

# THERE'S MORE TO THE FILM BOARD THAN MEETS THE EYE!



Photo: Nick Deichmann

And what would this gin-drinking terror who started the place thirty-five years earlier do if he were running the monolith now? Firstly, he'd move the place back into the center of the city or at least near a respectable selection of taverns. The truth is, he never approved of the move to Montreal in the first place, preferring its original sawmill in the nation's capital. For it is in Ottawa that we have a focus of a national consensus and it is there that the money is printed. When he visited the Film Board briefly on its 25th anniversary, he did not look with total favour on his oversized war baby. Reports have it that he went charging up and down its long halls shouting, "I'd fire them all!" Nervous secretaries peeked out of their offices to see what all the fuss was about.

That day, the entire staff was given a holiday. I was working as a sound technician there in the summer of 1964 and was told the Film Board was 25 years old. There was drinking in the normally staid, mahogany-trimmed building's hallways and decorations were being set up on the sound stage. Here, invited guests were later to give and hear speeches. One of these speakers was to be John Grierson, a name I had never heard before. I was later told that he had 'started' the Film Board and had flown in from England to be present and I was suitably impressed.

Grierson's speech was saved for the last and is the one that has stayed most vividly in my mind. The other speeches came from present Board officialdom as well as government officials and they consisted of the usual stuff spewed out on such occasions. Grierson's speech stuck out from these pleasantries like a red hot iron. His speech is, characteristically enough, not available even in the Film Board's own library so I have to quote from memory.

"I have come here to remind you that you are all employees

of the government of Canada — you are all civil servants using the tax money of, and working for the benefit of the people of Canada. This is not a playground. . . ."

There was a hush that came over the audience of the kind that would occur if somebody had committed some gross faux pas at a dinner party.

"It has come to my attention recently that the Film Board more and more is becoming infiltrated with 'arty-tarty' types who intend to use the facilities which it offers for their own private purposes. There will come a time, and mark my words, it will come; when the limit of public tolerance will be transgressed and the activities of the Board will be severely curtailed.

"The National Film Board of Canada is a public utility almost in the same sense as is the Electric Company or the Gas Board. If it fails to do its service as a public function, it will no longer have any reason for existing and will be destroyed. . . ."

We forget, but Grierson's genius was not only in discovering talent, but in setting up a meaningful environment in which this talent could grow. And when experts from Nigeria or Harvard University come to examine this organization, they don't come to visit its laboratories or its flashy sound mixing studios, they are looking at a 35-year miracle, a structure that allows creative filmmaking within the arbitrary winds of government in the boring sea of civil service. And Grierson somehow pulled it off. We only have to look at American government films (U.S.I.A.), or indeed the official films from almost any government in the world to see what things could have been like. Maybe he wouldn't have totally approved particularly of the excesses, but there is no doubt it was this fire-eating Scot that made it all possible.