

John Grierson: A Documentary Biography. FORSYTH HARDY. London: Faber and Faber, 1979. 298 p. ill. ISBN 0 571 10331 6. \$27.95

Grierson on Documentary. Edited by FORSYTH HARDY. London: Faber and Faber, 1979. 232 p. ISBN 0 571 11367 2. \$8.75 p.a.

John Grierson was one of the early proponents of documentary film, which he saw as an ideal means of mass education and propaganda. After initiating documentary film work in Britain at the Empire Marketing Board and, subsequently, at the Post Office, he was invited to Canada in 1938 to survey the film situation here. This visit was followed in 1939 by passage of the National Film Act (based on his recommendations), the creation of the National Film Board (N.F.B.), and his appointment as its first commissioner. Grierson's tenure at the N.F.B. lasted only six years, until 1945, after which he went to the United States to set up private documentary production. Denied landed status in the U.S. (at the behest of the F.B.I., which had been receiving slanderous communications from Canadian civil servants who had been disgruntled by Grierson's roughshod ways with the bureaucracy), he then worked for the U.N.; for Group 3 Films in Britain; for Lord Thompson's television network in Scotland; and ultimately as a guest professor at McGill University in Montreal. But his greatest contribution to documentary film was doubtless his creation of the National Film Board of Canada for, aside from the thousands of films which it has produced, it has also served as a model for many other state-operated film operations.

Forsyth Hardy, as author, editor, and film critic active in the documentary film movement, and as friend of Grierson's from the 1930s until the latter's death in 1972 would, one would have thought, been a good choice as Grierson's biographer. Unfortunately, *John Grierson: A Documentary Biography* puts the lie to this. It is a poorly executed volume and, at \$27.95, a poorly edited one. It is evident that the author has taken great pains to put it together for much of value to a biographer evidently was destroyed by Grierson himself. Hardy interviewed many of Grierson's contemporaries and co-workers in both North America and Europe, had total access to all Grierson's surviving papers, and received considerable (but unspecified) help from his widow, Margaret. Hardy also had access to several unusual sources in North America and Europe, providing him with some interesting material on Grierson's early career. Unfortunately, he apparently found this mass of material quite daunting.

There are so many problems with this book that it is difficult to summarize them all. To begin with, the title implies a "creative treatment of actuality" (Hardy's introduction, *Grierson on Documentary*, p. 11) which in turn implies a massing of information (in this case verbal rather than visual) to make a series of points, all of which are directed towards the service of one or several clearly defined ideas. Forsyth Hardy's biography does not conform to the creative treatment of actuality, but is instead pretty much a chronological recital of events in Grierson's public life. His technique is simple: he takes a three or four year period and discusses what occurred to Grierson during that time, without giving the reader too many hints about exact chronology within the period. This lack of chronological coherence is symptomatic of a more or less general incoherence. It is almost as if Hardy felt that, as he had the information, he ought to use it. Much in the book has a scissors-and-paste air about it. Thus, the last dozen paragraphs of chapter 6, entitled "G.P.O. Film Unit", start with comments on Grierson's alleged Communism and end with comments on his successes in growing strawberries, passing by comments on various film projects, meals with film directors, his invitation to Canada in 1938, and at least three other separate topics.

Hardy may have been led into some of this meandering because of the reminiscence character of one of his major sources, the interviews he carried out in 1976. He is led into

more than this, however: he gives as much value to reminiscences forty years after the fact as he does to sources contemporaneous with the event. It is impossible to know exactly how much of what he was told was known first-hand by the teller at the time, now how accurate memories might be forty years on. It is thus interesting that archival and other sources which would seem obvious points of reference were apparently not consulted. There is but one mention of the N.F.B. archives in Montreal, and that is a reference to an unpublished manuscript; there is no reference to the P.A.C., although I would think the King papers could shed some light on Grierson; and Margaret Grierson, though she “gave me information which I could have obtained from no other source” (p. 263) is mentioned only once in the notes.

The notes themselves are often of a rudimentary character and—because there is no bibliography whatsoever—are often useless. Although one must assume that the letters by and to Grierson are found in the Grierson Archives at Stirling University, other notes are captivating in their brevity. For example, chapter 3, note 8: “Rockefeller Archive Center”; Chapter 4, note 2: “Sir Stephen Tallents, unpublished manuscript” (this ms.—or maybe others?—is mentioned at least four times); Chapter 7, note 4: “John Grierson, manuscript article”. And so on. Only rarely are the notes used to amplify or explain a point in the text—which is perhaps just as well, for they are all grouped at the back of the book. What is more serious, however, is that certain subjects about which Hardy seems well informed, such as the succession of the N.F.B. to the Motion Picture Bureau, are barely footnoted at all. What are the sources of some of Hardy’s statements—and what of points which are glossed over in the text, such as the writing of the National Film Act itself? There is not a *single* note concerning the actual construction of this piece of legislation, which Hardy leads us to understand was not the creation of legislators but of Grierson himself.

Because Hardy’s biography is chronological in approach, it to a great extent avoids dealing directly with themes such as documentary film, education, and propaganda; it avoids the necessity of analysing these themes; and it lets Hardy avoid examining his *ex cathedra* claim that Grierson was the father of documentary. In sum, Hardy doesn’t put Grierson in perspective. For example, the formidable work which Stuart Legg did with the production side of the N.F.B. during the war is mentioned only in passing; yet Grierson remains the hero and Legg is relegated to being virtually only another interviewed source. Nor is Grierson examined in relation to other documentary directors; indeed, Mackenzie King’s name appears in the index as often as those of Einstein and Flaherty *combined*.

As mentioned, the editing of the book leaves several things to be desired. Although the index appears to be accurate, the notes are a botch, and there are numerous small errors, such as giving the Liberal party the number of seats which the Conservatives won in the 1940 election (p. 102); and numerous mis-spellings: Caldwell for Coldwell; St. Laurient for St. Laurent; Davidson Dunton has his name reversed in the notes; Coplan is spelled as Copland in the notes; Urbana, Illinois, becomes Urband. The editors should at least have pointed out to the author some of the more egregious sentences he managed to construct; it would have been a kindness to have permitted him to change them, though it would have robbed us of such inimitable statements as “Of film festivals near the sea Grierson had a marked affection for Cork.” (p. 200). They might also have put a check on his totally irrelevant asides. The following is a complete paragraph:

“While he was with Kenyatta he heard Peter Mbyu, the son of Konange, the Kikuyu chief, give an account of nine months he had spent in India. It was to be some years before Grierson could himself visit the subcontinent.” (p. 178).

Is the book completely hopeless? Fortunately, no. Chapter 17, a ten page essay on Grierson, is a perceptive view of his outlook and attitudes and how they shaped his career. It is a pity that the rest of the book was not written to the same level.

Grierson on Documentary is the third edition to appear since the original was published in 1946. The editor in all its incarnations has been Forsyth Hardy. For the first edition he provided an interesting 15 page account of Grierson's life. The second edition, published in 1966, included an expanded essay on Grierson, as well as examples of Grierson's writing and thinking during the intervening twenty years. Both editions were extensively illustrated with stills from documentary films, and brief forewords to each section were appended by the editor. The second edition was, incidentally, 411 pages long, contained 57 photos, and in its hardcover version cost \$8.50.

The third edition is an abridged version of the second, published simultaneously with the *Documentary Biography*. The introductory essay has been cut to six pages; twelve articles found in the second edition have been removed, as have the editor's section introductions; there are no photos; and the softcover price is \$8.75.

Without knowing Grierson's available output of writing it is however difficult to argue with Hardy's choice of material. But Hardy himself admits (in the *Documentary Biography*) to having found a 60,000 word unpublished manuscript written during the Second World War by Grierson on the subject of documentary: could not this have been excerpted and included in the new edition? As it is, the document remains unpublished and available only at Stirling University. Nor are there any transcripts of the many interviews which Grierson apparently gave while at McGill. Further, it might have been instructive had the script of one or more of his *Wonderful World* television programmes been included. This would perhaps have allowed us to see the man in action as well as in more contemplative mood.

It is discouraging to give these two volumes such negative reviews. Mr Hardy has obviously worked hard to amass his documentation, much of which is now through his efforts available in the Grierson Archives at Stirling University in Britain. Possibly the publishers realized that the biography was of limited interest, for one notes that funding was received from the Scottish Arts Council in aid of its publication; the sale price alone will discourage many from purchasing it. Nonetheless, anyone interested in documentary film will have to read the biography to get a fairly detailed chronology of Grierson's career; but for *Grierson on Documentary* one should purchase the current truncated edition only if a copy of the second can't be located.

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Checklist of Canadian Directories 1790-1950 Répertoire des annuaires canadiens. DOROTHY E. RYDER. Ottawa: National Library of Canada, 1979. xvii, 288 p. ISBN 0 660 50409 X p.a. \$10.95 Can. Other Countries \$13.15.

This checklist ought to be a basic reference tool for all archives and libraries. The city, county, provincial and national directories listed in it are a little-known source whose potential has yet to be fully exploited. A 1966 encounter with directories showed what a rewarding source of biographical data they could be—provided that one treats them with caution. The individual's occupation is usually given, and often the names of children and spouses will appear. Spelling errors may mislead the uncritical reader, and conclusions drawn from the disappearance of a name in later editions must be corroborated with information from other sources. A great discovery for this reviewer was the listing of deaths of the previous year which was included at the end of the Toronto directories in the late nineteenth century. From that, it was possible to locate obituary notices in newspapers and to solve not a few problems for the biographical dictionary published under the somewhat misleading title *The Canadian Directory of Parliament* (Ottawa, 1967).