

# ONE MAN'S DOCUMENTARY

A MEMOIR OF THE EARLY  
YEARS OF THE  
NATIONAL FILM BOARD

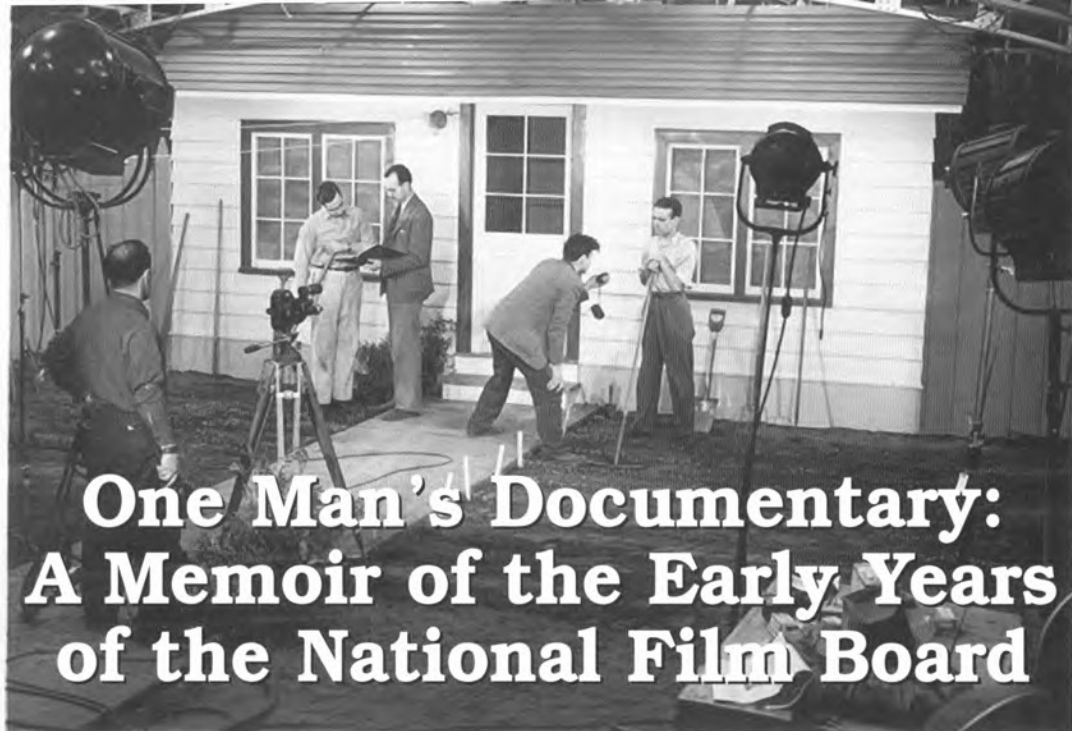


WRITTEN BY:

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EDITED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY:

GENE **WALZ**



The Plots Thicken 1944. McInnes in the centre with notebook.

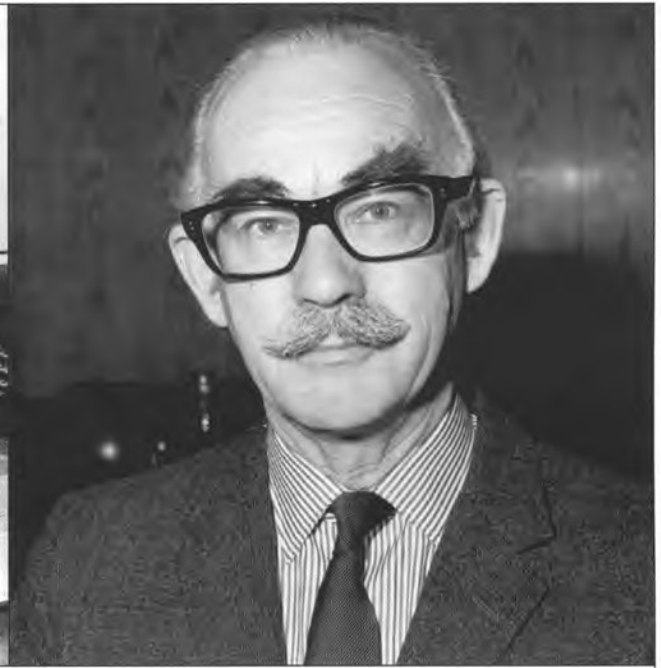
## One Man's Documentary: A Memoir of the Early Years of the National Film Board

Today the National Film Board of Canada has an international reputation as one of the great producers of documentary films. In its formative years in the 1940s, when this reputation was being built, the NFB was also a place of intense creative energy and excitement. Fuelled by wartime enthusiasm and led by the legendary John Grierson, by 1945 the NFB had won its first of many Oscars and had become one of the largest film studios in the world. Graham McInnes was arts columnist for *Saturday Night* magazine and a commentator on CBC radio before joining the NFB in 1939, making him among the first Canadians recruited by Grierson. *One Man's Documentary: A Memoir of the Early Years of the National Film Board* is a lively account of one of the most exciting periods in Canadian filmmaking. McInnes's stylish writing paints vivid portraits of Grierson and the others who helped make the NFB an international institution. Virtually unknown even to the most conscientious film academics and trivia-saturated film buffs, he has called his manuscript "an eyewitness memoir of days of high excitement." It is an insider's look at the people and practices of the NFB from 1939 to 1945. In 1948, McInnes left the NFB to join the foreign service; he eventually became Canada's first ambassador to UNESCO. *From the introduction by Gene Walz*

### McInnes first meets Grierson in October, 1939:

"Sit down, sit down!" [Grierson] barked. "So you got here all right? Good! Now I want you just to try to understand what we're endeavouring to do. You have to see the perspectives, the growing points behind what's going on up here on the Hill. A nation at war; but still bemused. Still half asleep. You have to search, to analyze, to articulate the potential of Canada and to make it so compelling that people will want to plunge their hands into their own pockets. Their *own* pockets. You understand?"

I wasn't quite sure I did. The barked torrent of words flowed over me: a cataract of verbiage with unknown phrases sticking up like sharp rocks to confound the frail barque of my self-confidence and perhaps overwhelm it. He had a habit of jabbing a hole in the air as he spoke; of running his finger round quickly inside his collar; of jerking his head impatiently; of scratching his scalp; above all of hoisting his feet up onto the desk—not in a lazy man's way, but with knees bent, poised like a coiled spring either, you thought, to push his own chair



Graham McInnes: At the NFB in 1945; later, with UNESCO in 1968.

back and send it skidding the length of the room or else to leap right on top of the desk to harangue some imaginary mob. He was wound up tighter than a watch and gave a tremendous sense of controlled strength, of bounding energy and bursting vitality barely held in check by the diminutive body.

He appeared to be driven by a tremendous force, yet when he stood up to say farewell, after bruising me verbally for half-an-hour, I was astonished to see that I was a good head taller than him. Sitting behind a desk, he gave the impression of being very large, or at any rate of being larger than life, a man of sizzling vigour. An alert acrobatic allusive converse bombarded you like a hail of bird shot and at the same time questioned enough of your accepted myths, prejudices or teachings to make you want to protest at every fifth word. Protesting but also fascinated. Numbd by the coruscating flow of ideas, but filled also with a heady sense of freedom and devil-may-care abandon. Because if he—perhaps your prospective employer and certainly at 42, which he then was, a man half-a-generation older than yourself—if he was so iconoclastic, could you not be so too? Could not you too sway along behind his chariot, thumb-



ing your nose at the mighty, even perhaps letting off a loud idealistic belch or an intellectual whistle in their direction? As he rose, I rose.

“Sit down, sit down,” he growled, for he hated—or pretended to hate—big men to overtop him, even in the more physical matter of height which of course none of us can help. He started to pace the room with a swift jerky lope; a cross between Groucho Marx and what, in my imagination, I had always imagined as the walk of Edward Hyde. He shot words, phrases, sentences over his shoulder like a stream of smoke and sparks from a turn-of-the-century locomotive breasting the Rockies.

“You can script in something about closer living, up here. Across the line, it’s all still pie and ice cream and mazuma. They haven’t really grasped the fact that it’s their war, for all that Roosevelt’s a greater man than most. And here they’re searching for leadership, scratching around in the dark looking for matches. You want to take images that will straighten their shoulders, brighten their eyes, put spine into them. It’s here, but they don’t know it. Things seem unreal to them. Pull out the images that they know—street-corner hockey rinks; sap flowing in





the sugar bush; the hard, clear line of the Laurentians; men and clattery combines on the Prairies. You know the kind of thing! You may not know much about visuals yet, but do us an outline. Write a script to time for nine minutes and put in your visuals on the margin, a guide to the director. All right, you got that?" He stopped his sudden pacing and jerked me back to earth. I didn't like to reply "Got what?" but I very nearly did. For the tirade had been so rapid, so like the Sten gun that could cut a man in two at 20 paces, that my numbed attention had wandered to the architecture and the decor.

The ceiling was enormously high with elaborate plasterwork round the remains of a nonexistent chandelier and an opulent floral dado. The windows, recessed and fitted with shutters, were enormously tall and hung with sedate and slightly moth-eaten green plush curtains. Through them I could see the snow-piled desolation of Parliament Hill with the romantic towers and pinnacles of the East Block and the main Parliament Buildings biting into the crisp blue winter sky. High up and near at hand a deep bell sonorously tolled the hour. I caught myself thinking: the view of St. Basil's in the Kremlin must be not too unlike this. I wonder if it looks as peaceful, as unreal? Are we at war? Or in a dream? The Kremlin; Moscow; the Nazi-Soviet Pact; the rape of Poland; the crushing of Finland. Yes, we were at war all right.

"You got that?"

"Yes. Yes, I've got it, sir."

"For Christ's sake cut out that public school stuff here. My name's Grierson."

"Yes, Mr. Grierson."

"Grierson!"

"Yes—ah—Grierson."

"All right now, McInnes. I haven't any more time for you today. Get the script written as soon as you can and mail it up to us. Miss Scellen will give you a cheque for expenses on your way out. Miss Scellen!"

**Later:**

[Grierson:] "There's no use pretending we're not in a terrible mess. The Germans have knifed right through our collective individualisms, precisely because they were individual. And there'll be rough times ahead for the Brits. We must oppose discipline to discipline. Ours to theirs. But you discipline a democracy by creating the collective will from within, not by imposing it from without. This is what we have to do. All of us. And in the next few months. For the British it'll be weeks, because they've only the Channel. We have the Atlantic. Don't let's cherish the vain illusion we can squat behind it. Otherwise all it'll turn out to be will be a bigger and wetter Maginot Line. Now let's see you all get going, with a conscience and a head of steam; analyze, project, get at the truth. And don't forget it's a many-headed monster and you may have, at times, to make people believe what they ought to believe rather than what they want to believe. Especially now. All right, off you go."

Pretty heady stuff for young men in an uncertain world with as yet uncertain guidance. And perhaps not altogether good for you, when you felt you ought to be enlisting, or offering your services to a Sten gun factory or doing volunteer work in canteens. But it was no use everyone going in for square bashing, even if you did form threes. Canada, we were beginning to be told—unexciting, prosaic, careful, quiet Canada—had a role to play: the Arsenal of Democracy; western end of the Atlantic lifeline; a new, young country that (with the USA not a belligerent) could play a vital part... and with Grierson's magic touch, even the clichés sounded dynamic and exciting. It was something in staid, safe Canada, 3,000 miles from any fighting, to feel that you were wanted, that your own particular skill was valid and needed, that you could make a contribution.

**From May 1940:**

Those of us who gathered, white-faced and tongue-tied, in Grierson's office that memorable day in May 1940 were scarcely aware of what had hit us, comprehending only dimly the magnitude of the crisis and of the issues at stake. We were also unaware that the sprightly man who stormed up and down the incongruous burgundy carpet, flailing us for our lack of ideas, scourging us with his ironic whiplash tongue, inspiring us to go out and lift Canada's morale up off the floor, had already fought and won his own particular battle. He had gained control of the bureau with its entire film-making facilities and all that this implied for the future of a centralized drive in the mass media. Even more important, he, the shocker, the inspirer, the perpetual gadfly and disrupter and disturber, had gained the confidence of the astute and judicious statesman who was our Prime Minister. How had he done it?

**The NFB's first headquarters:**

The old lumber mill was divided into two floors. Downstairs was the projection theatre, which doubled as a sound recording studio; the negative cutting room with its corps of white-smocked, white-cotton-gloved girls who, under the eye of their "matron," protected "the sacred negative," as a visiting French cameraman once called it. Beyond the negative cutting room (into which no man was ever allowed) and separated from it by the men's lavatory (into which no woman ever penetrated) was the lab entrance, to which rushes and opticals were delivered and from which fresh work prints were received. Beyond that lay the mechanical developers, the printers and timers, the chemicals mixing rooms, the machine shop. Next came the 6-mm developer for making direct 16-mm negatives and the reduction printer for reducing to 16 mm from 35 mm—16 mm being, broadly speaking, nontheatrical and 35 mm theatrical. In annexes made of cinderblocks were the film library, the negative library, the stock-shot library, shipping, delivery and stores and later another and smaller projection theatre.

Upstairs were the administrative offices, the optical cameras for the standard special effects of fade in, fade out, wipe and dissolve, on which the sense of cinematic time lapse or place change so often depends; a small animation studio and art room; all the cutting and editing rooms; the music and sound-effects libraries and cutting rooms; one of two offices for Grierson, Legg, McLean and the accountants and treasury people; and finally an enormous room crammed with desks known as "the manning pool." It was a great barn of a place with a cement floor, fibreboard partitions and windows only at the extreme river end. Over the clatter of Movieolas and the whirr and whine of rewinds, the sudden metallic surges and snatches of unidentifiable sound effects and truncated music, hung a dangerous pall of cigarette smoke, in a building stored at all times with at least 500,000 feet of highly inflammable nitrate stock. Into this enormous room the bewildered acolyte was hurled, to sink or swim in the dog-eat-dog rat race of making wartime documentaries.

To those of us so hurled or thrust it was, of course, all we had ever known of the film business. Thinking it normal, we learned to cut sound tracks for two different films in the same room, enduring the earsplitting cacophony without protest; we accepted the really frightful fire hazard; we welcomed the old, beat-up, bleacher-style seats in the recording room, the wooden carpenter's horses doing duty as cutting benches, the tables used as desks, the desks used for storing film, the rewind mounted on a jiggly piece of three ply; and finally



NFB's crowded office life.

we even enjoyed the composition of deathless prose in the atmosphere of a boiler factory. We flowed like treacle into every nook and cranny of the rotten old building and possessed it utterly.

We were a true "in" group—perhaps the first, certainly a very early one. Few treats were more exquisite than visiting the local cinema with one's colleagues so as to comment disparagingly on every jump cut, every out-of-sync sound sequence, every grainy show print and every enlarged, spluttering cue mark as the projectionist changed reels. And few parties were more keenly enjoyed than those at which Margaret Ann [Bjornson's] flat was joined by that of her next door neighbours, Norman McLaren and Guy Glover, and their crowd of animators, artists and musical friends. Then the wordy flow, the beer, the rye and the cigarettes did really produce—at about 2 a.m. on a night when the sky creaked at 20 below zero (i.e. 52 degrees of frost)—the genuine stuff of group creation.

unique and unrepeatable glimpse of another world. McLaren was the true Pied Piper, and those of us privileged to see his beautiful, witty and incredibly inventive films felt, when they ended, like the boy from Hamelin who had been unable to follow the piper through the fissure in the rock but who had momentarily glimpsed a world of astonishing beauty.

McLaren was not an animator in the Disney sense. Where Disney required a whole studio full of cameras, artists and special-effects men, McLaren required only himself, paint brushes and paper clips. Where Disney required thousands of plastic or celluloid overlays, photographed in depth by an optical camera and moved each frame or series of frames by an unseen corps of individual animators on ladders working from a story board, McLaren required only the actual film stock itself. The reason was that he drew, painted, scratched, etched, scribbled directly on to film. This gave his work a character, a personality similar to that of an artist's line or wash, and since McLaren was in addition no mean artist, some wonderfully flexible visions of wit, beauty and immediacy were produced.

We first saw McLaren in the fall of 1941. At that time the manning pool, crammed with sweated and dirndled workers, contained as many Movieolas as desks. Grierson strode, swift and chunky, into the pool and clapped his hands for silence—a habit to which he was addicted. "All right now, children! You're going down to the theatre to see an original McLaren. But before that you'd better see him, and here he is." Few of us had noticed the slight fellow beside Grierson: grey baggy pants, openwork sandals and a turtleneck sweater; above it a soft, intelligent, essentially inward-looking face, marked by thin tortoiseshell spectacles and topped by a curling unruly mass of black hair. The pose was diffident, almost apologetic; the voice, when it came, almost equally so, but in a soft Scots burr, and behind it a bite and precision that sprang from intimate acquaintance with his strange craft and complete certainty as to where he was going. He squiggled himself about on one sandalled foot and twisted his knotted hands before him as if he were a young girl performing at an elocution class.

"I'm going to show you two films. The first I made in New York last year with Mary Ellen Bute (some of us raised eyebrows: these pretentious Yankee



#### **McInnes first meets McLaren:**

One always hesitates to use the word "genius." It is a highly emotive word that normally induces in the reader (especially if he be Anglo-Saxon) a powerful distaste for the person to whom it is applied. Nevertheless, in respect of Norman McLaren, I have to crave the reader's indulgence. McLaren was not simply an animator; he had a sense of invention so delicate, so inexhaustibly fertile, so vividly and constantly informed with a sense both of wit and of beauty, that to see even a one-minute animated film by him (and his films were rarely more than five minutes long) was to experience a



names!). Unfortunately, she's not here today to see it. It's based on Saint-Saens's "Danse Macabre" and it's rather tentative..." "Primitive McLaren," Grierson interjected. McLaren gave a wintry smile. "The second film is one I'm making for the Wartime Prices and Trade Board here. It's to encourage investment in War Savings Certificates and it's called *Five for Four* because," he shrugged his shoulder apologetically, "you get five dollars with accrued interest if you invest four dollars. This is only a work print, but Grierson said I could show it to you. Because it's a work print, it's in black and white but the show print will be in colour, once we get the separation negatives made. I believe it's going into the theatres," he finished shyly.

"You bet your life it's going into the theatre," said Grierson aggressively. "And my guess is it'll do more to help war savings than all Donald Gordon's episcopal thunderings!" Gordon was chairman of the Wartime Prices and Trade Board. "OK. Let's go!" We trooped downstairs to the theatre, uncertain what we should see or quite how seriously to take this fey fellow McLaren. *Danse Macabre* turned out to be an ingenious but uncertainly developed theme of skipping skeletons and skulls descending hell-ward to the Saint-Saens music. It was titillating, made you tingle a bit, but seemed to foreshadow no strongly original performance. But when the strains of Albert Ammons, the great boogie-woogie pianist, hit the still darkened screen, we knew, even while we waited through aeons of white leader liberally splashed with giant grease pencil marks, that we were in for something heroic. As the strains of "Bass Boogie" beat on our ears, eldritch forms began to appear on the screen. They were dollar bills, but they limned and dislimned and flowed and contorted, and they were suddenly chairs, flowerpots, roosters, beanpoles, ladders, snakes, pots and pans, even (and with the possibility of an entire drawing appearing only on a single frame—1/24th of a second—how could you be sure?) jerries or *pots de chambre*.



Was ESP at work? It was of course far too early for LSD. The little signs hopped and twitched and flickered; became blobs, amoeba, floating eyes, floating figures, transformed in a brilliant blaze of slithery line from plus to minus and all at once they were five and took a bow and the film was over. After a few moments of stunned silence there was a burst of tremendous and prolonged applause. This cynical and brutal audience of young professional filmmakers had met their master and they knew it. Thereafter the fastidious recutting of the workprint continued at the Movieolas in the manning pool; and whenever the strain of Albert Ammons's "Bass Boogie" began to clatter through the gaunt and echoing room, we would steal from our desks and our rewinds to watch and listen, while outside through the big bare window, the Gattineau Hills turned from red and bronze to a bleak blue black, and the slate grey Ottawa River slowly filmed with ice.

From *One Man's Documentary: A Memoir of the Early Years of the National Film Board*, by Graham McInnes, edited with notes and an introduction by Gene Walz, published by University of Manitoba Press. 288 pages.

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