstrate, as do the writings of his Canadian contemporaries like Harold Innis and, yes, Lester Bowles Pearson, any singular and hegemonic vision of ideology, politics and governance (including the ascendant so–called market–driven capitalism driving all things today) is not only myopic, it is also stupid, barren and dangerous. In the arena of ideas, no one is innocent or politically uncontaminated, as Norman mistakenly believed himself to be, but no one need be condemned to death for thinking against the grain, either. In the suicide of Herbert Norman, which is the obvious but nonetheless powerful framing device for this film, we can perceive the terrible logic of a world that does not understand that what it sees is very much influenced, if not determined, by how it sees. Blind to the latter, it rarely can see the former. In its sober and conventional clothes, not unlike the cautious and carefully diplomatic Herbert Norman, the surprising strength of *The Man Who Might Have Been* resides in its admirable attempt to illuminate both. •

Norman and General Douglas MacArthur in postwar Japan