

JOHN GRIERSON (1898-1972)

BY NICHOLAS PRONAY

The documentary film I gave a push to forty years ago was a richer form of art than I ever dreamt of.

John Grierson, 1968

It will be eighty years next week, 10 November 1929, that John Grierson's *Drifters* had its premier in the old Tivoli Theatre in the Strand. The audience were members of the London Film Society, founded by, amongst others, Bernard Shaw, Augustus John, and HG Wells to provide a framework for viewing and discussing *avant-garde* films from the Continent especially Russia, Germany and France, which would not be shown in commercial cinemas as well as habitually being banned by the BBFC. The audience on the night came to see *Battleship Potemkin* and to talk montage with Eisenstein who attended himself. The surprise item was *Drifters*, a film from the Empire Marketing Board by a 30 year old Scot known, in so far he was known, only as a film critic recently returned from the USA, with interesting views, amongst others, on the artistic potential of the humble 'factual film'. With its artistic camera work, rhythmic, montage-type editing, which went along well with *Potemkin* from where in fact it was learned, and a poetic ambiance, it was like a film never before made in Britain. Those present, who regarded themselves as the members of the *avant-garde* and most of the critics of the quality press next morning, hailed it as a work of cinema art. Jack C Ellis later described it as *the final, fully formed prototype of what we have come to know as the documentary*'. All this was much helped by the fact that Grierson sneaked back in those 'arty' sequences which the sponsors of the film, who thought they were paying for a screen advert for selling more herring abroad, had ordered to be cut out as irrelevant to the purpose. This too was a prototype for the ambiguity of the relationship between those who make documentaries and those who provide the money which runs through the history of the documentary.

The critical success of the film brought it theatrical distribution which both returned its costs and brought good publicity to the Empire Marketing Board. The civil servant, Sir Stephen Tallents, who had stuck his neck out authorising the money for the film could now set up properly his nascent 'Film Unit' and he gave Grierson a Civil Service position as Films Officer. Several of the young aesthetes in the audience who had been looking for a creative direction had now found it and sought out Grierson to



Shooting *Drifters*, 1929

become his acolytes at the EMB Film Unit to realise Grierson's claim that '*the cinema's capacity for getting around for observing and selecting from life itself can be exploited in a new and vital art form.*'

As the clichè has it, the rest is history. Or to be precise 'histories' because there is, on the one hand, the mythologised history as told and re-told by his followers (and indeed himself), and on the other, what cold-eyed historians have unearthed from the records. What is common to both are the basic facts. The tiny EMB Film Unit progressed into the larger GPO Film Unit and eventually into the Crown Film Unit which was one of the two largest documentary producing studios in the world. Grierson also succeeded in fostering a ring of independent, satellite, production units comprised principally of former members of the EMB and GPO film units. In addition he established the National Film Board of Canada to become one of the largest and most prestigious documentary film producers outside Britain, and was directly instrumental in the setting up of government-funded documentary film units in seven of the countries of the British Empire and its successor states. By 1950, during the thirty years since *Drifters*, more than 1000 documentary films had been made by home and overseas units, most of them under Grierson's personal aegis. 'The British Documentary Film Movement' had its own theoretical positions but unlike other contemporaneous film movements it could put them into practice on a large scale because of Grierson's, perhaps most original, idea of fastening it onto the

adders of government propaganda machineries, characteristic of that period when the elites were frightened of potential social unrest. By being able to make flesh the theory in a thousand examples by 'a hundred other talents than mine' as he wrote later, it earned the oft quoted wry compliment from across the Channel: "The cinema of the English and the art of film are mutual contradictions. Except for the Documentary which is the unique and distinctive contribution of the English."

If history had stopped at c 1950 little would need to be added to Harry Watt's description of the role of Grierson in that ever upward success story: 'he was our Guru, our Chief, our little God, the man who had given us an aim and an ideal, who battled for us and at whose feet we sat'.

History however went on to a somewhat Greek tragedy-like sequel of hubris. Within the next five years it was effectively all over. The Crown Film Unit – with Grierson himself in charge having returned to the UK following the collapse of his documentary production companies in the USA – was wound up by the Government in 1952; its personnel dispersed, many with no employment to go to, to be followed three years later by Grierson himself after an unsuccessful period of managing another government subsidised production unit, *Group 3*. Although only 57 years old and at the height of his powers he was never again employed either in film production or government service, with not even a Civil Service pension, about which he was very bitter. In the eyes of the Civil Service he had committed the unpardonable sin of being found out trying to manipulate his fellow civil servants for ends of his own – art or something. The British Documentary Film Movement in its homeland vegetated on in a handful of company film units under the old hands doing more of the old things and shunned by young talent. It is summed in the title of a book by Elizabeth Sussex comprised of interviews with most of the participants including Grierson: *The Rise and Fall of the British Documentary – The Story of the Film Movement Founded by John Grierson*.

The root of both the rise and the fall was the same: Grierson's idea that, by selling the Documentary to the government as an effective propaganda medium, he could get the funding for making art. Yes, 'with a social purpose' but he held that all art has that.

It is difficult to know actually how far Grierson believed the kind of films, like *Drifters*, which he wanted to see made, could be effective tools of propaganda in the value-for-money sense. But saying so was the essential means for getting treasury officials,

ministers and capitalists to come up with the finance. To ask them to pay for a group of unknown *avant-garde* film makers to experiment with a new and vital art form – and an expensive one – would have been hopeless.

Grierson's enormous energy, charisma and remarkable facility with words – he was a great writer by any standard, one the finest practitioners of the English language – combined with a contempt alike for the pettifogging niceties of civil service mores and the 'bourgeois' – enabled Grierson to provide for his flock the wherewithal's for making their films. He was thus able to bring into being a critical mass of films, production facilities and documentary film makers to ensure that whatever happened later, the movement would not peter out in time – unlike all those other similar film movements of his lifetime, such as New Objectivity, Social Realism or Neo Realism.

That stands as his success. However much we debate the precise meaning of the term, there are still hundreds of filmmakers who make 'documentaries' and call themselves documentarians.

It was however a Faustian bargain. Although Grierson had been brilliant at persuading officials and politicians that, in return for financing his *avant-garde* movement they would be getting effective propaganda, it became increasingly difficult to pull the wool over their eyes. Once that particularly indulgent, and very complex a-typical civil servant in charge of the GPO Film Unit, Sir Stephen Tallents, had moved on, the hard-faced men of the Treasury and their equivalents were beginning to see through to the reality. Grierson was forced to turn his ingenuity with words and concepts to covering up the fact that those films were unable to reach large audiences, that their messages were too vague from a propaganda point of view and indeed that some of them were plain bad technically. He was forced to lead his followers increasingly to make films which were ever less art and ever more 'information'. Worse, he had to exclude a vast number of the very subjects about which he would



have loved to make films: paintings and architecture, nature, the cultures of peoples in far-away lands; sport and those industrial and scientific processes which the camera can see as the naked eye cannot. These were all of the subjects in which beauty and poetry was only inherent until the camera and artist brought it out, but none which could be pretended to be subjects for which government propaganda service filmmakers were paid. The same went for the narrowing of approach, exclusion of the eccentric, the satirical, the humorous, which he himself loved. Above all, Documentary became debarred from being investigative and oppositional. It could observe problems such as slums but had to project the positive message that they were being tackled by a benevolent state. That cramped, if not actually inverted, the meaning of *'the creative treatment of actuality with a social purpose'*. He had led them into a creative *cul-de-sac*.

He knew this himself. Almost at the point when it all came crashing down, October 1951, he wrote on the occasion of the death of Robert Flaherty: *Flaherty made a handful of lovely films, all with enormous difficulty both in finance and collaboration. The documentary people who went the other way got financed by the million, established educational and propaganda services for governments all over the world, and made themselves films by the thousand. And yet and yet ... I look at it all today and think with the gentler half of my head that Flaherty's path was right and the other wrong'.*

So when, with the War won, full-employment had arrived and the Conservatives returned to power, the government felt safe enough to pack in the propaganda machinery. Not only did the Griersonian financial and institutional framework vanish, but the creative vitality had gone too; it had ceased to be 'a new and vital art form'. The devil had come to claim its bargain.

Or at least so in Britain. What kept Grierson from despair were the excellent films from around the world, precisely on those subjects which he had had to eschew, which came to him for his weekly television programme *This Wonderful World* that also enabled him to spend his summers attending documentary film festivals abroad, where he was lionised in contrast to his treatment in England. In 1963 when Grierson had been invited repeatedly to visit Japan, but was too unwell to go, he sent a representative (the present writer). Standing with Akira Kurosawa and Yasurijo Ozu, Kon Ichikawa asked him: *Please tell Grierson-san that we are all his children here.*

That and the acceptance of an ever growing audience being shown serious, indeed *avant-garde*, contemporary films – about modern art, architecture, customs and cultures from Macedonia to Korea, macro-lens films about industrial and scientific processes – and also of examples from the past that he regarded as showing the true capability of the camera to create art in the right hands.



John Grierson at the National Film Board of Canada 25th awards

He believed in the people, the audience as the judge. He insisted that the moment his audience numbers fell he would leave even though this was his only income. He trusted that one day some new technology would come along which would allow a diversity of audiences to see and choose for themselves what they view. He was sure that then 'the documentary idea' was going to come fully into its own and flourish as it never could have done before. He died in 1972 embittered by the dismal state of the documentary in Britain but with a faith that it was here to stay, and grow.

If his spirit could materialise and he could be here today, in the jury and in the audience – although as with any jury or festival he had ever attended the proceedings would surely not go along the orderly plans of the organisers – he would be overjoyed by the number, range and variety of the films and the attendees alike, applaud the list of categories, especially 'the most entertaining documentary'. And, he would surely quote, in Latin, Sir Christopher Wren: *'if you seek his monument, look around.'*



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Cartoon by Emile Coia