AMHERST SALUTES

The Films of Colin Browne by Alex MacKenzie

A SOMBER, meditative figure floats in calm, deep waters, with only his head above the waterline. The sun's rays shimmer off those parts of the surface disturbed by his gentle movements. These opening images of Vancouver filmmaker Colin Browne's **Father and Son** run deep with a personal history drawn from a multitude of sources. This insightful and intelligent documentary examines the relationships between fathers and sons in a culture that deems the white, European patriarchy as the dominant power, yet the most repressed in its emotional tools. Through a series of discussions with a cross-section of sons and some of their fathers (including his own), Browne exposes the inherent dysfunctional nature of such a structure, exploring its massive failings in coping with emotion and change. The protective nature of the traditional white bread family in keeping father safely away from emotional confrontation exposes the strangely fragile and delicate nature of the "head of the household" position.

Browne's own father was in the navy—a physical absence matched by a more difficult emotional absence—and he was raised largely by the women in his life. Through a study of the relationship with his father, the film sets the stage for many other discussions and commentary from sources as different as British filmmaker Terence Davies (Distant Voices, Still Lives), who is quite obviously preoccupied with his paternal history; to Canadian author Michael Ignatieff, whose work often deals with his development through his father, and whose father had recently died at the time of the interview; to other men who spend little of their time ruminating on these issues but nonetheless consciously or unconsciously battle with them daily. Browne's interests quite evidently lie in the study and structures of history, memory, place, language and the source of the self. The methodology exposed in **Father and Son** can be traced back through a personal history of filmmaking.

In the late 70s, a job with the provincial museum in Victoria had Browne working on a series of small oral dramas which addressed the illusions of written history. Due to the physical limitations of staging these short pieces over and over, the idea developed into a number of short films. Having no experience in filmmaking up to this point, Browne was taken under the wing of Karl Spreitz (an influential figure at the Western Front art space in Vancouver at the time) and set out to essentially reinvent the wheel of the filmmaking process. After much research into the local archives, as well as tripping over the red tape of bureaucracy, Browne made a shocking discovery: "To a person, not one representative of any archival institution in British Columbia was aware of any films that were shot there previous to the 1950s." He promptly applied to the Canada Council's Explorations Program to research this and began producing the first comprehensive catalogue of over 1100 films produced in B.C. previous to 1950, ranging from home movies to government propaganda.

While immersed in this public extraction of history, Browne made the discovery that his great-grandfather had a ranch near Kamloops before World War II, a fact he was completely unaware of to this point. From this came **Strathyre** (1979), Browne's directorial debut (shot by Spreitz), a film about regaining the physical evidence of his personal history. A charming naiveté runs through the film, a sense of innocence and adventure where all historical data is taken at face value. "We didn't question the evidence...we were so enthusiastic that we could find it at all!"

A Visit From Captain Cook (1980), a film made in celebration of the bicentennial of Captain Cook's discovery of Vancouver Island, followed. Then came Hoppy: A Portrait of Elizabeth Hop-

◀ Colin Browne with his father

kins (1984), about an aging painter living on nearby Galiano Island, whose love of life was matched only by her extraordinarily simple and playful work. **The Image Before Us** (1987), a commissioned work that examines how we as Canadians have been represented in films since 1901, sprang from an obvious interest in and familiarity with archival photos and films. Each of these films are central to Browne's development as a filmmaker, though **Hoppy** is closest to Browne, its subject being the type of woman he had grown up with—very British, practical, and independent. "She managed to charm the whole crew until everyone was under her spell, and I think this comes out in the film." All the while Browne was developing a very personal film entitled **White Lake** based around his great-grandfather's ranch and the hidden, invented history and stories around the man.

The two works that preceded the release of **White Lake** work as companion pieces to the film, creating a tryptic of sorts. **Abraham** (1987), a suite of poems, was the first, stemming from a vision Browne had of looking into the ground glass of a box camera and seeing the image of a small Jewish boy in pre-war Eastern Europe, a boy he recognized as himself. The book layers this image with other preoccupations in Browne's life, interpreting it as a central narrative of his life and possibly his past. "In the book, an alphabetical narrative of sorts, a book of fragments and pieces, Abraham is somehow integrated with me and my past and welcomed into the ancestry," he says.

Groundwater followed in 1988. It was a performance piece (with composer Martin Gotfrit), effectively addressing the failures of any attempted Utopia. Among other things, the piece contained sequences from the unfinished **White Lake**. Through **Groundwater** Browne realized for the first time the massive burden he had been putting on his father to live up to particular expectations—expectations that were far greater than those his father had been putting on him. Here lay the groundwork for **Father and Son**.

White Lake (1989) began while Browne was making **Hoppy**. "My mother's cousin, who was going in for two hip operations and feeling her mortality, decided she was going to tell me about this ranch. Living not too far from the ranch at the time, I drove over and roamed across the valley for the day. As I drove away, I felt energized by the whole process. The interest in buildings, artifacts, and tactile history I had with **Strathyre** was gone. I felt released from history and began to create my own narrative."

As each relative told their respective tales of the White Lake Ranch, Browne began to notice subtle differences in their stories. It was then that he realized this film would not be "Colin Browne goes back to find more roots," but rather how we invent the past, our memories. "**White Lake** is really very much a film about how people talk, as much as what they don't say."

Father and Son, shot over the past two years, was partially influenced by Terence Davies' **Distant Voices, Still Lives**. "Here was a film that introduces a brutal man who mercilessly beats his children in the cellar and ten minutes later brings tears to my eyes as he wishes them goodnight." This acknowledgement of emotional contradiction inspired Browne to call Davies to set up an interview. Many phone calls and much research later, Browne was well on his way. "I did not want to have anyone who would be party line or ideologically disposed to giving a position around men and masculinity. I wanted politics or feelings, not abstraction. William Blake said that abstraction is the enemy of art and he's right."

An issue that frequently arises around discussions of the film is its concentration on a very Eurocentric study of the father-son relationship. "I was conscious that documentaries must be made with an awareness that an audience expects it to be representative of the society that they live in. If you choose not to be representative, there has to be a reason for it." As the film was being made and Browne spoke to men who had predominantly European white backgrounds, he realized that the whole issue of **Father and Son** is, in fact, about his culture. "I've got to make a film about my guys. If we're the patriarchy, if we're the men that oppress our wives and girlfriends and daughters, if I'm from the group of men who are abusers, whatever it is in us that must be in all of us, my duty is to investigate that." Through its specificity, the film speaks to issues that are at the root of the problems inherent in the dominant culture. "I don't see the film as representative of anything more than the men represented within it. That is why I have called the film partly a memoir, because in a memoir you don't expect lots of other characters to be brought in as examples. In making art or narrative, I always go for the specific; you can't help but fail if you go for the universal. And so, I offer it to everyone, and if they find something within it, great."

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The film is a prime place to begin discussion around just these concerns, but Browne's encounters with audience reaction extend beyond these to other quite basic and essential issues. "There is a strong desire on the part of the audience for the film to have transformed me, which speaks to me of their own desire on behalf of this film, or any film, to be transformed. I think transformation has always been the business of film."

What of Browne's personal progression? "I don't think we ever do come to terms or make peace with our parents. I think it would be a very dull life if we did. While I could say that my father is a custodian of the patriarchy, he's still my father. And that's the thing. I still have this emotional connection to him and I still love him despite what I might think of him politically. And we all have that with our parents and our children. And for me that's a much richer territory than any kind of polemic." ■

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