

JOHN GRIERSON

1898 - 1972

JOHN GRIERSON has a special place in the history of the Cinema – though less as a film-maker than as an organiser of the medium. In the 1920's, when economic crisis and political unrest were provoking the arts to find their subject-matter and their function in the neglected world of the everyday, Grierson saw that the film had an aesthetic potential that could serve society.

Having persuaded Sir Stephen Tallents of the benefits of his vision, the Empire Marketing Board set about turning their ideal into the film *Drifters* (1929). It was to be Grierson's only 'personal' film, it was to steal Eisenstein's thunder at a famous London Film Society premiere shared with *Potemkin*, and it was to enable Grierson to establish an international school of film-making (in which both Robert Flaherty and Alberto Cavalcanti were to join as teachers of the original, seminal group of young men and women whose destiny it was to provide the astonished Empire Marketing Board and General Post Office with a place in history).

In 1931 *The Times* newspaper ran an advert that simply read 'Wanted, Young Man over 22 who has studied films, for editing and production: University man with writing experience preferred'.



A young and very keen man by the name of Edgar Anstey [left] responded and appeared for interview. To his great delight, equally balanced by a feeling of absolute horror, he found himself confronted with Grierson. "So you want to work in documentary, eh?" were the first words that echoed across the room to him. Having been trained as a scientist

Anstey spoke of his desire to move into a more creative field and despite the nerves managed to tell of his presence at that premiere of *Drifters*, his views on mass communication and his interest in the cinema of Vertov and Eisenstein so much so that they had no time to interview anyone else that afternoon. Grierson offered him the post, later insisting it was only because of his obstinacy.

Grierson was as demanding as he was certain. Soon after Anstey was brought in he was helping to edit Robert Flaherty's material for *Industrial Britain*. While Grierson demanded the one and only shot that would clinch his sequence – snapping at him for it with his fingers – Anstey plunged yet again into the cutting room bins. "I knew I was attempting the impossible and that Flaherty had never

even shot it". Perhaps Grierson knew it too, but his appetite for perfection and Anstey's desire to serve it surely deserved a miracle? "By the time the editing moved into the basement of his Southwark house in Merrick Square I had begun to learn that miracles must be man-made. 'Tell a lie today and make it come true tomorrow' was a precept I was offered very early in our association".

When Grierson returned in the evening from a day's administration and tempestuous supervision at the 'joint' – as the unit's premises was called – Anstey would project his days work on the hand cranked 35mm projector. Grierson had an instinct for the shot that worked and demanded fluidity editing. "If I had that day assembled at least one sequence which Grierson was ready to approve exactly as it stood I knew clearly, unforgettably and, indeed, inescapably what film-making was about. One was able to give life".

Over dinner, consumed at break-neck speed which yet did complete honour to his cooking (Grierson loved to cook), Grierson would talk fiercely of what remained for tomorrow, then, to the pub in the Old Kent Road or just back to work to try again at that sequence with the shot that never was. "If we worked late I slept in one of a pair of spare bunks, Grierson doing the rounds at lights out to see that all was well with his ships company".

"Forty years later" Anstey recalled, "I am sure he never felt the voyage had ended. It was mankind's journey, not his".

A few hours before he died Grierson was busily dictating, still sending messages, the messages of discovery that for him were all that mattered. Back in 1932, he had sent Anstey on a years shoot aboard HMS Challenger, a Royal Navy survey ship charged with charting the Labrador Coast; Anstey had been given less than 24 hours training behind a movie camera. It didn't matter to Grierson; he had the courage to send him and the courage to back him up if things went wrong. "Take this with you" he said, handing him a hastily written set of instructions on how to use the camera "this is how we shot *Drifters*"! When he drove to Portsmouth by car to see Anstey off, he insisted on bringing the two crates of film stock and manhandling them on board the Challenger himself.

"It has taken me most of the rest of my life to appreciate the significance for him of what he did that day. The unexposed film, the

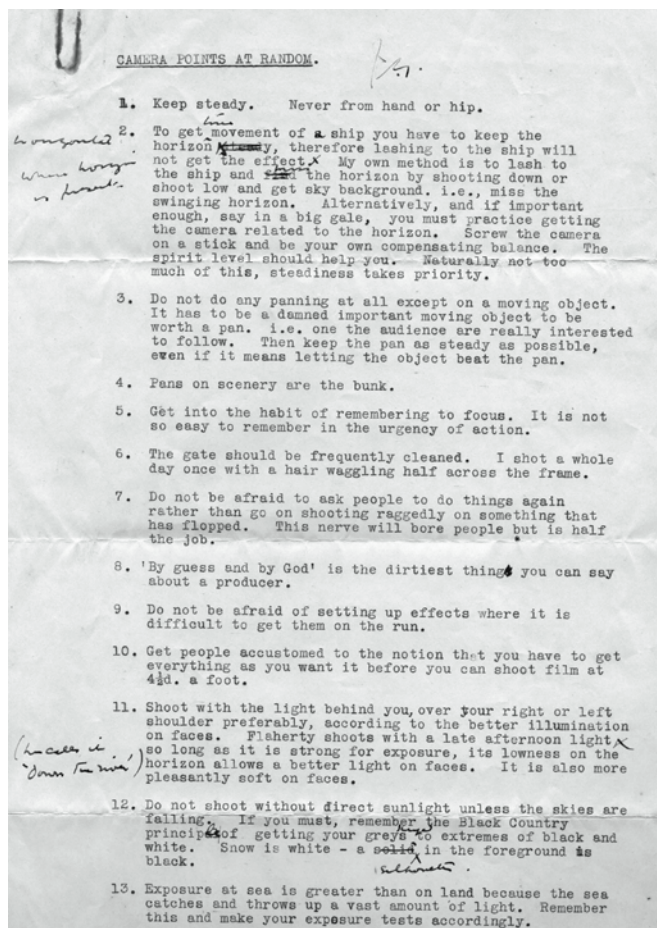
message pad, was all that was needed on the voyage – mine, or his”.

Once away at sea Grierson was never out of communication. The telegrams sent between the two men remain – enough to fill a large album. Grierson had been only 32 when Anstey first met him. “He had more authority than anyone I had met, or indeed have met since. He pointed and that was where you went, if you made a mistake, he would tell you in no uncertain terms and you wouldn’t do it again”.

Absolutely sure about everything he said and did, he remained so, and few ever found reason to question his judgement in the things that deeply mattered to him. It is true that after Canada he more easily, and more often, lost interest in the things that didn’t matter. He found little time to bother with administrative manoeuvres that were necessary to gain and retain a channel of communication. His earlier patience with bureaucrats wore thin. Amongst so very many other things he had been a great civil servant – but he had no desire to make that a lifetimes work. Younger men were now annotating and moving files (little believing that he had once been a grand master of their game – playing it now like poker or chess).

More than just a film-maker his business, indeed our business, was and is, to bear witness to man; to bear passionate witness not simply to what man is but to what he does and does fearlessly against all odds. His medium was oratory in all its forms; the appropriately dramatic camera angle, the collision of one image with another, the emotive word, the scholarly reference – often delivered with the punch of a heavyweight – the time worn phrase suddenly used to a new and conclusive purpose. His film-making, his writing and speech-making, his conversation all carried an inspiration of the moment which welled up from an experience which must have been constantly analysed and distilled.

“During the blitz he stayed for a short time in my flat in Belsize Park when he was visiting from Canada. The noise of bombs and anti-aircraft guns, to which he was unaccustomed, appeared to have not the slightest effect upon his routine of sleeping. His door slammed to and not open again until morning. His only complaint was that I had failed to report adequately on film the scenes he had witnessed for the first time the evening before on the underground platforms which were thronged with sheltering families”.



Grierson's notes to Anstey based on *Drifters* experience

Grierson's disciplines were absolute and entirely personal. He steered clear of politics and was unenthusiastic when Anstey and his other protégés came close to making direct political statements with films such as *Housing Problems* or *Enough to Eat*. Truth transcended politics. Grierson only admired one politician, Trotsky, "...only because Trotsky understood art as well as politics”.

“He was a man whose privacy was never violated and who was fastidious about that of others. He did his best to discourage young people from marrying and for years, quirkily, did not admit to his own marriage. He distrusted the competing demands of domesticity, yet was a great success in it. He was too busy for a lot of things in life, and dismissed with contempt whatever was cheap, mercenary, deceitful or exclusively personal. Yet whether fishing with his old friend John Golightly, or raising Strawberries in Kent, or getting drunk

with imaginative people who benefited from it (or thought they did) he didn't miss many of the highpoints in life. He had a lot of time for life, and life found a lot of time for him".

In his 73 years John Grierson touched many lives, often deeply and seldom superficially. When he did it through personal contact (in Anstey's case) his influence remained strong, needing no recharging. By the end of the 1930's Grierson had carried his conception of a social use of film more widely into Government practice in Britain and solidly into industry. In both Grierson and Anstey's time at the E.M.B and later G.P.O film unit they left behind them many notable films such as *Industrial Britain*, *Granton Trawler*, *Coal Face* and *Night Mail*. Grierson was ready to take his ideas to the people of the world, and Anstey was destined for a long and credit worthy career at the forefront of industrial documentary – always remaining friends and a veritable force in the film business.

Grierson passed away on 19 February, 1972, radiating confidence to the end that a better future for mankind could be fashioned if only there were imagination enough to see the real growing points in each society and culture.

As the direct descendents of Grierson's presence move on, the value of the Grierson Trust grows. Through its work, events and its



S. 1326b. Naval Message. (Revised—March 1930.)
CALL SIGNS, DISTINGUISHING SIGNALS, SERVICE INSTRUCTIONS, ETC.

For use in Signal Department only

TO: *The Empire Marketing Board Representative* FROM: *Grierson*

TEXT AND TIME OF ORIGIN: (WRITE ACROSS)

Rushes OK. But action too incidental. Beware too many still shots and pretty designs. Get further into and explain pertinent detail of each episode. Example man up most useless without detailed precariousness and what and why of action. No sign brainwork special skill special knowledge special planning etcetra on board.

System or Wave Frequency	P.O. of Watch	Ldg. hand of D.O.	Time Recd. in D.O.
Type of Code or P/L	Reader <i>AG</i>	Time of Despatch	Time Recd. in Coding Office
Cabinet No.	Sender	Time of Receipt <i>0106</i>	Date <i>16/2/32.</i>

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One of many telegrams to Anstey whilst on board HMS Challenger

association with the practitioners of today, many who did not meet Grierson come nearer to knowing and understanding the impact of the documentary throughout the world. Under the shadow of the feature film and against the unrest in factual television production, documentary faces greater challenges than ever; yet the movement is still moving in many ways. Grierson wrote that "The story of the documentary movement is, in part, the story of how, not without a scar or two, we got by. Maybe you win, more or less for keeps... Maybe you lose, though never altogether, to the bureaucrats and opposition. The fact is that there are many real sources of opposition to the factual film: and they will only be overcome where you establish a most manifest need, and secure a measure of imaginative indulgence on the part of the powers that be."

Once, whilst as a student at Glasgow University, he delivered a sermon to a small Highland congregation. He preached from Matthew XVI, 24. "Whosoever will come after me, let him take up his cross and follow me".

Steve Foxon

Adapted from the unpublished papers of Edgar Anstey (1907-1987)

left: Grierson and Anstey at one of the many film festivals they attended in the 60s