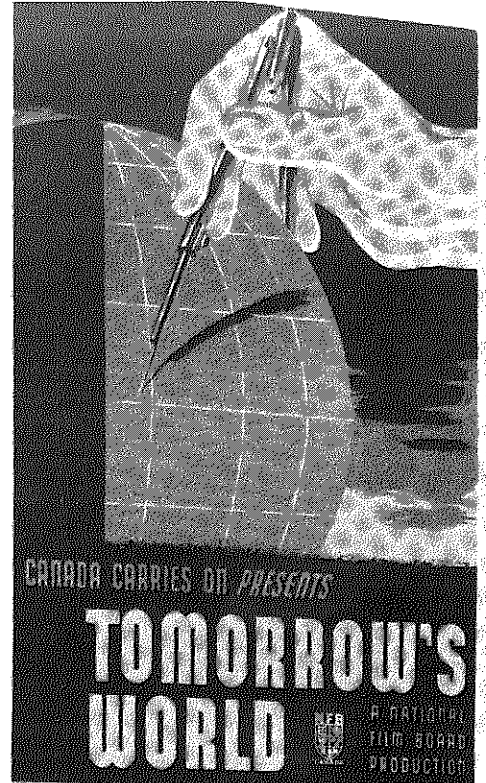
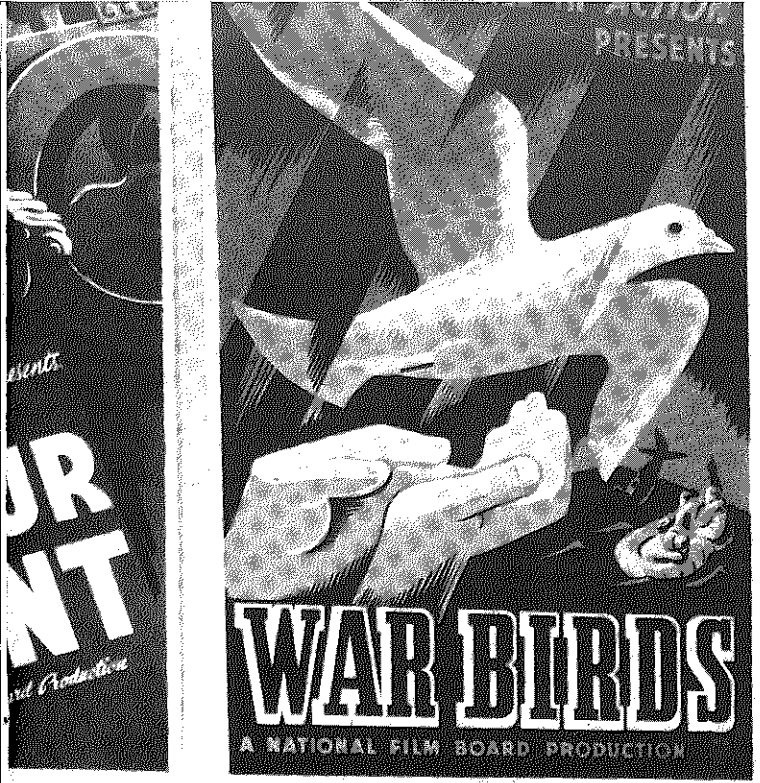


Grierson and Hollywood's Canada

Joyce Nelson

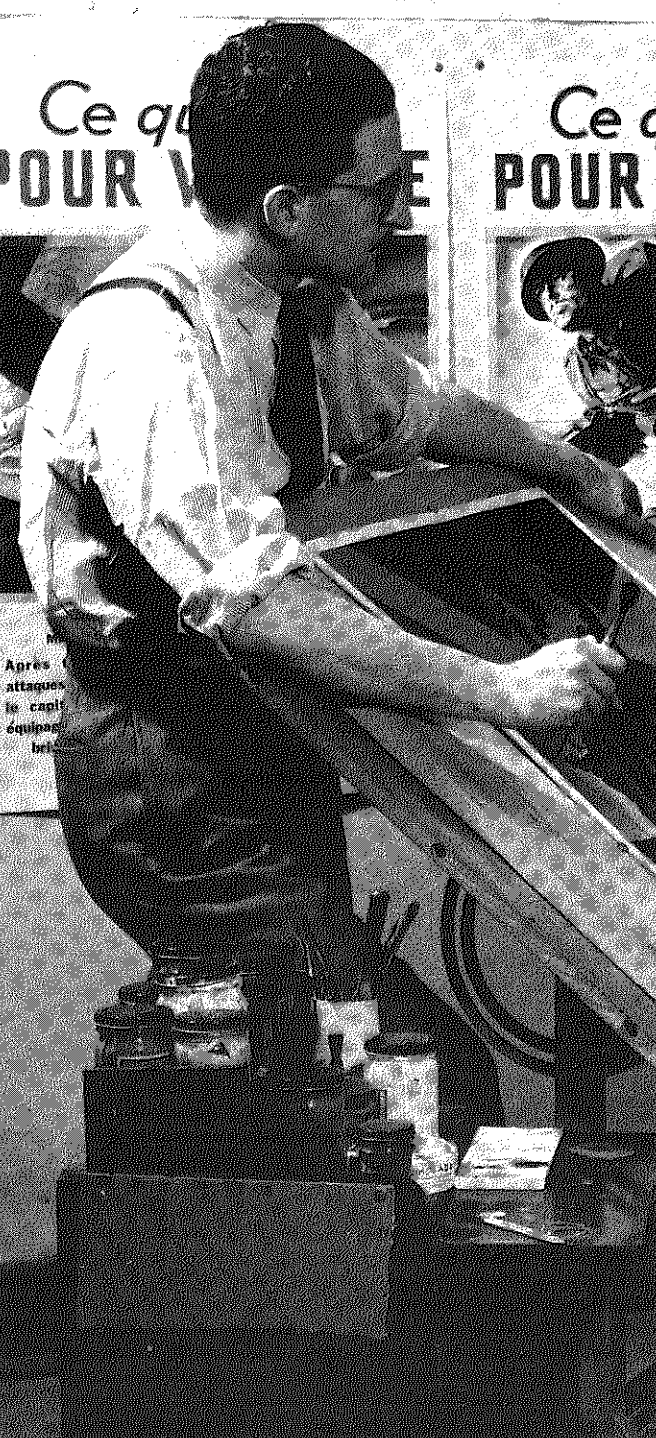
The long-standing legend of John Grierson, founder of the National Film Board in 1939, is beginning to show some deep cracks. Recent film scholarship in a variety of countries in which he worked or provided his expert media advice (England, Australia, Canada, South Africa) has begun to reveal that Grierson was far more politically complex than his legend as a left-wing populist would suggest. One belief that, for nearly fifty years, has been central to the Canadian version of the Grierson legend is the belief that his founding of the NFB was a challenge to Hollywood's hegemony in Canada, that, in his role as Canada's first Film Commissioner (1939-1945), he worked to ensure a viable place for Canada in the competitive postwar film and media scene. This aspect of the legend is undermined by his actions and policies in wartime Canada, where he continually catered to Hollywood interests. Although he was ostensibly hired to improve the film situation in Canada, his so-called "internationalist" perspective lead him to further marginalize the country vis-a-vis private U.S. media interests.





Ce qu'il faut
POUR VAINCRE

Ce qu'il faut
POUR VAINCRE



Of course, as a propagandist, Grierson had a more tantalizing way of expressing his intentions. As he wrote in his "Film Policy For Canada":

We have our moods of resolution and also our moods of relaxation. The movies until now have concentrated on the moods of relaxation. ...We have made a big business out of our moods of relaxation; we have not concentrated nearly so much on our moods of resolution. Yet, on the face of it, it is in our moods of resolution that we may be expected to build the future. These moods are worth organizing, just as deliberately as the movies, the newspapers and the show business generally have been organizing our moods of relaxation. (Grierson, p.12)

Viewing cinema from this perspective, as a way of deliberately organizing the "moods" of the public, Grierson was not about to tamper in Canada with that "big business" which had done such an efficient job in the relaxation category. Indeed, during the war years, Hollywood received some very useful assistance from Canada's Film Commissioner, while the NFB focussed on those seeming "moods of resolution."

In later years, wartime NFB filmmaker Evelyn Spice Cherry stated the still predominant rationales: "Because our hands were tied in relation to the feature film industry, we would develop the documentary." ("Workshop", p.12) The point, however, is that Canada's Film Commissioner could have taken steps to untie those hands. Instead he made the knots tighter.

By 1922, the Hollywood studio conglomerates had formed their powerful lobby, the Motion Picture Association of America. One of the first acts of the MPAA in its founding year was to set up a local bureau in Canada, called the Motion Picture Exhibitors and Distributors of Canada. Hollywood's goal of vertical-integration could successfully proceed only if those two aspects of the industry, distribution and exhibition, could become well enough entrenched in Canada to prevent indigenous films from playing on local screens.

But it was also perceived to be a useful tactic, in the post-World War I milieu, for the Hollywood studios to make pictures about Canada. With Hollywood apparently serving the narrative needs of its neighbour, competition on the filmmaking front might be nipped in the bud. As film magnate Lewis Selznick expressed it at the time: "If Canadian stores are worthwhile making into films, American companies will be sent into Canada to make them." (Thompson, p.177) Usually, though, it was cheaper for Hollywood crews to not even bother making the trip. In 1922 and 1923, for example, studio conglomerates made at least sixty-five feature films ostensibly set in Canada, with only a tiny minority actually filmed on location in this country.

Besides being a way of eliminating competition from indigenous small production companies, Hollywood's interest in constructing a screen image of Canada historically coincided with the larger pattern of U.S. branch-plant expansion north of the border during the 1920s. It was important to define "Canada" not only to its inhabitants, but also to a U.S. populace engaged, if unwittingly, in the colonizing of its northern neighbour. The U.S.-made screen image of a Canadian hinterland, loosely populated by lumberjacks, Mounties, and mad Francophone trappers,

conveyed open territory in which U.S. resource extraction and industrial expansion would be unimpeded and perhaps even welcomed.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s the MPAA clone, the Motion Picture Exhibitors and Distributors of Canada, wielded extensive lobbying power and influence in government and business circles. It became known as the Cooper organization, after its first president, Colonel John Cooper, who administered policies and practices with effective zeal. By 1939, American control of film monopoly proportions and exhibition in Canada was at virtual monopoly proportions, with ninety-five per cent of the box-office, and all first-run theatres, in the hands of the studio conglomerates. Old Colonel Cooper was still fronting for the MPAA in Canada in 1938 when Grierson arrived from Great Britain to survey the film scene and draft the Film Act. The State plan to establish a National Film Board was obviously not something that might slip past Cooper's attention.

Not surprisingly, when the National Film Act was being debated in the House of Commons in the spring of 1939, Trade and Commerce Minister W. D. Euler, who was responsible for the legislation, hastened to assure his colleagues that the proposed National Film Board "would not enter into competition with private business." (Evens, p.55) On the surface, this might look to have been an assurance to the small Canadian film production firms like Associated Screen News of Montreal, Cinecraft Studios of Montreal, General Films Ltd. of Regina, Audio Pictures Ltd. of Toronto, Vancouver Motion Pictures, and Crawley Films of Ottawa. But it was more obviously a reference to the Hollywood studio conglomerates, who would not countenance any infringement on "their" territory. Euler's assurances were signalling the ready cooperation of the State with the existing cinema status quo.

Such assurances were no doubt greatly appreciated in the forth-coming months. The outbreak of World War II had an immediate effect on Hollywood's worldwide market. As Grierson wrote in 1940:

I never saw so great a scurry in my life as in that first week of war in the chambers of Hollywood's magnates. A third of their world market had vanished overnight or become completely uncertain. ...Hollywood was so nervous that it had a new idea every day. The first reaction was to draw in its economic horns, make cheaper pictures, intensify its American market. There was some talk of forgetting its international role and going all American. The result of that policy was seen in more pictures of South America. Hollywood even began, in a sudden burst of light, to remember that Canada was a North American country. (Hardy, ed., p.87)

Obviously, to both Grierson and those Hollywood magnates, "going all American" meant more than the continentalist connotation of the words, with even South America included in Hollywood's "domestic" mandate. Nevertheless, with its world-market either vanished or uncertain, the Canadian box-office bonanza (some \$58 million annually at the time) was suddenly more precious to Hollywood than in the pre-war years. Remembering that Canada "was a North American country," rather than merely a lucrative extension of the U.S. domestic box-office, Hollywood's own foreign policy branch, the MPAA, was no doubt interested in whatever moves Canada's new Film Commissioner might make.

Clearly, Colonel John Cooper had long been an effective lobbyist for MPAA interests by the time he encountered Grierson. If Cooper had anticipated any threat to Hollywood hegemony as a result of the film expert's appointment, it must have become quickly apparent to Cooper that the new Film Commissioner had no intention of altering the status quo in Hollywood's Canada.

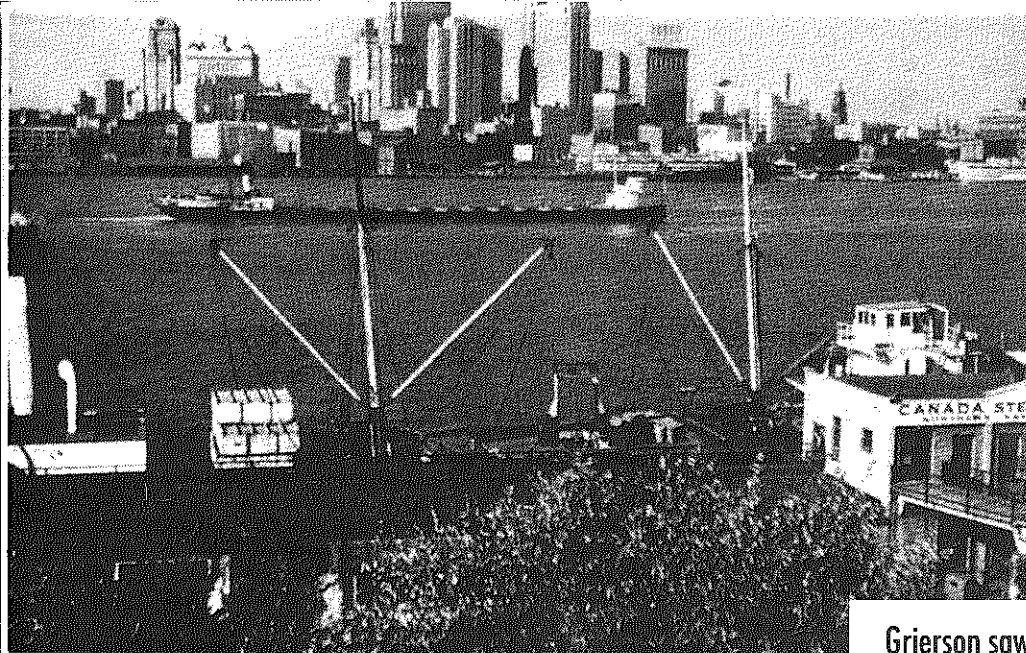
In 1940, Grierson's other, concurrent assignment — as film advisor for Great Britain's Imperial Relations Trust — made it necessary that he travel to Australia, where he was to organize a film propaganda base similar to the Film Board he had just gotten underway in Canada. If Colonel Cooper had any doubts as to Grierson's views on Hollywood's "international role," those doubts were surely put to rest when Grierson recommended to the Canadian government that Cooper be invited to act as Film Commissioner during Grierson's absence. The government readily complied.

Film historian Gary Evans accounts for this recommendation by explaining that "Grierson was counting on Cooper's influence to prevent Famous Players (Paramount) from wrecking the young, fragile National Film Board and to keep commercial distribution of government films from being altered." (Evans, p.73) Grierson had made arrangements for the *Canada Carries On* series to be distributed by Famous Players and Columbia Pictures, thereby gaining access for the series to virtually infiltrate the entire theatre system owned or controlled by the Hollywood conglomerates across Canada. But we might also see Grierson's recommendation of Cooper as interim Film Commissioner, and the government's compliance with that recommendation, as a gesture to the MPAA that neither Grierson, the NFB, nor the State would interfere with Hollywood's cozy and profitable set-up in Canada. In terms of film production, distribution, and exhibition, Hollywood's territory would be left untouched and entirely intact, including that sizeable box-office profit proceeding across the border throughout the way.

Quite early on in his career, during his work for the Rockefeller Foundation and for Famous Players-Lasky (Paramount) in the U.S., Grierson had recognized the significant role that Hollywood was playing in the realm of propaganda and the creation of Public Opinion. In his later work for Stephen Tallent's Empire Marketing Board in Great Britain, he had also studied the vertically-integrated international market that Hollywood maintained in Germany and France, and throughout Europe in general. Since at least 1927 then, Grierson had been thoroughly familiar with Hollywood's economic monopoly in the realm of film, and various countries' attempts to alter that structure. Grierson's opposition to Canadian nationalism and his admiration of Hollywood's efficiency in managing the public's "moods of relaxation" lead him to make important decisions during his wartime tenure beyond even the appointment of the MPAA's man-in-Canada as his interim replacement.

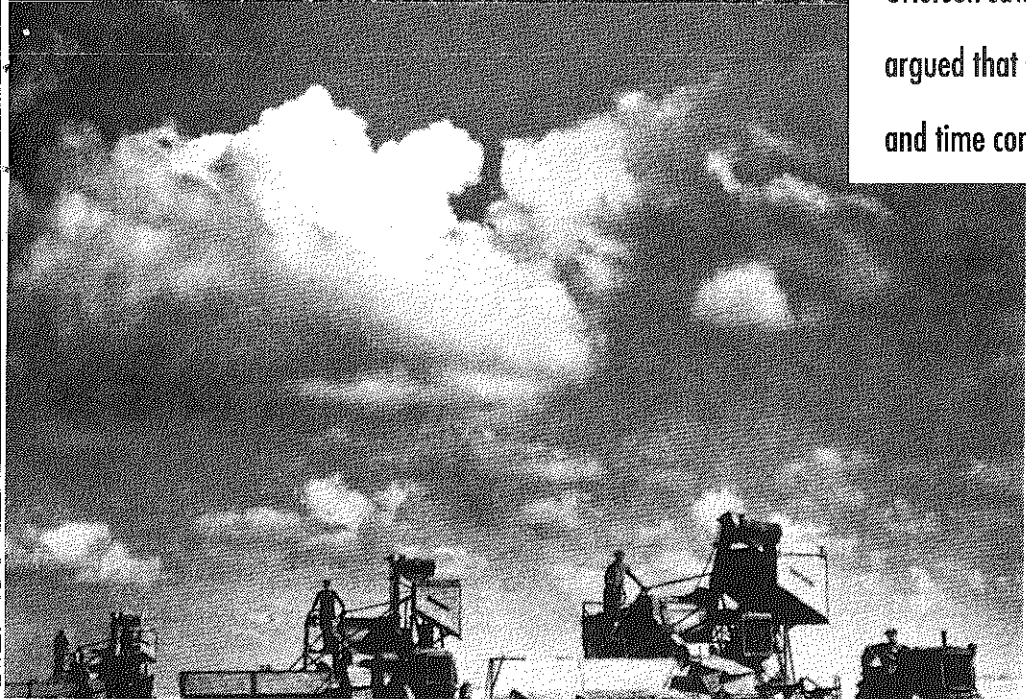
Grierson was not about to infringe on Hollywood's territory in Canada, but he was not above a certain knowledgeable manipulation on the basis of potential nationalistic measures, if that manipulation suited his own interests. For example, in 1941 the NFB released the film *Warclouds in the Pacific* — an installment in the *Canada Carries On* series and an episode which gained distribution in the U.S. by





From three NFB films
directed by James Beveridge:
Great Lakes, 1945
Battle of the Harvests, 1944
Highways North, 1944

Grierson saw no reason for Canada to have its own film industry. He argued that such a goal would be too difficult, costly, counter-productive and time consuming. It was essentially unnecessary.

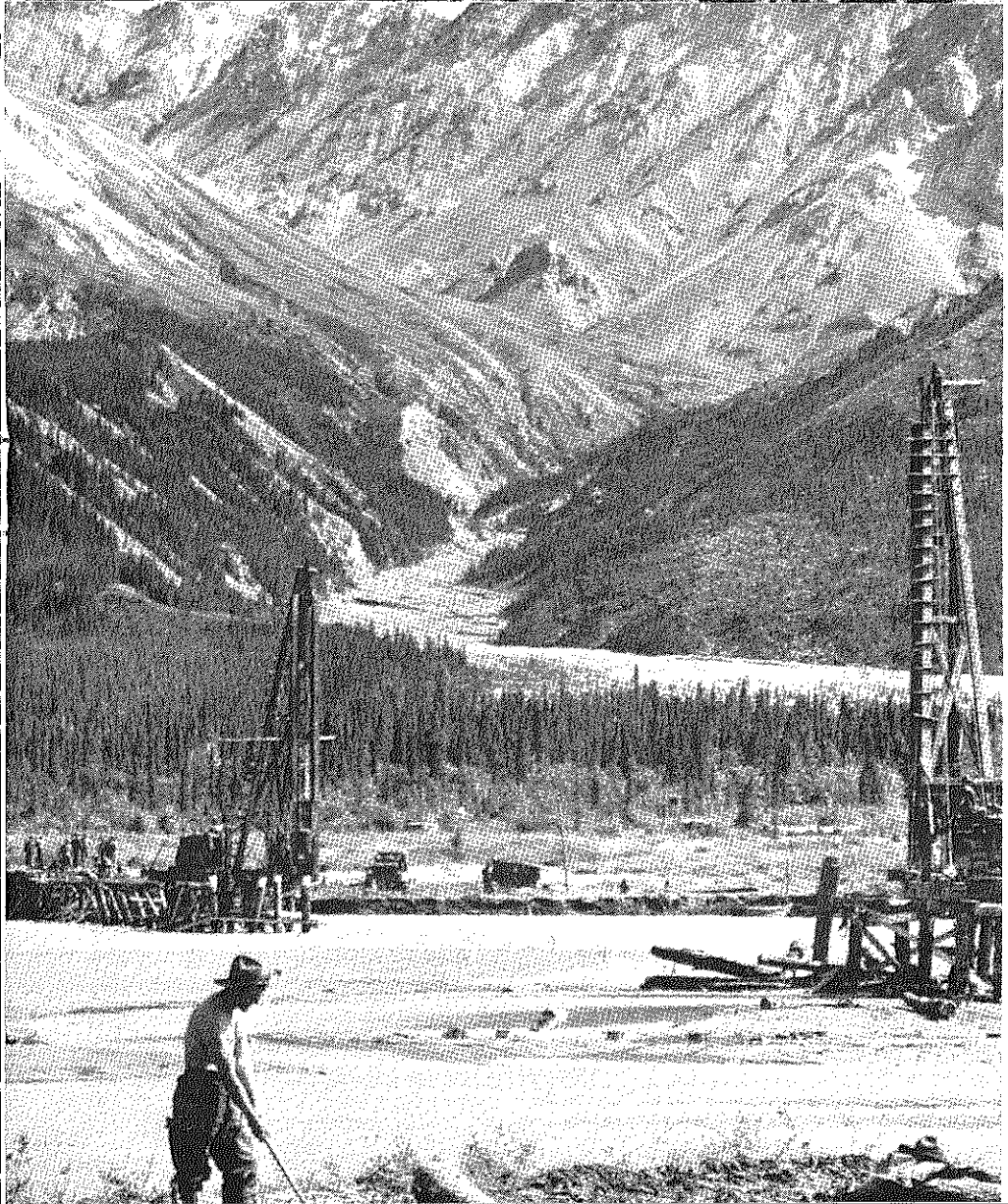


United Artists. The film, a compilation production like most of the series, contained footage provided to the Board by Louis de Rochemont's *March of Time* production outfit in the U.S., with the understanding that any film incorporating the sequences would be shown only in Canada. When de Rochemont learned that the film was about to be distributed in the American market, he instigated legal action to stop it. In the ensuing confrontation between Grierson and the lawyers for Time-Life Inc., Grierson made what Gary Evans has called "a bald threat":

He claimed to have said, "Gentlemen, I have it from the highest authorities in Canada that if the *March of Time* insists on pressing this suit, Canada will revise the existing laws regarding importation of foreign films to Canada." A moment of silence followed, then one of de Rochemont's attorneys allegedly spoke. "Louis, you started something you can't finish. Drop it." No one was prepared to jeopardize the entire American film industry's open Canadian market over a few feet of film. (Evans, p.166)

In terms of actual Canadian domestic film policy however, Grierson throughout his wartime tenure as Film Commissioner was firmly against any film quota system or any revising of existing laws regarding that open Canadian market. He used his influential role to dissuade those same "highest authorities in Canada" from taking any such legislated protectionist action. His argument seems to have been that any such moves would jeopardize the favoured-nation status that Canada had with the U.S. industry — though that "status" consisted of little more than the dubious honour of handing over the country's screens, industry and box-office profits in exchange for U.S. distribution of Grierson's wartime documentary series. (Morris, p.24)

Obviously, throughout the war, Hollywood was able to count on its Canadian market to remain certain in the midst of uncertainty across the rest of its worldwide domain. But Commissioner Grierson also felt prompted to assist the U.S. studio conglomerates in their wartime production. While Canadian apprentices at the NFB were busy making films out of stock-shots, library footage, and "pirated" film sequences — in line with Grierson's policy that the wartime Board would primarily make compilation films for *Canada Carries On* and the *World in Action* series — Grierson himself was out lining up film production work for U.S. companies in Hollywood. According to Forsyth



Hardy, in 1941 Grierson "flew to Hollywood where Stuart Legg [in charge of NFB production] met him and they lined up a dozen films to be made in co-production." (Hardy, p.11) Peter Morris has discovered that Grierson's NFB was subsidizing the production of short films by Hollywood studios "at a subsidy cost of approximately \$1,000 a picture." (Morris, p.25) These NFB-Hollywood co-productions were apparently meant to fill in gaps that the wartime NFB and Canada's private film companies were unable to meet. That, at least, is the most favourable interpretation of Grierson's arrangements with Hollywood during the war, though Grierson may also have felt that Canadian filmmakers were not skilled enough for such a task. Hardy tells us that "In July 1941 he [Grierson] was on his way to Hollywood to arrange for Walt Disney to produce four films persuading Canadians to hold on to their War Savings Certificates." (Hardy, p.121)

The Disney connection is worth examining a bit more closely. Walt Disney's right-wing proclivities had begun to reveal themselves by at least 1939, when Leni Riefenstahl, the leading propagandist for the Third Reich, visited Hollywood as Disney's guest. (Sontag, pp.80-81) According to Susan Sontag, four of the six films that Riefenstahl directed were documentaries "made for and financed by the Nazi government." When Riefenstahl left Hollywood and returned to Germany in 1939, she accompanied the invading Wehrmacht into Poland as a uniformed army correspondent with her own camera team. Coincidentally, Riefenstahl was also a friend of Grierson, "from whose shoe he is said to have once drunk champagne at a party at the French Club in London." (Hardy, p.261)

By 1940, Disney was adamant about keeping trade unionism out of his sizeable studios. To prevent the Screen Cartoonists Guild from gaining a foothold, he formed a "company union" for his workers, in defiance of the terms of the 1935 Wagner Act in the U.S. The result was that the situation at the Disney Studios became increasingly untenable, and a strike was called on May 29, 1941, led by the Screen Cartoonists Guild. With Disney refusing to negotiate with the union, the strike dragged on until August. (Schickel, p.251) Interestingly, the dates of the strike indicate that Grierson's July 1941 visit to arrange four Disney-NFB co-productions occurred in the middle of the stand-off. Apparently, not only did Grierson feel untroubled about using NFB funding to finance Hollywood co-productions, but he was quite willing to cross a picket-line to do so.

Grierson's catering to Hollywood interests found its ultimate expression in his 1944 policy recommendation to the Canadian government regarding the post-war film future in this country. Simply put, he saw no reason for Canada to have its own film industry or to engage in feature film production. He argued that such a goal would be too difficult, costly, counter-productive, time-consuming and essentially unnecessary. The Canadian desire to make Canadian feature films was, for Grierson, a sign of "old-fashioned nationalistic nonsense." Instead, the Film Commissioner outlined for the Canadian government his "internationalist" alternative:

Are there not other possibilities for the development of Canadian film production? I think there are, and far more practical and possible than this dream of a Canadian Hollywood. One way is for



Canada to make its feature films in New York or Hollywood. We might build up in either centre a company for the making of Canadian films with an associate producership in one of the big international companies. ...Simpler still is the notion that the United States must increasingly appreciate its international obligations and give a quid pro quo for the benefits it receives abroad. ...What can be asked of Hollywood, and is increasingly being asked, is that it should, as a matter of policy, spread its net wider for its themes. ...I myself expect that before very long the big American companies trading in Canada will see to it that one or two films are devoted to Canada. ...The next step, I expect, will be for Paramount to set aside a production unit in Hollywood for the production of Canadian feature films. (Grierson, pp.9-10)

Peter Morris has convincingly argued, in his landmark article published in 1986, that such a policy recommendation actually anticipated, and was the basis for, the infamous Canadian Cooperation Project of 1948, in which Hollywood agreed to insert dialogue-references to Canada in U.S. feature films, in ex-

change for the Canadian government's agreement not to impose a quota system or tax on the domestic box-office. (Morris, p.31) Grierson's 1944 "Film Policy For Canada" was circulated in Hollywood where it probably inspired the MPAA, which hatched the nearly decade-long Canadian Cooperation Project. As Pierre Berton has noted, the Project "prevented a quota system and thwarted any wistful hopes there might have been for a home-grown motion picture industry" in Canada. (Berton, p.172)

It probably shouldn't surprise us to learn that when Grierson left the NFB and Canada in autumn of 1945, one of the organizations which approached him for the possible employment of his services was the MPAA lobby, whose U.S. president, Eric Johnston, "was impressed by what he had achieved in Canada." (Hardy, pp.150 & 159)

Peter Morris states that "John Grierson was a key architect of Canada's marginalization in the film world, and events and policies since his time simply part of a self-fulfilling prophecy." (Morris, p.31) However, Morris suggests that Grierson's "faith" in Hollywood and its international role was "derived

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While apprentices at the NFB were busy making documentaries out of stock shots and library footage, Grierson was financing Hollywood productions.

from his often simplistic views on internationalism generally," that in relation to Hollywood, Grierson was "an innocent abroad." (Morris, p.23) Unfortunately, it's more complicated than that.

Throughout the war, Grierson's independent Film Centre in London continued to be a viable concern, engaged in the production of public-relations films for corporate industry and in bringing out the *Documentary News Letter*, for which Grierson wrote sporadically throughout the war and on whose editorial board he remained. (Sussex, p.120) By 1944, the film scene in Great Britain was embroiled in a controversy surrounding American domination of the British film industry, the role of independent British film producers vis-a-vis the film combines, and a recommendation by Rank — owner of General Film Distributors, with links to 20th Century Fox, United Artists, and Universal Pictures — that British producers should negotiate a share of the American market by exploiting links with the major American film companies, using control of the British market as a bargaining counter. (Dickinson, p.75) An article in *Documentary News Letter* in 1944 summarized the mood of the time among British filmmakers: "The trouble is of course that the issues keep on getting confused. Everyone is agreed that we need a truly national film industry, and need equally a share in the world's screen time. The methods of achieving this, however, are the source of conflict. The danger of domination by United States interests is clear enough." (Dickinson, p.79)

The dispute had obvious implications for government policy. Various pressure groups formed to campaign for government intervention in the British film sector. One of the most active lobby groups was the British documentary movement, which canvassed for "radical measures" to be taken by the government. Among those members advocating tougher measures in Great Britain for dealing with the Hollywood conglomerates was John Grierson, who was quietly working behind the scenes. In a private memorandum requested by the President of the Board of Trade in 1945, Grierson and his documentary colleague Paul Rotha outlined a plan for Great Britain to form a Government Film Corporation, which, among its many powers, would be enabled "to regulate the activities of private companies." (Dickinson, pp.82-83) In other words, at virtually the same time that Grierson was advising the Canadian government *not* to intervene in terms of Hollywood's screen monopoly in Canada, and *not* to foster a postwar Canadian film industry, he was actively (if surreptitiously) engaged

in the struggle in England for "a truly national film industry" through government regulation of Hollywood's private distributors' exhibitors.

Such discrepancies in his position obviously throw a monkey-wrench into the notion that Grierson in Canada was "an innocent abroad" with respect to Hollywood, but they also further confuse, in retrospect, any clear understanding of his wartime politics and allegiances. Adding to the confusion is the fact that Grierson, throughout the war, had also be advising the U.S. State Department on its film policy and postwar propaganda needs. (Cox, pp.16-18) By April of 1945, leaks to the media revealed that Grierson was being considered to head up a Film Unit in the U.S. State Department, overseeing its media needs. Central to those needs was the planned expansion of American mass media world-wide, as officially announced in 1946 in the U.S. *Department of State Bulletin*:

The State Department plans to do everything within its power along political or diplomatic lines to help break down the artificial barriers to the expansion of private American news agencies, magazines, motion pictures, and other media of communications throughout the world. ...Freedom of the press — and freedom of exchange of information generally — is an integral part of our foreign policy. (Bulletin, p.160)

Hollywood and the MPAA lobby had long led the way, and provided the operative model, for such expansion. If the way had provided a temporary setback to this planetary goal, the postwar milieu would more than make up for the delay in plans. Grierson's rhetoric to Canadian policy-makers about a "world of loyalty, faith and pride in which national barriers do not mean a thing" (Grierson, p.6) — the very rhetoric by which he convincingly persuaded the government against fostering an indigenous postwar film industry — was thus fully in line with the U.S. State Department's (and the private American mass media) plans for the postwar future: plans which Grierson himself had apparently helped to formulate.

Since Grierson had a poker in every media fire going at the time, it's challenging to make sense of (in the vernacular) where he as coming from. One clue is provided in his confidential report to the Canadian government in 1944, where he expressed the view that "International business becomes progressively an *international cooperative business*. ...The American film business has been one of the last of the great international concerns to learn this." (Morris, p.22) Whether in these terms Grierson was "an innocent

abroad" remains to be seen.

Nevertheless, nearly fifty years after the fact, Canadian film and broadcasting policy-makers remain committed to the path Grierson advised for Canada, handing over ninety-seven per cent of movie theatre screen-time, ninety-five per cent of TV drama air-time, and ninety-five per cent of the movie box-office gate to U.S. MPAA members' product. That's not "internationalism." It's colonization.

Joyce Nelson taught in the Department of Film Studies, Queen's University, for five years before becoming a full-time freelance writer in 1976. Her book The Colonized Eye: Re-Thinking the Grierson Legend will be published in October by Between The Lines Press, Toronto. She is also the author of The Perfect Machine: TV in the Nuclear Age, published by BTL Press in 1987.

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