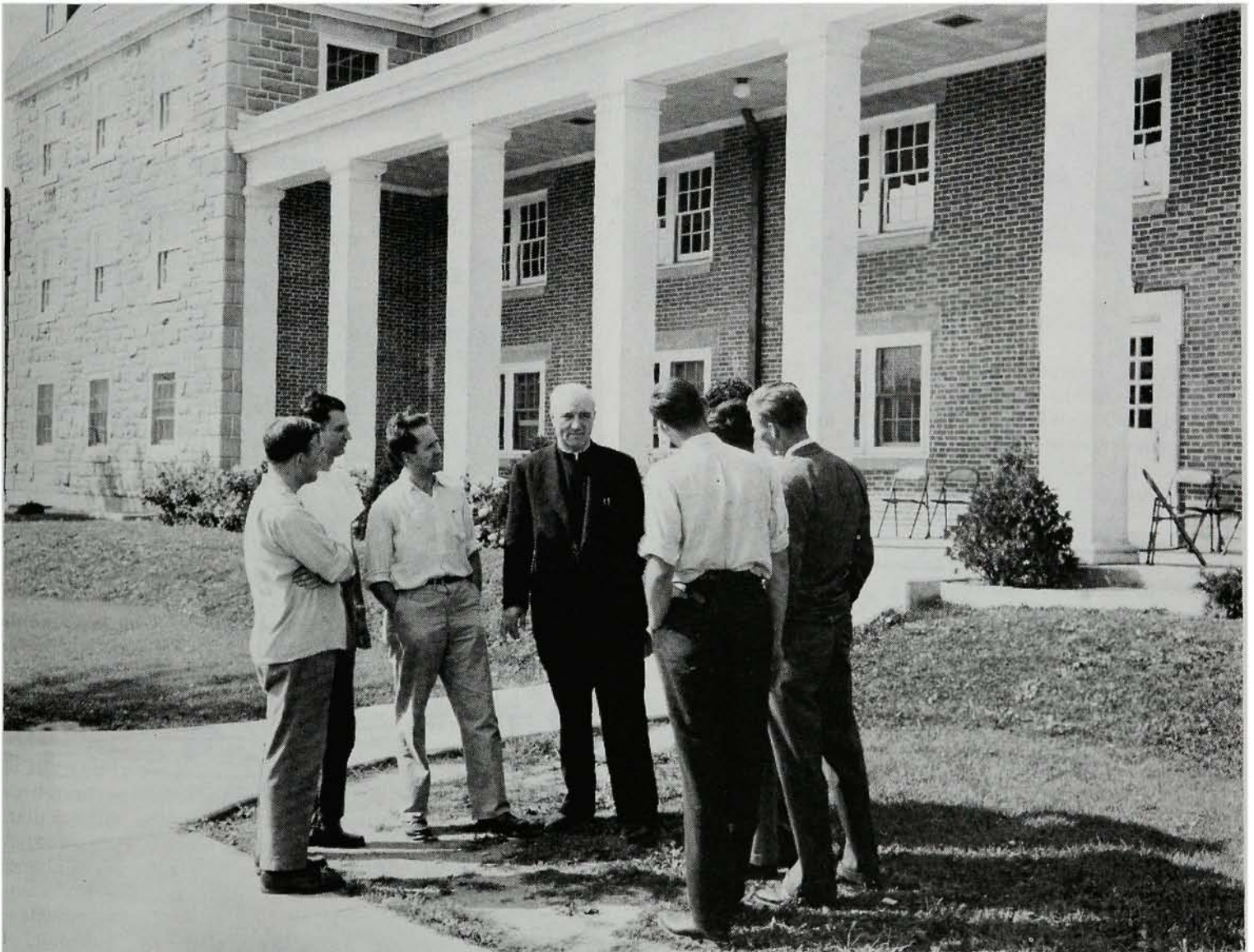


grierson film seminar

the documentary idea

Every year filmmakers, film librarians and documentary enthusiasts gather at the Grierson Seminar. Alice Smith gives us a rundown of this year's gathering and shares some thoughts about the documentary form.

by Alice Smith

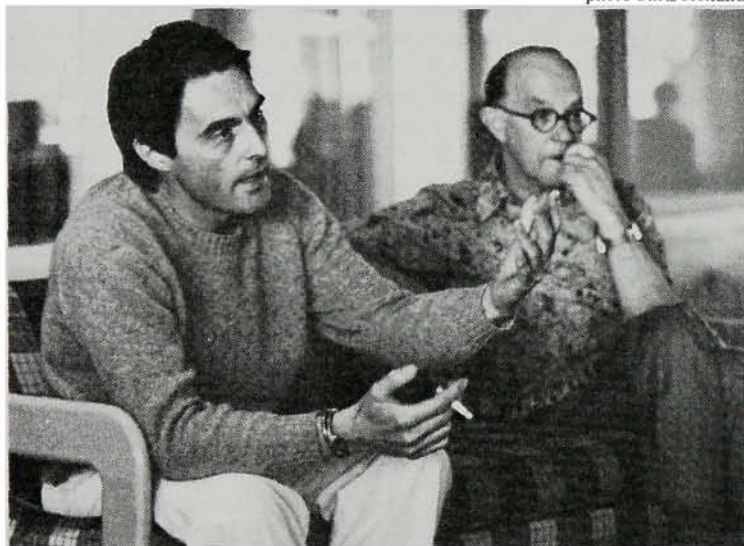


Dr. M.M. Coady, Director of St. Francis Xavier University Extension Department, greeting students who have come to attend "People's Schools": from **Moses Coady**

Is the word "documentary" a grab-bag term, at best? Its early definition, "the creative treatment of actuality" doesn't help much, and it belonged to Grierson. In any case, if the word or the genre it is supposed to describe owes anything other than its name to John Grierson, this year's Grierson Film Seminar failed to show it. The organizers managed, somehow, to celebrate Grierson and the documentary film without ever once discussing what either of them was all about.

It is essential to realize that the documentary idea was not basically a film idea at all, and the film treatment it inspired, only an incidental aspect of it. John Grierson said as much and in so many words. Grierson was a man devoted to the expression of an ideal democracy; his dream for documentary film was that it create a great, international interflow of "living documents" freely-traded amongst a people bound less by geographic lines than by a need to understand what he chose to call "the stubborn raw material of our modern citizenship." Put less esoterically (and a good deal later) by a former president of CBS News; "what you don't know can kill you. Our job is to see that you know." The idea is the same: film as knowledge, knowledge as the cement of society.

photo Chris Holland



Derek May from the NFB getting his point across.

Grierson's interest was in creating a progressive civic will through public education in regard to the nature of social and political influences in a fast-changing world. He was convinced, in the early days of the 30's, that film was a singularly appropriate medium through which people could be made to understand modern organization and the vast corporate elements in society. So informed, the "people," collectively, might better affect a climate for change where change is needed. "We were reformers, open and avowed," said Grierson, but reformers minus partisan political stripe. Correct political change, he maintained to the very end of his life, will be that alignment of political principles and loyalties which, given the circumstances of the world today, will best serve the "people," everywhere.

Ingenuous? Whoever manages to speak of evil and decadent forces or even of healthy elements with so little attempt at definition (never mind the remedy) is guilty of the wildest naïvete, however well-intentioned his humanist concern. And so he did and so he was. But with this saving grace, Grierson enunciated the primary principles of the documentary idea for good and all when, late in life, he reaffirmed that with which he began: today, he said, the materials of citizenship are different and the perspectives wider and more dif-

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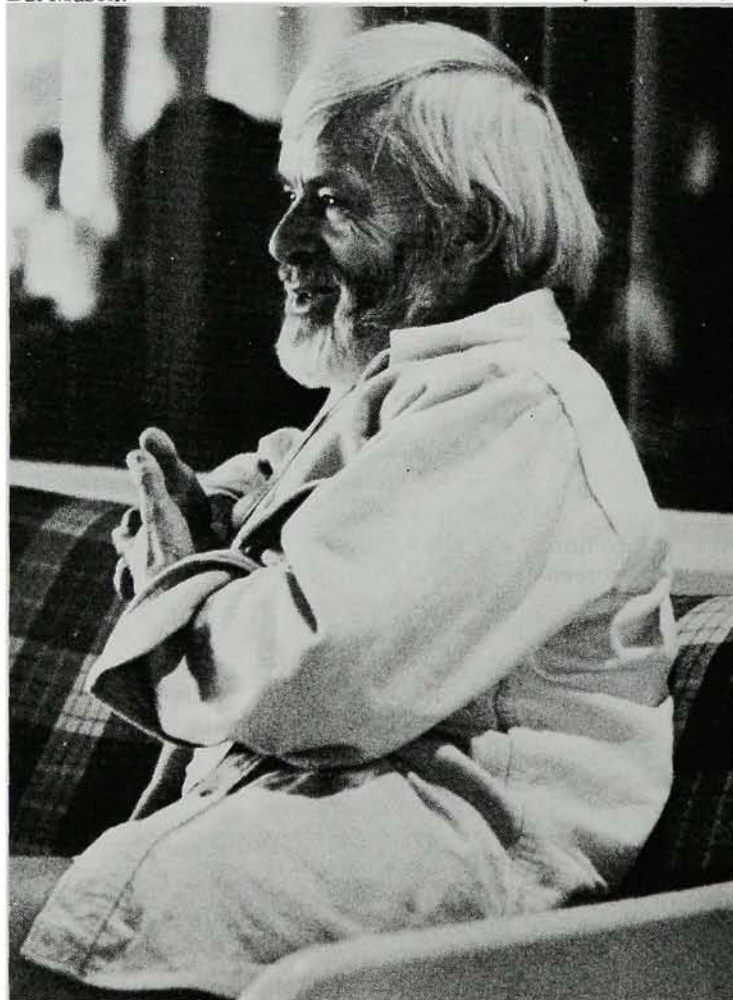
ficult, but we have, as ever, "the duty of exploring them and of waking the heart and will in regard to them."

Of the more than thirty films screened at the Seminar, two are distinctly Griersonian, ideologically; Clarke Mackey's **A Right To Live** and the National Film Board's **Moses Coady**, produced by Rex Tasker and written and directed by Kent Martin. Both films stress a participatory democracy wherein a united co-operative movement attempts to win for itself some measure of bargaining power as protection against bureaucratic abuse of human rights. Propaganda films both, and properly so; their aim is social action and, to a considerable degree, each has achieved success. **Moses Coady** has had CBC screening, and distribution through the Department of External Affairs to embassies around the world. **A Right To Live**, commissioned by the Union of Injured Workers, had had limited screening through the theatre system but frequent viewing before interested groups inside and outside the union movement. In the case of **A Right To Live**, the filmmaker approached the union with his proposal for the film and the union, in its turn, played an integral part in its assembly. So close-knit was the relationship that union members involved in the making of the film frequently accompany its screening to participate when discussion follows. Both **Moses Coady** and **A Right To Live** exemplify the intensified social reference of cinema used in the service of the community. Grierson would have approved and mightily.

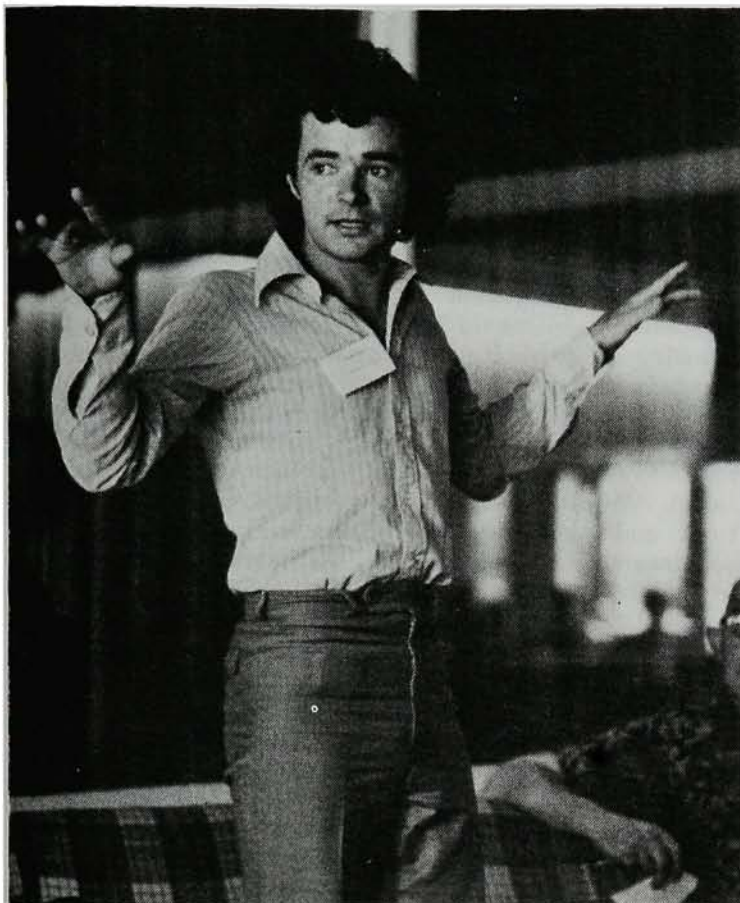
Avoiding ideology altogether, most of the films screened during the Seminar can be best described as portraits of contemporary society. Reportage is the basic method and the manner is reflective of British Free Cinema aesthetics in the 1950s. Unlike the traditional documentary in which the observer's position is external, these films move so close to the subject that detachment is all but abandoned. If this

Bill Mason.

photo Chris Holland



suggests a degree of recklessness (and, in fact, shaping frequently suffers, as a consequence) the result is often a film of intimacy and vividness quite beyond that of the traditional documentary.



Terry Burke

photo Chris Holland

The sensibility is that of a Lindsay Anderson and before him a Robert Flaherty: not the propagandist but the poet. It is here that we depart from Grierson. "Fantasy will not do", he said, "nor the dribblings of personal sentiment or personal story." But the tradition of human revelation, the personal documentary, is fellow-traveller to its more politically-conscious counterpart. It has been so since Flaherty produced *Nanook Of The North* and Grierson first coined the word "documentary" in a critical review of the film.

There is little remaining, in the contemporary documentary, of the Neo-Rousseauism of the early Flaherty. Universal values tend to give way to more immediate concerns, if one may judge on the strength of a majority of the films shown at the Seminar. Fast film, the quiet 16mm. Eclair, the radio mike and the hand-held camera allow an expressive, personal use of the medium. The focus, as Lewis Jacobs once described it, is not great issues, but human event on a human scale. Of the many filmmakers whose work was screened, most seem to have held hard and fast to this notion as if to God's truth.

The idiosyncracies of the celebrity-figure formed the nucleus of a group of Seminar film offerings: *Janis* by Budge Crawley, *Toller* by Pen Densham and edited by John Watson, *Flora* by the NFB's Peter Raymont, *Jill Johnston-Oct. '75* by Lydia Wazana and Kay Armatage, *His Worship, Mr. Montreal* by Donald Brittain and Marrin Cannell, and *Morgantaler* edited by Daniel Garson. It is impossible in the context of this article to offer a critical analysis of any of them. It is enough to say that the film treatment differs, one to the next, as widely as the choice of personality/subject suggests that it might.

A direct cinema approach which stresses empathy with the subject matter rather than observation of it is an ap-

proach familiar enough to us through the work of Allan King. The style was very much in evidence in a large proportion of the films shown at the conference. The considerable impact achieved by several depended greatly on the viewer's ability to respond emotionally to whatever issue the film served. Edging perilously close to voyeurism, the approach demands a great deal of conscience-examining on the part of the filmmaker. Human vulnerability is ever the focus here: individual capacity to cope with affliction is its constant ambience. Taste – for want of a better word, – is its most rigorous requirement and many filmmakers used this approach intelligently and with sensitivity. Among them: Ben Levin: *You See – I've Had A Life*, Mark Anderson: *Inside Story – Marek* (BBC), Leslie Harris: *Chabot Solo* (BBC), Martha Coolidge: *Not A Pretty Picture* (USA), Peter Byszewski and Maurice Borenstein: *Moments In Between*, Lorrie Graham: *50 Years At A Cow's Ass*, Richard Rowberry: *The Three Of Us*, Derek May: *Pictures Of The 1930s* (NFB), Alan Zweig: *The Boys*, Debbie Kirkland: *All In The Same Boat* (Film Australia).

These are the films of significance in terms of the needs of film libraries. Insofar as they mirror contemporary problems of living and do it well, it appears to matter, not at all, whether the films forego a broader Griersonian purpose. To be candid, the interchange between filmmaker and film librarian was what this conference was all about, John Grierson, notwithstanding. A buyer and a seller. A pragmatic, no-nonsense approach of "tell us what you need and we'll give it to you" gave purpose to their coming together. Marketability counts and if a film on rape like Martha Coolidge's *Not A Pretty Picture* fills a greater need than does Rex Tasker's *Moses Coady*, then...



Kay Armatage

photo Chris Holland

But what of the activist film? With two notable exceptions – *A Right To Live* and *Moses Coady* –, it was distinguished chiefly by its absence. A disappointment surely for pioneer filmmaker (and Grierson colleague) Basil Wright who, with Wayne Cunningham, chaired this year's session.

Its deficiencies aside, the Grierson Film Seminar provided an international forum, in which the presentation of a film was followed by a discussion of its ideas, its techniques – not only by its author, but by a jury of his peers; filmmaker and film user alike. Is this not the very essence of the democratic idea so favored by Grierson? □