

REVIEWS OF SHORT FILMS

The Working Class on Film

There are no credits on the film. This was a decision taken by the filmmakers; in the early years at the NFB it was policy that no film list individual credits. However, the name of Susan Schouten, the editor, in particular is associated with this film.

John Grierson's death in January of 1972 took a lot of people by surprise. Though he had been back in Canada (teaching at McGill University) since 1968, Canadians were only starting to warm up to the fact that Grierson still had something to contribute to cinema, particularly Canadian cinema, when he died.

Praise and recognition fell to John Grierson, founder of the National Film Board and the internationally acclaimed leader in the "documentary" movement, largely posthumously.

At the NFB, **Grierson**, a film chronicling Grierson's life through interviews with friends and colleagues, was released in 1973. **The Working Class on Film** is one completed film in a series of six on John Grierson's ideas and on his documentary philosophy.

The series was first proposed to the NFB by Grierson in 1971 though it never went beyond the discussion stage while he was alive. One of his students at McGill, Susan Schouten, decided to approach the Film Board for access to their film archives and the outs from **Grierson** to complete the project.

Schouten looked at over 500 films and spent 1½ years (sometimes waiting for months for permission to use NFB material copyrighted by foreign companies) to finish this 14-minute film. A second film on propaganda is now being edited.

"Bringing the world alive in terms of the ordinary... for there is drama and poetry in the ordinary." Grierson's words, recorded late in his life yet consistent with how he envisioned film could best be used and how he used film right from the beginning.

The beginnings were of course in England during the 30s. Schouten shows us scenes from **Coal Face**



John Grierson

and **Big Money**, films in which Grierson (not as director, but producer) used "documentary" to put the working class on the screen and to discover "the things that bind people together."

Other clips are from more recent NFB productions. A farmer's co-op in Saskatchewan, Southern Ontario tobacco pickers, asbestos workers in Quebec. Fleeting glimpses of faces, bent backs, hands picking and sorting. The film is a balanced and somewhat bland collage. It seems that the filmmaker was not enough at ease with the material to explore the tangents which naturally arise from this kind of assemblage. Viewers who have never had the opportunity to see the classics of documentary such as **Drifters** and the titles mentioned above, will perhaps be disappointed that the camera does not linger on these dynamic black and white sequences.

Curiously, there is nothing of Grierson the man in this film, except his voice in commentary and a final still photograph notable for his piercing eyes. There is no attempt to explain the personal qualities of Grierson that made him the leader he

was, or why so many young filmmakers adopted his philosophy of cinema and even sometimes his politics during the period he worked with them.

If Schouten was trying to find among the hundreds of films she previewed solid evidence of the continued tradition of documentary (as Grierson defined it) at the NFB, she does not make a strong point in this film that she did find it.

Of course, the full impact of the series, and whether or not Grierson's ideas of film as a tool for social education will have been delineated and preserved, cannot be judged at this time.

One wonders if Grierson had remained in Canada and at the NFB after 1945, in what directions he would have led the Film Board — his filmmakers suddenly freed from the making of war effort films. Would he have broadened his subjective definitions of filmmaking — in fact did his ideas change during his lifetime? Certainly the idea of documenting the working class, even what was ordinary about people, was to become a mere collar on the beast he had created.