

OBITUARY

# Prominent Toronto-born writer Silver Donald Cameron took on a Cape Breton name and identity

JAMES CULLINGHAM

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Writer Silver Donald Cameron in D'Escousse, N.S, in November, 1998. MARJORIE SIMMINS/HANDOUT

Silver Donald Cameron was nothing if not prolific. From his adopted home in Nova Scotia, he wrote 20 books, including two novels, a literary analysis of Stephen Leacock's oeuvre and a study of how beaches function. He wrote wry captions and commentaries for a book of photos of outhouses. There were also plays, films, radio and television scripts, corporate work, a Globe and Mail column and hundreds of magazine articles. On top of his writing, Mr. Cameron, who died of complications from lung cancer in Halifax on June 1, made films, built sailboat and taught and launched a website dedicated to environmentalism.

Born Donald Allan Cameron on June 21, 1937, in Toronto, he moved with his family to British Columbia at age 2. He did his undergraduate studies at the University of British Columbia, followed by a master's degree at the University of California, and a PhD at the University of London, in England.

After graduating, he became an English professor at the University of New Brunswick. His first marriage, to Catherine Ann Cameron, produced four children and ended in divorce.

In 1971 he moved to the village of D'Escousse on Isle Madame just off the southeastern corner of Cape Breton Island and got to work as a freelance writer.

He soon befriended local businessman Raymond LeBlanc, who said Mr. Cameron "respected the way we lived and I respected the way he lived. I can't think of a better friend. It's kind of odd because we were so different. I am French Acadian. He [spoke] English. I'm Tory. He was NDP. I'm Roman Catholic. I can't even tell you what religion he was."

Mr. Cameron loved the area and its mixture of people from Acadian, Afro-Canadian, English and Indigenous backgrounds. He also loved the sea.

"He grew up on the Pacific, but it was the Atlantic that he really loved," said the author, teacher and speaker Marjorie Simmins, Mr. Cameron's widow. "The first boats he built did not have engines. He was at home out on the ocean sailing with nothing but the sound of the waves and the birds. He was in heaven."

Mr. LeBlanc recalls Mr. Cameron's effort in building *Silversark* a 30-foot sailboat that Mr. Cameron constructed piece by piece from his own plan: "Jesus, he even added a lead keel. I told him I'd never go out with him in the thing because it was likely to sink the first time he sailed. Finally, I did go out with him and it was lovely."

Mr. Cameron recounted his circumnavigation of Cape Breton Island in *Wind, Whales and Whisky: A Cape Breton Voyage* (1991).

Author and former CBC broadcaster Linden MacIntyre was a Cape Breton newspaper reporter when he first ran into Mr. Cameron. "He was one of those hairy, smart magazine writers that we news reporters tended to look down on. When I heard he was settling in D'Escousse, I figured he'd be gone by the first fall of snow, but he stuck. I admired his ability to survive. He became part of the place. He was no longer an outsider."

Mr. Cameron married Mary Louise (Lulu) Terrio, a local woman with whom he spent 18 years until her death. The union produced one son. Mr. Cameron was deeply involved in the community, even becoming a volunteer firefighter. He helped launch Telile, a regional broadcaster.

Mr. LeBlanc said his friend was a master organizer and fundraiser: “He knew how to pull the strings. It didn’t matter whether the Conservatives or Liberals were in power.” His identity shifted to a more Cape Breton shape. He added “Silver” to his name to distinguish himself. There were too many Donald Camerons. And then there was his hair colour. Mr. LeBlanc recounted, “People in the village would say, ‘There goes Silver Donald.’ The side of his hair wasn’t grey; it was silver.”

Mr. Cameron’s brother, University of Toronto political scientist David Cameron, said, “I thought the name was a bit arch at first, but then I thought it was brilliant. It was appropriate for the Maritimes, where there are ‘One-Eyed Jacks’ and such. He took on a deeper, local identity.” Ms. Simmins recounted that her husband admired Cape Breton nicknames and loved having one himself.

Mr. Cameron did not retreat from the world in Cape Breton. “He managed to become even more engaged. It might seem tempting to hide away, but he moved in early, stayed late and never lost his connection to the wider world,” Mr. MacIntyre said.

That wider world included the community of Canadian storytellers. Publisher Douglas Gibson admires one of Mr. Cameron’s early books, *Conversations with Canadian Novelists*. “He understood who the important writers were. For an author he would have made a great publisher,” Mr. Gibson said. Mr. Cameron played an important role in strengthening the Writers’ Union of Canada. He was also a respected member of the Documentary Organization of Canada.

Last year he was appointed the first Farley Mowat Chair in the Environment at Cape Breton University. Mr. Cameron was a member of the Order of Canada and the Order of Nova Scotia. He also received honorary doctorates from the University of King’s College and Cape Breton University. In a peripatetic, influential career in education, Mr. Cameron also taught at Dalhousie University and was the first dean of the School of Community Studies at Cape Breton University.

Mr. Gibson was shocked by Mr. Cameron's sudden death: "He seemed almost unaffected by age. He had great energy." Mr. Gibson believes the seemingly disparate components of Mr. Cameron's career – small-town community advocate, environmentalist, teacher and writer – fit together.

"He had a sense of and cared for the connection between individuals, communities and ideas," Mr. Gibson said.

Mr. Cameron's 2015 documentary *Defenders of the Dawn: Green Rights in the Maritimes* explores alliances between environmentalists and Indigenous activists. Mr. Cameron created "The Green Interview" website, for which he spoke with luminaries such as Margaret Atwood, Jane Goodall and David Suzuki.

After Mr. Cameron's death, Mr. Suzuki said in a statement, "He connected with audiences in an impactful and thoughtful way few of us can. ... Don was a warrior who will be kept alive by his work."

Mr. Cameron's last book, *Blood in the Water: A True Story of Revenge in the Maritimes*, which is due out in August, is a study of murder in a small Cape Breton community. Mr. MacIntyre said the local understanding could only have been summoned by Mr. Cameron. "If he had planned to write his way out, that would have been the book."

In the days following her husband's death, Ms. Simmins said, she found herself momentarily despairing about what would happen to certain causes with "giants" such as her husband and Farley Mowat gone. She then corrected herself, recalling that her husband would not have agreed with that kind of thinking. "He was in love with the young generation. He thought they would bring us back from the dark spot that we're currently in."

Mr. Cameron, who was 82, leaves Ms. Simmins; his children, Maxwell, Ian, Leslie and Steven Cameron and Mark Patrick Terrio-Cameron; and his brothers, David and Ken Cameron.