

john grierson

the canadian connection

by Doug Herrick

There was a man who felt that films should educate and enlighten. His name was John Grierson, and the years he spent in Canada have been felt by every filmmaker working in the country. At the end of October, a retrospective of films, made during the war when Grierson headed up the National Film Board will be shown in Boston. Doug Herrick, the man behind the screenings, has gathered together the following background on the man and his career.



Grierson on the Scottish Television's set for *This Wonderful World*

In 1924, a ship loaded with thirty thousand cases of Scotch whiskey left Glasgow, destined for the thirsty shores of Prohibition America. In addition to its illegal cargo, the vessel also carried a 26-year-old passenger named John Grierson.

Grierson was heading for the University of Chicago on a Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship, and the scope of his study would be nothing less than American culture itself. During his four-year visit, he would come in contact with the films of Robert Flaherty and Eisenstein. While reviewing Flaherty's *Moana* in 1926, Grierson would invent a word onto which he would focus much theoretical debate and creative action during his lifetime. The word was "documentary."

In 1924, Grierson would also visit Canada for the first time. A decade earlier, Canada had become the first country to set up a government filmmaking unit. In 1921, this original unit under the Department of Trade and Commerce became the Canadian Government Motion Picture Bureau, and it was this institution that would provide Grierson with a valuable model of how the documentary film could be used by the public sector. Grierson would return to Great Britain in 1928, and approach the British government with his film theories. The result would be nothing less than a documentary film movement. The extent to which the Canadian film unit influenced the Empire Marketing Board film unit that Grierson created in London is not certain. But any debt in his thinking that Grierson may have owed Canada was more than repaid a decade later when he returned to Ottawa to create a filmmaking institution that would remain his ultimate achievement: The National Film Board of Canada.

Most of the literature surrounding John Grierson tends to emphasize his contribution to the British documentary movement of the 1930's, over his legacy to Canada. But the links between Grierson and Canadian filmmaking are more extensive than the six years he actually spent at the National Film Board. Grierson first came to Canada as a student, and left the country as a lecturer at McGill University. He died a year later in 1972. Although Grierson's Empire Marketing Board and General Post Office film units have rightly earned an important place in the history of the government-sponsored film, they lasted only about four years each. In comparison, the National Film Board is the oldest government film unit, and will celebrate its 40th anniversary next year. But more important than its longevity, the Film Board has disproved the old adage that government film units that do survive, invariably become compromised by politics and cease to remain innovative.

The National Film Board survived its first crucial years because in 1939, at 41 years of age, John Grierson was at the peak of his organizational and promotional talents. Everything he had learned in England at the Empire Marketing Board and General Post Office about integrating filmmaking and bureaucratic structures was ready to be applied again. That year, a sympathetic Canadian Prime Minister and a World War would provide Grierson with the freedom to transform a moribund government film unit operating out of an abandoned sawmill, into what would become the largest documentary film studio in the Western world.

Doug Herrick is the film librarian for the Canadian Consulate General in Boston and is preparing a retrospective of Grierson's wartime propaganda films to be screened at Harvard University.

Grierson is famous for his seemingly anti-aesthetic pronouncements on film. Indeed, he chose to make a career out of the medium not because he was intrigued by its artistic or formal possibilities, but because of its social and political possibilities. While studying in the United States, he became convinced that, of all the mass media, film possessed the greatest capacity to educate and influence large numbers of people. But he also realized that to find support and sponsorship for his ideas about this expensive medium, he would have to go outside the motion picture industry. Grierson had visited Hollywood, and was aware that the emerging film moguls held little enthusiasm for the documentary film. Columbia Pictures' Harry Cohn typified the entertainment industry's appreciation of the genre at this time, by defining it as "a film without women."

Grierson only directed two films himself: *Drifters* (1929) and *Granton Trawler* (1934). He is primarily remembered for the former film, because its success created the support necessary to create the EMB unit. *Drifters* combined the accepted artistic standards for film of the day (strong creative cutting) with Grierson's social imperative (presenting a true picture of the British working man). Despite the praises extended to Grierson by such filmmakers as Paul Rotha and Joris Ivens for abandoning the joys of directing to create organizations to train others, it seems doubtful that the restless, cosmopolitan vision of John Grierson could ever have found fulfillment in the manipulation of cinematic forms. More often, he seemed to prefer manipulating social and political forms. When Grierson did address the issue of "art", the concept of "social purpose" was never far away. Grierson's life was a constant battle against the idea of "self" in art. For him, an artist had to have a commitment to something outside of himself before his art could achieve significance. The aesthetics of pure art and the primacy of the artist remained for Grierson too limiting. It would restrict art to a level of personal vanity. Instead Grierson proposed an aesthetic for art based on life: By observing and making choices about life, each individual would develop his own aesthetic, or morality. Only when an individual fulfilled in form his own particular world view could true art result. Without this basic moral underpinning, artistic expression would forever remain simply a person affectation.

This philosophy grew out of Grierson's experiences and family life in Glasgow, where he spent his childhood. It was a period of militant labor agitation and the emerging Clyde-side movement. Born of upper middleclass parents in 1898, Grierson claims to have been on a soapbox from the age of sixteen. He was apparently arrested several times for making speeches, and was blacklisted by the local companies. Grierson never more than dabbled in revolutionary politics, however; his motivations were too intellectual and his ideas complex for any one social movement or political dogma. Instead, he developed a comprehensive world view based on a well-defined sense of social right and wrong and the need for reform. His father was a school teacher and his mother a socialist and suffragette. Thus his early life at home is remembered as intense in moral, religious and political debate. When World War One broke out Grierson served aboard a British minesweeper, and after the armistice entered the University of Glasgow. It was here that he became active with the Fabian Socialists before graduating with distinctions in English and Moral Philosophy.

This Fabian element in Grierson's life should be reviewed, because it illuminates an important principle in his approach to social change. The Fabian Socialists, such as George Bernard Shaw and H.G. Wells, were anti-Marxist, and believed that man's economic activities were best preserved in socialism in the same way that his political rights were best preserved in a democracy. The Fabians were disenchanted with "laissez-faire" capitalism's tendency to permit certain groups of individuals to dominate the living standard of the majority. But instead of class warfare and revolution, the Fabians believed in reform, progressive legislation, and gradual improvement of social services. State socialism in England today is to a certain extent an outcome of this philosophy. In any case, one of the reasons why Grierson was so successful in creating his documentary movement and getting the British and Canadian governments to finance it was because, in the Fabian sense, he was a radical, but not a revolutionary. He worked within the system, and no other person in the history of film could manipulate the system like Grierson. By keeping his projects above the squabble of party politics, his film units tended to survive the electoral fortunes of any one government. In addition, he had no qualms about working with conservative companies like Shell Oil. Because of this, the documentary film never received the leftist reputation in Great Britain that it did in the United States.



Grierson shooting *Drifters* in 1929

After graduating from the University of Glasgow in 1923, Grierson was approached to enter politics but declined. Instead he went to North America. It was here in Chicago, working with the journalist Walter Lippman, that Grierson's ideas about using film to educate and enlighten began to crystalize.

While in North America, Grierson didn't just stumble upon the Canadian Government Motion Picture Bureau. During the 1920's, the MPB was a rare institution, with an international reputation for producing quality information and travel films. This film unit had grown out of the Exhibits and Publicity Bureau of Department of Trade and Commerce which had been set up in 1914, to promote the sale of Canada's abundant natural resources. In 1921, the film unit was reorganized and became the MPB. It was given the expanded

role of producing information films for all other government departments in addition to its travel and trade film responsibilities.

One of the flaws of the MPB that was to cripple its activities later on was the fact that it was set up as a theatrical business enterprise. Under the leadership of Raymond Peck, the MPB emphasized sales of its films to theatrical markets, and chose not to transfer prints to the 16mm and 28mm non-theatrical formats of the day. Soon, government departments wishing to distribute non-theatrically started setting up their own film units, which tended to siphon off money from the MPB. But in 1928, the year Grierson returned to London to set up the EMB film unit, these were not major problems for the MPB. It continued to have no rival in the area of government-sponsored films, and its prints were sold all over the world.

While building the EMB film unit, Grierson continued to make trips to the MPB in Ottawa. There were two reasons for this. The first was to report on the activities of the MPB to build support for and improve the EMB. Also Grierson realized that if the EMB was ever to achieve wide circulation of its films, non-theatrical outlets had to be set up. To do this, he had to convince schools, churches, clubs, and other organizations to buy projectors. And obviously before this could happen, he had to supply them with something to screen. Thus, Grierson also used these trips to Canada to bring back large amounts of MPB films, which were to become the basis for the first major non-theatrical film library in England.

During the early years of the depression, the EMB expanded the role of Grierson's film unit to form tighter economic bonds and promote greater trade among the Commonwealth countries. But at the same moment that government-sponsored film was assuming a greater role in England, the MPB was entering into a period of decline.

Sound had come to film in the late 1920's, and like film producers everywhere, the Canadian government at first hesitated to purchase the new, costly equipment. Soon the government was struggling with a depression economy, and there was no money available for such a low-priority item as sound equipment. By 1933, the MPB still hadn't made a single sound film, and all of its theatrical markets had dried up. Although its films were now being converted to non-theatrical formats, these brought in no money. In the private sector, American motion picture companies were completing their stranglehold over the Canadian entertainment industry, and it appeared that filmmaking in Canada was a thing of the past. Even Grierson no longer came to Canada. He had moved his film unit to the General Post Office, and was too busy producing such classics as **Night Mail** and **Housing Problems**.

In Canada, a reaction started to set in. In 1934, the National Film Society of Canada was formed. This institution, which would later evolve into the Canadian Film Institute, was concerned about American domination of the film industry, and the decline of the MPB. One of the first things that it did was to publish a lengthy report highly critical of the state of film in Canada. One of the signatories to this document was a young editor named Ross McLean, who would later replace Grierson as head of the National Film Board. McLean accepted the position as personal secretary to the Canadian High Commissioner Vincent Massey, and went to London with him the next year. There McLean met Grierson, and soon became convinced that here was just the man to

shake the MPB out of its doldrums. With the support of Vincent Massey (His brother is the actor Raymond Massey) McLean sent a report back to Ottawa in 1936, outlining the success of the British government's film efforts, and recommended that Grierson come to Canada to study the situation. With the National Film Society and Peck's successor at the MPB, Frank Badgley, applying pressure in Ottawa, it was finally decided that it was time for Grierson to return to Canada.

In 1938, Grierson submitted his report on the MPB and returned to London. Among other things, he had recommended that an advisory committee be created to centralize film agency for the the government, meaning that other departments would have to give up their film units. The Minister of Trade and Commerce accepted the report and cabled Grierson to return to Canada to help implement his ideas. Grierson realized that the best method would be to formalize this agency through legislation, so with the help of Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King, on May 2 1939, the National Film Board was created through Act of Parliament.

The initial structure of the National Film Board revealed the two basic loyalties that would soon confront each other. Of the seven Board members, three were to come from the civil service and three were to come from outside the government. The Minister of Trade and Commerce was to be chairman of the Board, reflecting the fact that the MPB still remained under his control, while the position of Government Film Commissioner was responsible to the Board, but independent of civil service rules. The differences in style and work routine between the civil servants and those not used to government procedure would lie dormant for awhile, but under the pressures generated by the Board's new wartime role, the antagonism would increase.

Several months after the creation of the Board, the Government Film Commissioner's post was still vacant. Grierson had wanted a Canadian to fill the position, but no qualified individuals were found. But on August 31, 1939, Canada found itself at war with Germany, and the position could no longer be left vacant. Grierson was in the United States at the time, and was offered the position. He accepted with the understanding that it would be temporary. Installed in an office in the West Bloc of the Parliament buildings in Ottawa with Stuart Legg as production supervisor and Ross McLean as his assistant, Grierson started hiring filmmakers. From the defunct GPO film unit came Stanley Hawes, Norman McLaren, Evelyn Spece, and Raymond Spottiswoode to train the young Canadians Grierson had recruited. Among the latter were Sydney Newman, Tom Daly, Michael Spencer, James Beveridge, Don Frasier and Guy Glover.

The Motion Picture Bureau was increasing its staff also, and under the increased tempo of production, conflicts between the two groups started breaking out. Grierson's group was predominantly young, college-educated, non-conformist, and self-consciously bohemian. Their style and pace were totally at odds with Frank Badgley's slow, routine-oriented Motion Picture Bureau staff. As tempers flared during the 24-hour shifts in the sawmill and battle lines were drawn, Grierson tendered his resignation. It was December, 1940, and he had explained in a letter that he could no longer mediate between the two factions. By resigning, he claimed that he would be free to speak out on the structural problems of the NFB. He saw these as the need for more money and flex-

ibility in hiring filmmakers, the problems of civil service regulations in an activity like filmmaking, and the problems of an independent MPB. In essence, Grierson was making a case for absorbing the MPB. Thanks in great part to the support of Prime Minister King, the NFB officially absorbed the MPB in June of 1941, and gained control of film production.

More and more power came to Grierson. In 1943, he became General Manager of the Wartime Information Board. Before this, the British government had named Grierson as its official censor for North America, and was sending him all the German propaganda footage captured off Bermuda en route to Latin America. In 1944, the Board incorporated a display and filmstrip section, starting its involvement in other forms of mass media.

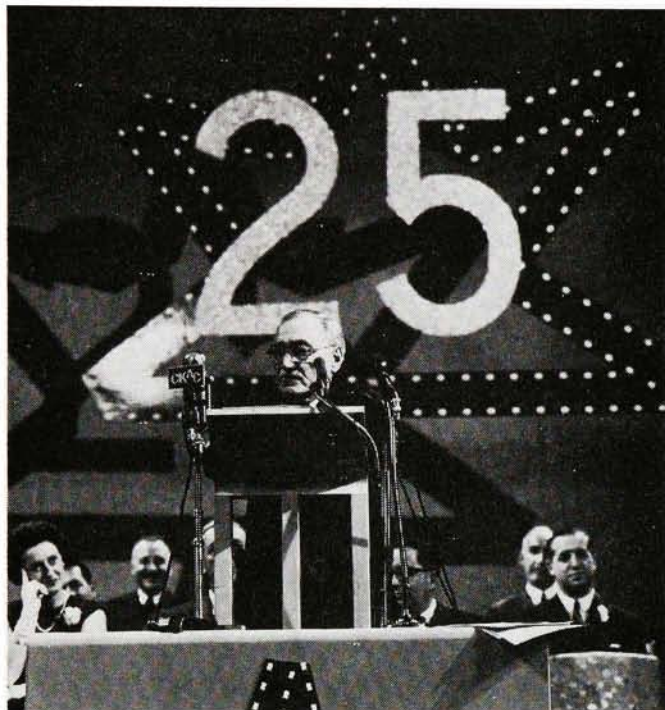


Grierson at the NFB in 1942

The principle mandate of the National Film Board during the war was to communicate Canada's wartime policies and achievements to itself, and to the world at large. Thus, the "Canada Carries On" and "World In Action" series were created. Both series were similar in style to the "March Of Time" newsreels, and were narrated in "voice of doom" fashion by a young CBC broadcaster named Lorne Green. It was part of Grierson's philosophy that these films be released theatrically to gauge their success and quality. After six months, the films were reduced to 16mm. and distributed across Canada through the huge non-theatrical network set up to gain maximum exposure for the Board's films.

To a great degree, the series reflected the sensibilities of producer Stuart Legg, who was in charge of "Canada Carries On" from 1940 to 1943, and in charge of "World in Action" from 1942-1945. As compilation films, few credits were given

to individuals. The music and visuals were constructed to back up the commentary and build the editorial point of view. Legg was a student of montage theory, and much of the CCO and WIA style reflected his concern with the psychological impact of each image. In the WIA series especially, Legg goes to great lengths to build visual metaphors and create similes out of his editing, and work these off the narration to create irony, contrasts, and sometimes humor. Compared to the American War Department propaganda films, they were slightly less strident, shorter (rarely over 22 minutes), and wider in political and economic treatment.



Grierson speaking at the 25th Anniversary of the NFB in 1964

CCO was begun in 1940, as a monthly, one-reel series designed to dramatize to Canadians their participation in the war. By playing up communications and transportation issues, and showing Canada's strategic position relative to the North, it attempted to undercut isolationism and regional loyalties at home. Like the WIA series, its style was developed not out of extensive aesthetic debate, but the need to turn out material quickly, and present large amounts of information within a short format. Newsreel footage came from captured Axis propaganda, Free French and Russian Newsreel services, the British Ministry of Information, the U.S. Army Signal Corps, and Canadian sources.

The first film of the series was "Atlantic Patrol" (1940), which explained the Canadian Navy's role in protecting convoys bound for England. Among the other films in this series from 1940 were **Letter From Aldershot**, **Letter From Camp Borden**, **The Home Front**, **Children From Overseas**, **Wings of Youth**, and **Everywhere in the World**. Churchill's **Island** (1941) won a special Academy Award that year for its portrait of England in the dark days of the Blitz before the United States entered the war. Another popular film of the CCO series was **War Clouds In the Pacific** (1941), which predicted war between Japan and the U.S. and was released a few weeks before Pearl Harbor. Like many of this series, it was distributed widely in America by United Artists.

The CCO series was given to Sydney Newman and Guy Glover to produce when Stuart Legg took over responsibility for the WIA series. They had been concerned about the lack of Canadian material in the former series, and had complained to Grierson. They ended up continuing the series until 1951, firing Lorne Green shortly after the war in an attempt to tone it down. The WIA series had been started in June of 1942, and reflected Grierson's and Legg's global world view. The WIA films were rich in information, less pedantic than the American "Battle of..." films, and assumed a certain degree of historical knowledge on the part of the audience. It attempted to define the political and military forces that had brought the world to the brink in 1939, and suggested issues and problems that the world would have to face at the end of hostilities. This series was more popular outside of Canada than CCO, and was seen in about 6,000 theaters in the U.S. as well as in Latin America and the British Commonwealth countries. The films were generally twenty minutes in length, and included such titles as **Fortress Japan** (1944), **The Gates of Italy** (1943), **Geopolitik-Hitler's Plan For Empire** (1942), **Inside Fighting China** (1942), **Our Northern Neighbor** (1942), **Labor Front** (1943), **Spotlight on the Balkans** (1945), and **The War For Men's Minds** (1943).

In addition to the war films, Grierson also produced films designed to "bring Canada alive to itself." These films, with titles like **Peoples of Canada** (1941), **Painters of Québec** (1944), **Peace River** (1941), **Listen to the Prairies** (1941) and **High Over the Borders** (1943) were a main priority of Grierson, and insured that the Board would have a well-defined post-war function.

In 1945, Grierson resigned as Film Commissioner, and finished up his filmmaking activities in Canada. During the war, he had earned more than a few political enemies from his takeover of the MPB and the end-run tactics that he used to build up the NFB. He was tired of slugging it out with cabinet ministers and bureaucrats, and with the coming of peace, he decided that it was time to move on. He would return to Canada to tour the West in 1957, and again in 1964 to celebrate the Board's 25th anniversary. His last role in Canada would be as a lecturer at McGill.

Partially as a result of Grierson's ideas, government film units were created in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and, for a short time, North Carolina. Grierson's presence lives on at the NFB today through such programs as "Challenge For Change" and through the excellence of such directors as Donald Brittain and Michael Rubbo. Brittain, in particular, through his precise structure and succinct narration, has probably come closest to Grierson's desire to fuse the artistic and formal possibilities of film with its capacity to educate and inspire.

Film as a medium was born in 1895. Grierson followed three years later. His ideas on social change would grow and develop with that medium, and Grierson would devote his life to create institutions to insure that the capacity of film to educate and enlighten would be available as a matter of routine. As a filmmaker, John Grierson would probably have become famous in his own right. But his legacy was to go beyond the filmography of one man: it was to become, in a sense, the filmography of an institution. And Canada, as the home of that institution, has done well by its relationship with John Grierson.

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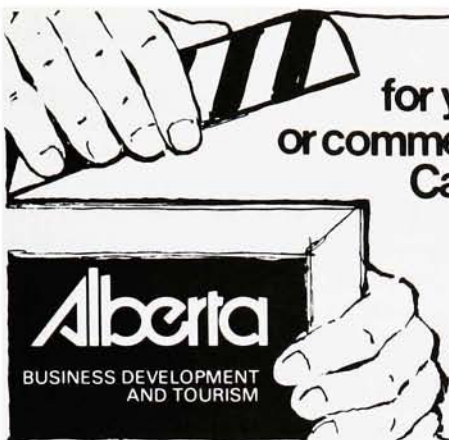
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