

Documentaries For The Dominions

John Grierson, Noted Film Producer, In New Zealand

WHEN Robert Flaherty came back from Hudson's Bay in 1920 with a moving picture about Eskimos, a big film company thought his work so dramatic they asked him to do the same for the South Sea Islands. Flaherty applied the same singular technique for "Moana," but the film company changed the name of his film to "The Love Life of a South Sea Siren."

In those two names lies the secret of the definition of what is or is not a "documentary film." It is life, it is people, it is work, it is play, or education, or information, or propaganda, or someone's argument against someone else. It is *not* the love life of a South Sea siren.

Flaherty left that particular film company. Then he made "Man of Aran," and the true-to life film became part of the cinema, to be dubbed "documentary" by the generation that had invented "technology."

Interest of New Zealand Government

And Robert Flaherty is one of the reasons for the presence in New Zealand at the moment of John Grierson, who arrived at the end of last week as a representative of the Imperial Relations Trust, at the invitation of the Prime Minister's Department.

Mr. Grierson is to meet a committee composed of representatives of several Government Departments, the film industry, and outside organisations interested in films, such as the Film Institute.

He is an expert in documentary films. With this committee he will discuss their production by the New Zealand Government Tourist and Publicity Department.

Documentary films concerned with social, industrial, economic forces as distinct from documentary films concerned with tourist publicity pure and simple, have already been made in New Zealand. From the Miramar Studios about ten have so far been born.

Aided by the advice of the Trust's film officer, who is a recognised expert, and encouraged by the prospective interest of other organisations represented on the committee, the Tourist Department hopes to accelerate production and improve technique.

Entertainment and Instruction

The result will be used in New Zealand for its entertainment as well as its instructional value. But, as the name of the Imperial Relations Trust implies, the greatest significance of Mr. Grierson's visit will be its effect on Imperial relations. Most, if not all,

of the locally-produced documentaries will be used to exchange with similar productions from the other Dominions — over the seas.

Already Mr. Grierson has been in Canada. After New Zealand he will go to Australia.

Showing the World

A belief that the moving picture is a peculiarly potent means of communicating ideas has prompted his visit. He will help New Zealand to put New Zealand's idea of



A still from the Grierson documentary, "Under the City" (describing London's underground cable services), made by the Post Office Film Unit in Britain

New Zealand on to films, pruned and polished for consumption in other countries.

Anonymous, but generous, in 1937 some philanthropist placed £250,000 at the disposal of Lord Baldwin of Bewdley to endow any means of strengthening the bonds of Empire. The Imperial Relations Trust was formed as a result. Part of its work has been the financing of the exchange of visits between the British Isles and the Dominions of such people as those concerned with University administration, or people not normally engaged in academic work. Scholarships are available in the same way for an interchange of people interested in film production of the sort represented by Mr. Grierson, who was appointed in 1938 by the Trust's film committee.

His work in Canada was immediately productive. With the assistance of the Trust, Canada organised a conference which spawned the Canadian General Film Committee, to produce films for educational purposes.

John Grierson's Reputation

More than 10 years ago John Grierson's reputation in the field of the documentary film was established by "Drifters," a story of the North Sea fishing fleet. Since then he has gone from one success to another.

The English became really interested in documentary films in 1928. "To bring alive" the manifold workings of the Empire, a government promotion department known as the Empire Marketing Board was set up.

Mr. Grierson, a Scotsman, organised a film unit for it, produced some excellent early pictures, and continued in charge when the unit was taken over by the General Post Office in 1933. Since then that film unit has made some 250 documentaries, for such services as the telephone, telegraph, radio and air mail lend themselves nicely to dramatisation. "All in all," says an American authority, "it is generally conceded that documentaries are Britain's chief contribution to the film industry."

Controversy And Propaganda

Although production by a Government Department means and must mean certain limitations, the scope for the documentary film is so great in its extent that possibilities in New Zealand's untrodden ground are almost limitless. The documentary in its pure form is most often controversial. It presents an idea, propagates propaganda. And it does

this work with undeniable effect. The historical documentary is an example. The "March of Time" series comes into this class. The development of the newsreel, like Herbert Kline's story of Czechoslovakia in 1938, "Crisis," is another. In the U.S.A., they have taken burning national political questions as their themes.

All have been eagerly accepted by public opinion. While the documentary can influence opinion, it is even more likely to excite opinion by creating interest. It can hardly distort opinion, for if it is faked it is not documentary, and in any case the human eye remains fairly impartial.

It can be dull enough. But already the Tourist Department's production units have shown that it need not be entirely dull. With Mr. Grierson in New Zealand the possibilities of the documentary may be realised even more fully.

Its immediate use, of course, will be to say on the screen, perhaps a little more subtly, what the newspapers and the radio are so busy saying in print and through the microphone about those ideals represented by the Imperial Relations Trust.

J. Robertson, M.P., will take the chair at the meetings. He is secretary of the New Zealand Motion Picture Exhibitors' Association. The Listener's film editor, who is president of the Film Institute, will sit on the committee.