



## JOHN GRIERSON (1898-1972)

BY JO FOX

*There is not a creative use of film anywhere in the world which does not owe something to Grierson's demonstration of what film can achieve in involving us actively in the developments and decisions which affect our lives.*

Forsyth Hardy

'Documentary' was never a term with which John Grierson, its originator, felt wholly comfortable. Describing it as a 'clumsy' expression, 'a swell word for a simple thing', he recognised that definitions were transient: 'documentary' was intended as an evolving concept, a concept that 'doesn't fit very tidily into a museum', a concept which has more in common with 'what people are doing now, or are going to do tomorrow'. For Grierson, documentary was 'the art of giving film sequence to natural material'. It was not simple 'reproduction', but 'interpretation': the ability to give 'creative shapes' to defined realities; not a 'mirror', but an 'hammer', forging new contours in the perception of the world around us. In short, it had purpose and it gave him purpose.



Grierson filming *Drifters*, 1929 (above)

Although Grierson's critics accused him of deserting the aesthetes in favour of the documentary 'purists', his prolific writings attest to his deep commitment to all forms of creative representation in cinema. His sponsorship of artistic pioneers such as Len Lye and Norman McLaren, alongside Paul Rotha, Basil Wright, Harry Watt, and Arthur Elton, highlighted Grierson's view that the documentary form was a broad church. Social purpose and creativity were not mutually exclusive, Grierson furthering that 'political necessity may well encourage the possibility of art'. Ultimately, it was in redefining what constituted filmic art that Grierson propelled the documentary into the international arena. He ushered filmmakers from 'studio interiors... into the open air' to create new heroes without 'the effete stamp of Mayfair,' shining a light on the romance of the ordinary. This, as he claimed of his ground-breaking 1929 film *Drifters*, was an easy task, since his subjects already had 'the romance of distance and of novel surroundings'. He considered the new wave of documentarists as the poets of the future, 'furling at the edge' in 'the smokestacks, the steelworks, and the dark interiors of the potteries'. These were new 'secrets to reveal, dramatise, poeticise, and bring to life'. To this end, the documentarist did not have to 'find something at the ends of the earth but... in front of [their] nose'. In pursuit of this purpose he brought Robert Flaherty from the worlds of *Nanook of the North* and *Moana* to *Industrial Britain*. The documentarist was at once 'the pedagogue, the priest, and the public servant'. After all, recalled McLaren, 'the most successful filmmaker is someone with a bee in his bonnet', a sentiment reflective of Grierson's insistence that filmmakers ought to be 'engagé', since there was 'always a chance to say something, to teach something, a chance to reveal something, a chance possibly to inspire something, certainly an opportunity for influence of one kind or another'.

