


Norman McLaren

A TRIBUTE

by Chris Robinson



For many, the Scottish-born Norman McLaren (1914–1987) was a genius. Former colleague Derek Lamb believes that “like Picasso there were few if any corners that McLaren didn’t explore.” McLaren’s innovative experiments and techniques resulted in a number of brilliant animated shorts (*Begone Dull Care*, *Blinkity Blank*), and while his work is sometimes naive (films like *A Chairy Tale* and *Neighbours* accentuate McLaren’s unconscious oversimplification of social injustices), there is no denying McLaren’s enormous influence and inspiration as both an artist and teacher. Outside of his work, McLaren often held many informal workshops in his cluttered, two-room studio. “You learned simply by watching him,” says Lamb. “You could see the craft, care, understanding, professionalism and curiosity he brought to the medium.”

In a tribute to McLaren, the godfather of Canadian animation, *Take One* asked some of the best animators to remember him.

Gerald Potterton (*My Financial Career*, *The Railrodder* and *Heavy Metal*): “When I came to Canada in the 1950s,

Neighbours was all I knew about Norman’s work. His impeccable timing with both the visual and aural remains unsurpassed. Strangely, there was one area of timing that he never did quite sort out, and that was his ability to drive a car and talk to his passengers at the same time. Like all his work, it was an exciting and unforgettable experience.”

Derek Lamb (*I Know an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly*): “While most American studios relied on large teams of people to work on a house style, the NFB was very much about the individual animator. I think that McLaren’s willingness to experiment with so many techniques played an enormous role in this.”

Jacques Drouin (*Nightangel*): “The kind of filmmaking that McLaren represented was both a goal and model. The Film Board was almost in my parent’s backyard in Montreal, and I could easily knock on Norman McLaren’s door. And this is exactly what I did.”

Caroline Leaf (*The Street*): “Norman seemed frail when I met him in the early 1970s and he walked through the endless miles of NFB corridors looking at the ground. I thought he avoided eye contact because he needed to save his energy. But when Veronika Soul and I needed a workspace, he gave us the room next door to his. I think he liked us or our work, and we were quiet. It wasn’t until I had been animating for several years that I discovered what Norman meant to me. His thoughts about frame movement both articulated and confirmed what I was feeling about my own work.” ■