

CRITIQUE

History Television and the General Strike: Three Views

Prairie Fire: The Winnipeg General Strike. Produced by Audrey Mehler and David Paperny, written and directed by Audrey Mehler: David Paperny Films, Inc. 1999

Prairie Fire: A Personal View

David J. Bercuson

PRAIRIE FIRE, a documentary for History Television by Audrey Mehler, was my idea from the very start. With the approach of the 80th anniversary of the Winnipeg General Strike, I went to Ms. Mehler of David Paperny Films of Vancouver with the idea for a 90 minute documentary telling the story of the strike. I knew that there would be very few survivors of the strike to interview, but I also knew from earlier work I had done that there were hundreds of very effective still photographs, including pictures taken by two different photographers, unaware of each other, of the "Bloody Saturday" riot from two different vantage points! These photographs, plus mountains of newspaper and documentary material would, I thought, be enough to produce a visually exciting documentary.

I was too pessimistic about what we would find. Ms. Mehler eventually found several bits of dramatic newsreel that had been missing for decades and used that footage along with the photographs we already knew about, on-scene location

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shots, newsreel interviews of now-long dead strike participants such as R.B. Russell, and interviews conducted in Winnipeg and Calgary in the fall of 1998 with strike survivors, Hub Gray (the son of the late Mayor Charles F. Gray), current social activists living in Winnipeg, and others.

My involvement with the film began with my proposal to make it. I also prepared the original "treatment" or outline of the documentary, reviewed early shooting scripts, suggested a number of interview subjects, gave Ms. Mehler an extended on-screen interview, reviewed early "takes" of the film, and provided lists of reading materials including studies of the strike, such as my book *Confrontation at Winnipeg*, other historical works, and copies of magazines and newspaper articles that had been published at the time of the 50th anniversary of the strike, in 1969, when I was in Winnipeg researching my PhD thesis.

Prairie Fire was the third documentary I had worked on with David Paperny Films. Another, entitled *Murder in Normandy*, about the war crimes perpetrated by Kurt Meyer's 12th SS Panzer Division on Canadian prisoners of war in Normandy in June 1944, appeared on History Television last fall. I am currently working on two other documentary film projects with the same company and I have helped other film-makers in the production of three other documentaries.

As a historian, trained in the examination of primary materials and the use of historical analysis to tell stories, in words, about the human past, I am well aware of the shortfalls of historical documentaries. Some years ago, when I was retained by the CBC Ombudsman to comment on the three episodes of the CBC's *The Valour and the Horror* series, I wrote this in my report:

There is a fundamental difference between a documentary film which attempts to tell a story of a historical event and the event itself.... The act of writing is the act of presenting a large amount of information.... in a relatively economical way which the reader can access at his/her own pace.... In the production of a good documentary, the film-maker cannot present as much information as a writer on the same subject because the resultant film would be impossibly long.... The film-maker must, therefore, make his/her point not over many days, but in a very few hours, even minutes, and not through a time consuming narrative but through an artful combination of visual image, sound effects, and the spoken word.

Despite the limitations of the documentary form, I have personally embraced it as a vehicle that is very different from written history but which fundamentally aims at the same purpose — to tell stories of the past. Documentaries cannot be used to do "cutting edge" research because they are not suitable for that purpose. They must entertain to be successful. That is their primary goal. But history books that do not have *some* entertainment value, which are totally unexciting, uninteresting, or boring, have limited value in their own right. They may enlighten a handful of specialists, which is legitimate enough, but they won't tell any significant number of readers a story of their own past because they will remain mostly

unread. There is no inherent contradiction in seeking good, "cutting edge" history that actually entertains; the work of Herbert Gutman is just one obvious example.

I work in the documentary medium, as well as write books, because it is important to reach people and especially important to help Canadians learn their own history. My own book on the Winnipeg General Strike has been in print for a quarter century now; I doubt that all its readers combined over that time amounted to as many as 10 per cent of the viewers of *Prairie Fire*. What those viewers saw was, no doubt, much more superficial a treatment of the strike than what they may read in *Confrontation at Winnipeg*, or in the dozen or so serious treatments of the strike written by others of different ideological perspectives. But so what? At least the 100,000 plus viewers now know something about the strike and if their curiosity is aroused, they can easily seek out more substantial reading matter on the subject.

I want to add some words here on ideological perspective in the treatment of the strike's legacy to Canadian history as depicted in *Prairie Fire*. First, when I suggested names of people Ms. Mehler might interview on screen, I gave her the names of two scholars living in Winnipeg, both experts on the subject, whose views on the strike are diametrically opposed to my own. They chose not to participate in the project. This certainly caused some problems for Ms. Mehler who was well aware from what I myself had told her, and from her own readings on the Strike, of the ideological chasm that separates me from others who have written on those events. It was important to have that point of view not only for balance, but to show the viewers that the strike remains controversial even over eighty years later. In the absence of those experts, she did what she could using the views gained in interviews with surviving strikers or people openly sympathetic to the legacy of the strike.

Second, in a documentary film such as *Prairie Fire*, the producer — Ms. Mehler — has, to say the least, considerable input into the final product and the messages it will convey. As an intelligent person committed to telling a balanced story of what she believes to have been a key event in the struggle for social justice in Canada, Ms. Mehler had no small opportunity to get her point across. I believe she did that. I believe *Prairie Fire* was as true to the facts and events, and to the struggles of those who believed passionately in what they were doing, as any piece of film could be. I am proud to have played some part in that production.

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