
John Grierson: Trailblazer of Documentary Film is an interesting story—from the first page to the last—about the man who brought Canada the documentary film and also brought Canada to the world through documentary film. Gary Evans never complicates the narrative with global historical context nor bogs it down with communications analysis, but he still offers a remarkable tale of a Canadian cultural hero. The text is ripe with tasty bits of detail, pieces that are meant to assemble into the clarity of an image of the “true” John Grierson.

Trailblazer recounts the mechanics and the moods that make up the mosaic of the Grierson legacy, and it does so with candour and unmistakeable underlying sentimentality. We learn briefly of Grierson’s childhood and formative years at school and at war. We learn of Grierson the teacher, Grierson the prophet, Grierson the auteur, and Grierson the autocrat. Much of the book is dedicated to following the trailblazer as he builds castles of cultural fortitude only to retreat from them, beating a path through the brush to the next institution, the next country. In all this, the reader is told of Grierson’s dedication to documentary, his unmatched work ethic, and his self-destructive personality.

After reading Trailblazer, one is left with a delineated and very personal idea of who John Grierson was in relation to his profession and his habits, and through these lenses the Grierson ethos emerges—stubborn, bellicose, industrious, driven, principled, and compassionate. What is left out is his relationship with his family, his wife, and his friends. More importantly, what is omitted is context: what did it mean to usher in this new medium that claimed to (re)present the real world as it was? What was happening on the planet other than wars? What did the activities of state-sponsored cultural engineers like Grierson signify for the future of national identity as well as the cultural landscape of Canada? What can students of policy and/or film learn from his experience?

In asking these questions I am really asking for a different sort of book, the likes of which I am assuming has been written. It is difficult to read this tight and modest historical text and not forget that it is meant to be just that. To this end, I would argue that Evans has achieved the goal for the Quest Library Trailblazer series: Trailblazer is written in simple language; it illustrates character through anecdotes and dialogue; and it weaves together a narrative that leaves the reader with a clear, albeit simplified, idea of who John Grierson was. Apparently in homage to Grierson himself, Evans’ book hammers home one central message that any reader—young or old—will be left with: Grierson believed in the transformative power of film and wholeheartedly believed that the documentary film should be the agent for both education and social transformation.

An alternative epilogue to Trailblazer might discuss this Grierson doctrine further and place it in its historical context as well as juxtaposing it with the present day. When Grierson was making documentaries and/or advocating for their production and dissemination, the social-transformation project was about postwar nation-building. Grierson and his team of apprentice filmmakers strived to have film educate and build understanding in audiences. They tackled issues from poverty to war that they believed mattered to the greater good, and they wanted film to act as a pedagogical transformative agent in achieving this greater good. In the present-day context concerning documentary film, some see the medium as an active agent for radical social change, some see it as impartial witness to history and human injustices, and still others see it as just another form of truth manipulation (even cheekily calling some new films “docu-ganda” cinema). However people view the medium of documentary
film, a discussion of the gospel of Grierson in today’s docu-philiac climate would make for an intriguing and much-needed contextual conclusion to *Trailblazer*.

Evans’ short, easy read on Grierson is historical semi-fiction that captures the spirit of one of Canada’s cultural pioneers in a straightforward and uncomplicated form. The book is great for young readers, and it may even inspire some to take up the practice of filmmaking—and deter even more from becoming policymakers. *Trailblazer* belongs on the shelves of secondary schools and colleges in Canada, and it does provide an impressionistic narrative complementary to more academic or historical texts on Grierson and the history of documentary film in Canada. Where Grierson succeeded in painting portraits from moving images, Evans succeeds with straightforward prose that conjures up one of Canada’s great cultural icons, lest he be forgotten in this fast-paced digital world of new auteurs.

*Ezra Winton*
*Concordia University*