



Life Without Death

The Cinema of Frank Cole

Edited by Mike Hoolboom and Tom McSorley

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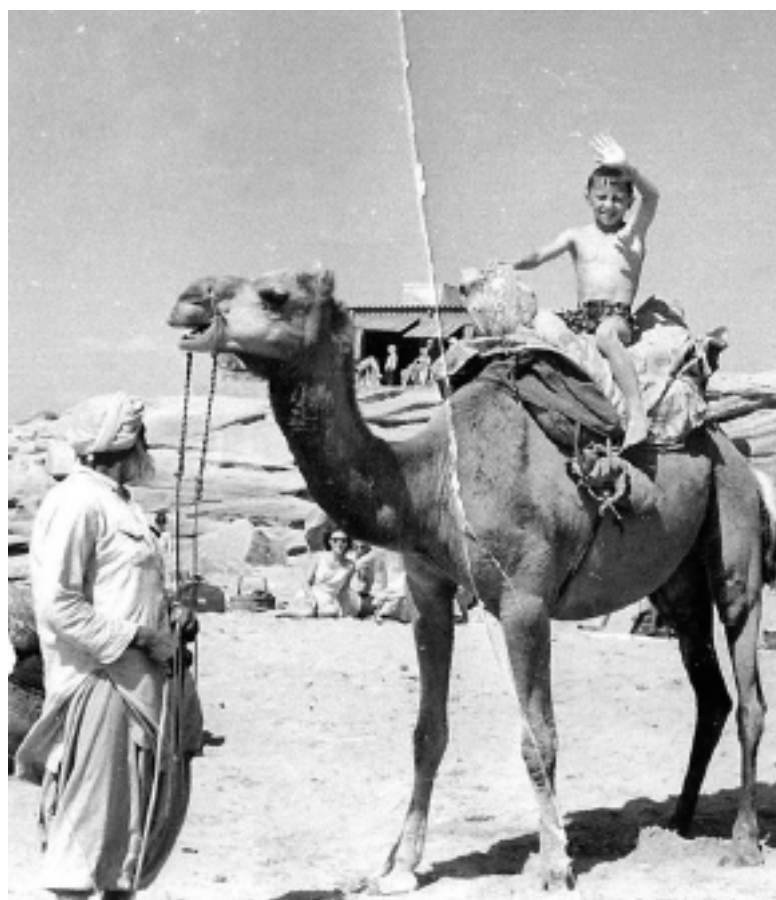
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All Franked Out

Mike Hoolboom and Tom McSorley

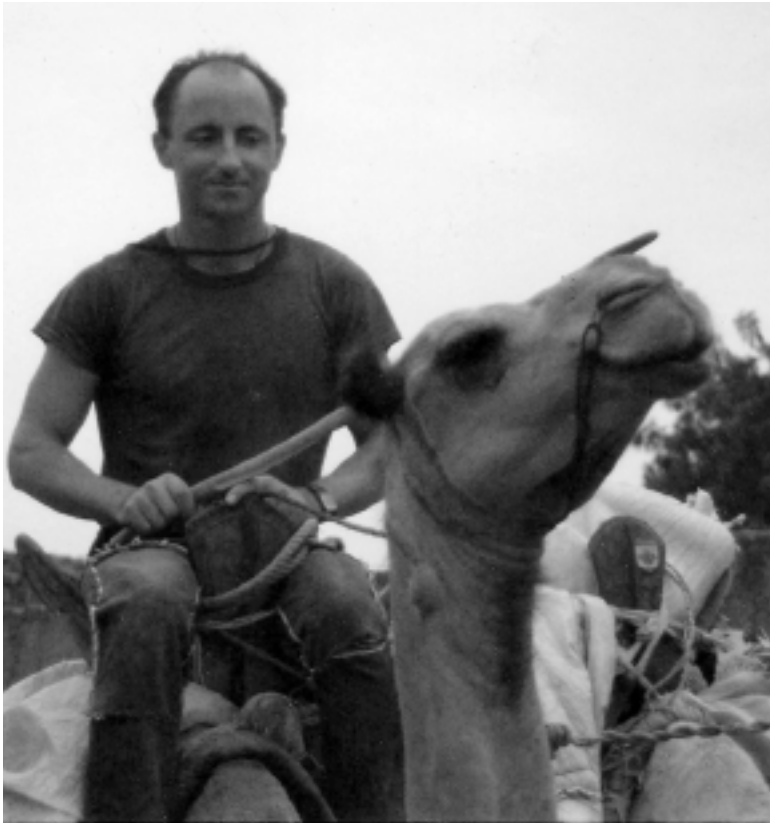
They told him not to go and he went. They said it was impossible and he climbed up over that too. The limit, the stop sign, the forbidden; he called all that home.

When we talked to one notable wag about contributing to this volume, he begged off. He just couldn't anymore. He'd spent the long nights after Frank's death talking to friends and family and those who knew him least of all at conferences and festivals and gatherings and now he was at the end of his frankness. His frankability. Not one more word, please. He said he was "all Franked out."

Frank Cole is a long trip. While he managed to complete only four movies, each is filled with a blood commitment that is more usually resolved in sacraments of marriage or death. And for all their stern, visionary rigour, they remain home movies, family snaps that never wander far from the side of his grandfather, who dies slowly over the course of each film, again and again. Frank's cinema is a wound that never stops opening, beautiful and terrible in equal measures. To survive these pictures, he reschooled himself, applying the strictest codes of discipline. He left possessions behind and withdrew into solitude. He took up weightlifting and an obsessive diet that found him portioning out his grief in calories, and then in pictures. He knew better than anyone that these movies had to be lived before they could be introduced to the camera.

Is it strange to welcome a book about a man who regarded language as a foreign country?

When he talked, the words would begin somewhere deep inside the body, where cells were busy dividing and forming new lines of tissue and filament. It came through miles of intestine and bloodlines and emerged in a slow-motion deadpan. How. Are. You. He spoke as if each word were its own sentence, and even when he was repeating tried-and-truisms, he laid them out as if language were discovering itself for the first time. He was a stranger to small talk and easy party chatter. The restless flow of language, where meaning could be found in the flux, carried away by its own relentless tide, all this was strange to him. He might have learned to speak listening to his diplomat father, who took him around the world one carefully parsed line at a time, the diction groomed in policy documents and terse encounters with states in transition. During the invasion that ended the Czech spring, for instance, or the apartheid regime in South Africa, the conflicts between India and Pakistan. If Frank's words were forged during wartime, their economy ensured that they were already a form of writing.



This experience of the chaos of martial reality and its vocabularies of uncertainty, displacement, dispossession, and death clearly mark Frank's work, on the screen and on the page. The paradoxes of such lived experiences are embodied in his oeuvre: a taut aesthetic cinematic code and a life reduced to monkish asceticism to explore the vicissitudes of living, dying, solitude, losing loved ones. There is, in this compelling work, a lean musculature sculpted by the profound tensions between infinity and closure, between definite and indefinite, between reduction and irreducibility: in life and in cinema. This is an artist, in so many senses, at war, and the war is fought on the daunting, elusive fronts of memory, epistemology, the body, and time itself.

This volume collects voices near and far. His family is here, along with friends and familiars, and of course there are his own words, precious words, sounded out in interviews or excerpted from a book-length volume composed at the end of long days during his Sahara treks. But there are also others who

weigh in for whom Frank was only a distant rumour, or an unnoticed glimmer in cinema's infinite rectangle. Many are artists, or programmers who shape their public lighting like artists, or critics who have occupied parallel territories. All have been encouraged to speak in the first person, to allow their own hopes to rub up against his unreasonable emulsions. These multiple openings offer viewing platforms that can be tested, argued, tried. They bring local knowledge to Cole's tightly enclosed infinities. Benjamin writes that there are two kinds of storytellers: the ones who stay rooted and learn the lore of their habitat, and the others who carry stories from one place to another. Frank was both, of course, sometimes at the same time, so perhaps it's no surprise that this volume collects nomads and recluses, believers and skeptics, desert travellers and artists whose real worlds begin with the opening of a book. Let a thousand Franks flourish.

Perhaps Frank Cole sought death; not as some gesture of quixotic and romantic heroism, but as an intensely curious displaced person, a nomad in a world he understood to be, metaphorically at least, a desert of constant flux, its sands shifting in continual contingency. One thing seems clear: death spoke to Frank Cole and he bravely formulated a response. The dialogues collected here attempt, with varying degrees of risk and candour, to honour his modest, doomed, and indefatigable answer to whatever questions he may have heard emanating from his grandfather's small hospital bed or from those ancient restless plains of the Sahara.

This publication accompanies a tour of Frank's work, and soon there will be handsome new DVDs available. It's our hope that you will be able to see his charmed pictures for yourself, and invent the new and necessary pleasures that might yet accompany each of us while walking across our own Saharas.





Introductions

Life During Wartime

An Interview with Charles Cole by Korbett Matthews

CHARLES COLE: My wife, Jean, was born in Saskatchewan, and I went out there in 1950 to teach law. Frank was born on March 26, 1954, in Saskatoon, and a year later we moved to Ottawa when I got a job with External Affairs. Frank was about five years old when he began to wait outside the front door of our home for my return from work. When the new season commenced, he was reluctant to come inside until we agreed that he could help clean the driveway after dinner. In those days we did not have a snow blower, but used shovels, including a small one for Frank. It was not long before he became frustrated at not being able to clean the snow off right down to the asphalt. As he grew older, he was gradually able to accomplish this objective. In later years, when he had his own apartment, he offered to come and help me with the snow. Although we had a snow blower, he was not satisfied until the snow was removed right down to the asphalt, which usually meant using a shovel.

We still live in Ottawa, though we had five postings in the following years, the first one in Pakistan. We were located in Karachi for about a year, and we enjoyed our time there, particularly on Sundays when we went out to the beach near the Arabian Sea. That was where Frank had his first camel ride. The local people would come along with camels and Frank wanted to have a ride. You can see a photo of that ride in his film *Life Without Death*. He was nine years old. This experience must have lodged in his mind all the following years.

We then moved to Rawalpindi in northwestern Pakistan, where the High Commission in Karachi had opened an office adjacent to the new capital of Islamabad. We had taken our small chihuahua with us to Pakistan, which was a mistake. Frank was very attached to that dog and in the summer of 1964, our first summer in Rawalpindi, the dog became ill. There were no veterinarians available. The Pakistani army doctors tried to help out but they were accustomed to treating horses. As a result, our chihuahua died and Frank was heartbroken. This was his first encounter with death.

During the hostilities between India and Pakistan in 1965, all the Western children except Frank were withdrawn. Their parents had arranged for them to leave the country, and the Americans took a number of them out on their flight. Rawalpindi had been bombed in the late evening and early morning of September 6, 1965. While serious damage had not been done, it raised concern that there might be further bombing if the ceasefire did not hold. Frank came into my office and asked me to come out to the garden, and I was quite puzzled

why. Gardens are nice, but when you have work to do, you can always look at the gardens later. But I went with him, and he said that when Rawalpindi is bombed again, here is a place I could seek shelter. He showed me a trench he had dug, and said that a Pakistani friend had helped him with the digging. It showed great persistence for an eleven-year-old, and I think that was typical of Frank. He was always considerate.

On August 21, 1968, the invasion of Czechoslovakia took place. I got a call from a Czechoslovakian who spoke English quite well. He said, "Mr. Cole, Mr. Cole, they're here!" He was crying. This was shortly after two in the morning, so I thanked him for letting me know. It was a great surprise for me, as it was to many others in Czechoslovakia. I woke Jean and Frank and told them that I had to go to the embassy and that they should come with me. I asked them to dress warmly and to take good walking shoes because we didn't know what we were facing. Frank turned up at the front door with his tennis gear and rackets all set to go. I was in charge of the embassy until the arrival of an ambassador five months later and arranged for an office driver to come pick us up. I told him that if it was dangerous he shouldn't come. But he turned up and we got in the car and drove down the wide thoroughfare of Leninova, and every few yards there was a tank. There were no other cars visible. None of us said a word when we drove between the tanks, which formed a long column into the horizon. I thought: It's just going to take one shell from one of those tanks and the family will be wiped out, including the driver. As far as the Coles are concerned, we all go at the same time. In its own way, that was a bit comforting.

Frank never talked much about his feelings during the invasion of Czechoslovakia, but it undoubtedly had a major influence on his thinking. I regret that my work made it difficult to spend much time with him.

I was particularly concerned that I might be prevented from returning to the embassy during the early stages of the occupation when there was so much to be done. An immediate priority was providing assistance to the many Canadians (including scientists and family members) attending the World Geological Congress in Prague who were stranded by the cancellation of air flights, trains and buses. There was much relief when surface transportation resumed within a few days.

During long days and some nights, I remained at the embassy with a few staff members. Shortly after the occupation an 8 p.m. curfew had been announced, which resulted in empty streets and risky travel. Although there were plenty of worries, I was somewhat reassured that Frank was at home with his mother, Jean, even though a large group of the invaders had set up camp in the beautiful

park across the street from our house. In early September, the embassy in Vienna asked if we could assist a Canadian air stewardess whose three-year-old daughter was visiting her Czechoslovak grandparents. Could we get her to Vienna? As Jean would be accompanying Frank to school in Switzerland in a few days via Vienna, she volunteered to help out. It was not an easy trip. They were disturbed several times during the night by Soviet soldiers knocking on their compartment door and demanding entry. Jean credits Frank for the satisfactory resolution of this problem and the reunion of the little girl with her mother.

Frank went to school in Pakistan from 1963 to 1965, he was back in Ottawa in 1965 to 1968, and from 1968 to 1971 he was at school in Switzerland. He was schooled in South Africa in 1971 and for a brief period in 1972 and then went

back to Switzerland to complete his matriculation there. He had a great variety of schooling and never said much about it, but I think all these adjustments were hard on him. In South Africa, he attended school in Cape Town, and the arrangement at that time was that the Canadian embassy spent roughly six months in Cape Town and six months in the administrative capital of



Pretoria. Frank did not react very well to school in South Africa. I couldn't understand at first why he was unhappy, but apartheid was still very much a factor in daily life in South Africa at that time. And school discipline didn't go down with him very well. Minor infractions could result in heavy reprisals and Frank could have weathered that, but he didn't like the principle of it.

One morning at roughly three o'clock I received a telephone call from the school in Cape Town and was told that Frank had disappeared. Needless to say, this was quite shocking to me. It was the middle of the night and here was Frank wandering around. So I quickly dressed and thought about where he might possibly be. I didn't inform the police that he was missing, but went looking for him myself and wondered where a sixteen-year-old unhappy boy might be at that time of the morning. I drove out to the airport and sat in the lounge from 4:30 to 9. It was a long wait. Around 9, who should walk into the lounge but

Frank. I was so relieved. I asked him to come to Pretoria, where our present home was, and in the meantime to stay with me in the hotel. I could see that the best place for him was to go back to Switzerland, where he had been very happy, and that's what he did. But for the first time I really understood how determined he was. When he made a decision, it was almost impossible to change his mind. I think that this personality trait undoubtedly had to do with his obsession about the Sahara. He told me once that he was never happier than when he was in the Sahara, despite all the challenges and dangers.

When we were posted in South Africa, the embassy was located in Cape Town, the legislative capital. We rented a house and hired a housekeeper who had worked for the owner. Her name was Minnie and we were delighted with



her services. In 1971 we were transferred to Pretoria, where Frank would join us at the end of his school year. We had maintained contact with Minnie and invited her to visit us. It would be her first trip away from Cape Town. We arranged a ticket with South African Airways and for Frank to accompany her. She had never travelled by air. As things turned out, Frank's schoolmate, the son

of an American diplomat, would be taking the same flight. When boarding the aircraft, Minnie was told to take a seat at the rear, while Frank and his friend were shown seats at the front. Contrary to apartheid regulations, Frank and his friend moved to the rear to sit with Minnie during the two-hour flight. The embassy never heard anything about this incident from the South African authorities.

When we returned from South Africa to Ottawa in 1972, Frank played a lot of tennis at the club and then started engaging in competitions. He and another player won the Canadian doubles championship in 1972 in Vancouver, if my memory serves me correctly. He started attending Carleton University that fall and completed his BA degree.

At that time we had been posted to Holland while he remained in Canada. We were separated from Frank for long periods of time on postings, and Jean's

parents became substitutes for us. Particularly Jean's father. You can see that from his films. Frank was so solicitous, so helpful to Jean's father, and Jean's father was very important to his development.

The next thing we knew he had enrolled in a filmmaking course at Algonquin College. He spent three years there, and that's where he learned his craft.

KORBETT MATTHEWS: Where do you think Frank's obsession about the Sahara came from? What made him want to travel across such inhospitable lands?

CC: I think he wanted to show that he could do it. And he wanted to show *himself* that he could do it. I could be wrong; I always respected Frank's privacy and inner thoughts and would rarely question him too much. He seemed to be able to look after himself so well. There was little I could do to influence any decisions.

When I picked him up on his return from the Sahara, I believe it was in November 1990, he was the last one to come through customs and immigration from the Mirabel Airport, and I wondered what was delaying him. Finally, some minutes after the last person except Frank had come through, I saw him walk through the doors carrying what looked like a saddle. And sure enough, that's what it was. He said he'd been delayed because the customs people had become fascinated by the saddle and wished to talk to him. They seemed to be very interested in where he had been and so on. On the drive back to Ottawa, I said to Frank that I hoped he had some better clothes because the clothing he was wearing, even his jeans, were pretty worn out. Frank replied, "Dad, these are the best clothes I have." I gathered later that he had worn the same pair of black Levi's during the entire trip.

On the drive back from the airport he told me that he was thinking about going into medicine. I said, "That's quite a change, isn't it? Why would you want to do that? You should have started years before." He said, "Well, Dad, when I was in Chad waiting for permission to go to the Sudan, I helped a German doctor who was trying to cope with many people who needed medical attention." He added, "I'm thinking that's something I might do, to go back to the Sahara and try to help people."

KM: When did he tell you he wanted to return to the desert?

CC: That same evening. I said to him, "Well, Frank, I suppose you've had enough of the Sahara now," and that I'd be glad to see him back in Canada for a while. He said, "Dad, I'm already planning my next trip to the Sahara." What

could I say? Frank was very systematic. I believe he intended to make regular trips back to the Sahara, working on his films in the meantime.

KM: Did he speak to you about what happened on his first journey?

CC: No, he didn't. There are a lot of things I don't know. He kept a lot of detailed notes about his trip across the Sahara and worked on a book based on these notes. They answer some questions but it's very difficult for me to say definitely, "This is what he thought." I asked him once if he was ever afraid on this trip of almost a year. He said, "Dad, there was never a minute I wasn't afraid." He was afraid of running out of water or being robbed, or sustaining an injury that would not permit him to continue. He didn't articulate all this to me, but I understood. He was determined to complete it nonetheless. One thing I know about Frank is that when he made up his mind to do something, he would do it.

There's only one thing I know of that he would have liked to have done but refused, and this shows some flexibility. He wouldn't do anything that would deliberately endanger his own life; that is, he wouldn't do anything that would certainly run the risk of death. When he was in Peru, he used to go to the beach and stay out there and surf. He loved surfing. With great patience, he taught his younger brother Peter to surf that afternoon after many tumbles. I thought he was too young to begin to surf, but Frank persisted and won the struggle.

In 1984, Jean and I were posted to Peru, where I took charge of the embassy's consular section. This involved regular visits to Canadians imprisoned for drug trafficking in Peru and Bolivia. On my first visit to La Paz, the capital



of Bolivia, I was recognized by one of the prisoners who had played tennis with Frank many times as teenagers. When Frank visited us some months later in Lima, I mentioned this meeting. He was eager to know how his friend was faring. I told him he was nearing the end of his twelve-year sentence, but serious depression was obviously a factor, caused mainly by the prevailing conditions. These included the poor food, the absence of sanitation and the lack of basic comforts of life in a prison situated at an elevation of some 10,000 feet. Friendship with two other Canadian prisoners with whom he shared a gloomy cell seemed to be one of the few positive features.

Frank left Lima by bus a few days later on a sightseeing tour to Chile, including its Atacama Desert. I learned only after his return that he had changed his itinerary to visit his friend in La Paz, not forgetting to bring along some of his favourite food.

In Peru we had been reading about a huge wave that came in to the beach every year or so where he liked to swim. Day after day he sat on that beach waiting for the wave to come. It did come, and when he came back from the beach I said, "Well, I understand they had that big wave up there." "Yes," he said, "but I didn't try it. I realized it was too much for me." Of course I was greatly relieved to realize that he had an appreciation that there was some limitation to what he could do.

In 1987, my youngest sister, Marcella, died in Florida, where she had been living for some years. She was an American, born in New York City, and a graduate from Columbia University. In 1987, she telephoned and told me that she was ill and asked if Frank could find time to come down and help her a bit. I phoned Frank and of course he agreed immediately. Frank went twice, and was planning a third trip. I heard him say to his brother Peter, "You've got to come with me, we have to keep Marcella alive." Peter agreed and the tickets were booked, but the day they were to leave, word came that Marcella had died. In the days when she was entering her final illness, she called to tell me how much help Frank had been to her. That's the kind of consideration he maintained for his aunt, whom he didn't know very well since she had been living elsewhere for many years.

KM: I wonder if you could tell me about your impressions of Frank's last film?

CC: I didn't see anything of the film until it was shown at the Hot Docs Festival in Toronto. I asked Frank a number of times how it was coming along. He never told me very much, but he indicated that both he and Francis Miquet were working very hard. When I saw the film in Toronto for the first time in

May 2000, I was practically glued to my seat. I now had an idea of what he had gone through.

At that time, he was already back in the Sahara, and I wish I had been able to exert more influence on him not to make that trip. He called me from the Sahara sometime in June. It was a brief telephone conversation. He had encountered serious drought on the route that he was following and found the wells were dry. That's about all we had time to exchange. I tried to phone him back and couldn't get through. I kept trying all afternoon and finally had to give it up. That was the last time I talked to Frank.

KM: How did you find out about Frank's death?

CC: About his murder? The way we were informed was done with a great deal of empathy and consideration. Jean and I had gone down to Chile to visit our son Peter in October 2000. Peter took us around the country a bit. When we returned to his house in Santiago in late October, it seems the Ottawa police had tried to contact us. I realized that something must have been wrong and went to the Canadian embassy the following day. A young officer there told me about Frank, and the embassy offered whatever help it could, such as arranging transportation back to Canada.

Because of the distance, few details were known. But it was acknowledged that Frank had been murdered, and all of his possessions had been taken from him, including his two camels. In February 2001 we arranged to obtain Frank's DNA from the RCMP. Frank had left specimens of his saliva in case anything happened to him. We tried to obtain DNA earlier, but due to inexperience, we were slow in getting it from other organizations that might have provided it. The remains were sent back by air to Detroit, where the Cryonics Institute is located. Frank was a member of that organization and had an agreement that his remains were to go there.

KM: Do you think the case will ever be solved?

CC: It's a hard question. We get hopeful signs from time to time from Mali, but it seems to be one step forward and two steps back. But we haven't given up. I don't believe in capital punishment, for one thing, and would never stand idly by if I knew some innocent person was being prosecuted. You saw from Frank's film the concern he evidenced when he thought the police might harm the man who stole his camel. Only time will tell what the final result will be.



The end of the world in
the usual dress

in a night full of hope.

