

BOOK REVIEWS

John Grierson and the National Film Board: The Politics of Wartime Propaganda

by Gary Evans,
University of Toronto Press,
329 pp., illustrated,
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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 my humble existence. I was his graduate-student assistant at McGill University. In his human incarnation, he was a cantankerous, irascible, totally unpredictable deity who had bad breath, seduced some of his female graduate students and hotel chambermaids, and would call my all-too-Jewish mother late at night to tell her that he didn't think that I was eating well. That's all she needed to hear.

But most of all, he was inspiring. For those who became close to him, he brought diverse worlds together and smashed cherished illusions. As the consummate teacher, he fought with you, yelled at you and scared the wits out of you. At the same time he made you aware that there was a big world out there and you were part of it. He has been dead now for almost 15 years. I knew him at the end of his life and the beginning of my own. Yet hardly a day goes by when I do not think of him.

Grierson, the star, the famous person, attracted a coterie of groupies. Some were just curious, some were opportunists and some were jerks. Some of the jerks went on to write his various biographies – none of which were particularly insightful or informative. (That is perhaps one of the downsides of being famous). From the very beginning, Gary Evans had a different take on Grierson. Grierson used to divide humanity into the politicians and the aesthetes. Gary Evans is the former, his interest is history rather than film, ideas rather than imagery. He was not attracted to Grierson the film man, and certainly not Grierson the star. He was interested in Grierson the propagandist, Grierson the ideologue. Evans' task was not an easy one. Grierson touched everyone around him with bolts of inspirational lightning; but, like lightning, the electricity diffused when no longer charged by his pugnacious human presence. Who was that masked man? What did he stand for? Was he a bureaucrat, a pinko Commie, a Fascist totalitarian, a ruthless pragmatist or a helpless visionary? The answer in Gary Evans' new book, *John Grierson and the National Film Board*, is yes, yes, yes and yes. But another side emerges from this extensive and penetrating historical portrait – Grierson the tragic hero.

When Grierson showed up at McGill in 1969, my generation was busily engaged in flexing its demographic muscles. This 69-year-old, well-weathered Scot was totally at ease with the seeming chaos of the times. "Give me anarchy and lots of it," he once said to me with a laugh, "because then we thugs are sure to win." As Evans' book demonstrates this winning also had to do with a superb sense of timing and politics. By

putting himself in the right place at the right time, he almost single-handedly invented the documentary medium. He wrote its myths, created its heroes, and set its directions. In England and later in Canada he fired up several generations of filmmakers with his own peculiar brand of messianic zeal. As Evans writes, "Together they shared a dream that film could provide the ordinary citizens and working man with a new collective consciousness – that their humdrum daily life was something of consequence. Documentary's missionaries believed that film could weave the discordant and often contradictory elements of twentieth-century existence into a thematic whole portraying peace and international understanding."

Grierson believed firmly in the idea that film propaganda was a legitimate weapon of the state – a weapon to forge a national consciousness and collective will. Today his old idealism doesn't play any better than his old documentary movies. But during World War Two, in an innocent Canada suddenly thrust into a world of where bad guys were killing good guys, there wasn't the luxury to philosophize. It was the sort of anarchic vacuum that Grierson loved and he gleefully jumped into the breach. In Evan's book, scriptwriter Graham McInnes 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, the very picture of sulphurously creative disruption, and we heard and we wondered..."

"There's no use pretending we're not in a terrible mess. The Germans have knifed right through our collective individualisms precisely because they were individual. We must oppose discipline. Ours to theirs. But you discipline a democracy by creating the collective will from within; not by imposing it from without. 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 we can squat behind it... Now let's see you all get going!"

And so the boys and girls of the wartime National Film Board – a ragtag collection of artists and intellectuals and hayseeds from the prairies – went off to their cutting rooms to save Western civilization. For those of us who love the ideal 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 has been 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 a wartime emergency in a Canada where national morale was as vital as guns and ships. As Grierson points out, "If our stuff pretends to be certain it's because people need certainty... If we bang them out one a fortnight and no misses, instead of sitting six months on our fannies cuddling them to sweet smotherooos, it's because a lot of bravos in Russia and Japan and Germany are banging out things too..." But, as Evans demonstrates, Grierson piggybacked on

these inspirational films his internationalist message of one world – a world where the distribution of wealth would be more equitable. To see what these films could have been like, we need only look at Frank Capra's *Why We Fight* series made for the U.S. Army. In these we are treated to pictures of Hitler and Mussolini with narration lines like "if you ever see these men – don't hesitate..." Grierson's films looked to a time beyond the war where, in the narration of a World in Action film, "We shall see the separate anthems of the nations become the single united marching song of all mankind."

Well, it didn't quite work out that way, either for the world or for Grierson; and here is where Evan's tale assumes both epic and tragic proportions.

The problem was Canada, and more specifically the Ottawa of the 1940's. Grierson could not have picked a more small-minded, uptight place to sow his missionary seed. In his zeal to get things done, he stepped on the toes of the entrenched WASP bureaucrats and became their moving target – he had energy where they had plodding dullness; he had idealism where they had party politics; he believed in a Canada that could be a force for change in the world, they were just minding the store in a country dominated by foreign interests. But, for the duration of the war, he was untouchable. He had created the National Film Board from nothing and had made it into an institution of major influence and prestige. Forty to 50 million people around the world were seeing Canadian newsreels every week. His enemies could only watch and wait. During the war, Leo Dolan, head of the Canadian Government Travel Bureau, wrote a letter to his friend Michell Hepburn, premier of Ontario, and an enemy of Mackenzie King: "This guy Grierson is the smoothest Limey to come here in years. He has had the inside path with your pal Willie King... I know that these New York Jews are always with Grierson and I am convinced the little bastard is an English Jew. The whole film board setup should be investigated..."

At war's end it was – and with a vengeance. The Gouzenko disclosure of a Communist spy ring in Canadian government circles was effectively used to smear the Film Board. Grierson had already left Canada to pursue his ideals of internationalist 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 erstwhile Russian ally..." Grierson's internationalist views and eclectic 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 an FBI dossier, vague innuendoes, and no public or private support from a government he had so loyally served. The Leo Dolans had won and Grierson's fall from grace was rapid and brutal. Active intervention by no less than J. Edgar Hoover insured his rejection by a U.S.-dominated United Nations and eventual expulsion from the country.

Evan'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 outsider 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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