



Graham McInnes is one of a large number of talented young people who worked at the National Film Board of Canada during the heady days of World War II. Virtually unknown even to the most conscientious film academics and trivia-saturated film buffs, he is the author of the accompanying reminiscence, *One Man's Documentary*, which he has called “an eye-witness memoir of days of high excitement.” It is an insider’s look at the people and practices of the NFB from 1939 to 1945, a vivid “origin” story about Canada’s emerging world-class film studio, providing the NFB with the kind of full-bodied vitality usually associated with Paramount, MGM, or Warner Bros.

Sydney Newman, former head of drama for BBC-TV and CBC-TV, and National Film Board commissioner from 1970 to 1975, calls it “a fascinating and valuable chronicle of those wartime years in Canada, and of the somewhat exotic characters whom Grierson brought together to make wartime propaganda films.”

McInnes was working as a CBC radio broadcaster, art critic, extension lecturer, and freelance writer, with regular contributions to *Canadian Forum*, *Saturday Night*, and *Queen's Quarterly*, when he began writing scripts for newly appointed Film Commissioner John Grierson in the fall of 1939. He was one of the first freelance scriptwriters hired. Three of the

initial six documentary films commissioned by Grierson (*Home Front*, *Front of Steel*, and *Wings of Youth*) for the "Canada Carries On" series were written by him; his experience as a writer of radio documentaries and commentaries for CBC likely recommended him. Hired as a full-time employee in the first expansion of the NFB's rolls in January 1942, McInnes was primarily a producer and a screenwriter (see his filmography), but he was also a director, a narrator, and, for a brief period, Coordinator of Graphics. His contributions to the NFB have been almost entirely overlooked—even for such classic films as *Coal Face*, *Canada* and *Heroes of the Atlantic*, and the outstanding "Canadian Artists" series, which was largely his project and his main cinematic legacy, as it is still in wide circulation. He is unmentioned in Peter Morris's *The Film Companion* and in the more recent and comprehensive *Essential Guide to Films and Filmmaking in Canada* by Wyndham Wise.

McInnes is not alone in his virtual anonymity. With the exception of John Grierson, Canada's first film commissioner and the guiding spirit of the wartime NFB, plus maybe a dozen other filmmakers (Stuart Legg, Raymond Spottiswoode, Basil Wright, Tom Daly, James Beveridge, Joris Ivens, Evelyn Cherry, Norman McLaren, Guy Glover, Budge Crawley), practically everyone else who was employed by the Board has remained disappointingly absent from accounts. Gary Evans refers fleetingly to the filmmakers mentioned above, as well as a few others, in his book *John Grierson and the National Film Board*, but he is mainly interested in policies and productions, not the personalities who toiled at the infamous ex-lumber mill on John Street in Ottawa that served as NFB headquarters. Likewise, James Beveridge in *John Grierson: Film Master* and Forsyth Hardy in *Grierson on Documentary* give the impression that the NFB was almost a one-man show, paying scant attention to anyone other than the master and his British ex-pat inner circle. Even writers about individual films or filmmakers during this period do little to provide any sense of who worked for the Board and what they did there.

In many ways, Graham McInnes was the ideal man to chronicle the early days of the NFB. Not only was he there from the beginning, participating in every possible way; he had already published four acclaimed memoirs, two well-received novels, and two books of art criticism when he began *One Man's Documentary* in the mid-1960s.

Born into an artistic and well-connected family (his great-grandfather was the noted Pre-Raphaelite painter Edward Burne-Jones; he was also related to Rudyard Kipling and British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin), Graham McInnes was trained early to develop a sensitivity to literature and the cultural life. As a youth and throughout his life, art and artists were all around him. His father, James Campbell McInnes, was a professional singer who delivered the Edwardian standards with syrupy passion. His mother (née Angela Mackail, the daughter of a classics professor) was striking enough to pose as an artist's model (her portrait was painted by John Singer Sargent). During World War I, Angela divorced her husband and married a younger Australian flyer, George Thirkell. After the war, she took her two sons, Graham aged six and Colin aged four, to their stepfather's homeland, insisting that they take his name. There she continued the mandatory after-dinner readings of Dickens and other Victorian novelists. After less than a dozen years she moved back to England, where she began a thirty-year career as a novelist. As Angela Thirkell she published thirty-six novels, comedies of manners that were engaging enough to develop loyal fans in "Thirkell Circles" throughout England and North America. Her brother, Dennis Mackail, was also a popular novelist.

Graham stayed behind in Australia to complete his undergraduate degree at the University of Melbourne, then set out in search of his birth father and a career as a jazz composer. When he found his father in Toronto, it was by the simple expedient of looking his name up in the phone book. He immediately changed his name back to McInnes; a year later his brother chose a slight variation: Colin MacInnes.

It was as Graham McInnes that he began his career as a writer. In 1939 he wrote *A Short History of Canadian Art*, one of the earliest books of its kind; he revised this in 1950. His first novel, *Lost Island*, published in 1954, was a fantasy romance that was compared favourably by critics to *Lost Horizon*, though Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* and Dafoe's *Robinson Crusoe* also spring to mind. A second novel, *Sushila*, set in India and featuring a strong-willed, beautiful woman, followed in 1957. It too was received with considerable enthusiasm. For the next several years he proceeded to write four memoirs, focussed mainly on his adventures as a young man: *The Road to Gundagai* (1965), *Humping My Bluey* (1966), *Finding a Father* (1967), and *Goodbye Melbourne Town* (1968), all published in Britain.

Reviewers were enthusiastic in praising the memoirs. Robert Hughes (in the *Sunday Times*) said: "McInnes . . . has almost total recall of smell, colour, shape, place and conversation. . . . Uncannily accurate"; Mordecai Richler (in the *Observer*) notes their "Charm" and "gusto," adding, "McInnes emerges as a most charming and likeable man"; and the *Times Literary Supplement* calls them simply "a work of literary art."

In the meantime, his brother Colin MacInnes had also turned to writing. Beginning with *To the Victor, the Spoils* (1950) and continuing through a series of London youth novels in a gritty realistic style—*City of Spades* (1957), *Absolute Beginners* (1959), and *Mr. Love and Justice* (1960)—he achieved a kind of notoriety because of the subjects of his novels, and because of his alcoholism, outspokenness, sexual adventurism, and scrapes with the law, problems that continued to the end of his writing career in the 1970s. His books are still taught in university courses around the world and have resulted in the following description of Graham's *Sushila*: "a compelling novel of India from Colin MacInnes's less celebrated brother." Even less celebrated was Lance Thirkell, Graham's and Colin's half-brother, who also tried his hand as a novelist.

With such a pedigree, it is easy to see why McInnes was such a gifted writer, but it may sound odd to hear him refer to himself and his fellow filmmakers as "we Canadians." In fact, because of his maturity, his name, and his accent, some of the younger "born-Canadians" considered him to be "one of Grierson's boys," i.e., one of the experienced Scots and Brits whom John Grierson imported from his English film units. But McInnes chose as his own the adopted country of his father over the native lands of his stepfather and even his mother's and brother's. And he knew more about Canada than many natives, having travelled by car from Halifax to Victoria in 1937 (before there was a Trans-Canada Highway), making contacts across the land, and broadcasting a series of fifteen weekly radio documentaries for CBC. In his dedication to Canada, he brought "the zeal of the converted" to his filmmaking and post-filmmaking careers.

THE GRIERSON CIRCUS

When McInnes arrived in Canada, not many people were engaged in making Canadian films. Fewer than two dozen feature films were produced in the 1930s, and most of those were “Quota Quickies,” low-budget films made by registered Canadian companies just to satisfy a British law requiring that a certain quota of films screened in Britain be made there or elsewhere in the Commonwealth. Hollywood movies dominated the nation’s theatres, and Hollywood stars would often venture to Victoria, BC, to appear in Quota Quickies.

More legitimate Canadian filmmakers were restricted to short films. Individual entrepreneurial filmmakers, like Dick Bird in Saskatchewan and Frank Holmes in Manitoba, were spread across the country, scrambling to make a living, one small project at a time. Only three companies employed more than one or two people: General Films of Regina, Audio Pictures Ltd. of Toronto, and Associated Screen News of Montreal. For the latter two, filmmaking was a secondary pursuit; they were mainly labs that provided Hollywood movie prints for the Canadian market.

The federal government had set up an Exhibits and Publicity Bureau in 1917 to make films. In 1923 the name was changed to the Canadian Government Motion Picture Bureau (CGMPB); it became a clearing house for all government filmmaking, with short films about tourism, agriculture, trade, and industry being staples. During the Depression, production suffered. There was enough money for salaries, not enough for films.

Meanwhile, in England, that government’s filmmaking activities were in the capable hands of John Grierson, a charismatic Scot who had invented the term “documentary” and studied the effects of media with Walter Lippman at the University of Chicago in the mid-1920s. Returning to England, Grierson found a receptive audience for his ideas, and was appointed a joint Films Officer at the Empire Marketing Board (EMB). He immediately put his ideas into practice with a stunning silent documentary about the importance of herring fishing to the fortunes of the country. *Drifters* (1939) combined the editing sophistication of Russian cinema with the energy of Hollywood and Grierson’s own social-minded intimacy. It was the only film Grierson ever directed, but it set the standard for the committed, propaganda documentaries he would champion for the rest of his career.

Grierson's forte was as an organizer and encourager. He soon assembled a cadre of young, like-minded disciples: Basil Wright, Stuart Legg, Arthur Elton, Edgar Anstey, Norman McLaren, Alberto Cavalcanti from Italy, and Evelyn Spice from Canada, among the more notable. Their films quickly captured the attention of the world.

When EMB got out of the filmmaking business, Grierson and his operation moved to the General Post Office (GPO), setting up an outstanding Film Unit there. Among the GPO Film Unit's admirers were the members of the National Film Society of Canada, a group of educators and civic-minded businessmen interested in alternatives to Hollywood cinema and film as art. When the Liberals returned to power in 1935 under Mackenzie King, the society exerted its influence through Ross McLean, the youthful private secretary to the Canadian High Commissioner to England, Vincent Massey. Disappointed with the meagre output of the CGMPB and the lack of interest in Canadian films in the British marketplace (and perhaps influenced by the ominous war-thumpings on the continent), McLean wrote a report encouraging the Canadian government to hire John Grierson to study the state of the art.

Grierson's own report led to an Act of Parliament, the National Film Act, in May 1939, which set up an eight-member National Film Board to oversee all government film production under a Film Commissioner. When war was declared and the first person offered the job (a member of the National Film Society) rejected it, Grierson was convinced to become Canada's first Film Commissioner.

Despite his energy and experience, Grierson's job was not an easy one. Government filmmaking was a bifurcated proposition. Grierson was the overseer, but Frank Badgley remained in charge of production at CGMPB. Grierson imported some of his British colleagues (Legg, Wright, Spice, among others), commissioned some films, and hired eager freelancers. Legg, working out of CGMPB, set up a monthly series called "Canada Carries On" (CCO), short compilation films, cleverly edited from existing footage, to show Canada to Canadians and Canadians to the rest of the world, to quote an often used phrase.

Chafing under this fractured filmmaking system, Grierson used his superior political savvy to gain overall control. He threatened to resign as Film Commissioner, and succeeded in getting the government to ease

Frank Badgley out of CGMPB and consolidated his own power in the summer of 1941. Always adept at garnering funds from government departments and agencies, Grierson had Legg institute a second series, the "World in Action" (WIA), devoted to broader international issues of war and peace. He also substantially expanded the employee rolls, moving from only a handful to over 200 in 1942. At its peak in 1945, the NFB employed over 600 people in Ottawa, expanding rapidly year by eventful year. Graham McInnes was hired "full-time" in one of the first big waves in January 1942, though he had unofficially been collecting a regular salary for almost two years.

UNCOMMON QUALITIES

As the accompanying account indicates, film training at the NFB was not a very formal or extensive process; "You want to take images that will straighten their shoulders, brighten their eyes, put spine into them" was about the extent of Grierson's screenwriting advice. But McInnes soon cottoned onto the required voice-over style that carried NFB films at the time: rhythmic, dramatic, and urgent, almost bombastic, especially in the rousing and hortatory conclusions. This, for instance, is how McInnes ends his script for *Wings of Youth* (1940): "The battle for individual rights is fought with individual skills. Wings above New Zealand, above Sydney, you who are young we salute you. For never was so much owed to so many by so few." The final words of his script for *Ottawa on the River* (1941) are his most Grierson-esque: "Lights burn late, often all through the night. In wartime Ottawa they have set themselves to prove that the will of the people can be carried out just as swiftly and effectively as the edicts of dictators."

By later that year, McInnes had found a better idiom; *Heroes of the Atlantic* (1941) contains these more sober nuggets:

—"barrels of oil and barrels of rum which men need at sea"

—"boys are with their first girls and boys are with their last" (about sailors on leave at a dancehall)

—"Here the professor of the tattoo. Here a game of billiards. Here the prolonged rattle, the strike, the spare, the blow of the bowling alley."

McInnes had quickly learned the crude poetry of documentary voice-

over narration: the repetitions and cadences, the distinctive slang of ordinary voices, the sharp expressions of war rather than the puffy encouragements. The voice-overs, however, were only part of a screenwriter's job. The advice that McInnes, the producer, gave to Stanley Jackson, his scriptwriter on *Great Guns* (1942), indicates the scope of both jobs. In addition to thorough research, he expected "the prose treatment giving a broad shape of the film with suggested visuals in the left margin." But he also requested "a director's dope sheet, giving factories, human [resources], visual[s], and contact info useful to the director and cameraman."

Wartime filmmaking at NFB was a collaborative effort, with individual contributions not regularly listed, but it's clear that it was primarily a producer's medium—like its Hollywood cousins. For instance, for one of his films, McInnes wrote a five-page, single-spaced memo on legal-sized paper to his scriptwriter Bob Edmonds; it contained additional ideas and notes for changes to the draft script submitted. For *Wings Parade* (1942), McInnes used different crew members for footage shot in Montreal, Kingston, Brantford, Belleville, Merritton, Edmonton, Halifax, Winnipeg, Ottawa, Leaside, and Toronto—all on a budget of \$10,000. The producer clearly had to be an idea person and personnel director, an accountant, logistics expert, tactician, and diplomat.

Nonetheless, despite his extensive experience and successes as a producer, director, and writer, McInnes was sanguine about his filmmaking talents. At the end of this memoir, he muses about his career at the NFB:

Grierson had early decided that I was not a real filmmaker. I was a good writer, certainly; and also an able administrator and an efficient PRO [Public Relations Officer]. . . . My best work had been done as an idea man, as a scriptwriter, a cutter, a producer and a PRO. My worst as a director. Since this is the core and marrow of film it must be there that Grierson had unerringly perceived that I should fail. . . .

It was for this reason that McInnes looked for an opportunity for a graceful exit when Grierson resigned in 1945 and the downsizing began. In 1948 he moved to the External Affairs department. Beginning in 1951 he filled a series of consular positions in postings to India, New Zealand, England, Jamaica, and Paris. He became Canada's Permanent Delegate to UNESCO in 1965, before that post was converted to Ambassador in 1967, after which he was elected to UNESCO's board of governors. He died in office there in 1970.

ONE MAN'S DOCUMENTARY

Blessed with a photographic memory, a gifted mimic's ear for dialogue, and an artist's eye for telling details, McInnes writes with an easy grace that is completely different from his mother's and his brother's styles. He can limn characters with strings of apt adjectives and describe action succinctly and forcefully. As his friend, Canadian novelist Robertson Davies, said in his introduction to the second Canadian edition of *The Road to Gundagai*, his prose is "supple and evocative" and he possesses "qualities of perception and selectivity that are uncommon in autobiography." The selectivity is evident in his descriptions of the major (but not, thankfully, all) projects he worked on and the portraits of three score (again, thankfully, not all) of the workers at NFB, from Grierson on down; musicians, editors, lab technicians, distributors, secretaries, other directors, producers, and writers are the subjects of his vivid portraits.

His perception is as much a function of Paris in the 1960s as it is of Ottawa in the 1940s. Perhaps influenced by the new wave in filmmaking (Truffaut, Godard, et al.) and *Cahiers du cinéma's* promotion of the auteur theory, he overvalues directors at NFB (at least in his final evaluation) and undervalues his own contributions. More importantly, it is both nostalgic and romantic (eminently 1960s attitudes), a look back at an heroic era from a point in time when the NFB was still in its ascendancy and Canada was bullish on itself in the glow of Expo 67. Much has happened since then.

The glory days of the NFB, which this memoir evokes both directly and indirectly, are long since gone. Revisionist historians have not been as kind to John Grierson as McInnes is. Grierson left Canada under a dark cloud, the so-called Gouzenko Affair. Gouzenko, a defecting Russian, identified one of Grierson's minor secretaries as a spy. McInnes does not provide even a hint of this, ever the disciple and diplomat. He would have been unaware of the challenges to Grierson's ideology and methodology that have emphasized the master's clay feet. And Norman McLaren's reputation as a lone genius, promoted here, has been trimmed back somewhat over the years as the contributions of Evelyn Lambart have come to the fore.

Nonetheless, the significance of this memoir cannot be denied. Had it

been published when it was written, *One Man's Documentary* would have been unique and ground-breaking, certainly influential. The books on Grierson and/or the NFB by Forsyth Hardy, James Beveridge, and Gary Evans were at least a decade in the future. Its only competition at the time was Marjorie McKay's slight, in-house *History of the National Film Board of Canada*; a mimeographed pamphlet by a fellow employee, it has had very limited circulation among outsiders then and now. McInnes's book published in the early 1970s would have set the stage and established a lively, personal, inclusive tone for subsequent studies.

Even now *One Man's Documentary* is invaluable. The NFB was a colourful, dedicated, unique community, and these qualities have not yet been captured and communicated. It is important that people realize, Canadians especially, that the NFB was not the stereotype many people believe it to be: a grey, earnest, propaganda-spouting, money-wasting institution run by a cranky and forceful if benevolent ideologue. McInnes's account shows what a lively, social place the old lumber mill was, how committed and talented most of the people were, how conscientious they were in their research (sometimes overly or misguidedly so), and what the times were like that framed their cinematic activities. These were civil servants who kept scandalously uncivil-servant hours, civil servants who were convinced they were artists learning from scratch and shaping an essential, nation-building and perhaps world-saving medium. Many of them went on to bigger and better things but are now at best merely names, at worst anonymous or long forgotten. More importantly, many of the films of this era are still in circulation. This book provides a crucial link to these films and to that important stage in Canada's history.