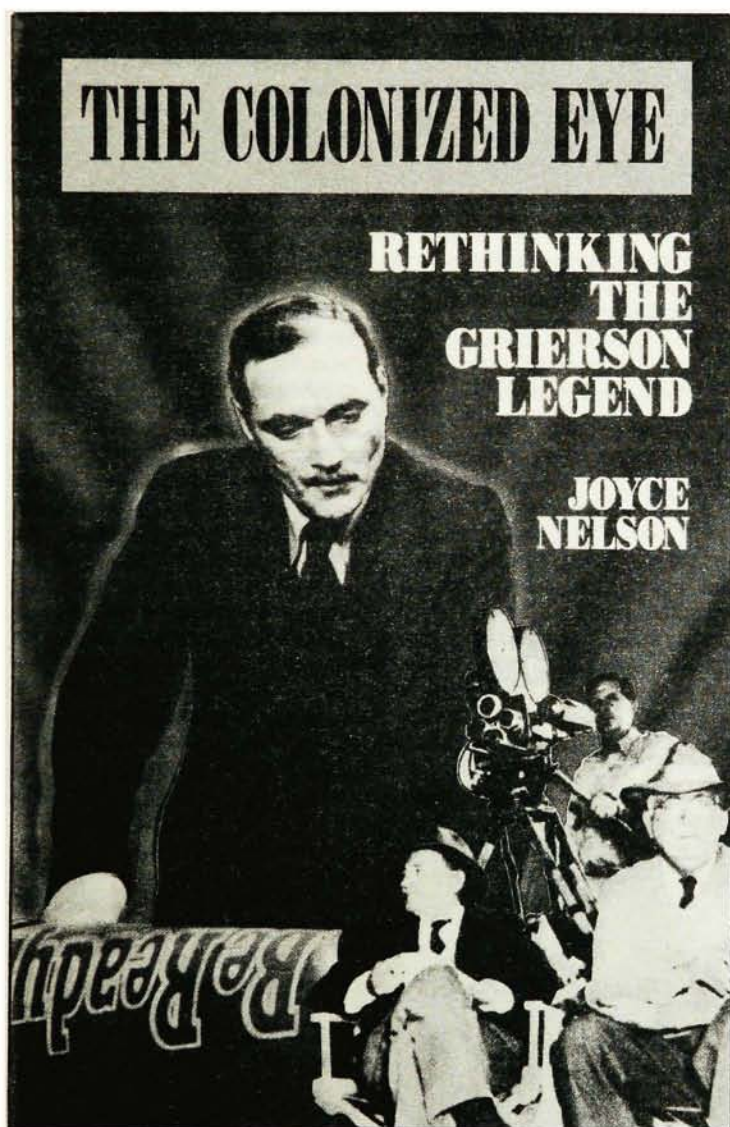


# Joyce Nelson goes to war

BY SUSAN SCHOUTEN LEVINE



**The Colonized Eye – Rethinking the Grierson Legend**  
Joyce Nelson. Toronto – Between the Lines. 197 pp. 1988, \$12.95 (paper).

In writing this review of Joyce Nelson's new book, *The Colonized Eye – Rethinking The Grierson Legend*, I find it hard to contain my anger and simply expose her lack of scholarship. The difficulty comes from the fact that, like many other people who knew Grierson when he returned to Canada (from

1969-71), he changed my life. An older generation of Canadians, who knew him from the early days of the National Film Board, are even more angry and hurt because they feel an unjust and spurious attack has been made on a man who contributed generously and imaginatively to this country.

Gudrun Parker, one of the women directors at the National Film Board during the war, has this to say about Nelson's book:

*The errors and inferences and misinterpretations have made those who knew and worked with Grierson gasp with incredulity. The man she accuses of being a supporter of multi-national corporations, a Nazi sympathizer, a colonialist, a sexist, a totalitarian, an enemy of the working class, is a fabrication arising out of a false premise which proceeds doggedly to a ludicrous conclusion.*

*The false premise begins to take shape on the second page of Chapter One, in which the unlikely subject of the Ludlow Massacre, 1913, is introduced, (a strange introduction to a book on Grierson). The plight of the strikers at this Rockefeller-owned mine is graphically described. Since a public outcry – led by the powerful voices of Upton Sinclair and Carl Sandburg – followed the tragedy, Rockefeller hired a public relations man to deluge the press with stories on the management position, and also hired a young Mackenzie King to be the head of a new industrial relations department.*

*Nelson then makes a leap of eleven years to Grierson's arrival in the United States in 1924, on a Rockefeller Foundation Research Fellowship, and the premise is in place. It is "The Rockefeller Connection" – anti-union manipulation of the media, multinational power with all its sinister implications, and the added advantages of the link with Mackenzie King. Nelson then imprints this contrived premise on every phase of Grierson's thought and strategy, and infers this hidden agenda in the National Film Board's films. Nelson doesn't mention Grierson's warm friendship with Carl Sandburg whose sympathies he shared.<sup>1</sup>*

Historian Gary Evans has been studying Grierson for over 20 years. He has written the major reference book on Grierson and the National Film Board, and indeed Nelson relies on his scholarship as her main source. Evans was outraged when he read Nelson's book. He says:

*It is scurrilous armchair revisionism at its worst. In the long tradition of the left, she has both shot herself and the progressive movement in the foot. History is too important to be left to journalists.<sup>2</sup>*

I asked Jack Pickersgill, a former principal secretary to Mackenzie King and the man who hired Grierson, to comment on the book:

*Joyce Nelson, in The Colonized Eye seems to be doing what Senator McCarthy did, taking quotations out of context and distorting their meaning to prove the thesis she started with. She far from proves that Grierson was a fascist, a tool of the Rockefellers or Hollywood, or that he believed that multinational corporations should rule the world. Instead, it seems to me that she has unwittingly shown that Grierson was a Scot on the make. He was a pragmatist without any clear philosophy, but someone who wanted to get results.<sup>3</sup>*

Why are so many people upset by this book? What are the real facts about Grierson that have been twisted out of recognition in this political tract? It would be truly fascinating to read a book critical of Grierson's methods and his ideas. The problem with Joyce Nelson's book is that it is not about a secret Grierson whose true nature is revealed only to a historical sleuth; it is about a Grierson that no-one knew.

John Grierson was no saint, and those who knew him were only too aware of his many faults. He was at times ruthless, at times dictatorial, but always intellectually stimulating. He did start the realist movement in filmmaking in England in the late 1920s and early 1930s. He did coin the word "documentary." He did develop the concept of the "creative treatment of actuality," and he was a prolific critic and writer on the use of film for social purposes. Also, along with Dziga Vertov, he was one of the first filmmakers to put the working class on the screen in a non-fiction film. And he created the National Film Board of Canada.

To accuse someone whose whole life was dedicated to putting the ordinary man on the screen of being a supporter of multinational capitalism and an enemy of the working class constitutes a kind of Orwellian doublethink. As Grierson stated in *Grierson On Documentary*:

*In one form or another I have produced or initiated hundreds of films; yet I think behind every one of them has been that one idea, that the ordinary affairs of people's lives are more dramatic and more vital than all the false excitements you can muster.<sup>4</sup>*

Grierson surrounded himself with forward-looking young people, and some of them were

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left-wing. In England, his filmmakers were accused of "going Bolshevik" because their films were the first to dramatize and expose the working conditions of ordinary people. This association with the left does not mean that Grierson was a communist. As he stated, he was: "one inch to the left of the Party in power."<sup>5</sup> Ironically, after Grierson resigned from the Film Board in 1945, he was plagued by the FBI and was refused a visa to the United States for his "communist sympathies." Like Charlie Chaplin, he suffered because of this absurd treatment, and had he not been such a forceful intellect, his life would have been ruined.

Nelson claims to be looking at her subject anew and uncovering truths everyone else has missed. In fact, however, her book is riddled with distortions and half-truths. Grierson did not, for example, work for the Rockefellers and their multinational corporations. He merely had a Rockefeller Foundation Research Fellowship. Distortions of this type are characteristic of the book.

### GRIERSON SELLS OUT DOCUMENTARY

Nelson "proves" many of her arguments by taking quotes out of context. Here is just one example. She quotes Grierson's associate Stuart Legg as saying the sponsorship formula to finance films was a sell-out of documentary:

*As Stuart Legg candidly recalled in his 1970s interview with Elizabeth Sussex:*

*In the early '30s you had in this country (Great Britain) what was virtually a pre-revolutionary situation, owing to the Depression. There was a need on the part of governments for communication, and a little later, industries too... Now it is possible, I think, to accuse the documentary movement of, in principal (sic) at least, being prepared to sell itself to the wishes of the government, of the major industries, the Establishment, the capitalists, whatever you like. Legg attributes this sellout to "the sponsorship formula... devised by Grierson."<sup>6</sup>*

As any historian knows, beware of those little dots. Here is the sentence that Nelson cuts out:

*And a great deal of philosophical effort, and in fact argument with sponsors, was devoted to pointing out that you cannot exact a total control. You can only exact control to the point where minds meet.<sup>7</sup>*

Thus Legg does not regard the sponsorship formula as a sell-out at all; the words are put into his mouth by an over-eager Joyce Nelson. Grierson sought the most viable relationship possible between sponsor and filmmaker and his record of success in achieving this aim silenced the cynics. Now for Nelson to suggest that those who accepted money from oil companies, for example, would necessarily be corrupted, is like saying Patrick Watson's *Democracy* series is suspect because it has been sponsored by Petro-Canada.

### GRIERSON AS COLONIALIST

Nelson accuses Grierson of being a colonialist because he rejected the presumably inferior compilation film technique for the early documentarians in England, and forced it on Canadian filmmakers during the war at the National Film Board. Ron Blumer, who researched Donald Brittain's film on MacKenzie King and was one of Grierson's assistants at McGill, has this to say about Nelson's charge that Grierson was a colonialist:

*Like every other "ist" that appears in Nelson's book, this is an accusation that is wrenched out of the context of history. Canada today is not the Canada of the 1930s and '40, and to judge Grierson's actions and behavior as if they were happening now is a distortion so gross that I can only conclude that it must be deliberate. Her object is not to inform or illuminate, her object is to prove a point.<sup>8</sup>*

Blumer's criticism is well taken. Nelson reveals a basic ignorance about Commonwealth relations at that period, not to mention film technology in the '40s, and she chooses to ignore the pressure on the fledgling National Film

Board to meet the war effort's information needs. The war began the same year the Film Act was passed. Grierson began with a secretary, an office, and three English filmmakers brought in to teach young Canadians filmmaking skills. Films were required immediately to inform Canadians about war needs such as recruiting, training, armament production, and selling war bonds.

To bolster her absurd colonialist theory, Nelson makes much of a small Disney contract early in the war. She says:

*When Canadian apprentices at the NFB were busy making films out of stock-shots, library footage, and pirated film sequences, Grierson was lining up film production work for U.S. companies in Hollywood.<sup>9</sup>*

The facts are these. Norman McLaren had not yet come to the Film Board, nor had Canadian animators been trained. Since short clips were needed to sell war bonds, Grierson had them made as quickly and efficiently as possible. The Disney contract involved four short clips costing \$1000 each. It is too ridiculous to interpret this as

proof of a colonial mentality. Bob Verrall, trained in animation by McLaren, says:

*Does Nelson really believe that four short Victory Bond clips from Disney constituted most of what the NFB had to offer as cartoon entertainment? If Nelson can prove this to be the case, why doesn't she? The answer is simple, she can't. Disney's contribution to the wartime production programme was so minor, no one remembers it, whereas McLaren's films and those of the animation unit he trained are treasured in cinematheques around the world.<sup>10</sup>*

As she does with the small Disney contract, Nelson imposes a sinister and incorrect interpretation on the early NFB's production of compilation films. The facts are these. The Film Board produced two monthly theatrical series: *The World In Action* and *Canada Carries On*.

*The World In Action* dealt with major developments, strategies, and issues of the war as they related to Canada, the Allies, and the enemy. Obviously, it was not possible to shoot on location in enemy territory. Enemy film was captured (not "pirated" as Nelson puts it), while the Allies supplied whatever they shot of



John Grierson carries on.

their activities (a good example was the air battle during the Battle of Britain). From these materials, and while training Canadian editors, Stuart Legg brilliantly edited a film a month. The series was screened in all the theatres in Canada, as well as 6,500 theatres in the United States, and also in the Allied countries. Nelson does not mention that as soon as they were trained and available, cameramen from the Film Board were sent to the various war fronts with Canadian and Allied troops to shoot footage that the Board used in the war films.

The second monthly series, *Canada Carries On*, dealt mainly with the concerns of the Canadian war effort and were shown in Canadian theatres. The majority of these were not compilation films, but shot on location. In the early days, many other crews shot on location films on such subjects as the services, agriculture, nutrition, labour, the arts, and so on. These films were distributed on the rural and labour circuits and to the services throughout Canada. Nelson's colonialist accusation is totally out of focus and should have been left on the cutting room floor. To quote Bob Verrall:

*Nelson's contention that the Canadians recruited by Grierson were deprived of a decent apprenticeship by having to work on compilation films is utter nonsense. Although work on compilation films (a type of film she unfairly dismisses as second rate) did provide excellent training – especially with Stuart Legg, a master of the genre – the fact of the matter is that by 1945 Canadian crews had learned their craft principally on location in every corner of the country and were capable of producing, by war's end, films of technical and artistic excellence, such as Listen to the Prairies, (begun early in 1945), Who Will Teach Your Child, Ordeal by Ice, Expedition Musk Ox, to mention only a few.<sup>11</sup>*

### GRIERSON AS ANTI-NATIONALIST

In another attempt to discredit the work done at the NFB during the war, Nelson argues that Grierson was anti-nationalist. She uses a 1943 catalogue to make the following claim:

*Virtually one-half of the films listed in the NFB's 1943 catalogue (46 out of 102 titles) were imported from Great Britain or the United States and that listing does not include the many shorts and series brought in especially for showing on the rural circuits.<sup>12</sup>*

I have a catalogue which includes productions made in 1944 and it lists 181 Canadian films, 47 British and eight American films. Peter Morris, writing in *Take Two: A Tribute To Film In Canada*, obviously does not see Grierson's "anti-nationalism" when he states:

*Designed by Grierson in 1939, fashioned by him during the war, the National Film Board grew from a modestly planned coordinating agency to one of the world's largest film studios, with a staff of 787 in 1945. Its achievements were remarkable: the release of over 500 films in five years; the propaganda series (The World in Action and Canada Carries On)*

*released monthly to theatres in Canada and abroad; the establishment of non-theatrical distribution circuits that were international models; and, not least, the training of a group of young Canadian filmmakers. By 1945, when John Grierson resigned, the NFB could justifiably claim that "Canada has assumed a commanding position in the use of this great medium of human communication."<sup>13</sup>*

### GRIERSON SELLS OUT CANADIAN FEATURE FILM INDUSTRY

Nelson believes that Grierson's article, "A Film Policy For Canada," was responsible for delaying the development of a feature film industry in Canada. She calls it a "policy recommendation to the Canadian government"<sup>14</sup>, which it was not. It was an article written in 1944 for *Canadian Affairs*, a Wartime Information Board publication. This was no secret government policy recommendation. The article was so widely distributed that Bob Verrall's art school teacher gave him a copy to read. In "A Film Policy For Canada," this is how Grierson presents the problem of developing a feature film industry in Canada at the time:

*It is an attractive notion, this building up one's own local Hollywood, but how difficult it would be to execute. If films are to compete successfully in the home market, they have to be big enough and bright enough to compete in the international market. This costs a great deal, anything from half a million dollars up for a single production, and distribution and promotional expense besides. It can't possibly be got back in a home market of a thousand theatres. Only a very great market like the American one can keep a home film industry going. All the others, England included, depend on freedom of access to American theatres which are the Golconda of the film business. It is not an easy matter to conjure a film industry out of the local sky. It involves a host of highly specialized technicians, of writers, actors, directors, of specialists in a thousand and one fields of mass showmanship. It takes a generation to build a mature tradition of skill like that of Hollywood.<sup>15</sup>*

Here is what Nelson constructs, through arbitrary editing (note again those telltale dots), of Grierson's actual text:

*Are there not other possibilities for the development of Canadian film production? I think there are, and far more practical and possible than this dream of a Canadian Hollywood. One way is for Canada to make its feature films in New York or Hollywood. We might build up in either centre a company for the making of Canadian films with an associate producership in one of the big international companies... Simpler still is the notion that the United States must increasingly appreciate its international obligations and give a quid pro quo for the benefits it receives abroad... What can be asked of Hollywood, and is increasingly being asked, is that it should, as a matter of policy, spread its net wider for its themes... I myself expect that before very long the big American companies trading in Canada will see to it that one or two films are devoted to Canada... The next step, I expect, will be for*

*Paramount to set aside a production unit in Hollywood for the production of Canadian feature films.<sup>16</sup>*

Following this selective quote from Grierson's article, Nelson states:

*No wonder the MPAA (Motion Picture Association of America) was interested in hiring Grierson after the war. As Peter Morris effectively argues, such a policy recommendation actually anticipated, and was undoubtedly the basis for, the infamous Canadian Co-operation Project of 1948, in which Hollywood agreed to insert dialogue references to Canada in U.S. feature films, in exchange for the Canadian government's agreement not to impose a quota system or tax on the domestic box office.<sup>17</sup>*

The ridiculous Canadian Co-operation Project of 1948 had no similarity to the proposal Grierson wrote in 1944. But the lack of similarity does not prevent Nelson from saying that it inspired the CCP. Nelson says:

*Grierson's 1944 "Film Policy for Canada" was circulated in Hollywood where it probably inspired the MPAA, which hatched the nearly decade-long Canadian Co-operation Project.<sup>18</sup>*

What Nelson fails to mention is that Ross MacLean, Grierson's deputy during the war, and his successor in 1945, objected to the CCP. In speaking of the powerful Hollywood interests, Peter Morris states:

*Those interests were suspicious of McLean's alleged interest in moving the NFB into feature film and television. McLean had also lobbied to decrease American domination of the Canadian film industry and even proposed the imposition of a quota system based on the British or French models. Hollywood's answer was the infamous Canadian Cooperation Project. This has been fully discussed elsewhere but it is worth noting that the lone Canadian to raise his voice in protest was Ross MacLean.<sup>19</sup>*

A fundamental question today is why are Canadian films not distributed in our theatres. But that was not the question then, as there was no Canadian feature film industry existent. As Nelson herself says early on in her book:

*By the 1920s, Hollywood controlled the screens and box offices of Great Britain, France, Germany, Australia, and Canada, accounting for 90 to 95 per cent of all films shown. This tight control over the international market meant that countries outside the United States could not build their own film industries. Without access to either distribution or exhibition inside their own borders, foreign film efforts were doomed to failure, at least financially if not artistically.<sup>20</sup>*

Therefore, was it not a stroke of genius that Grierson managed to show Canadian films during the war in theatres across Canada, the United States, and the Allied countries? And is it not the case that, without the assistance of the National Film Board, the feature film industry we do have would be nonexistent? As film scholar Gary Evans states:

*She understands neither history nor government whose wartime policy was to encourage private enterprise of all sorts to flourish. The last thing government wanted was to tamper with Hollywood, which was providing free screen time in Canada and the United States. Grierson had the status of Deputy Minister. Had he tried to change existing policy, he would have been out on his ear in a moment.<sup>21</sup>*

Nelson is out to prove the existence of a grand conspiracy – a conspiracy which Grierson masterminded. Many of her sources, Forsyth Hardy, Gary Evans, and Elizabeth Sussex among them, do not corroborate her conspiracy theories. I have talked to people who knew and worked with Grierson, and they all flatly contradict everything she is saying.

Many of the people involved in the events Nelson describes in her book live in Toronto, Montreal or Ottawa: Tom Daly, Gudrun Parker, Pierre Juneau, Bob Verrall, Colin Low, Beth Bertram, Louis Applebaum, Jim Beveridge, and Jack Pickersgill. In the name of research, why were none of these people consulted? In the name of scholarship and truth, why did Nelson not take her ideas and test them out on any of the people who knew and worked with Grierson?

Joyce Nelson underestimates the intelligence of two generations of Canadians who were influenced by Grierson's passion to use film to educate, to inform, to enlighten, and to strengthen international understanding. Likewise, there are two generations of filmmakers working in documentary and fiction who know her allegations are false. Their lives are inspired by by Grierson's words and actions.

### NOTES

1. Conversation with Gudrun Parker for review.
2. Conversation with Gary Evans for review.
3. Conversation with Jack Pickersgill for review.
4. Forsyth Hardy, ed., *GRIERSON ON DOCUMENTARY* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), p. 225.
5. Gary Evans, *JOHN GRIERSON AND THE NATIONAL FILM BOARD* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), p. 14.
6. Joyce Nelson, *THE COLONIZED EYE* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1988), p. 36.
7. Elizabeth Sussex, *THE RISE AND FALL OF BRITISH DOCUMENTARY* (London: University of California Press, 1975), p. 81.
8. Conversation with Ron Blumer for review.
9. Joyce Nelson, *THE COLONIZED EYE* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1988), p. 87.
10. Conversation with Bob Verrall for review.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Joyce Nelson, *THE COLONIZED EYE* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1988), p. 150.
13. Seth Feldman, ed., *TAKE TIVO* (Toronto: Irwin Publishing, 1984), p. 182-183.
14. Joyce Nelson, *THE COLONIZED EYE* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1988), p. 151.
15. Canadian Affairs; John Grierson, "A Film Policy for Canada", Vol. 1. No. 11., June 1944, p. 8.
16. Joyce Nelson, *THE COLONIZED EYE* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1988), p. 90.
17. *Ibid.* p. 90.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Seth Feldman, ed., *TAKE TIVO* (Toronto: Irwin Publishing, 1984), p. 183.
20. Joyce Nelson, *THE COLONIZED EYE* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1988), p. 31.
21. Conversation with Gary Evans for review.