

DRAMA ON YOUR DOORSTEP

John Grierson Talks of Films, Radio, and Propaganda

"You have done things of tremendous international importance in this country with your social experiments. There are audiences all over the world who would want to see and hear about these things. You can command international attention because you have contributed internationally. And it is particularly vital at this time for democracy that a country such as New Zealand, which has been so notably an experimental ground for democracy, should let its voice be heard. It is your right and your duty—and your urgent need—to show democracy in action by bringing these things to life."

—John Grierson

TO talk about films with John Grierson or to have him talk about films to you is not to hear a discussion in the usual terms of box-office, camera-angles, scripts, super-spectacles and movie stars. It is to hear about an idea, a conception of the film and its purpose which is a whole philosophy in itself. But Mr. Grierson would probably be the first to disown that word "philosophy," for he holds very strongly that there should be nothing "arty" or drily academic about the documentary type of film in which he is so interested. Its whole purpose is to come right into the lives of people, to stimulate their imaginations in what is going on all around them, to show them in his own phrase, "the drama on their doorsteps."

Formally Mr. Grierson is the Canadian Government Film Commissioner and a member of the Imperial Relations Trust who is visiting New Zealand at the invitation of our Government. But he is more than that. He is a pioneer of the documentary film. He is also, in a sense, a man with a mission.

"The Savages of Whitehall"

There were other men before John Grierson who saw the possibilities of an escape from the limitations of the synthetic Hollywood story-drama, and who went out with their cameras to the far corners of the earth and returned with real-life dramas of savages. But Mr. Grierson and his colleagues saw even beyond that. They would make films something after that style, but they would stay at home and do it. "We will show you the savages on your own doorstep," they said, "the savages of Whitehall and Birmingham or any place where we can find drama in everyday lives. There is plenty of it." For this new type of film they coined the term "documentary," and the British Documentary Movement began.

World-wide Movement

It is significant that it was a Movement right from the start. It has kept on moving. Mr. Grierson has come to New Zealand to stimulate interest in documentary films and what lies behind them but, as he told *The Listener*, the thing has been springing up spontaneously in all nations.

The reason for this spontaneous, largely simultaneous interest, he suggests, is that the documentary film it-

self is only a part of the whole modern theory of education and public information. To understand the vast conception from which the documentary movement arises, it is necessary, Mr. Grierson says, to realise that, before the war, the International Labour office at Geneva was exploring the possibility of acting as the clearing-house of 50-odd member States in a scheme whereby each country which had made some worth-while contribution to living standards and social progress—for instance, in such matters as town-planning, or safety in mines, or pre-natal care—would make human documents and records of those things, and the I.L.O. would distribute them internationally.

Different Nations, Same Interests

"When the war came we were on the verge of something very big," said Mr. Grierson. The old idea was for one nation to show off to the world its pretty scenery, or its ceremonial customs, or what good fishing it had. But to-day there was a big move beyond that. What the people in one nation were now interested to learn about other nations was not so much whether they had pretty scenery as what those other nations were contributing to the common good of the world as a whole.

The idea of creative propaganda such as was found in the documentary type of film was to bring those things to life and spread information about them, so that the town-planner in one country could talk to the town-planner in another, or the person interested in dental education in the U.S.A. could talk to the person with similar interests in New Zealand.

"Nation Shall Speak Unto Nation"

Schools, mines, agricultural research—activities like that were now organised in specialised groups in all countries. Everywhere there were specialised groups in terms of special interests—centres for new civic enlightenment. The great thing in Mr. Grierson's view, was to co-ordinate the demand and secure the supply of information about them, so that nation could speak to nation and knowledge could be shared for the good of all. To-day the documentary movement had to concentrate much of its energy on the immediate task of providing war-information; but they had also to keep on thinking about to-morrow, and the day after to-morrow.



Spencer Digby, photograph

JOHN GRIERSON: A man with a big idea

That was the international aspect; the national aspect followed directly from it. Nowadays life was so complicated that it was no "longer possible for people to know everything about everything all the time." Large organisations had grown up to cover nearly every aspect of national life; the tendency was for them to get out of touch with the public. There were gaps between State Departments and the citizens. If citizens were to have a true sense of citizenship, some means—some kind of "shorthand" method—had to be found to bridge the gaps and make it possible for the work of State Departments and the functions of government to enter into the imagination of the citizens.

Films and Radio Compered

"It is also an obligation of democracy that State Departments should be able to give an account of their stewardship to the citizens of the country," Mr. Grierson points out. "Otherwise the citizens will feel that they are living in a world of abstract giants. And if they are to function best, these organisations of the State must be able to feel the significance of their own work. In order that they themselves may be first rate, they must be able to see appreciation of their work in the faces of the people.

"The documentary film is merely one instrument of public information. Radio is another. Radio has the advantage of 'immediacy,' of being right on top of events. In the film you get the face-to-face element, and also the power of being able to co-ordinate in a living form many aspects of a subject. The film is a physical medium with a punch. It is more mature from the

point of view of creating a lasting impression. The film has got mass punch, whereas the radio is intimate, a person-to-person affair. But the two complement one another in the job of bringing things alive.

Pretty Scenery Not Enough

"How does New Zealand come into all this? Well, New Zealand has certain special problems. Because of its isolation, it has to be able to project interest in itself across a much greater mileage than other countries. And it has to be able to arouse interest in itself abroad because it draws its life blood from foreign markets. In the past you have concentrated mainly on your scenery, and you have done a good job. But in the international market that is no longer enough. Other countries have been discovering that they have got beautiful scenery, too. So now you must consider those things which are now most likely to command attention overseas. There are plenty—the work of Sir Truby King, your grassland research, your Plunket system, your schools, your housing, your approach to economic problems. Those are some of the things in which New Zealand has contributed internationally, and those are the things which people overseas want to hear about. There are audiences waiting all over the world; for in those matters you can command international attention.

"And, finally, as New Zealand goes about this from the international aspect, and gains international appreciation, so it will benefit nationally. For it has been said that if you want to feel good about yourself, you must first make other people feel good about you."