

# Sisters of Documentary: The influence of Ruby Grierson and Marion Grierson on documentary in the 1930s

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In a sense what's really interesting about the documentary and the way that it's evolved is that it's more directly involved with Ruby Grierson's approach to filmmaking than to his. He's called the Father of Documentary but actually he's probably the father of the commercial, whereas her films and paying attention to the details, paying attention to the truth of ordinary people's lives, is what *vérité* filming has been built on [. . .] (Roger Graef, filmmaker, in Adams 1994).

**R**uby Grierson (1904–1940), like her sister Marion, was a prolific maker of documentary films throughout the 1930s.

Grierson initially worked as a teacher at an all-girls school in Edinburgh. She spent summers working in London for the GPO film unit, before giving up her work as a teacher to commit herself full-time to filmmaking. Her life and career was cut tragically short in 1940 when she was making a film about British evacuees for the National Film Board of Canada and the ship she was on, 'City of Benares', was torpedoed by a German submarine.

Marion Grierson, m. Taylor (1907–1998) first trained as a journalist. Early on in her career she spent two years working in Canada. It was during her time there that she met Evelyn Spice, a Canadian and fellow journalist who, with Marion Grierson's encouragement,

moved to London where she became a pivotal filmmaker in the documentary film movement. Grierson joined Empire Marketing Board film unit in 1930 and was eventually head of production for the Travel and Industrial Development Association.

The two sisters are relatively unknown as documentary filmmakers, especially when compared to their brother, the 'Father of Documentary'. While John Grierson is known as 'Grierson', they, like many women filmmakers, are often referred to by their first names, if they are referred to at all. Even when their work as filmmakers received attention in the press, it was undoubtedly framed in relation to their identity as the "sister of John Grierson, the brilliant Scottish director who established his reputation with that remarkable film *Drifters*" (*Glasgow Herald* 1934: 18). Of course, having 'Grierson' as a brother proved influential in the development of both of their careers in documentary. He offered jobs, but he also just provided opportunities for general exposure to the work of a documentary filmmaker. Marion Grierson's account of her introduction to editing provides a good example of this:

Well my first introduction to it, though I didn't do any work on it was while my brother was working on *Drifters* in his little flat in Hampstead . . . this was a rather primitive attempt at a cutting room he had there, and as far as I remember, the films were all suspended from the mantelpiece



The Grierson family in 1905(?) when Ruby was a baby and John was a small boy.

in strips . . . he had waste paper baskets to hold most of it . . . I had no idea how he found any sense to the whole thing [. . .] I didn't have anything to do with filmmaking at that time and went as you know to Canada . . . for two years . . .

Then, as she recalls, when she came back:

. . . he wanted me to come in and help him with a thing we called the *Empire Journal*, it was a feature that went out monthly and showed at the Imperial Institute to the public . . . and this contained items from Canada and other countries [. . .] that was my first introduction when I did the editing. [1]

So began Marion Grierson's career as an editor and documentary filmmaker, albeit in the shadow of a high profile brother.

Ruby Grierson's contribution to documentary filmmaking is better known. However, her impact on the development of documentary filmmaking in the 1930s wasn't given due consideration until after her untimely death. Her role in the direct-to-camera interviews in the pivotal film *Housing Problems* (Arthur Elton, Edgar Anstey, Johy Taylor, 1935) was uncredited. Even her 'most important film' cited in her obituary in *The Scotsman* is given the wrong title *Cargo from Ardrrossan* (rather than *Cargo for Ardrrossan*) and is incorrectly described as shot in Mull (rather than its actual setting, Islay) (*Scotsman* 1940: 2).

Gwendolyn Audrey Foster writes a persuasive plea for due consideration to be given to the two sisters' work, connecting their achievements to British documentary but also the feminist movement. For Foster, the women:

deserve to be reintegrated into a revisionist version of British film history. Their participation has been obscured by their brother's brilliant career. Perhaps the three Griersons should share credit as the founders of the British documentary movement. It is not surprising to uncover women filmmakers' contributions in this area. The movement's ideological support of social reform certainly shares common goals with the feminist movement! (Foster 1995:158).

Similarly, it is not surprising to note their mother was a committed socialist and suffragette. As Marion Grierson recalled in Fiona Adam's 1994 documentary focusing on her sister's life and work, the possibilities presented by the new medium of film in the 1930s was exciting, "It was in line with what my mother had in mind for a long time . . . there were better things for women than the kitchen sink". Both sisters' commitment to a documentary approach that would give voice to its subjects rather than impose a 'Voice of God' narration realigned documentary with a spirit of equality rather than authoritarianism. The filmmaker was not the father, but instead, could be brothers or sisters, fellow conspirators. It is in this sense, that their filmmaking could be seen as feminist in its approach. This is certainly true in *They Also Serve* (1940), a film that was arguably Ruby Grierson's most important film. It is a feminist film in its focus on the importance of the intimate thoughts, worries and frustrations of the ordinary housewife during the War, but also for its attempts to connect intimately with its subject.

Today the intimate engagement with documentary subjects is so commonplace that the significance of what was achieved in these early innovations can sometimes be glibly underestimated. For instance, the BFI's Screenonline description of *Housing Problems* forewarns that "to a modern viewer the rehearsed lines sound stilted" (Birchall, n.d.). Yet, when compared to the stilted voice-over narrations from the time, the voices of the real people we are looking at on screen seem daring and fresh. In *People of Britain – Peace Film* (dir. Paul Rotha and asst. dir. Ruby Grierson, 1936), the full impact of this approach is felt when a woman, bent over washing her clothes, rises slightly, before looking directly to camera and beginning an impassioned speech:

When there's a quarrel between two people the police are called in to settle it. Why can't the League of Nations be strong enough to settle disputes between nations?



The caretaker who speaks to the camera in *Housing Problems* – one of Ruby Grierson's suggestions.

There is no voice-over narration, no mediator between the audience and the subjects filmed. Instead, Ruby Grierson's approach gave the subjects of her films, often disempowered within society as a whole, the chance to speak directly about what mattered to them. As she was notoriously reported to have said to the tenants filmed in *Housing Problems*: "The camera is yours. The microphone is yours. Now tell the bastards exactly what it's like to live in slums." (Hardy 1997: 114). The result was powerful and represented a significant departure from documentary filmmaking at the time. Grierson was also overtly challenging her brother's approach to documentary, reportedly saying to him:

"The trouble with you is that you look at things as though they were in a gold fish bowl."

In reply her brother said, "Yes I do. But so what?"

"I'm going to break your goldfish bowl", was Ruby Grierson's retort. (Hardy 1977: 114)

*Housing Problems* is generally cited as the revolutionary film that broke down some of the barriers between filmmakers and the subjects they were filming. The significance of Ruby Grierson's input, and as a filmmaker in general, wasn't fully recognised until after her death. See for instance, Basil Wright's passionate tribute in the *Spectator* shortly after her death:

The synthetic world of film needs, more than anything, the true human touch; few in documentary have it in full measure; none have it in its intrinsic purity as did Ruby Grierson. All those who believe in the social potentialities of film will mourn the

loss of a passionate pilgrim and a loyal and unselfish worker. (Oct 4 1940, p. 339)

Ruby Grierson's death had an enormous impact on John Grierson and the rest of the family and, in the years following her death, he aimed to set right her marginalisation by emphasising her contribution whenever he could. For instance, in a number of episodes of his television programme, *This Wonderful World* (1957-66), Grierson took the opportunity to share and celebrate her work. On the 3 of March 1958, he recalled "she really had a very great feeling for people – a very good filmmaker, particularly the human side". [2] A few months later, on the 10th of August, he cites *Housing Problems* as "the first great classic of intimate film reporting [ . . . ] It changed the whole attitude to interviewing not only in film but on the BBC too – and the revolution of attitude was so unmistakable that I jumped aboard the wagon immediately". [3] And on the 3rd of August 1961 he shows and praises *Housing Problems* as well as his sister's film, *Zoo and You* [a film now sadly lost] for demonstrating 'her interest in just looking at faces'. [4] In his book, *Grierson on Documentary*, he gives further emphasis on Ruby Grierson's importance in the development of documentary:

Sociological observation became more and more an integral part of the films [ . . . ] It was noted first in such films as *Workers and Jobs*, *Housing Problems* and *Enough to Eat* and among those whose influence on this trend will always be acknowledged was Ruby Grierson. Her sympathetic handling of people living in depressed conditions in the slums of London brought a new warmth and feeling into documentary and after *Housing Problems* the films were never again quite so detached and impersonal. (1946: 22).

Marion Grierson was also an uncredited assistant for *Housing Problems*, yet little is said about her own input. As mentioned previously, Marion Grierson's contributions to documentary are even less known and certainly less celebrated. Ruby Grierson is known as a young documentary filmmaker full of promise whose life and career was tragically cut short by her untimely death. The fact that Marion Grierson's remarkable achievements in her career were cut short by the demands of becoming a mother

seemed to have relegated her to even greater obscurity. And yet, she made a similar number of films during the same time frame as her sister and her work was, arguably, equally innovative. As Ros Cranston writes, in a recent BFI list of '29 Inspiring Women in Film' for this year's International Women's Day, her films present 'a sophisticated array of visual sound techniques' (10 March). Although it is not an overtly political subject as that in *Housing Problems*, her film *So This is London* (1933), made two years before *Housing Problems*, also gives voice to its subjects in what Gwendolyn Audrey Foster refers to as an 'unflinchingly realistic approach to documentary journalism' (1995: 158). The film is about the city dwellers' escape to the seaside and features a commentary by WH Auden. On one level, the relationship between the film and commentary presents a poetic style of documentary whereby lines of spoken word are cast against rhyming images (e.g. an aerial view of London streets accompanies the words 'under these roofs one cannot tell how many people sigh for the sea'). But it is really the film's innovative use of the non-synchronous soundtrack that really forms its most striking feature. Throughout the film casual conversation and seemingly overheard intimate exchanges with people who are, as Londoners, the focus of the film, develop a less poetic impressionistic approach in favour of a more direct relationship. So, for instance, long shots of busy London streets, where people are kept at a distance that ensures anonymity, are contrasted with acoustically close-up and intimate conversational exchanges about going to the seaside on the soundtrack. Overall, the relationship between the soundtrack and images creates a sense of identification with the Londoners' longing for escape from the busy city streets to the open seascapes, gloriously established in the film's opening.

Marion Grierson's journalistic approach, incorporating interviews with the people who feature as part of her seaside portrait, is similar to the direct approach adopted in *Housing Problems* two years later. Considering *Housing Problems* is the first film Ruby Grierson has been officially 'unofficially credited' as working on, it seems fair to consider Marion Grierson's own development of technique might have had some influence on the production or even just Ruby Grierson's intervention into the production.

Fiona Adams' documentary on Ruby Grierson (BBC Scotland 1994), although wonderfully rich and detailed, perhaps paints an all too optimistic portrait of Grierson as someone who 'would have lived to become one of the giants of the merging medium' (Donald 1994). It is both sad and encouraging to imagine she would have been; however, it is also likely that had she lived, she would have faced the same challenges of other women filmmakers post-war, where curbed filmmaking activities meant fewer chances for employment. As Adams reflects elsewhere, 'one can only speculate that she would have had to make the same choices between family and film-making, but it is highly possible when you consider her age, the era and the experiences of women in the same position' (2006: 2).

In 1937 the GPO Film Unit employed ten women (out of 51 staff overall), most were for low grade work such as short hand typing, cleaning and negative cutting. Senior positions were occupied by men. Evelyn Spice, in her role as director, whom Marion Grierson encouraged to come to London to work for the GPO, was the exception (Fox 2013: 587). After the war, less work meant fewer opportunities for women to extend their work beyond lower grade jobs. Jo Fox's recent article on female labour in 1930s documentary unpicks the realities faced women documentarists in detail. Things like irregular hours and social demands meant women with children were likely to be excluded. As a result, many women had children late in life or chose not to have children at all. In a recent Q&A after the Glasgow Film Festival premier of the new documentary, *Documenting John Grierson* (2013), director and former mentee of Grierson's, Laurence Henson, recalled Grierson's demanding and idiosyncratic working methods, which often involved going to the pub in the evening before returning to work late at night, and expecting others to do the same. It is not surprising that female filmmakers, like Marion Grierson, felt unable to continue after having children. In fact, as Jo Fox's article reveals through reference to a letter from Marion Grierson to Evelyn Spice, the war had an unexpected effect of affording Grierson more time to work as a filmmaker and away from her duties as a caregiver during the time her children were evacuated to Gloucester. [5]

From an early age, Marion Grierson recalled finding her own voice as somewhat of a struggle. In an interview

she said, 'I don't think my brothers were particularly reserved . . . it was a bit difficult to find a voice in the household though – too many voices. . .' [6] Perhaps it was these anxieties around being heard in a household of many voices that drove both sisters to ensure that other people had the chance to make their own voice heard. Whatever the root of their egalitarian approach to documentary, it is a legacy that should be remembered and celebrated. Both sisters' voices deserve heard. The films also deserve to be seen.

In 1994, a screening of Ruby Grierson's films at Glasgow Film Theatre was organised to mark the broadcast of Fiona Adams' documentary on Grierson on BBC Scotland. As Adams recalled, Janet McBain (then curator of Scottish Screen Archive) spoke out in a lively post-screening discussion, 'stating that that Ruby's films should not be locked away in the British Film Institute in London but housed in Glasgow and available for anyone to see if they wanted to' (Adams 2006). Twenty years on and although the physical collection of her films has not expanded north of the border, digital technologies has meant that a number of the films are more widely available. A few of both sisters' films are available for viewing through BFI's Screenonline (albeit through registered access), but there is still scant material available on DVD. The BFI's DVD boxset, *Land of Promise: The British Documentary Movement (1930–1950)* includes Ruby Grierson's *Today We Live* and *They Also Serve*, yet there is much more to be seen. A full retrospective of the contribution of both sisters to the development of the documentary tradition would be very welcome and is long overdue.

#### Notes

- [1] Interview with Marion Grierson for documentary on John Grierson, Grierson Archive, University of Stirling, GA.10.51.  
 [2] Transcript for *This Wonderful World*, 3 March 1958, Grierson Archive, University of Stirling, G8.5.21.  
 [3] Transcript for *This Wonderful World*, 10 August 1958, Grierson Archive, University of Stirling, G8.5.21.  
 [4] Transcript for *This Wonderful World*, 3 August 1961, Grierson Archive, University of Stirling, G8.23.17.  
 [5] Fox citing letter from Marion Grierson to Evelyn Cherry (Spice), 5 July 1944, MG 31, D173, 34: 7, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa.  
 [6] Transcript of interview with Marion

Grierson, Grierson Archive, University of Stirling, GA.10.51.

#### Filmography (Ruby Grierson)

*Housing Problems* (Arthur Elton, Edgar Anstey, John Taylor, 1935), Ruby Grierson, uncredited assistants  
*People of Britain* (Ruby Grierson, 1936)  
*London Wakes Up* (Ruby Grierson, 1936)  
*Today and Tomorrow* (Ruby Grierson, 1936)  
*To-day We Live* (Ruby Grierson and Ralph Bond, 1937)  
*Animal Kingdom – The Zoo and You* (Ruby Grierson, 1938)  
*Animals on Guard* (Ruby Grierson, 1938)  
*Cargo for Ardrossan* (Ruby Grierson, 1939)  
*Choose Cheese* (Ruby Grierson, 1940)  
*Green Food for Health* (Ruby Grierson, 1940)  
*Six Foods for Fitness* (Ruby Grierson, 1940)  
*What's for Dinner?* (Ruby Grierson, 1940)  
*They Also Serve* (Ruby Grierson, 1940)

#### Filmography (Marion Grierson)

*So This Is London* (Marion Grierson, 1933)  
*London Town* (Marion Grierson, 1933)  
*St James's Park* (Marion Grierson, 1934)  
*Edinburgh* (Marion Grierson, 1934)  
*Britain's Countryside* (Marion Grierson, 1934)  
*Housing Problems* (Arthur Elton, Edgar Anstey, John Taylor, 1935), Marion Grierson, uncredited production team  
*Southern Seaside* (Marion Grierson, 1935)  
*The Heart of an Empire* (Marion Grierson, producer, 1935)  
*The Key to Scotland* (Marion Grierson, 1935)  
*For All Eternity* (Marion Grierson, 1935)  
*Beside the Seaside* (Marion Grierson, 1935)  
*Cathedrals of England* (Marion Grierson, 1937)  
*Around the Village Green* (Marion Grierson and Evelyn Spice, 1937)  
*London on Parade* (Marion Grierson, producer, 1937)

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