

GRIERSON GROWS IN STATURE

INSTEAD of reviewing any films this week, I intend to review a book about films. But even that is not strictly accurate, for there are whole pages, and even whole sections, in *Grierson On Documentary** in which the words "film" or "cinema" are not once mentioned. John Grierson's name is one of the most famous and significant in the cinema; and yet, as this selection of his writings, contributed to a variety of journals over the past two decades, makes abundantly clear, he is far from being only a film-man, though he has, he tells us, "been associated in the making of maybe a thousand films or more . . . and has also had something to do with the machinery of their financing and distribution in different parts of the world, which is a greater labour still." In addition, Grierson has been, or is, an able journalist, a shrewd critic of the commercial cinema (of which he is, in general, fairly contemptuous), a hard-headed and practical civil servant, a lecturer, an organiser, a businessman, a propagandist, a political philosopher, and above all an educationist. Almost a jack of all trades, he is, it would seem, master of most. We in New Zealand, of course, have a special interest in him, and owe him a considerable debt, as the man who, as the result of his visit here in 1940, was largely responsible for launching the National Film Unit along the right lines, and whose philosophy has profoundly influenced its development. Those members of our Film Unit who may occasionally have a sense of frustration and a feeling that they might get further faster under other conditions might perhaps take special note of this statement by him: "As I know after many years, no service is so great or inspiring, and particularly for film-makers, as a service which detaches itself from private profit. It frees one's feet for those maturing experiences which are vital to the new art. It makes a daily bravery of what (under British commercial film conditions) is a dull little muddle of private interests and all too personal vanities."

In presenting the many aspects and interests of Grierson's phenomenally energetic career, Forsyth Hardy has done a good job, supported by fine printing and 92 illustrations, though one could wish that he had included more references to the dates and sources of the excerpts he has chosen. The temptation to a reviewer of the book to quote extensively from it is very strong; and this is, indeed, perhaps the best way to give an indication of the contents and of Grierson's philosophy of the film.

FIRST, Grierson the critic. Nobody, I should think, has ever written more pungently, vigorously, and perceptively about ordinary cinema entertainment than he did in reviews contributed to several journals after his return to Britain about 1930 from the U.S.A. (where he had gone on a Rockefeller Research Fellowship in Social Science) and nobody has made a better statement of what should be the true duty and purpose of the film critic and of the standards he should serve. Of every film

**Grierson On Documentary*.—Edited by Forsyth Hardy. Collins.



Spencer Digby photograph

JOHN GRIERSON

Peace must be made exciting

and of every film talent, he asked a modicum of revelation:

It may be a novelty of fact, or an angle of beauty, or an efficiency of technical demonstration. These will serve in the absence of better things . . . It is my old-fashioned opinion that nothing less will serve us finally in our attention on cinema . . . Even a medium of professedly popular entertainment cannot quite escape that demand.

As I understand it, the first job of a critic is to stand as sensory instrument to the world of creation, and register this revelation as it comes along, and point people to it, and, it may even be, do something to underline or elucidate it. I look to register what actually moves: what hits the spectator at the midriff: what yanks him up by the hair of the head or the plain boot-strap to the plane of decent seeing. I see no reason why, because a film is made for the populace and made for money, we should exempt it from the ordinary duties of art. To any body of men interested in the better shaping of the world, the cinema's influence is a serious matter. By romanticising and dramatizing the issues of life, even by choosing the issues it will dramatize, it creates or crystallises the loyalties on which people make their decisions. This, in turn, has a great deal to do with public opinions. I do not mean that the critic must examine in every film its social implication or lack of it. It is enough if the critic is conscious of the general question and does his utmost to have the honours of life decently distributed.

That profession of critical faith comes early in the book, as it came early in Grierson's career, yet as one reads on one finds it consistently maintained: though it is restated differently, it is the basis of his creed of the realistic film, the documentary. What is most striking, however, about the reviews of old films reprinted in the first part of the book is their immediacy, their relevance even after 10 to 15 years, and above all the almost prophetic insight revealed in his assessment of various directors and stars who were, for the most part, new to the cinema at that time. His writings about Chaplin, the Marx Brothers, von Sternberg, William Wyler, Alfred Hitchcock, Lubitsch, Clair, and others, reveal a perceptive understanding of the permanent values in their work: he was able to discern what was gold and what was dross. For instance: "I am all for this William Wyler; he has a taste for the greater gestures and is still steering them past the hokum they so easily invoke" (that was written well before Wyler made *Dead End*). And this about Hitchcock: "I believe the highbrows, in their praise

of him, have sent Hitchcock off in the wrong direction, as they have sent many another: Chaplin for example. They have picked out his clever little pieces, stressed them and analysed them till they are almost everything in his directorial make-up."

WELL, it is interesting to have such evidence that Grierson was as expert in criticising films as he later became in producing and inspiring them. However, this book is *Grierson On Documentary* and it is, of course, with the documentary movement that it is most concerned, that movement founded and guided by Grierson to provide "a kind of educational shorthand which will somehow give people quick and immediate comprehension of the highly complex forces which motivate our complicated society." The story of that movement and Grierson's part in it is probably pretty well-known in outline already, but it has never been better or more clearly told than in his own writings and lectures on the subject, for he is a lucid as well as a tireless expositor of his creed. However . . .

It is worth recalling that the British documentary group began not so much in affection for film *per se* as in affection for national education. If I am to be counted as the founder and leader of the movement, its origins certainly lay in sociological rather than aesthetic aims. Many of us after 1918 (and particularly in the United States) were impressed by the pessimism that had settled on Liberal theory. We noted the conclusion of such men as Walter Lippmann, that because the citizen, under modern conditions, could not know everything about everything all the time, democratic citizenship was therefore impossible. We set to thinking how a dramatic apprehension of the modern scene might solve the problem, and we turned to the new wide-reaching instruments of radio and cinema as necessary instruments in both the practice of government and the enjoyment of citizenship.

Succeeding articles tell how Grierson and his team of brilliant young film-makers worked at first for the Empire Marketing Board, and later for the G.P.O. in Britain, and then how he himself went to Canada to become Government Film Commissioner. Less and less he becomes interested in films for their own sake; greater and greater grows his impatience with the purely aesthetic concept of the cinema ("the self-conscious pursuit of beauty, the pursuit of art for art's sake to the exclusion of jobs of work"); more and more he rides his hobby-horse of education and social purpose. And yet to call it a hobby-horse perhaps implies a rather unfair criticism: it is not he so much as the editor of this collection of his articles who is responsible here for taking it so often out of the stable. Similarly, in his impatience with the aesthetes, it has to be remembered that his outlook was at least partly dictated by the necessity of making films, and plenty of them, to do a particular propagandist job during war-time. Even his vocabulary reflected the urgency of the situation. So . . .

Since it is a question of giving people, a pattern of thought and feeling about highly complex and urgent events, we give it as well as we know, with a minimum of dawdling over how some poor darling happens to react to something or other . . . If our films pretend to be certain, it's because people need certainty . . . If we bang them out one a fortnight and no misses, instead of sitting six months on our fannies cuddling them to sweet smotheroo, it's because a lot of braves in Russia and Japan and Germany are banging out things too and we'd maybe better learn how, in time. If the manner is objective and hard, it's because we believe the next phase of human development needs that kind of mental approach.