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The Documentary Impulse in Poetry and Film: An Approach to Anne Wheeler's *A War Story*

Eighteen years ago at York University, Dorothy Livesay addressed an audience at the Learned's, and made a strong case for the existence of a new "genre," the documentary poem. What Livesay set out to demonstrate was that the "Canadian longer poem is not truly a narrative at all" but "a *documentary* poem, based on topical data...held together by descriptive, lyrical, and didactic elements."¹ With the rise to power in recent years of the contemporary Canadian long poem, critics have eagerly examined, refuted, and retailored Livesay's definition. In his article on the long poem, "*Amelia*, or: Who Do You Think You Are?", Stephen Scobie, for example, modifies Livesay's argument and presents his own version of the documentary. While both Scobie and Livesay alert us to specific developments in the long poem, the term 'documentary' belongs to another discipline. As Scobie points out, "Livesay adapted the term 'documentary' from film, specifically from the work of the National Film Board under the direction of John Grierson."² I would like to bring Livesay's and Scobie's observations full circle—in effect, to double their tracks—and demonstrate how the characteristics of the long poem-as-documentary illuminate an NFB-sponsored docudrama, *A War Story*, by Anne Wheeler.

Released in 1981, *A War Story* (winner of the blue ribbon for the Best Historical Documentary Feature at the American Film Festival in New York, 1982) is Wheeler's account of her father's years as a Prisoner of War in Formosa. In 1943, Ben Wheeler, a Major in the British Army, was a victim of the Japanese takeover of Singapore. Along with thousands of other men, Wheeler was taken prisoner and shipped from the island of Singapore to Formosa (Taiwan). After surviving in one camp, Taihoku, for twenty-one months, Wheeler was shipped to Kinkaseki, a copper-mining camp on the North-East corner

of Formosa, and finally to Shirakawa. Conditions in these camps were horrific. Wheeler's diary entrance from May 6, 1943, reads:

The sick parade was a bit bigger than average but all genuine and a number of very sick men. Along came the Lance-Corporal, absolutely white with rage, screaming at me, then lined them up shouting in Japanese, then gave each a good slapping with a long wooden roller. He picked out one of the sickest, an acute gastritis, and struck him until he collapsed. The prisoners were lined up in the mid-day sun without hats. One officer with malaria collapsed with a temperature of 105.5 degrees.³

As the only medical doctor in the first two camps, Wheeler sustained and relieved thousands of suffering fellow prisoners. Without proper medical supplies or tools, however, operations were nightmares for both patient and surgeon. In one dramatic re-creation of a scene in an operating hut, for example, director Anne Wheeler shows her father performing an appendectomy on a fully conscious victim. A short but gruesome close-up reveals the blood spurting as Dr. Wheeler makes the initial incision with a razor blade.⁴

Emerging from this documentary is a composite picture of Major Wheeler. To the men under his care, Wheeler was nothing short of Christ-like. A quiet but compelling figure of authority, he was, in the words of a comrade, "doctor, priest, confessor, everything."⁵ Similarly, Robert Collins, in his article on Dr. Wheeler, reveals:

Soon after their release in 1945, three ex-POWs wrote a letter about Wheeler to a Canadian newspaper dubbing him "a man sent from God." He had saved so many lives and lifted so many hearts with his quiet strength and feats of medicine that scores of survivors spoke—and still speak—of him with awe and reverence.⁶

To mitigate this portrait of "St. Ben," Anne Wheeler shows us the tender and passionate side of her father as it is displayed in his love for his wife, Nell. We are privy to a love story as well as a war story; at the centre of Anne Wheeler's documentary rests her father's "lifeline to sanity and hope,"⁷ his journal entries to "Nettie."

A War Story is an evocative record of human faith and human perseverance. What saves this film from melodrama or self-indulgence is Anne Wheeler's handling of the documentary aspects. Albeit in a different context, Scobie details those aspects. With reference to such long poems as Margaret Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, Gwendolyn MacEwen's *The T.E. Lawrence Poems*, Phyllis Webb's *The Kropotkin Poems*, and his own *McAlmon's Chinese Opera*, Scobie argues that a

documentary (poem) exhibits two basic recurring features: "a fascination with the interplay between fact and fiction, history and imagination, and the attempt to define the identity of the self by a dialectic process of contrast to the other."⁸ Scobie's latter point is connected to his notion of "alterity" or the "self-defining aspect of a documentary."⁹ That is, the duplicitous relationship between poet and persona engages his interest. I shall return to this double-talk presently.

As its name would suggest, crucial to the documentary is the concept of the document itself. About this intertextuality Scobie explains:

the document is the necessary link, provided by the author, between the reader and the "real" material. The document guarantees the *accessibility* of the facts on which the poem is based.¹⁰

That is, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* relies on the document, *Roughing it in the Bush*; *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, claims Ondaatje with tongue-in-cheek, is a mere editing and rephrasing of source material on Billy; *The T. E. Lawrence Poems* builds on Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, and so on. Such privileging of the "authoritativeness of fact," or rather, such emphasis on the requisite tension between "fact and fiction, history and imagination," is akin to Grierson's view of documentary. As rumour (that is, as history) has it, Grierson is purported to have defined a documentary as "the creative treatment of actuality,"¹¹ the "ordering or structuring of unstaged film material."¹² Actuality, the facts, the raw materials from which Wheeler shapes her film are various. While the primary document is her father's secret diary, Wheeler also incorporates into her work interviews with comrades, newsclips and footage, photographs of her family in India and in Canada, and home-movies.

To repeat, the document at the heart of *A War Story* and that which tells its story is Ben Wheeler's diary. Excerpts chosen by his daughter are narrated, throughout the film, by Donald Sutherland. Based on his experience of the events of World War II and written during his internment, the diary of Major Wheeler—the document which "guarantees the *accessibility* of the facts"—is in itself a re-construction of events. The diary signifies the doctor's shaping of the raw material of his world, and as Scobie notes:

The document "proves" the historicity of the subject: but the document itself is no more than another instance of *writing*, and is not exempt from its own context of equivocation.¹³

Writing subverts history. As writers like Ondaatje and George Bowering delight in revealing, there is no such animal as an objective fact. Wheeler, too, seems to bear this notion in mind. Added to the doubleness of her father's diary is its re-creation by the filmmaker herself and Sutherland. Neither the diary nor the editor/director's use of the diary is "exempt from its own context of equivocation." Such duplicity is the stuff of which the documentary in general is made.

Japanese newsclips and both Japanese and Allied footage represent other examples of the document in *A War Story*. Wheeler's treatment of the actuality of the war is brilliant, for she both highlights and undercuts the raw war material. Of note here is the dialectic between the newsclips and the dramatic representations starring David Edney as Major Ben Wheeler. Both the actual (though abridged) war footage and the fictional shots of Wheeler and the camp are in black and white. While this technique is sanctioned by documentarians such as Klaus Wildenhahn who are adamant in their preference for black and white film stock over colour—i.e., they feel that the picture should not be enhanced or altered in any way¹⁴—Wheeler extends and exploits *cinéma vérité*. Her use of black and white film stock, along with the rhythm of the montage, obscures the line between the "real" and the dramatic re-construction of the real. In effect, *A War Story* partakes of what Scobie calls "the borderblur area between fact and fiction."¹⁵ In a review of *A War Story*, Seth Feldman arrives at a similar conclusion. Though I take issue with his comment on 'distancing,' he and Scobie concur in their views of the documentary. Feldman notes, somewhat cryptically:

...Wheeler's use of black and white and voice over to distance the reenactments alerts us to their dual nature as history and fantasy. The film deserves the best that may be said of its genre: we are on honest ground here, guessing at what we will never know.¹⁶

Also contributing to this borderblur is the use of photographs and home-movies. *A War Story* opens, poignantly, with a shot of David Edney, alias Ben Wheeler, examining, or more correctly caressing, a snapshot of Nell and their first born, Harry. The photograph is verifiably real; Edney, on the other hand, is an actor assuming the role of Dr. Wheeler. Captured by the power of Wheeler's story, however, we temporarily suspend such distinctions. Edney *is* Wheeler. Here and elsewhere (for instance, in the scene containing the shot of the Wheelers and their sons in India) we submit to the play between fact and fiction, the actual and the invented.

Wheeler concludes her docudrama with a longish segment from an Edmonton home-movie taken to bear witness to Ben and Nell's twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. In part, the juxtaposition of the pre-war snapshots with the post-war home-movie indicates the tension in *A War Story* between paradise lost and paradise regained. Major Wheeler's dream did materialize. After a separation of over four years—"It is hard to stop tearing one's hair and cursing when I think of all this time cut out of our lives, the best part of our lives"¹⁷—the doctor was reunited with his wife and his family. As is the case with most home-movies, this family document is rough and unprofessional. And apart from Nell Wheeler, who shows a certain grace under pressure, the other members of the family seem vaguely ill at ease in front of the camera. Dr. Wheeler, in particular, looks shy and vulnerable, or as John Bemrose remarks, "frail, nervous, almost pathetically human."¹⁸ Born after the war, a young Anne Wheeler appears in this movie-within-a-movie.

The appearance of the director in her own documentary is vital. Indeed, we are aware of Anne Wheeler's presence throughout the whole eighty-two minute film. Near the beginning of *A War Story*, sandwiched between a newsclip of the fall of Singapore and Formosa, is a cut of Anne Wheeler attending a reunion of the Japanese Prisoners of War. (Use of colour stock here comes as somewhat of a shock, and serves to emphasize this moment in the film). The camera focuses on Wheeler as she listens to one of Major Wheeler's comrades talk of her father. Her voice, too, is prominent from first to last; along with Sutherland, Anne Wheeler co-narrates the documentary.

This sort of self-reflexivity is in accord with many NFB productions from the late 60s through to the 80s. In her summary of the 1982 Grierson Film Festival, for instance, Lois Siegel comments on the propensity for filmmakers to appear in their own films. But such manipulation of fact and fiction in a documentary Siegel finds problematic. On such blatant 'trespassing' she remarks: "Without shame or self-consciousness, the filmmaker was there, often telling the story of a personal experience with himself or a mother or father or brother...."¹⁹ Objectivity is sacrificed when "fact becomes fiction and fiction becomes fact"²⁰ as, for example, in Bruce Elder's *The Art of Worldly Wisdom* or Jacques Godbout's *Two Episodes from the Life of Hubert Aquin*. On the other hand, David Barker Jones, in his Ph.D thesis on the NFB, examines a number of documentaries including *Free Fall*, *A Film for Max, Nell and Fred*, and *Coming Home*, and argues for the effectiveness and "legitimacy of self-reference."²¹ To

turn to the long poem, Scobie's paradigm of the documentary helps to explicate this contentious issue. For self-reference, as Scobie sees it, is synonymous with alterity: "One...detail which attests to the self-defining aspect of the documentary is the tendency of writers to make 'personal appearances' in their works."²² These appearances affirm the double bond between poet and persona, for as Scobie writes, "the documentary poem opens the way to the other, the opposite."²³ The route to the opposite is frequently by way of possession. That is, "[the] writers of documentary poems speak frequently of a sense of 'possession' by the voices they assume."²⁴ To write about Robert McAlmon, for instance, Scobie had to 'become' McAlmon. In the case of writers who treat their own past, "poets who use their own family history seek to define personal roots."²⁵

Though the relationship in a film between filmmaker and subject is not the direct equivalent of the relationship in a long poem between poet and persona, the parallels are nonetheless intriguing. With Scobie's comments in mind, I would suggest that in choosing to document her father's life (*A War Story* is not just an account of the war years), Wheeler is attempting a form of self-definition. The self-defining aspect of the documentary helps to explain the intensity of her film; her subject "possesses" Wheeler. Ostensibly in pursuit of her father, Wheeler is also in search of herself.

Matching the reunion or anniversary celebration which highlights Ben and Nell, for example, is the POW reunion dominated by the shot of Anne's face. This close-up of the director, who is clearly advancing some version of truth, reminds us of the close-ups of Dr. Wheeler/David Edney as he performs his rounds. One particularly brooding shot of the Major reinforces tonally the bond between father and daughter. Our attention is divided, too, between Dr. Wheeler and Anne Wheeler. Anne Wheeler is not just a commentator but a crucial character in her own documentary; Ben's story is also (equally) Anne's story. *A War Story* concludes with Anne's voice recording the death of her father in 1963 and stating: "It wasn't until *I* was almost thirty that *I* read his diary" (emphasis added).²⁶

A counterpart to the bond between father and daughter is the relationship between mother and daughter. While critics call *A War Story* "a tribute to her father,"²⁷ or, more uncharitably, "an act of adulation, a canonization of father by daughter,"²⁸ they tend to ignore Nell Wheeler's role in her daughter's film. Such myopia warrants correction; Nell's image, in fact, haunts the screen. Framing *A War Story*, for instance, are two references to 'the doctor's wife': the opening shot,

which I have already mentioned, centers on Nell as much as it does on Ben; in her final credit, Wheeler thanks her mother. Despite the literal and figurative marginality of the silent Nell (i.e., a credit is certainly a border), it is her absence which paradoxically becomes a presence to Ben in the prison camp. Nell, after all, informs Ben's existence. As Dr. Wheeler confesses in a sentimental phrase which nevertheless rings true in context, to him, "Nettie means both freedom and life." Whereas to his fellow prisoners Wheeler acted as guardian and inspiration—according to J.O. Edwards, "Nothing seemed to get him down...The men came first, and that was the end to it"²⁹—to viewers of *A War Story*, the author of the secret diary is unabashedly loving and needy. Major Wheeler depends on and is sustained by Nell. "Why did you marry little me?" he queries.³⁰

By indicating that such a self-deprecatory gesture is unfounded, the film posits a sort of answer to Wheeler's question. Or, to rephrase this notion, the film, which casts Ben as hero, puts words in Nell's mouth. At least in part. Upon reflection, Ben's half-rhetorical, half-serious question is far from inconsequential. How indeed does Nell view their marriage, Ben's absence (as Dr. Wheeler admits, "our life seems to have been one succession of partings"³¹), his eventual return? What shape did Nell's life assume during the war years? And finally, begging the issue of delicacy or decorum, why is the living Nell a silent partner to her dead husband in *A War Story*?

Adding to the appeal of Wheeler's documentary are these telling gaps and omissions. Out of such negative space (out of what is unsaid/unfilmed) we construct a portrait of a stalwart and determined and inscrutable Nell, a portrait, moreover, which bears a likeness to Anne Wheeler's other studies of "independent, indomitable...women"³² in *Great Grand Mother* (1975), *Augusta* (1976), or *Loyalties* (1986). It appears, then, that our attention is not simply divided in *A War Story* between Ben and Anne but rather among Ben and Anne and Nell. Though by adumbrating the bond between father and daughter, I am suggesting that Anne Wheeler (filmmaker) and Ben Wheeler (war hero) are doubles in terms of opposites (cf. Phyllis Webb, 'reclusive' poet, and Peter Kropotkin, the "sweet Prince" who devoted his life to the well-being of the Russian proletariat, in *The Kropotkin Poems*), I would also argue that mother and daughter are doubles in terms of secret sharers (cf. Margaret Atwood and Susanna Moodie, whose voices merge and separate in Atwood's documentary long poem). In a photograph of Nell Wheeler to which the camera repeatedly returns is revealed a striking physical resemblance between Nell and Anne. The

context of this focus renders significant this likeness. By allowing the silence, the past, and the dead to be interrogated, perhaps Anne speaks for and through Nell, Nell speaks for and through Anne. (Although this is not apparent to viewers of this documentary, Collins states, in his own tribute to Dr. Wheeler, that "Nell Wheeler Homer, remarried now, has never been able to read the diary through").³³ Certainly, not only is Anne Wheeler attempting in *A War Story* to assimilate her father (the man and the myth), but she is also coming to understand her mother (the woman and the marriage). While the filmmaker's final word concerns the connection or correspondence between herself and her father, the film's concluding statement is a recognition of her mother. The final credit reads:

"A special thanks to Nellie Rose..."³⁴

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As a coda to this paper and as an acknowledgement or oblique summary of Scobie's thoughts on documentary, I would like to add my own document to the story of Anne, Nell, and Ben Wheeler:

The Thing is Relative
(for my aunt, Nell,
my cousin, Anne, and
to the memory of my
uncle, Ben)

- I. Saint with a scalpel
legend has you, almost
a war-time Christ
(those surgical midnight
miracles, those lashes
you bore—a kind of stigmata,
an impossible pain).

- II. And back home
after the letters ceased
the day "missing in action"
hung like a talisman
Nell—those honkey-tonk
fingers (cigarette

smoke and lazy jazz)
 rocked to sleep
 three small boys.

III. Later a fourth
 a girl
 homage to a homecoming
 bridged the gap
 filmed her own war
 and exploded
 the man, the myth, the marriage.

IV. Now the theatre
 is quiet, and
 after, applause.
 Nell rises, clinging
 to her new husband—
 "I forgot my glasses"
 she confesses, unrepentant.

V. Out into the cold
 Edmonton evening
 later, over wine
 and family and friends
 Anne listens to a
 montage of thank yous
 while a memory of
 Ben and Nell is laid,
 perhaps to frozen rest.

NOTES

1. D. Livesay, "The Documentary Poem: A Canadian Genre," *Contexts of Canadian Literature*, ed. E. Mandel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 269.
2. S. Scobie, "Amelia, or: Who Do You Think You Are? Documentary and Identity in Canadian Literature," *Canadian Literature*, 100 (Spring, 1984), 267.
3. B. Wheeler, quoted in "A Man Sent from God," R. Collins, *Reader's Digest*, 123 (August, 1983).
4. cf. C. Williams, "Calling her own shots," *Calgary Herald Magazine*, February 15, 1987, 7.
5. J.O. Edwards, quoted in *A War Story*, dir. Anne Wheeler, North West Studio, 1981.
6. R. Collins, 172.
7. *Ibid.*, 145.

8. Scobie, 270.
9. *Ibid.*, 276.
10. *Ibid.*, 275.
11. J. Grierson, quoted by D. Barker Jones, "The National Film Board of Canada: The Development of its Documentary Achievement," (Ph.D. Thesis, Stanford University, 1977), 4.
12. D. Barker Jones, 4.
13. Scobie, 273.
14. cf. L. Siegel, "Documentaries: Notes on an Open Wound," *Cinema Canada*, 93 (February, 1983), 32.
15. Scobie, 273.
16. S. Feldman, "The Flickering Dead," *The Canadian Forum*, LXII, No. 723 (November, 1982), 40.
17. B. Wheeler, quoted in R. Collins, 149.
18. J. Bemrose, "Tribute from an adoring daughter," *Maclean's*, 95 (June 14, 1982), 50.
19. Siegel, 33.
20. *Ibid.*, 32.
21. Barker Jones, 213.
22. Scobie, 276.
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*, 277.
25. *Ibid.*
26. A. Wheeler, *A War Story*.
27. T. Crighton, [Review of *A War Story*], *Cinema Canada*, 83 (April, 1982), 45.
28. Bemrose, 50.
29. Edwards, quoted in *A War Story*.
30. B. Wheeler, quoted in *A War Story*.
31. *Ibid.*
32. B. Halpern Martineau, "Canadian Women Filmmakers," *Cinema Canada*, 71 (January-February, 1981), 21.
33. Collins, 175.
34. A. Wheeler, *A War Story*.