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DOCUMENTARY FILMS A British Anniversary

THIS year the documentary film movement in Britain will be 20 years old. It was in 1928 that John Grierson, with his famous film, *Drifters*, laid the foundations for that collective, purposeful system of film-making which, under the generic name of documentary, has come to be known as Britain's most distinctive contribution to world cinema. After the success of *Drifters* Grierson gathered together a group of young men and women who were interested in the use of film for direct sociological purposes. Since then this documentary group, working in a unified manner and with agreed intentions, has produced many hundreds of films, and now embraces some 25 units giving permanent employment to about 1,500 expert technicians.

In the following article by Basil Wright, received by *The Listener* from the United Kingdom High Commissioner, Wright explains that the object of the documentary movement is to provide information in an imaginative way by using the film medium as a means of giving ordinary people a true understanding of the facts which affect them in their daily lives and in their relations to the rest of the world. Documentary has been successful not merely because the films themselves have been good or because they have evolved new and exciting techniques. The really important fact was that Grierson and his colleagues correctly estimated a general need, and set out to meet it.

In this they were in part inspired by the work of great individual artists like Robert Flaherty, who subsequently worked with them (1931-2) and produced that remarkable film *Industrial Britain*.

No Imitations

Primarily British documentary succeeded because it was not content merely to imitate others. It assimilated the best from other countries, and then created for itself, and in its own way, new techniques (which in turn have influenced others—not least the British feature film), new production systems, and, very importantly, new systems of distribution.

During the formative period of the documentary movement the main obstacle to success was the difficulty, first of finding finance of the sort which would permit a reasonable amount of creative freedom, and secondly, of getting the completed films shown to a wide public. The film industry as a whole was not enthusiastic about the idea of paying for the production of films on real-life subjects and without love stories, murder or romance.

First Years

In view of these circumstances, and of the fact that the fundamental purpose of documentary was (and is) a social purpose, it was decided right from the inception that finance should not be sought primarily from the film industry. The documentary film being conceived as a public service, it seemed only proper that it should operate directly within the public service field—and this,



Spencer Digby photograph

JOHN GRIERSON
He laid the foundation

of course, meant within the area of government. That is why the first years of the documentary film were passed in the service of British Government departments; firstly at the Empire Marketing Board, which was concerned with educating the people of Britain in the new conceptions of Colonial trusteeship and in an understanding of the principles laid down in the Statute of Westminster; and secondly (after the abolition of the Empire Marketing Board) at the General Post Office, where the job was not merely to tell people about the structure and ramifications of the postal services, but also, in terms of airmail routes and radio, to point the way to new international conceptions.

Mood of Inquiry

The channels for distribution through the public cinemas were virtually closed to documentary films, and, in fact, only a very few managed to get wide circulation in this way. There was, however, another audience. This consisted largely of the same people who went to the public cinemas, but those people in a different mood—a mood of enquiry, interest and a desire for education in the broadest sense of that word. It was necessary, therefore, to take documentary films to these people in the schools, the village halls, colleges, co-operative groups, and all the other places where people meet together for discussion of mutual activities and problems. A complete new system of distribution was built up to serve these audiences. There was a central library from which the films (on 35 or 16 mm. stock) could be borrowed free by anyone with a projector. Later a large number of mobile cinemas were put on the roads, giving regular film shows to people all over Britain. By 1939 this new audience numbered some nine millions; and during World War II, when the film was

(continued on next page)

Owing to his absence from Wellington, our Film Critic is not able this week to supply his usual notes.