

BOOK REVIEWS

John Grierson — Film Master by James Beveridge

Macmillan Publishing, NY,
361 pp., \$21.95.

When a rich person dies, there is often the sorry spectacle of relatives fighting over the jewelry and bits of furniture left behind. When a famous person dies, there is a similar tearing at the coat tails of the deceased in an effort to be pulled into immortality in the wake of the great man's reputation. This certainly has been the case after the death of John Grierson, pioneer of the idea of documentary film and founder of the National Film Board. One is faced with the sad sight of various second rate people scrambling to get into print for a piece of the Grierson action. In a way, I have always thought it was the old man's fault. Although he had a superb eye for talent, he was also, in his own quixotic way, quite authoritarian. Those who tended to stick with him became feeble reflections of his own image.

The book **John Grierson, Film Master** written by his friend and long time associate Jim Beveridge is a good example of the flaccid intellect that surrounded the great man. In a way it is a scandal, not because it is not interesting or not informative about the grizzly Scot who turned the film industry on its head. The problem is that it is simply not a book, but rather a loose collection of clippings — the unorganized droppings from somebody's bottom drawer. The bulk of the book consists of straight transcripts from interviews done for the National Film Board film, **Grierson**, a film which in itself was so disorderly in conception that it had to be 'saved' by its editor and commentary writer. In his rush to get his name in print, Beveridge serves us these film interviews raw. They begin where they begin, wander through frequent irrelevancies and end where the film in the camera ran out — often

leaving you hanging. These interviews are sandwiched between chapter introductions and are individually introduced with brief factual backgrounds and frequently some silly anecdote of how the buzzing of the bees disturbed the soundman while the interview was being filmed. There is, of course, nothing wrong with the idea of using interviews to write a book. An excellent example is the recently published book by Elizabeth Sussex on British documentary which uses interviews in a very telling way. Unlike Beveridge, Sussex has a point to make and her raw material is finely worked into the thesis of the book. At \$22, Beveridge's grab bag is being promoted as a biography of Grierson. In fact, it is a sloppy, lazy effort, a non-book which is a disgrace to the memory of the man who changed the face of Canadian cinema.

There are almost fifty people interviewed in this book. Some, like actor Lorne Greene or Roberto Rossellini, are included not so much for any great knowledge they had of Grierson, but for their star value. Of all the interviewees, it was often the men behind the scenes who seemed to know Grierson the best and, among the trivia, this book contains some stunning insights into the workings of JG's mind. Laurence Henson worked with Grierson in the early sixties on the popular British television show, *This Wonderful World*.

Grierson was very proud of how this cultural show had achieved such high ratings and Henson describes Grierson's style as follows. "Grierson did an analysis of Reubens' compositions ... by showing a sequence of World Cup Football and explaining Reubens to the TV audience in terms of how Reubens played the corners of the rectangle of green like the football field. After that program, a man stopped him in the street and said in a heavy Scottish accent, 'You know Doc, that was fuckin' poetry.'"

Henson goes on to describe in a nutshell the Grierson I knew at McGill. "He was austere, he was capricious, he was funny. At times he could charm the birds out of the trees. He existed in an enormously complex manner. He demanded things, and when questioned,

wouldn't give answers, but would see your own reaction to what you had done. Without actually saying anything, he would be saying: 'There, you see, do you get it?'" According to Henson he had one message over and over again to all creative people and it is a message which has sadly gone unheeded by many of the artistes presently working for the Film Board. "If you had a dedication to something outside of yourself, you were in business; if you did not have a dedication to something outside of yourself then you had had it, and you ended by disappearing up your own arsehole." It was on such seat-of-the-pants philosophy that the documentary film movement was created.

Throughout his life, Grierson was not so much a "film master" as a teacher. He was the front man through whom others could exercise their own creativity. He taught through abrasion, Joris Ivens described his methods as follows: "When he saw a Communist, he quoted the Bible and when he saw Catholics, he quoted Lenin. Above all he taught that it was the job of the artist to create order from the chaos of information surrounding our daily lives.

What is particularly infuriating about **John Grierson, Film Master** is that in reading its 361 pages, you get a tremendous first-hand feeling from the large collection of people appearing in the book whose very different lives have been touched by this great media prophet. But as any journalist knows, spoken material needs a great deal of work to give it impact on the printed page. As a filmmaker, surely Beveridge would not subject his viewers to several hours of raw, unedited rushes. Reading the book, those who already know Grierson will make the considerable effort to piece this mish mash together. Those who did not know him will find here yet another book on documentary preaching to the converted and will wonder what all the fuss was about. But, in an odd way in reading Jim Beveridge's disordered collection, one cannot help but be inspired. The data is there and someday the book on John Grierson, film master is going to be written.

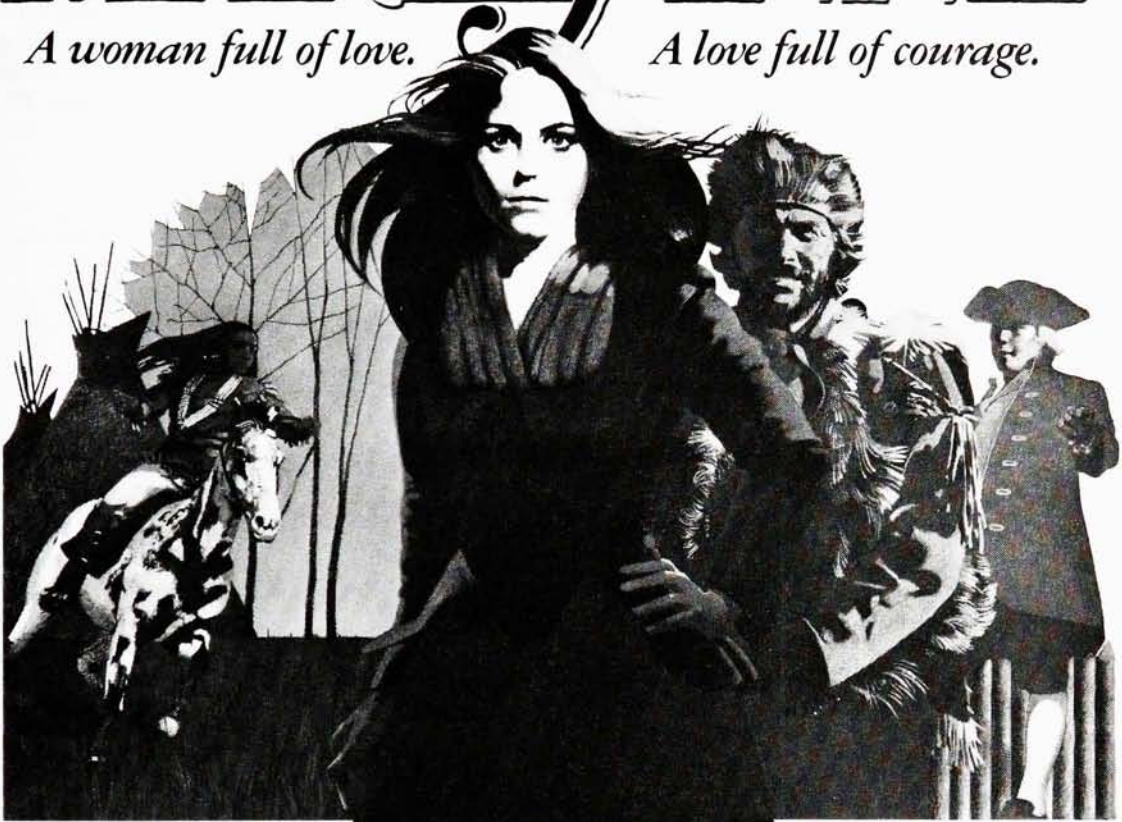
Ronald Blumer

Ronald Blumer, a frequent contributor to *Cinema Canada*, was John Grierson's Graduate Assistant when he taught at McGill University in 1969 and 1970.

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