The life of a war photographer

‘Looking at what others cannot bear to see is what my life has been about.’

Don McCullin

Known as one of the greatest war photographers in history, Don McCullin has spent the last sixty years taking photographs of devastation and suffering in war zones all over the planet. His prolific output includes haunting photographs of the Vietnam War in the 1960s, of civil war in Cyprus, of massacres in the Congo, of famine in Sudan and Bangladesh, and, most recently, of the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Often at great personal risk, he has been to the most horrific places on earth in search of photographs that bear witness to the tragedy and heartbreak of war, disaster and poverty. His work will always remind people of the suffering endured by so many people during the second half of the twentieth century.
B McCullin started out, not as a war photographer, but as a photojournalist of poverty and crime in his native country, England. In what must have been a difficult childhood, young Don was brought up in a one-bedroom basement flat in a rough and violent part of London. He shared a bed with his brother and the bedroom with his parents, and he grew up streetwise and tough. His childhood was good preparation for his career. Like the people he has photographed, Don experienced hunger, violence and poverty in his life. He understood what it was like to experience extreme hardship, which enabled him to really observe people’s suffering. He could look at hard reality when most people would have just looked away.

C Young Don’s big break as a photographer came as a direct result of his deprived childhood. He snapped a gang of young thugs from his neighbourhood and, soon after he took the photo, one of the gang members stabbed and killed a policeman. As a result, a national newspaper bought and published Don’s photo and offered him a contract to take more photographs. This was the start of his career as a photographer.
Don McCullin was fearless and reckless in his search for the perfect photograph. He would just walk into the houses of people who had had a death in the family, and point his camera at their faces, and he would go up to starving children or injured soldiers and snap their portraits. In many ways, he was a ‘war junkie’. He found the adrenalin-rush of living in a war-zone so exciting that he felt depressed and useless whenever he was back home in peaceful England. On several occasions, he was very nearly killed. In Uganda he was captured by soldiers, imprisoned for four days and threatened with execution, and, in Cambodia, a sniper shot at him just as he was lifting his camera to his face to take a photo. By pure luck, the bullet struck the camera and bounced away.

Despite the risks, McCullin was driven throughout his career not just by his personal need to experience danger and excitement, but by a sense of moral purpose. He wanted to reveal the true face of war and famine and to tell the stories of those who have no voice. In interviews, he stresses that he wants his photographs to provide evidence of what is really happening in the world. ‘You have to bear witness,’ he says. ‘You cannot just look away.’

In later life, McCullin has spoken about how he felt remorse for being so intrusive during his career. However, he is also haunted by the people he photographed. ‘Sometimes,’ McCullin said, ‘it felt like I was carrying pieces of human flesh back home with me, not negatives. It’s as if you are carrying the suffering of the people you have photographed.’ In his quest to photograph the truth of war and struggle, he has paid a high personal price.