



# A TIME THERE WAS

*Stories from the Last Days of Kenya Colony*

# A TIME THERE WAS

Stories from the Last Days of Kenya Colony



## The Film

It's early afternoon, May 1, 1955 — and Donald McWilliams finds himself with other British soldiers in Ndyeya Gorge in central Kenya.

At their feet a Mau Mau fighter lies dying, mortally wounded by their gunfire.

Above them all, the vast skies of the Rift Valley.

McWilliams is hardly out of his teens — a child of wartime London, stationed to Kenya for his national service. Raised on the romance of Empire, he'd imagined a great African adventure. But the look in the eyes of that dying rebel sets his life on another course.

Over fifty years later McWilliams confronts his past with creative audacity and unflinching self-inquiry in *A Time There Was: Stories from the Last Days of Kenya Colony*.

With historical rigour and visual lyricism, he combines his own photographic record of the times with original animation and archival imagery, crafting a film diary of singular beauty and a thoughtful account of the Mau Mau Rebellion — one of the most contentious episodes in Britain's imperial endgame.

The conflict arose from long simmering resentment among Kikuyu who had lost vast tracts of fertile land to white colonial farmers. The rebels were portrayed as depraved savages intent on attacking the civilizing forces of British settlers, but in fact atrocities were committed by both sides — and Africans died in far greater numbers than Europeans.

McWilliams frames his own story with testimony from other participants in the events. Mau Mau veteran Mwaria Njuma, who took the Mau Mau oath to reclaim the native birthright of Kenyans, details the on-the-ground struggle — as a freedom fighter in the forests and a prisoner in the British detention camps. Activist lawyer Achroo Kapila, from Kenya's Asian minority, defended hundreds of political dissidents, including future president Jomo Kenyatta. And John Nottingham broke rank with fellow colonial officials to embrace the cause of independence.

**Running time: 88 min**

In the tradition of his mentor, Norman McLaren, McWilliams employs a rich palette of filmic devices, finding fresh meaning in the random gestures and expressions of old newsreels and snapshots, and arranging his evocative narration within a soundscape that features Kenyan and Mau Mau songs alongside original compositions by jazzman Kevin Dean.

With *A Time There Was*, McWilliams completes a remarkable autobiographical trilogy that includes *The Passerby* and *The Fifth Province*, distinguishing himself as one of the great poetic essayists of Canadian cinema.

## The Filmmaker

### Donald McWilliams

A master of the poetic film essay, Donald McWilliams follows in the creative tracks of his mentor, the late great Norman McLaren, inventively drawing upon a rich palette of cinema

techniques to explore the endless possibilities of moving pictures. With *A Time There Was*, his personal reflection on Kenya's Mau Mau rebellion, he completes a remarkable autobiographical trilogy that includes *The Fifth Province* and *The Passerby*, crowned Best Cultural Documentary at Hot Docs. He was nominated for an Oscar® as the producer and editor of *Sunrise*

over *Tiananmen Square*. Other credits include the acclaimed *Creative Process: Norman McLaren*.

**Written and directed by** Donald Williams with the collaboration of Karen Feiertag

**Camera** James V. Aquila

**Original Music** Kevin Dean

**Sound Editing** Oana Suteu

**Producers** Marcy Page and Adam Symansky

**Executive Producers** Ravida Din and David Verrall

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

Canada

USA

International

Internet

**1-800-267-7710**

**1-800-542-2164**

**+1-514-283-9000**

**www.nfb.ca**

**info@nfb.ca**

