

# Ian Cameron: A Tribute

This journal is proud to claim continuity with the achievement of *Movie* magazine. There is also a grievous and irreparable discontinuity. Ian Cameron died in January this year. Without him *Movie* would not have happened, and to him it owed its particular character and most of its success.

If anything has a beginning, the beginning was Oxford University in the late fifties. Ian served on the committee of the student Film Society and set himself to transform the quality of the programme brochure. That is where our friendship began. We conspired to nudge the programming away from the orthodox: a screening of *In a Lonely Place* was one result of our endeavours. Ian was concerned that the materials for which he was responsible should be well informed, well written, and should not shame him through shoddy presentation. So he designed them himself, and he set about finding others who could contribute interestingly to the content.

He drew in Mark Shivas (1938-2008), who was studying law – how seriously I've no idea. Ian was a zoologist, a committed one with lifelong interests in science and ornithology. I was nominally a student of modern history. We came together as film lovers and in outrage at the way some wonderful pictures were treated by the official culture. (Oxford gives you a full immersion in the official culture.) It is very hard now to believe that things were as they were. In music it was accepted that one might be an enthusiast for, say, the singing of Billie Holiday. But a sense of proportion demanded that Holiday – whose repertoire included masterpieces by Arlen, Gershwin, Kern, and Porter – should be praised for redeeming the commercial banality of the songs she sang.

1958 was the key year. It was the year of *The Tarnished Angels*, *Touch of Evil*, *Party Girl*, and *Vertigo*, films to revere, to see and see again, but loftily dismissed by the critical establishment. It was the year, too, when Ian returned from a stay in Paris bearing copies of *Arts*, *Cahiers du Cinéma* and other evidences of a livelier and more congenial film culture across the channel. Orson Welles was crucial. The depth and eagerness of his response to admiring interrogation about *Touch of Evil* (in *Cahiers* 84) did two things. It showed us that film makers might rise to the level of the questions put to them, and it stoked our fury at the blinkered terms of this film's and others' reception in the English-writing world. It was necessary to seek out other films endorsed by the French. I remember train trips to Didcot in pursuit of *Kiss Me Deadly* and *Hot Blood*. The talk on such occasions was often about the ways and means of raising a challenge on behalf of vigorous cinema.

Somebody noticed Ian's success with the programme notes because a student magazine *Oxford Opinion* first invited him to contribute cinema criticism, then accepted his offer to edit a film section as a regular feature. Editing, on

this understanding, included design and layout. Ian had proved his interest in typography and the aesthetics of design by his founding role in the creation of a design society. Now he showed his creative gift in those arts – an innate talent, I suppose, but one fertilised by enthusiasms such as for the photography of William Klein. (Ian was, too, a gifted photographer.)

In *Oxford Opinion* he wrote the first appreciative discussions in this country of movies by Samuel Fuller (*The Crimson Kimono*) and Budd Boetticher (*Comanche Station*), and he encouraged Mark to write on Douglas Sirk. The section was also strongly polemical, taking one of its cues from the delightfully disdainful way in which month by month *Cahiers* received the output of the British film industry. (The respect accorded in Britain to *The Bridge on the River Kwai* was almost as galling to us as the rejection of *Vertigo*.) Our wrath found a main target in the British Film Institute and its publications, *Sight and Sound* and *Monthly Film Bulletin*.

There's a kill-the-parents aspect to this. Of course we had been through years of thinking to educate our cinema addictions by absorbing the teaching of the experts. But that led to disillusion when we saw how little increase in understanding the study had brought. British film writing was predictable in its judgments and predictable in putting judgment ahead of appreciation. It offered next to nothing that could count as analysis, where a verdict or an interpretation come with support from argument. The absence of an evidenced criticism was a particular affront to Ian's scientific sensibility.

So we attacked. A polemic from Oxbridge commands an attention that it may or may not deserve. *Sight and Sound* felt obliged (was perhaps instructed) to respond. Its effort of self-defence gave *Oxford Opinion* publicity. I suppose it must have been some time in 1960 that Ian and I set up a stall outside the National Film Theatre to sell copies of the magazine alongside a placard: 'Now read what we really wrote'. Evidently *Sight and Sound* had offered a characterisation of our tastes and opinions that many found interesting and attractive. Readers sought us out. Allies appeared and pacts were made.

Crimes against cinephilia had continued: 1959 had brought *Rio Bravo* (virtually ignored) and *North by Northwest* (trivialised). We heard from Charles Barr in Cambridge. Within the Federation of Film Societies, whose officials we had supposed to be solidly orthodox, there was a surprising willingness to offer us a platform. There was an occasion staged by the London Film Society and billed as a Great Debate when we presented *Pick Up on South Street* as an instance of the kind of film to which the societies should extend their embrace. The choice was one to maximise the offence to those whom our taste would offend, but the hear-

ing from a large part of the audience was generous. Lawrence Alloway spoke up in our support, and it was there that Paul Mayersberg made himself known to us.

After university Ian continued for a while to edit the *Oxford Opinion* film section. (It must have been for one of his last issues that he provoked me to write the first considered appreciation in English of *Psycho*, under a very *Cahiers* title that I remain proud of: "Charm and Blood".) From there he went on to organise for other Oxbridge publications an interview with Joseph Losey and a large round-table discussion in praise of Otto Preminger's *Exodus*. That was the point at which Robin Wood entered the group.

A major preoccupation for Ian at this time was his work on Antonioni, to which *Film Quarterly* devoted the whole of its number for Fall 1962. That was a recognition not only of the perceived significance of the filmmaker, but also of the newness of Ian's experiment in film analysis. The monograph clearly works towards fresh ways of supporting interpretation by tracing patterns in descriptive detail.

By now it was clear how great a talent Ian had for drawing people together and enabling them to use and to refine their skills as critics and writers. That was in addition to his keen editorial eye: there was little that emerged from his scrutiny unimproved in structure, argument and style. It was obvious that there should be, and that there would be an audience for, a new film magazine to mount a sustained challenge to critical orthodoxies. Just as obviously Ian was the one to edit it.

Less obvious were the practicalities. Nobody in the group but Ian had the persistence and initiative, the gift for locating and tapping the most helpful sources of advice, so as to find ways through the problems of setting up a limited company, costing the publication and securing the distribution of a little magazine with no institutional support. (I recall a couple of humiliating interviews on rich men's premises in the effort to attract a backer.) Though I put in a hundred pounds myself (from where is anybody's guess) I still have no idea how it was financed. The gamble was that a successful launch would secure a future.

Anyway Ian made *Movie* happen and he enabled lively collaboration. There was a lot of debate. In face of surrounding doubt I argued and argued for the title. I think Paul was the first to be persuaded that the vulgar Americanism of the word gave it shock value and pronounced identity in a culture as unwilling to call *The Seventh Seal* a movie as it was to see *Written on the Wind* as a significant instance of cinema. On an agenda agreed in discussion Ian wrote an editorial proclamation but it appeared unsigned. Robin Wood's authorship is evident in some passages of the lead article on British cinema that appeared over my name. Ian's layout of the article was fifty per cent of its impact, and the histogram of directorial talent that served as a brazenly provocative appendix was a designer's inspiration to make a graphic pattern pronounce an argument – entirely Ian's. Then again the placing of names within categories scaled from the Great to the Competent Or Ambitious was determined in strife, with some verdicts resolved through barter.

That first issue showed Ian's widening net with a major contribution (on *Viridiana*) from Andrew Sarris. There was also a round-table discussion of Richard Fleischer's *Barabba* and an interview with Vincente Minnelli about *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* that aimed to engage him in shot-by-shot reflection on his staging of a climactic sequence. The formats were experimental, and there was defiant originality in using them, with their implication of high status, to embrace the despised genres of the biblical blockbuster and the archive-ransacking remake.

The collaboration that informed the content of the magazine was enabled and led by Ian. The elegant solution of the design challenges was his work completely. I can recall the thrill of the encounter with his cover, and the typeface he had designed, for the first issue. Once impressively the wizard of the Letraset, he had now created a look that gave unity to the magazine and supported its content and attitude.

Looking back it seems to me that what was involved was more than a revolution in taste. *Movie* should also be seen as part of – and a stimulus to – an international effort to invent film criticism, to find ways of writing about cinema that escape the limits of the reviewer's craft. Hardly surprising, then, that one of the complexities of its history since 1962 has been its relationship, far from straightforward, with the development of academic film studies.

Through alterations in format and publishing context, changes in the main personnel, Ian maintained his dedication to quality. It was my impression that over time his awareness of what he had achieved made him watchful that what added to the record should also enhance it. Yet there were lives to live, and livings to earn. As his own career in publishing developed, movies and *Movie* had to be found a place alongside other commitments. The magazine's appearances became widely spaced and unpredictable. There's nothing unusual about that. Little magazines most often live only for a day. A run of three is remarkable, ten almost a miracle. Ian took *Movie* close to forty. What turned out to be its last issues contained some of its finest articles.

Then there were the books. In a range of formats, under various imprints, more and less closely associated with the *Movie* brand, Ian produced important work by Charles Barr, Peter Bogdanovich, Andrew Britton, Raymond Durnat, Robin Wood ... A basic library of film would have to include several of Ian's titles. Unsurprisingly he was good at anthologies. Early were collections on Godard and Bresson. Relatively late came *The Movie Book of Film Noir* (1992) and *The Movie Book of the Western* (1996, co-edited with Douglas Pye). I am glad that a couple of essays give me a presence in these volumes, since they impress me as peaks in the refinement of Ian's editorial and design achievement. The covers are terrific and in these cases you can indeed tell a book by its cover.

Now without Ian to enable, edit and design there can be no *Movie*. All the more reason for the work of renewal presented here for the digital age. *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism* will wish to be found worthy of the tradition that Ian Cameron built.

V.F. Perkins

[Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism](#), 1, 2010.