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TESTIMONIALS
Filming Layton

by Donald Winkler

In 2002, when my second film on Irving Layton (*A Red Carpet for the Sun: The Life of Irving Layton)* appeared, Robert Fulford, in a piece on the film, referred to Layton as my "hero." I couldn't really blame him. I had, after all, devoted two separate films to the man—three, if you want to get technical about it—and so it was an understandable thing to say. But it made me uncomfortable. Although I admired Layton's work enormously, and although our relationship was always warm and cordial, I was too familiar with the shortfall in some of his attitudes and opinions, which I had observed at first hand—his views on the role of women domestically and in the arts, for instance, or his political perspective on the Middle East—for me to embrace him wholeheartedly as my hero.

When I first met him, however, he really was my hero. I cannot claim, as can Seymour Mayne and some fortunate others, to have been shaped by him in my tender youth, to have known him as an educator when I was in my teens. And my first encounter with him was certainly brief. But it marked me profoundly.

Let me set the stage. It's another time, November 1960, and I am an undergraduate at the University of Manitoba. I am studying literature. English literature. And a bit of French. I am, however, woefully ignorant of Canadian writing. It's just not being taught. Or it was not being taught until the university's inaugural course in Can. Lit. was launched in that very academic year. It was a half-course at that, and more of a seminar than a course, really—not many of us were taking it. And it was being taught by an Australian: John Pengwerne Matthews, who wrote the book *Tradition in Exile*, a comparative study—and a revealing one—of Australian and Canadian poetry. It was he, an Australian, who was shocked by the fact that some of us had not, for instance, so much as heard of Frank Scott.

Now, every fall in those days, the University of Manitoba staged an arts festival, and invited some luminary or other to be a special guest. The luminary, unsurprisingly, was invariably British. In the previous two years, if I remember correctly, the invitees were Sir Herbert Read, and Stephen Spender. But that year, someone had the bright idea of inviting a Canadian, someone called Irving Layton. I'd never heard of *him*, either. True, I'd

been away for a year living in the States...but all the same. *A Red Carpet for the Sun* had been published in 1959, and Irving, as he liked to say, was on a roll.

So my initial reaction was one of disappointment. That year we were "only" getting a Canadian. The university, I thought to myself, must be having budgetary problems. (I really did think that.) But I went to see him anyway, and my world changed. The energy, the irreverence, the gusto, the ebullient sexuality, and the celebratory, virile language seduced me on the spot. And my view of what Canadian writing could be was never the same. It was November 8, 1960. I remember it distinctly, because that evening, in the living room of the professor's house where Irving was being lodged, we found ourselves avidly following the American election results, as John F. Kennedy was being declared President of the United States. Enthroned in an armchair in the corner of the room, Layton, delighted, repeated over and over: "This is historic! This is historic!"

I was not the only one seduced by Irving, of course. One of my female classmates, rhapsodizing over the poet's "pepper and salt hair" and other attributes, decided on the spot she was going to write a book about him, and Layton was not averse to the idea. As for the rest of us, after he left we formed a kind of informal club. Every noon hour we would assemble in the library auditorium and read his poems aloud to each other, not only from *Red Carpet*, but from his early, self-published books that were lined up on a shelf in the stacks. (I suspect that by now they're carefully closeted away in the rare book room.)

Some months later, passing through Montreal, I did something I had never done before or since. I stalked the man—I collared him just as he was returning home at lunch hour from his teaching job. I must say, he was more than generous. He invited me in, served me a glass of sherry, and we chatted amiably for a good half-hour.

Time passed. I finished university, I travelled abroad, I returned, I landed in Montreal, I joined the National Film Board, and I became a documentary filmmaker. Now at a certain point in the late 1970s a small number of NFB filmmakers began, as though by common consent, to make films about Canadian writers. (Let me say in parenthesis that this was very much a bottom-up initiative, originating with the filmmakers themselves. Once staff filmmakers vanished from the NFB so did these films.) There were films by Robert Duncan on Hugh MacLennan, Margaret Laurence, and W.O. Mitchell, Don Brittain made his masterful film on Malcolm Lowry—and it occurred to me that someone should chronicle, while there

still was time, some of the poets who had made significant contributions to the modernization of Can. Lit..

And so it began. I did a film on Earle Birney, and then on Frank Scott. Now, you would think that Layton would have been an obvious next choice. But the truth is, by that time I wasn't at all sure that I wanted to do a film on Layton. I was concerned that his baroque personal life, and his penchant for bombast, would overwhelm everything else. And he was already so much in the public eye. It took an Italian this time, and not an Australian, to change my mind. On a visit to Europe, at the University of Bologna, I met Alfredo Rizzardi, a great proponent of Canadian literature in general, and of Irving Layton in particular, whom he had translated into Italian. He insisted on the need for a film on Layton. So when I got back, I invited the poet to lunch. And I decided to take the plunge. But I was determined to circumvent his complicated love life by not doing a biographical film. Instead, I would do a kind of cinema verité film, following him around, capturing him on the fly. Fortuitously, he had been invited to Greece for the launching of a selection of his poetry in translation, and we were able to film him in a most attractive setting. And he was, of course, a cooperative and enthusiastic subject. No reluctance here, to talk about his work, and no compunction about dashing off poetry in front of the camera. (We soon found that all we had to do was to take him somewhere, sit him down, give him time to get bored, and he would begin a poem.) So in 1986, *Poet: Irving Layton Observed* saw the light of day. And it's viewable now on the NFB web site.

Of course, I never thought I would do yet another film on Irving. But in 2001 CBC's biography series Life & Times, now long defunct, decided they really should have a film on Irving Layton. My earlier opus was not appropriate for them, so I was asked to come up with a second film, this time on the life. But here there were real problems. By this time Irving was suffering from dementia, and could no longer talk about the early days. I had a bit of footage from the first film's outs in which he told stories about his childhood, but that didn't go very far. I wasn't sure what to do. And then one day someone mentioned, casually, that Irving's older brother Hyman was alive in Santa Rosa California. "My God, why didn't you tell me," I said. "You didn't ask me," was the answer. And it was true, it had never occurred to me that one of Irving's siblings would still be around. And so as soon as I could I hopped on a plane to San Francisco, and drove up to see him where he was living in a very modest bungalow. Hyman had been a businessman—that is, after he'd stopped working for the Communist party—and he'd made quite a bit of money at one point, but his circum-

stances were now clearly reduced. But to have him in the film was a godsend. Not only was his memory sharp, so was his tongue. He was outspoken, and offered a perspective on Lazarovitch family life that was harsher and more sardonic than Irving's ever would have been. And as he revealed to what degree little Irving's—or little Izzy's—precocious interest in poetry and the written word was mocked and ridiculed in the household, as he expressed his regret that he himself did not have the same gumption (the gumption, for instance, to blackmail one's own mother into coughing up the money for him to go to high school), I began to see Irving once again as something of a hero. And later, in talking to Seymour Mayne and Howard Aster about the years when he and a small group of poets struggled valiantly to get their works published and read in this country—well, I had to acknowledge that there was something heroic in that effort as well. Certainly, Irving had his flaws. But all heroes do.

He's gone now, these many years. The sun has called his brown skin in. What lingers are the words of a poet who had to elbow his way out of obscurity, but whose career spanned a brief time when poets had heft, and who took full advantage of that fact. More power to him. As for me, now nearing the age he was when I first filmed him, I am happy to leave in my wake, for those too young ever to have stood face to face with the original, some suggestion of what it was to "see Layton plain." I was privileged to know him strutting, in his prime, and diminished, at the end of his life. But always, in those last days, I was able to call to mind a stricken grass snake transfigured into a celestial serpent proud and resplendent on the horizon. Wresting transcendence from our transient lot is perhaps the definitive heroic act.

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