John Grierson and the National Film Board: The Politics of Wartime Propaganda
by Gary Evans.
University of Toronto Press, 329 pp., illustrated.
$24.85

John Grierson was the first famous person I ever got to know personally. He descended from his godlike perch in the indexes of venerable histories of cinema to emerge, aging, but still filled with fire, into the student body at McGill University. In his human incarnation, he was a cantankerous, irascible, totally unpredictable deity who had broad, seduced some of his female graduate students and hotel chambermaids, and would call my all-too Jewish mother a Fascist totalitarian, a ruthless WASP bureaucrat and be- drawn to you with the scents of change. The young and the old alike were impressed by the ideas that Grierson loved and he gracefully jumped into the breach. In Evan's book, scriptwriter Graham Mc­ Innes describes a meeting with a Grierson at the peak of his inspirational power: "We watched Grierson pacing back and forth and rubbing his sparse, sandy hair. He was nervous. But you discipline a democracy by creating the collective will. This is what we have to do. All of us. And in the next two months. For the British it'll be weeks, because they've only the Channel. We have the Atlantic. Don't let's cherish the vain illusion that we can solve it and... Now let's see you all get going!"

And so the boys and girls of the wartime National Film Board - a ragtag group of idealists with no organization, no money, and hayseeds from the prairies - went off to their cutting rooms to save Western civilization. For those of us who love the idea of a National Film Board, it is important to remember that it truly was Grierson's baby. In Canada, there was nothing like it before. In the world, there was nothing like it since. Grierson's genius was not only to get the government to pay for filmmaking, but to pay for good filmmaking - films that were socially relevant, often controversial, espousing high ideals while appealing to a large general public.

He got away with it under the cover of war's necessity for government money where national morale was as vital as guns and ships. As Grierson points out, "If our stuff pretend to be certain it's because people need certainty... But, for the duration of the war, he was untouchable. He wanted the National Film Board from nothing and had it into an internationalist filmmaking enterprise that could provide a force for change in the world, they were just minding the store of our stuff pretend to be certain it's because people need certainty..."

For the McCarthy era was a moment of inernationalist filmmaking with the United Nations. Even that was not to be. As Evans puts it, "The hot war against fascist aggression would become a cold war against communist ideology and the while Russian and American internationalist views and eclectics politics did not easily fit in a world where everything had suddenly become black and white. The McCarthy era was coming and Grierson was one of the first public men to be destroyed. Instead of". A thanks from a grateful Canada. Grierson was rewarded with a vengeful innuendoes, and no public or private support from a government he had so loudly served. The Leo Dolans met and Grierson's grace was rapid and brutal. Active intervention by no less than J. Edgar Hoover repressed his rejection by a U.S.-dominated United Nations and eventual expulsion from Canada. Grierson's book is this chronicle of Grierson's Canadian experience. It is an amazing story, told with thoroughness and objectivity. Evans is not another Grierson idolater, and, in his critical appraisal, Grierson's life-work becomes unified with its ideological core. The book also says a lot about our political establishment that tolerated this out­ for his short-term usefulness. It was Canada that allowed him free rein to develop his radical and innovative experiment in government and media - and it was the same Canada that destroyed him.

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March 1985 - Cinema Canada / 25