

FILM REVIEW

THE LEGACY OF MARY McEWAN A Film by Patricia Watson

Reviewed by Judy Steed

The Legacy of Mary McEwan, a one-hour National Film Board film by Patricia Watson, explores the work of one of Canada's first feminist psychiatrists. It is a powerful film in which Dr. McEwan's friends and "graduates" — I am one of them — speak about her impact on their lives.

Watson met her once, interviewing her for a film she was making on women and menopause (*The Best Time of My Life*). "I was," Watson says, "profoundly affected. Mary was an enabler of women — and of men. She was immediately acces-

sible. She was funny and wise and gave you a sense of your own potential."

A filmmaker for twenty years, Watson says that "one of the treats I was promising myself was to go into therapy with Mary McEwan. I missed out on it." Suffering terrible grief from the death of her youngest child, Sandy, in a motorcycle accident, and the illness of her daughter Veronica, who was struck by encephalitis and lapsed into a coma, Mary died suddenly two years ago.

Then Watson was approached by the painter Helen Lucas*, one of a group of

women who had formed the Mary McEwan Memorial Fund. Watson met with the group — artist Joyce Wieland, journalists Doris Anderson, Bonnie Cornell and Olivia Ward, and management consultant Bonnie Fowke. They wanted to keep Dr. McEwan's memory alive and decided a film on her work would be a first step.

The film opens with footage of the inimitable, feisty Mary sitting at a table, chatting with June Callwood. "I didn't want to be a man," says Mary, chuckling. And we are transported into the world of a woman who was far ahead of her time,



Mary McEwan as a toddler (right)



Mary as a medical school graduate

who told her husband Gus when they were married in 1945 that, "Men are stupid. They want to waste half the intelligence of the human race by keeping women in menial positions."

Watson covers the biographical details: Mary was an Irish Catholic born in Glasgow, Scotland. When she told the nuns she wanted to be a doctor, they called her "a dirty-minded girl." In charge of a 300-bed hospital when she was a young bride, she had two children, emigrated to Canada with her husband and went into psychiatry when she was in her 40s. She seems to have been one of those women who was always a feminist. Doris Anderson got to know Mary when Anderson was editor of *Chatelaine*. Mary wrote feminist columns for Anderson that were, again, ahead of their time. "The Cinderella Curse," "The Myth of Motherhood" — these are some of Mary's *Chatelaine* titles. "Mary was in favor of a woman nurturing herself, looking after her own needs, and that was radical then," says Anderson. "Women were supposed to nurture men and children. Period."

Joyce Wieland leads off as a leading McEwan graduate. She describes going to see Mary and talking about her problems with her then-husband. Mary said, "You're tired of holding your marriage together." Joyce fell apart. Mary gave her permission to let the marriage go.

Judy Steed (that's me) talks about going to see Mary because "I was afraid I was going to interfere with my daughter psychologically in the way my mother had interfered with me." Steed says Mary diverted all the anger and was "a spirit-hurler."

Helen Lucas describes having seen a male psychiatrist who "seemed to close his eyes and fall asleep" and encouraged her to submit to her family's needs. "Then I heard about this wonderful feminist psychiatrist," says Helen beaming — and we cut to Helen's glorious studio at her country house where she lives among, and paints, flowers. Suddenly it hits me that this film is about creativity, about being released from the constraints, traps, ter-

rors that have gripped us as women. About finding a way in, through therapy, that leads out. This process is most graphically demonstrated by Wieland and Lucas. As artists, they show in their work the flowering that was fostered spiritually by Dr. McEwan.

The voices of the different women, speaking about Mary, sift into a dense portrait of this remarkable woman. Says Shelagh Wilkinson: "Mary was her own person and that was an incredible thing,

which was good for both sides. At Hickling-Johnson, which then merged with Mercer, Dr. McEwan "assisted presidents and executives, counselling men in high stress positions," says Bonnie Fowke, who worked with her.

At the height of her powers, Mary was then hit by the tragic loss of two children. The woman we saw as invincible was shattered. The film ends, however, on an upbeat note: footage of Mary speaking about women in their forties and fifties becoming powerful. "They have a burst of energy, whereas men start to feel they're slowing down, and feel threatened by these powerful women — so they sometimes look for younger women who'll listen to the same old stories...We get rid of the garbage on our way through, we unload. There's no need for deception, for artificiality. We can relax and enjoy."

Watson has captured the rollicking characteristics of her wonderfully complex subject. She also proves adept at handling women's issues, which she says have become the main thrust of her work "since I've gone back to working on my own." For more than a decade she collaborated with her former husband, Alan King, on a string of movies, from *Who Has Seen the Wind* (Watson: screenplay, associate director) to film adaptations of Alice Munro and Margaret Laurence short stories. Her recent films include *The Best Time of My Life*, a film about women and mid-life, and *Adoption: Breaking Taboos*.

The Legacy of Mary McEwan, on which Watson functioned as producer, director, researcher, production assistant etc., was originally intended to be a half-hour film; Watson's NFB associates liked the rushes so much they supported an extension to one hour. The film will be available from the NFB early in 1988, and should show on television. Watch for it. Mary McEwan's legacy is beautiful.

**Editor's Note: Helen Lucas' paintings frequently appear in CWS/cf; see the back cover and pp. 74-75 of Vol. 8, No. 3.*



Mary McEwan in 1982

coming from our backgrounds...Mary taught us to enjoy our womanhood instead of being victimized by it."

As Dr. McEwan's career evolved, the honours and awards mounted and she decided to shift, again, into the corporate world. She liked power and as Canada's first corporate psychiatrist she gained a unique insight into the inner sanctum. At the same time she retained a private practise and would have individual clients come to see her at her Bay Street office —