

Grierson, John (1898-1972)

Producer, Director, Executive

John Grierson was born on 26 April 1898 at Deanston, Perthshire, Scotland. After serving on minesweepers during World War I, he graduated from Glasgow University and served a Rockefeller fellowship in the USA (1923-27), where he developed an interest in mass communications and spent some time in Hollywood. On his return to Britain, he became Assistant Films Officer at the Empire Marketing Board and was commissioned to make *Drifters* (1929), a documentary about the North Sea herring fleet. In 1933 Grierson became Films Officer at the General Post Office film unit, and in both these capacities he played what has later been argued to be a pivotal role in British film culture.

Grierson's specific achievement as a director is not easy to assess, as the documentary movement took a collaborative approach to production. Grierson is only credited as directing *Drifters*; however, he exerted significant influence on the talented team of young filmmakers he attracted around him. *Drifters* contains many of the traits that would later characterise the documentary movement's output, notably an emphasis on the social interaction and everyday routine of the fishermen at sea, and on the economic importance of the fishing industry, and some technically innovative 'underwater' shots achieved at the Plymouth Marine Biological Research Station. The new montage style of Soviet cinema and the poetical style of Robert Flaherty were clear influences on Grierson.

In June 1937 Grierson resigned from the GPO and formed Film Centre, an advisory and co-ordinating body for the documentary film movement. It was this kind of supervisory capacity that characterised Grierson's role and influence on factual film, with him also acting as production advisor to Films of Scotland, and, throughout the war, serving as Film Commissioner at the National Film Board of Canada.

After a brief and fairly fruitless period in New York, Grierson returned to the UK in 1946. In February 1948 he was appointed to the Films Division of the Central Office of Information. Over the next two years he attempted to re-establish a major programme of government documentary production, but was repeatedly frustrated by political opposition and public sector spending cuts provoked by the post-war economic crisis. In the 1950s, Grierson acted as joint head of Group 3, the production arm of the National Film Finance Corporation, spent several years in independent television, before finishing his career teaching at a Canadian university.

Critical opinions regarding the impact and influence of Grierson on British film are sharply polarised, possibly more so than with any other prominent British filmmaker. His supporters claim that he single-handedly established the principle of public service filmmaking, analogous to Reith at the BBC. His detractors believe that the legacy of Grierson is more modest, that the documentary movement films reached limited

audiences and their cultural impact has been exaggerated. Because so much of his vision was expressed through managing the work of others rather than by direct involvement in making specific films, his legacy as a director per se is in many ways a side-issue. John Grierson died on 19 February 1972 at Bath.

Bibliography

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