

# DON MCCULLIN: LIVING WITH THE PRESENT

**T**HE MEDIA often tries to turn into secular saints those it sends off to report on the sufferings of others. None more so than Don McCullin who, during the years he photographed wars, poverty, and famine for *The Sunday Times* in London, became as well-known as the images he made, and whose own woundings were reported as they happened.

Even now, long after he has retired from war photography, newspaper interviewers dwell on McCullin's past and his recurring nightmares, showing in a left-handed way how they believe he still suffers on our behalf.

When you meet Don McCullin you realise that even though he has been through a lot in his life, he does not dwell in the past in the way the media portrays. Since leaving *The Sunday Times*, he has had to find his way with other subjects and through other avenues of photography. He has swapped photojournalism's small and mobile camera for the larger one of the still life and landscape photographer, and has discovered advertising as a new means of earning a living.

McCullin's first advertising job, the slice-of-reality Metropolitan Police Recruitment campaign, led to constant work where his background in reportage was in demand.

'There was a fashion ten years ago for a more photo-journalistic kind of style in pictures, when advertising was looking for a bit more reality, so people would be convinced they were looking at the real thing,' explains McCullin. 'That's how the police thing I did came about. It looked like editorial. They felt that reportage photographers could make it look more real than advertising photographers.'

'I did the police [jobs] for two or three years, then I stopped because it ran out of interest for me. I've done all kinds of things, pictures for an anti-AIDS campaign, pictures for the Central Office Of Information. There are certain things I won't do. I won't have anything to do with

cigarette smoking, and that's the most lucrative money of all. And, I won't do anything for the military war machine.'

'I don't want to sound too high and mighty, but I just don't want to see people smoking cigarettes and killing themselves,' he says. 'When my work for *The Sunday Times* was over, I had to look for things to do that had certain principles that didn't bring too much criticism to me, and advertising allows that really.'

Although McCullin had a lean time of it earlier in 1994, almost half a year without work, he has hit his stride again with another big advertising campaign and a new turn in his commissioned photography. 'The job I just did last week was for Land Rover. I went off to Africa and did it in the African countryside. Before that, I worked on some ads in Scotland, and went and did a 'special' for a film there. I had six months without offers, then all of a sudden three solid months of work. But in the meantime I've been doing a lot of my own work for my own pleasure. I'm taking pictures every day of the week,' he comments.

Special photography on film sets was a tradition started by Magnum photographers, shooting stories on the making of major motion pictures for sale to the quality illustrated magazines such as *Life* and *Look* in America. The theory was that photographers working independently of the film's production company would feel free to study the movie as a phenomenon, studying the personalities and issues of making the movies itself, rather than simply making the kind of publicity photographs the productions stills photographer was employed to make.

Recent shows of McCullin's work in England and France have combined many of his most iconic war photographs with more contemporary images of still life objects, and landscapes taken around his home in Somerset. The landscapes in particular show he has developed an eye for the transcendent, blending a sense of pleasure with sadness at the transitoriness of the things of this world.

'If I make a picture that appeals to someone and it gives them some pleasure, then there's no harm in that really,' he says in justification. 'Much better to do that than show them a picture of someone dying on the other side of the world. In a way, it gives me a release of conscience and it makes it possible for me to do something without someone pointing the finger and saying, "why do you do war photography?"'

The press and the newspaper-reading public have often held McCullin responsible for the sights he he brought back to them from the war zones of the world, as

if by showing us them he was somehow creating those horrors. This criticism has dogged his footsteps since he left war photography and, conversely, has turned him into a kind of living national treasure in the public's perceptions. McCullin is still pursued by both critic and worshipper to the extent that his house has, in his words, become a kind of fortress. He hardly goes out any more and a Don McCullin interview is now a rare event.

McCullin feels his decision to stay out of the limelight was confirmed by a recent occurrence, when a student obtained his unlisted phone number and demanded a visit, an interview and free samples of his photographs!

The public interest in him has created a healthy market for his books such as the recently published *Sleeping With Ghosts*, and his autobiography *Unreasonable Behaviour*. In this interview he preferred not to discuss his earlier life in photojournalism, as that is so well covered in the books. McCullin simply states that, 'It says as much as I am ever going to say about what I did and what I am.'

However I did raise the issue of his younger brother, Michael. After escaping the tough inner London suburb of Finsbury Park, the brothers both went to war in their separate ways, but instead of becoming a photographer, Michael joined the French Foreign Legion. They separately toured many of the world's hot spots, and met up briefly in Africa in the middle of both their careers. As it happened, the day before we spoke, McCullin had received a surprise telephone call from his brother. Michael had retired from the Legion at the age of 51 and become an Outward Bound style adventure tour guide in Corsica.

Neither of the brothers admits to being particularly happy in their current lives, Michael because he lost the home the Legion became for him, and Don because 'anyone creative can never afford to be happy, or assume to be happy. All you can assume is that you're privileged enough to be trying. What I do by standing on hills trying to do landscapes, is to be paid with the pleasure of standing there and looking at great sunsets and great cloud formations, and that's it,' he comments.

'I hope that there's a great deal of time left for me to do more of it, and surprise people before I get shovelled under,' McCullin concludes. Those surprises may appear in the next personal project he is about to embark on, five years worth of still life and landscape photography.