

BOOK REVIEWS

John Grierson, A Documentary Biography by Forsyth Hardy. Faber and Faber. London and Boston. 1979. \$27.95

In this official biography of John Grierson, Forsyth Hardy has amassed a mountain of detail about the meteoric public career of the dynamic, if enigmatic father of the documentary film movement. The author, who believes Grierson to be a Great Man, may have written a hagiography. After forty years of contact, having edited Grierson's only book, **Grierson on Documentary**, Hardy puts his fellow Scot close to the angels.

It is primarily through personal interviews that this chronicle reveals some of the raw energy of the man who breathed life into the documentary film movement, while conducting a self-appointed cinematic mission: to bring people closer together and affirm ordinary humanism in this world bent on self-destruction.

Those who seek in biography an exposé of personality flaws (often referred to as 'warts and all' history) will be disappointed, because the book is about the public career of a public servant. People in the book describe Grierson as arrogant, intolerant, pitiless and ruthless, among other memorable adjectives. But Hardy has kept a cloak around the private Grierson. And this is how Grierson would have wanted it. Though himself an inveterate questioner and prober, it was part of his mystique to remain unknown. (He once told this reviewer that a good propagandist never leaves a trail, and that he had burned all his documents!) He preferred to let his work and crusade speak for themselves. He believed that personality was irrelevant in the Great Mission. In his dynamic career, he was always gone before people really got to know him.

Grierson enjoys a rather special place in Canada's social history, because he created the National Film Board in 1939. That institution has become an enduring

symbol of how documentary film can unite a nation of naturally divided regions. Through his efforts the world came to experience an image of Canada which was people, not landscape, oriented. He emphasized and dramatized the relationship rather than the differences between those people. His creed was quite simply that there is beauty in common things, in the common man and his destiny.

For Quebec, Grierson's influence may have been more important than even he realized. Paul Theriault, who served as adviser and consultant to the commissioner and the NFB until 1952, appreciated how Grierson tried to give the Francophone element fair representation. Because of the wide distribution of NFB films which pervaded Quebec before the television age, Theriault thought he could see the genesis of the Quiet Revolution.

Throughout the biography the reader follows a man whose breathtaking pace at times seems herculean. How could one man accomplish so much? But Hardy seems to be so caught up in the onrush of events, that he cannot stop to reflect on what all the hustle and bustle and sixteen-hour days were about. One wishes there was more of a political critique of Grierson, an exploration of his intellectual roots and analysis of how the documentary films he was associated with changed over the years.

Hardy might have explored how the man, who was influenced by Hegel's idea of the State, by Liberalism, Fabianism and Calvinism, made for such a complex personality -- his seemingly limitless energy. But Hardy makes it difficult to discern just what ideas fueled the fires of that relentless engine.

One reads about the prodigious output of NFB propaganda films during the war years, yet there is no textual analysis of what those films were saying. And there is hardly enough credit attributed to Stuart Legg whose brilliant narration provided the core and standard for the theatrical series, **Canada Carries On** and later, the **World In Action**.

Those propaganda films were aimed at inspiring the Canadian and American populations to prepare for a brave new world to follow the world war. The message, frequently repeated, was one of hope, brotherhood and internationalism. The fact that pipers Grierson and Legg were playing tunes, which by 1945 were

out of harmony with those in the minds of their political masters, warranted an emphasis which Hardy neglected to give.

Hardy reveals a man with a compelling presence, "a demanding uncompromising man, his convictions aflame in his eyes, a man who had the gift of making exciting everything he spoke about, who could inspire endeavour above and beyond the normal." But what, the reader asks, was at the core of this prime mover's personality?

Grierson's Achilles heel was probably that he moved too fast in a world where bureaucracy prefers steadiness and longevity. Like the itinerant missionary of old, he arrived at a new locale to preach. He believed his job was to fire the imagination of his congregation and to inspire. Sermon complete and audience suitably agitated, he prepared to move on to the next congregation. He enjoyed tremendous freedom because he had the prescience and good fortune to arrive at an historical crossroad at moments when he was needed, and when he could do the most for his crusade. Those moments, 1929 and 1939, brought about the documentary film movement and the National Film Board: both abiding achievements. The rest of his life was dedicated to the ideal of using film as a vehicle of education, and a tool with which to shape propaganda into a statement of democratic principles.

This reviewer was the anonymous person mentioned in Hardy's last chapter, who likened Grierson to a cowboy out of the old west who had come in to clean up Dodge City, hang up his guns, turn in his badge and leave the townfolk wondering just who he was. Grierson, the Scotsman, was profoundly influenced by his American experience and the romantic notion of how things get done in North America. As he found to his dismay, shooting from the hip is fast and accurate but also very dangerous. No doubt Grierson's notion of being the peripatetic, selfless good guy was founded in some romantic ideal.

Hardy has revealed some of the essential Grierson, but the reader wishes for a greater intellectual structure around the whole. Nevertheless, the book demonstrates how Grierson's public life remains a paragon to those who believe that selfless devotion to a just cause is its own reward.

Gary Evans

Gary Evans lives and teaches in Montreal and has written about the documentary film in Canada.

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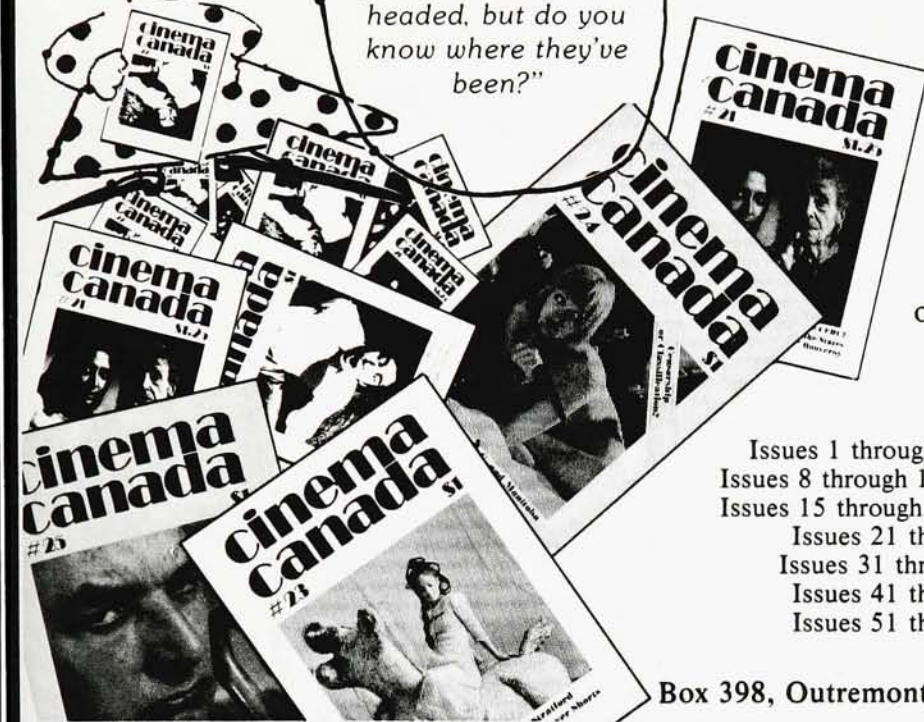
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