

OBITUARY

National Film Board veteran helped create a new visual vocabulary for documentaries

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Terence Macartney-Filgate.

Terence Macartney-Filgate was a renowned cinematographer, film director, educator and aviator. He was a pillar of Canadian filmmaking, having made his mark in an extraordinarily creative burst at the National Film Board of Canada, and worked with leading filmmakers in Canada and the United States for decades. “His greatest lesson was film ethics in his treatment of subjects and crew members,” visual researcher Elizabeth Klinck said.

Mr. Macartney-Filgate died in Toronto on July 11 at the age of 97 of complications associated with Parkinson’s disease.

He was born in England on Aug. 6, 1924, and spent part of his childhood in British colonial India. He enjoyed his upbringing there and spoke admiringly of an Indian caretaker who taught him how to ride horses and to shoot.

During the Second World War, Mr. Macartney-Filgate enlisted in the Royal Air Force. That gave him his first taste of Canada, where he was trained. He eventually saw combat on bombers flying missions from bases in Italy.

Following the war, Mr. Macartney-Filgate went to Oxford University where he graduated with a Master's degree in politics, economics and philosophy. He then began a career in business, which he found unsatisfying. He decided to return to Canada where he joined the National Film Board in technical roles.

Mr. Macartney-Filgate learned filmmaking from the ground up. At the Ottawa studios of the NFB, he worked alongside gifted colleagues who developed a new visual vocabulary for documentary filmmaking in the 1950s. They were avid learners, watching films in a small screening room known as the "sweatbox" at NFB Ottawa. In a 2014 interview Mr. Macartney-Filgate joked that they watched "great stacks" of films they had ordered because Ottawa was "not a very exciting place." They admired films by Sergei Eisenstein, Joris Ivens and closely studied the photography of Henri Cartier-Bresson.

Mr. Macartney-Filgate, along with colleagues such as Wolf Koenig and Michel Brault, added "poetry" to documentary in their close observation of ordinary lives, according to Marc Glassman, editor of *POV*, Canada's magazine of documentary filmmaking, and an adjunct professor at Toronto Metropolitan University. Mr. Glassman is currently writing a history of the NFB.

Many would call this style *cinéma vérité*, but Mr. Macartney-Filgate and his colleagues preferred the term "direct cinema." Mr. Glassman argues that these NFB filmmakers "changed the way documentaries are made. With hand-held cameras, no script and on-location sync sound, they created drama in reality."

They found an outlet in the *The Candid Eye* series, produced by NFB and broadcast on the CBC, to which Mr. Macartney-Filgate was a principal contributor. Watching *Candid Eye* entries is a master class in cinematography, editing and respectful observation of behaviour.

The unique style of Mr. Macartney-Filgate's early NFB period is evident in two productions he did in Montreal. *The Days Before Christmas* which Mr. Macartney-Filgate directed along with Stanley Jackson and Mr. Koenig looks at a staggering variety of Christmas-related events in both French and English Montreal, featuring choir practices, snow falls, turkey preparation, Santa Claus with kids and an armed security firm moving the cash of consumerism. *Pilgrimage*, directed by Mr. Macartney-Filgate alone, is an observational contemplation of devotees at Saint Joseph's Oratory. The film straddles the line between direct cinema and a more expositional style in its use of a remarkable interview with a priest who knew the oratory's inspirational figure Brother André, now a saint.



View of several farm workers gathering up tobacco leaves from the tables during the production of the film, *The Back-breaking Leaf*, in Delhi, Ont., August 1959. The film earned the Eurovision top documentary award at the Cannes Film and Television Festival.

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The camera work and editing style are gobsmacking in films such as *The Back-breaking Leaf*, about itinerant tobacco pickers in Southwestern Ontario. This is an unsentimental yet moving portrait of the hard-working men and women behind tobacco cultivation at the time. The film is also distinguished by Mr. Macartney-Filgate's empathetic interviewing style which allows ordinary people to express themselves in their own vernacular.

"He knew how to compose himself on set. He was quiet. He didn't jump all over subjects' answers. It appeared effortless, but was incredibly successful," Ms. Klinck said of Mr. Macartney-Filgate's approach to interviewing.

"He had a deep respect for the people on screen," said Sarah Spring, executive director of the Documentary Organization of Canada. "He believed in their dignity. He wanted to understand the lived reality of his subjects." The effect is sometimes startling. His film *Up Against The System* about poverty ends with an elderly woman eyeing the camera and stating, "You know what they need here is a revolution."

Mr. Macartney-Filgate worked extensively in the United States. He collaborated with the team that made *Primary*, about the 1960 nomination fight between then Democratic senators Hubert Humphrey and John F. Kennedy. He worked on an Oscar-winning film about U.S. poet Robert Frost. In New York, he reconnected with African-American filmmaker William Greaves who like Mr. Macartney-Filgate cut his teeth at the NFB. Mr. Greaves chose Mr. Macartney-Filgate as cameraperson on his experimental drama cum documentary *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm*, which has inspired the likes of American director Steven Soderbergh and actor Steve Buscemi.

Mr. Macartney-Filgate also taught film both at Toronto's York University and at the famous film school of University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA.) That's where he instructed American up and comers including then film students Jim Morrison and Ray Manzarek of the Doors rock band. Mr. Macartney-Filgate would remind

friends that he was the film professor who gave Jim Morrison a mark of “Incomplete.”

After two marriages that ended in divorce, Mr. Macartney-Filgate’s continuing love of flying led to romance and a third marriage. In 1986 he mentored Lorna Novosel, a speech therapist by profession, who was learning how to operate gliders at the Southern Ontario Soaring Association Gliding Club. Mr. Macartney-Filgate flew the towing planes for the gliders. By 1993 the couple married. Ms. Novosel marvelled at her husband’s love of flying. “He would say, ‘It concentrates the mind immensely.’”



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The couple spent several summers at a home in southwestern France at Mirepoix. It was Mr. Macartney-Filgate’s long-time getaway. He fell in love with France after visiting as a British Boy Scout before the Second World War.

In the 1980s and 90s, Mr. Macartney-Filgate contributed frequently to the CBC. He returned to the NFB to direct the series Canada Remembers about Canada in the Second World War. That’s when he met editor Markham Cook who was about 40

years younger. “It was like being a minor-league baseball player being coached by Babe Ruth,” Mr. Cook said. “Yet he was just a regular guy. The age difference never seemed like anything.”

Ms. Novosel and Mr. Cook both admired Mr. Macartney-Filgate’s fascination with information technology and gadgets. Unlike some of his veteran peers, Mr. Macartney-Filgate welcomed the advent of digital technology and lightweight cameras.

“He was always shooting, always taking pictures,” Ms. Novosel recalled.

Mr. Cook saw a connection between the direct cinema process and aesthetic in Mr. Macartney-Filgate’s enthusiasm for small digital cameras. “Terry’s biggest concern was being a fly on the wall and people not noticing him. That’s what let him pay attention to the mood in the room and to make sure he wasn’t flagged as a journalist or filmmaker. He just wanted to record the moment. That’s what appealed to him about digital gear.”

As a foundational figure of Canadian cinema, Mr. Macartney-Filgate kept a rather low profile. “He didn’t hang out or want to play the elder statesman role,” Mr. Glassman recalled. Friends like Mr. Cook state that while Mr. Macartney-Filgate was aware of his contribution and pleased that the films he and his NFB colleagues had made were considered important, he refused to draw attention to himself.

“To the extent I can be objective, I can say he thought about other people 100 times more than he did about himself,” Ms. Novosel said.

Mr. Macartney-Filgate’s film *The Back-breaking Leaf* earned the Eurovision top documentary award at the Cannes Film and Television Festival. His filmmaking also won Canada’s annual top documentary awards, a Peabody Award in the United States and a Lifetime Achievement Award at Hot Docs, the Canadian international documentary festival. In 2011 he was named an officer of the Order of Canada.

He leaves his wife, Ms. Novosel; his children, Michèle Macartney-Filgate (from his marriage to Isobel Peebles-Brown) and Adrienne Campbell and Terry Macartney (from his marriage to Jessica Strebig); plus five grandchildren.