

THE FACTUAL FILM

SIX years ago the Trustees of Dartington Hall created an organisation called the "Arts Enquiry." It was to produce four reports—on the visual arts, the factual film, music, and the theatre. Its report on the visual arts came out some little time ago. Music and the theatre have yet to appear. The report on the factual film has just been published.* Those who would like to know what Britain has done and where she stands to-day in the production of the different breeds of factual film will here find what they want. Those who already think they know the story will find this report an invaluable book of reference. Every one of them, I suspect, will find, too, that the book knows more than he does.

The summary opens with an emphatic sentence. "The documentary," it says, "is Britain's outstanding contribution to the film." Partly because I was there when documentary was born, but mainly because there lies behind the story of its fortunes so much that has a bearing on the other types of film described in this report, I am going to take British documentary as the spearhead of my subject. But don't let me, in so doing, give you too narrow a view of the report's scope. It examines in detail, for example, the use of the film in education; the need for more films; for films more nicely adapted to the requirements of different age groups; for proper collaboration between teaching advisers, subject experts, and film producers; for standardised projectors. The educational film has clearly a long way to go before it approaches the mature quality of the BBC's broadcasts for schools. However, to-day there are some signs of life in that field. Teachers who have seen in the services what training films can do should be a useful influence. Then again the report handles our newsreels rather severely, and it remarks that no attempt has yet

*THE FACTUAL FILM. Published on behalf of the Arts Enquiry by P.E.P. Oxford University Press.

From a talk by
SIR STEPHEN TALLENTS
in the Third Programme of
the BBC

been made, though one had been announced, to provide an interpretative news service like the well-known American *March of Time* or the Canadian *World in Action*.

"Remarkable Headway"

Those are only a few of the missed opportunities which the report uncovers. You can set against them its striking demonstration of the growth in the "non-theatrical" showing of factual films—showing outside the picture houses, in factories and village halls, libraries and social centres. In 1931, I remember, there were just 350 organisations borrowing films from the little library at the Imperial Institute. It had no travelling projectors attached to it, and it was serving about a million people a year. The Ministry of Information changed all that. It developed the library and equipped itself with mobile projectors. By 1940 it was serving an annual audience of seven million. Three years later that audience had grown to 18,500,000. Yet, as the report says, "the demand for shows had been far in excess of the equipment and films available." Here, perhaps, is the most encouraging feature in the whole report—the certainty that the public would welcome a sight of far more factual films than they get at present, if only good films could be produced in sufficient numbers, and if proper arrangements could be made for their projection.

How came it that, in this otherwise rather frustrated company, British documentary has made such remarkable headway? The first credit is due to a single man and the team that he gathered about him. Twenty years ago this February, a young man called at the office of the Empire Marketing Board with an introduction from Robert Nichols, the poet. The caller was John

Grierson. He was lately back from the United States, where he had gone with a fellowship to study psychology. He had there made a study of the public's reaction to films. He had never made a film himself; but he had strong views, which he unfolded to me eloquently, of what wanted doing. Himself the son of a Scottish schoolmaster in the old tradition, he maintained that most of what then passed under the name of education was addressed only to the mind and never touched the imagination. He wanted to see a new form of education, that should stir men's imaginations by bringing out the drama in the daily life around them—give them, as he once said, faith as well as facts. That's all too brief a sketch of Grierson's ideas. You will find his own exposition of them in a book called *Grierson on Documentary* which Forsyth Hardy edited and brought out last summer.

We at the Empire Marketing Board were already convinced that the screen could give us a unique opening for "bringing the Empire alive," as we used to say; and we wanted to enlist Grierson in our cause. But, on Rudyard Kipling's confident advice, we had already embarked on a long romantic feature film. The best we could do was to get Grierson to study for us what we could learn from existing films, British and foreign. Thus, very soon, we found ourselves at Grierson's suggestion watching displays that ranged from *The Covered Wagon* to the *Secrets of Nature* series; from Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* and *Moana* to those unforgettable early Russian pictures *Potemkin*, *Turksib*, *Storm Over Asia*, and—a favourite of mine—*Earth*.

"Drifters"—a Milestone

By now Grierson wanted to make a film of his own and the E.M.B. not less keenly wanted to give him the opportunity. The Treasury, to put it mildly, did not favour the idea. But fortunately Grierson had served in minesweeping drifters while the Financial Secretary to the Treasury had written a book called *The Herring: Its Effect on the History of Britain*. So we got it agreed that Grierson should try his hand on ever so little a film of the North Sea herring fisheries. There were plenty of crises during its production; but 19 months later—in November, 1929—the Film Society showed to an enthusiastic audience the film that has since become a myth in documentary history, *Drifters*.

From that day, working at first in ludicrously primitive quarters, the E.M.B. Unit went ahead. The E.M.B. itself was destroyed. Its Film Unit escaped to the Post Office and there made some notable experiments in sound. W. H. Auden and J. B. Priestley wrote scripts, Benjamin Britten, Walter Leigh and Maurice Jaubert wrote music, for films that put the work of the Post Office dramatically on the screen. Various commercial undertakings joined in the movement—the Ceylon Tea Propaganda Board, the Orient Line, Imperial Airways, the gas industry, the oil industry, later Imperial Chemical Industries. So, first under the wing of the Government, then with the encouragement of big business, the British documentary film established itself.

Things like that do not happen by accident. In part the stimulus came from



JOHN GRIERSON
Faith as well as facts

within. Grierson had a fine gift for inspiring others. By careful selection from hundreds of would-be recruits, he gathered round him a small group of men and women which included at one time or another most of the senior documentary producers of to-day; and ever since, as the report says, "documentary production has always been undertaken by a unit working as a group." There was in that first young group fine internal loyalty, lively internal controversy, and a solid front to the outside world. Both its spirit and its structure, with its frequent exchanges between the public service and the commercial companies, its interest in the craft of film criticism, deserve study.

But it needed something more than the organisation of an enthusiastic group to put British documentary in the proud place it now holds. The truth, I am sure, is that there is an imperative call to-day for wholly new methods of popular interpretation, always, of course, in addition to the well-tried medium of the national and local press. Government departments and local authorities alike are feeling the lack of means to explain convincingly to the public the vastly increased and complicated tasks which they have got to tackle. Industry has to find new ways of bringing alive not only to the public but also to its own huge and specialised staffs the complexity of its undertakings. Every agricultural research worker recognises the need for new methods of conveying the fruits of his work to the farmer. Every Colonial civil servant in the field is searching for new ways of helping backward populations to learn new methods in public health and cultivation. We want to encourage visitors to come, or to return, to these islands. All of us are conscious of the urgent need of new media by which people may speak to people through the bars of different tongues. That is no more than a sketch of the world-wide demand for new media of interpretation which to-day gives a new importance and a new urgency to every one of the activities—documentary and newsreel, class-room film and film of training, films of travel, and record, and research—with which this report is concerned.

The Practical Approach

And now a word about the practical approach to this bewildering wealth of opportunities—by those who provide the raw material for these new interpretative processes, and those whose job



A SCENE from "Drifters," the film "that has become a myth in documentary history"