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## **Interview with Marion Grierson**

**Interviewer: Margaret Thompson**

**Marion Grierson (1907-1998) was a Scottish documentary maker, who with her sister Ruby and brother John was part of the documentary film movement. She worked with her brother at the Empire Marketing Board Film Unit then went on to run the film unit at The Travel and Industrial Development Association. She later went on to become editor of *World Film News* before retiring from film work. She then went on to have a second career working for the Youth Advisory Service.**

**MT:** This is Margaret Thompson interviewing Marion Grierson; documentary film director, editor reporter, literary editor and writer. These were the professions that she followed in the early years of documentary filmmaking. She later went on to become Area Youth Work Coordinator for Ballantrae Council in the West of Scotland. The date of this interview is 1st October 1989.

Marion, would you like to tell us something of the background of the Grierson family?

**MG:** Yes, to start with both my parents were teachers; my father when I was born was headmaster of a village school set in the heart of Scotland. It was a miner's village and the miners past our house early on the morning and passed again in the evening where their faces were black. Their wives were waiting at home with a tin bath in front of the fire. My parents were both interested in politics and when an election was due and speakers came to the village my father always chaired the Conservative party meetings and my mother the Labour party meetings. My mother had come from the Keir Hardie country in Ayrshire and knew a great deal about what happened to the workers there. My father's father had been a lighthouse keeper and indeed had something to do with the Stephenson family when the Bell Rock was built. He was then a blacksmith and I think he was able to weld metals. Later on, when the lighthouse was built he was asked to remain as light keeper. He was always very fond of the sea and every summer for two months we went to the coast on the West of Scotland and rented a flat and every morning we saw the lighthouse ahead of us. My uncle was the lighthouse keeper there. My father went back to his youth, there was a rowing boat there and we went out to fish, indeed it was necessary as it was very remote and was to largely find our own food from the sea. We were a family of eight, my brother<sup>1</sup> was the first born and third member of the family, I was the youngest of the group. As I mentioned, there was a great deal of political argument, in the village and in our house was well and I think my brother was constantly mixed up with them arguments, certainly he found it very easy to argue, on the right side, on the wrong side, whatever. We had a lot to do with the village because my father was also registrar in the village and knew about all the families because the children went to the village school, we went to the village school as well and we knew all the village people.

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<sup>1</sup> John Grierson (1899-1972), brother of Marion, was a Scottish documentary maker. A pioneer of the documentary film movement, his films included *Drifters* (1929) as director and *Night Mail* (1936) as producer. He was also a film critic and a social critic.

They were a very deprived lot really the mining wages were poor and there was really no great work for the women though a carpet factory did exist. There was a real need during the war and we set up a soup kitchen. It was set up in the school and it was made from bones from the butcher and vegetables from the local landowner and the village people came, the children of course had soup during the day from this source. The school during the war was partly occupied during the war as was the carpet factory. The Colonel of the regiment stayed in the school house and we had a great deal to do with the military at that time, but the war didn't really exacerbate the poverty that remained static. There was always help asked from various purposes sometimes to obtain old age pensions which was difficult at that time as the records were poor for old age pensions and so forth but my father did a lot of research work for individuals. The other help was given by my mother who visited the village people a great deal and knew which ones needed help. My younger brother when he was older became a medical student and he was called upon quite often this way we were really part of the village life and indeed when the soldiers came back from the war and had a parade through the village my father was almost at the lead of this because he knew almost everyone of them. Although our family was a large one, in quite a large house we were always called upon to help victims of sea disasters. My father's family was large to begin with and when they married they generally married light keepers or those involved in the sea in some capacity. There was three families I remember came to us whose orphans came to use at one point or another. One was a husband; he was killed on board ship stepping into the hold backward. Another one was drowned at sea a third was lost on the Flannan Isle disaster. The light was found by a passing ship not to be burning and when an investigation was made the three light keepers were seen to be vanished. There had been little evidence of anything to cause this but the general opinion now was that a general high wave had swept and taken the men away as they tried to save the gear.

This was a bit of a difficulty to stretch the few resources across a large family plus orphans but we managed somehow- growing vegetables in the garden. My mother was an extremely good manager and certainly we did not suffer malnutrition as many of the children in the village did. But largely I think it was her knowledge of nutrition, she studied it. She also made a very great point of saying that we were all able with school work and so on, to go to university. But to do that it was necessary to get scholarships so she saw that as her job to get us through to scholarship standard and to get through the brightest students in the village school. So we had regularly little classes in the kitchen, our own family and the children of the village. She did indeed manage to get one of the boys to Oxford to Ruskin College and her own family, they didn't aspire to such heights but they managed to get to university, usually Glasgow. In fact that was where I started at Glasgow University, my brother had a degree with them at one time, and my brother had studied Philosophy. My father retired when I was in my second year at Glasgow University, they moved to Edinburgh and I transferred to Edinburgh University and graduated. After graduating I went to London to try and find a job as many Scots had done before me. It was a time of high unemployment everywhere. Highly qualified people, people more qualified than I couldn't get jobs and I had wanted pick up a writing career some how. I did a lot of freelancing with not much result my sister with whom we lived was a physiotherapist and as a

physiotherapist she worked freelance and her bills were sent out quarterly and this made life very difficult indeed and we had a very hard time for a couple of years until I spotted in a newspaper and advertisement for a competition that aimed at getting a group of young people out to Canada on a special train. I entered this and had to spend a couple of weeks learning about Canada and it all it entailed and answer a large number of questions. I was used to examinations by then it wasn't a great hardship and it just so happens that I was chosen as one of the group and we travelled across Canada and I conceived the idea of staying there for a while and indeed managed to get a job at a newspaper in the Middle West. I was hired as a reporter at first and went round the station and saw the immigrants come in with their goods and chattels tied up with sheets sitting around wondering what to do unable to speak the language and they were being allocated to farms usually. I visited the local morgue everyday and usually there were people there that they didn't know what to do with as they had no relatives, no records for them. It was the Headquarters for the mounted police and we sometimes saw them. I spent two years as a reporter latterly I was women's page editor but that job didn't interest me as much I confess and I decided to come home.

**MT:** Can you remember what date that would be Marion?

**MG:** It was around 1928, 1929. Back home I went to London and found my brother at that time in a flat in Hampstead and when I visited he was busy editing *Drifters*. The film was suspended from the top of the mantel piece and hung down both of us no fire burning I must say and he used a waste paper basket for the cut outs. He showed me a bit of how to join film at that time and gave me some rudiments on how to edit. He was very moved by the Russian films of that time and learnt an awful lot from them about editing. Just about this time the Empire Marketing Board started up. Their main source of material were the off cuts from a film made by Roger Crichton of a Royal visit made to various parts of the empire and there was quite a lot of material on Canada, well at the outset John Taylor<sup>2</sup>, Basil Wright<sup>3</sup>, J.D Taylorson were on the staff. I was called in to edit Canadian material for the express purpose of showing regularly programmes at the Imperial Institute. These were short films, and I think added to them were off cuts from films made about industrial Britain. Flaherty had shot material on glass blowing and pottery and the steelworks too and we made little short films of those too and we showed them at the same place for the same purpose. Grierson at this time was thinking of wider outlets of films for Educational, instructive purposes and he was much interested in the movement that was coming to introduce films into schools. There had been a group in Scotland that had been making films for schools; they were teachers strictly teaching films. His films weren't to follow such narrow lines. He wanted to give more of a picture of industry for example, of the people who were in industry and the kind of work men were called upon to do, of their attitudes to work and so on and he did this increasingly well through the early Empire Marketing Board films. He was shooting sometime down at the port of London and the aim was to make a film on this basic subject but the material was well shot and was so attractive, that I'm afraid we used it all up on

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<sup>2</sup> John Taylor (1914-1992) was an English documentary filmmaker; his films included *The Song of Ceylon* (1934) as assistant director and *Island People* (1940) as producer.

<sup>3</sup>Basil Wright (1907-1987) was a documentary filmmaker, he directed films including *Song of Ceylon* (1934) and *The Face of Scotland* (1938) whilst he produced films including *Night Mail* (1936).

the various smaller films that were being made at the time. I remember that there was a seagull shot that we all craved to make cutting easier, when an obvious cut wasn't very clear that poor seagull was probably duplicated numerous times before we were able to shoot more than the one seagull. However, that really completed my work on the bench for the time being. We got cameras eventually one was a Newman Sinclair one and I was called upon to use to make films for the Travel and Industrial Development Association<sup>4</sup>. I used it alone, carried it alone and had a few pretty nasty experiences. *A March of Time* camera man was with me part of this shooting of a film that was to be about London. He gave me a few tips and we started filming from the same spots. One of the spots I remember was St Clement in the Strand and there a scaffolding had been erected in order to clean the spire at the top, he thought it would be a very good idea to climb to the top and take a few shots from the top. This he proceeded to do and had the camera taken up by workman in buckets to the top. I followed him without thinking and had the most horrendous attack of vertigo. I was totally unable to do any shooting but he used my camera and got some shots for me but the horrifying prospect of going back down this scaffolding was really overwhelming, however I managed to get back down without disaster. Another episode where I had the same thing happen was from shooting from the top of the building at the river, at Thames House and there was a parapet that I managed to walk along quite happily till I looked down as soon as I looked down I had to creep back pushing the camera ahead of me as I was quite unable to walk back to the window where I had access. A third episode was shooting from an open monoplane and this was quite terrifying. I did manage however to get some shots of London, undercover of course when I got to the ground.

**MT:** This material would be used for *London Town*, wouldn't it?

**MG:** Yes and for a number of films made about London for a number of other purposes. The Town and Industrial Development Association were hoping to attract visitors from America and a version would be made for that purpose another version would be made for instructional purposes in parts of Africa and perhaps another version still for British schools. This explains the number of edits and explains whether there were some editions that were silent and some with sound.

**MT:** By this time you were using sound then and could you also tell me, I know you wouldn't have moviolas<sup>5</sup> in the early days; would you have moviolas by now?

**MG:** No we still had no moviolas but there was an expansion of all the activities when we moved from Wardour Street to bigger premises in Oxford Street about that time we acquired new staff and were training Fred Gammage and Jonah Jones as cameramen Arthur Elton joined us and Donald Taylor. Later Harry Watt came along and at times Rotha<sup>6</sup> would come to help. I

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<sup>4</sup> The Travel and Industrial Development Association (TIDA) was an initiative that aimed to increase the amount of American money that was spent by tourists. It started its own film department in 1932.

<sup>5</sup> A moviola is a device that allows a film editor to view a film whilst editing. It was invented by Iwan Serrurier in 1924

<sup>6</sup> Paul Rotha (1907-1984) was an English documentary filmmaker. His films included *The World is Rich* (1947) and *Cradle of Genius* (1961) which were both nominated for Academy Awards.

remember an occasion when we were asked to make a propaganda film for selling tomatoes and we did this cartoon style which was really adventurous for us in these premises. My professional cameraman was William Shenton<sup>7</sup>, at that time we hired cameramen by the day because we couldn't afford to have one on the staff. However, others were training and we all could cope with camera work, editing, writing scripts. We could do all the jobs really, a lot of it was technical, manual and nobody jibbed at doing it, we were also involved in carrying film back and forth to Wardour Street I remember that distinctly

**MT:** What lab did you use?

**MG:** We used Studio Film Labs and the first use of sound was when we recorded commentary at Studio Film and then it just a question of typing the film and running the commentary to it. There was no direct speech that didn't come until later after the unit had been turned over to the GPO<sup>8</sup> and then a studio acquired at Black Heath. Cavalcanti<sup>9</sup> joined us at this point and gave us considerable help over the use of sound which was quite unfamiliar at the beginning. Then there was the adventures in sound such as *Night Mail*<sup>10</sup> and one and two of the others. Auden<sup>11</sup> came at this stage and Benjamin Britten<sup>12</sup> and really we had quite a hive of activity coming from Oxford Street and Blackheath. I forgot to mention George Noble who was a stout character and helped enormously with making films but he again was only hired when need arose. He came with me to Scotland I remember he did the *Key to Scotland* film and did some very brave things. He stayed with us over several years doing a considerable body of work for nearly all the directors at Oxford Street and it became of course the GPO and the expansion and it affected nearly all of us who were working there, even me because even though I was still working on the travel films for the Travel and Industrial Development Association. We all discussed each others films and in fact loaned each other material from the films, other people will bear me out. *Night Mail* for example has pieces from everybody's films. John Taylor has two shots in it, I have two shots in it of Edinburgh film and there are probably other people that can claim to fame from the use of one or two shots in.

**MT:** Do you think Marion that there was any prejudice against women at that time?

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<sup>7</sup> William Shenton was a cinematographer, his films included *Hindle Wakes* (1927) *Bed and Breakfast* (1930).

<sup>8</sup> The GPO film unit was a subdivision of the Post Office, it was set up to produced sponsored documentary films for the General Post Office

<sup>9</sup> Alberto Cavalcanti (1897-1982) was a Brazilian film director. He made films for GPO and Crown Film Units including *Coalface* (1935) and *Alice in Switzerland* (1940) as well as for Ealing Studios where he made films including *Champagne Charlie*.

<sup>10</sup> *Nightmail* (1936) was a documentary film about a London, Midland and Scotland mail train from London to Scotland. It was directed by Harry Watt and Basil Wright, and a poem written by W.H Auden was narrated by John Grierson and Stuart Legg. Music was provided by Benjamin Britten.

<sup>11</sup> W.H Auden (1907-1973) was an English poet; he published a number of collections as well as plays and libretti. Notably, he wrote the narrative for the film *Night Mail* (1936)

<sup>12</sup> Benjamin Britten (1913-1976) as an English composer, conductor and pianist. His worked included operas (*The Beggar's Opera*, 1948), church parables, ballets and orchestral pieces including *Sinfonia da Requiem* (1940).

**MG:** There was of course prejudice against women in practically every activity but my brother wasn't particularly prejudiced against women. Our salaries were low but they were the same as the men's. He was very keen to get more women into the unit and when I suggested that my friend Evelyn Spice<sup>13</sup> whom I had been working alongside in Canada, he thought it would be a good idea to invite her to come over. My sister Ruby<sup>14</sup> who had been working as a teacher came to work firstly on housing problems. The subjects we worked on were diverse, a lot of them were for the Gaslight Cook Company and my brother had made a contract to do six films, five of which were allocated to the Gas propaganda and the sixth could be on any topic. My brother made a film about housing problems and it was made without thought to gas propaganda. But I think to show his gratitude a little bit of propaganda was put in at the end. My sister worked on this not as director but she prepared the ground for the director to know the women who suffered from these terrible deprivations in the slums, got them to talk and rehearsed them to talk to the film it was one of the earliest moves to show people talking sincerely about their own situations and rather broke new ground but this wasn't the only film that broke new ground. Len Lye<sup>15</sup> and Norman McLaren<sup>16</sup> were working in the unit and experimenting with the strip films which they made in strange films. I couldn't describe them but I think Len Lye painted on the celluloid and I think Norman McLaren experimented a great deal with sound effects and visual effects with him. To go back to Evelyn Spice she came over and was used in films dealing with the countryside which she had particular affection and knew a great deal about. Several of her films are classics for getting over the atmosphere of the countryside. We worked together on one film around the village green enjoyably and she worked on films sometimes for the Ministry of Agriculture Evelyn went back at outbreak of war and finally in Saskatchewan set up her own unit and worked for many years in the documentary field in Canada, accepting contracts from several of the provinces in the west.

**MT:** Lovely. I have here a list of the films that Marion made from 1930- 1938. I'll read them so we can get them into chronological order. *Empire Journal* (1930-1931), edited by Marion Grierson, EMB Film Unit. *Glass Makers of England* (1932) and the *The English Potter* (1932), these were the two films that came out of *Industrial Britain*, directed by Flaherty and edited by Marion Grierson, EMB Film Unit. *London Town* (1933) directed by Marion Grierson, EMB. So *This is London* (1933), edited by Marion Grierson this was an edit of *London Town* for the Transport and Industrial Development Association (TIDA) *Britain's Countryside* (1933), directed Marion, GPO Film Unit. The last half dozen were all made for GPO and they were: *For All Eternity* (1934), produced and directed Marion Grierson, *Edinburgh* (1934) directed Marion, *Beside the Seaside* (1935), produced and directed Marion, *The Key to Scotland* (1935) produced and directed Marion, *Cathedrals of Britain* (1937) produced and directed Marion,

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<sup>13</sup> Evelyn Spice (1904-1990) was a Canadian documentary filmmaker. Her films included *Spring on the Farm* (1933) and *Birth of the Year* (1938).

<sup>14</sup> Ruby Grierson (1904-1940) was a Scottish documentary filmmaker and sister to Marion and John. Her film credits included *London Wakes Up* (1936) and *Today and Tomorrow* (1936)

<sup>15</sup> Len Lye (1901-1980) was a New Zealand artist known for his experimental films. His films included *Newspaper Train* (1942) and *Free Radicals* (1958/1979).

<sup>16</sup> Norman McLaren (1914-1987) was a Scottish animator and film director known for his work with the National Film Board of Canada; he won a number of awards, including an Academy Award for *Neighbours* (1952).

*Around the Village Green* produced and directed Evelyn Spice and Marion Grierson. I am now going to read a criticism of one of Marion's films, it's a review in *Sight and Sound* signed by J.R.F.T, I don't know who that is, it gives us an idea of the calibre and scope of her filmmaking:

The theme of this film, the spirit that rests in the great churches of England and its relationship to the people is of far deeper significance in the national life than modern opinion would allow and is affected by no narrowness of sect or denomination and is a theme that calls for broad understanding, sensitiveness of touch and personal conviction. All these Miss Grierson has brought to the making of this film and combined them with technical skill of which there can be no question. There is no inert photographic panorama or dully echoed speech and sound but a living subject unforgettably presented visual and sound impressively welded into an instrument of impressive penetration. There is no "background" to this film in the accepted sense that leaves a feeling that churches are of the people and the people of the churches. Neither are superimposed upon the other, a most difficult effect to convey. The manner in which music, choir and especially organ are utilized to suggest emphasise and simplify is most interesting and is obviously the result of careful experiment whilst the intermittent commentary is not at any time a disturbing element. Photographically also the film is of high order, there are sequences of great beauty, especially interiors. Miss Grierson is to be congratulated on a great achievement, deserving of the widest showing.

## Side Two

**MT:** This tape follows on from cassette one because we found a lot of noise on the reverse side, so hopefully we're doing better on this one. That means the reverse side of cassette one has nothing on it. Now I wonder Marion if you can remember anything about the money affairs of those days, the cost of film, the cost of living or your wages, anything of that sort, in the early days in the thirties

**MG:** I do remember there never was enough to live on. I think the initial salary was around £3 a week, it was less than I'd been earning on a newspaper in Canada and I found it very tricky indeed living on this, this eventually was increased to £6 a week but some years later, it was £6 a week when I married. I remember distinctly because my husband was out of work.

**MT:** That was Donald Taylor<sup>17</sup>?

**MG:** Yes, Donald Taylor, he was out of work at that time and we had to live both of us on that until he was able to get Strand Films going.

**MT:** Yes, that was about the middle thirties?

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<sup>17</sup> Donald Taylor (1911-1966) was an English documentary producer and director. His films included *Healing Waters* (1939) and *The Straw Man* (1953)



**MG:** No, early thirties. As far as the cost of films was concerned, I do remember that £400 was quite a big sum to be allocated for the type of films I was allocated at the Travel Association. It was difficult to cost the London films because so many different versions were made for so many different purposes, but £400 was certainly a large solid figure to be working on for say the Cathedral film and even employing cameramen for a short period of time- not for the whole filming but for the more difficult pieces, same applied to *The Key to Scotland*. Now those budgets we knew about at the start of the film and we always kept within the limits because we knew there wasn't any more available. As far as the rest of the staff on the rest of the unit were concerned I think some of them could manage very easily on these small sums that we got for wages because they had private incomes, those of us who hadn't found it very difficult, flats could be got for about £2 a week.

**MT:** That's a big lot out of £3 a week isn't it, I suppose you'd share them?

**MG:** Yes, you'd share such a flat and food wasn't wildly expensive, going to opera was really pretty difficult one saw mostly all the films one could on £6 a week.

**MT:** And you remember what sorts of places you would be staying when you went on location? Would the film unit have its own transport?

**MG:** I can't imagine they had their own vehicles, if the need arose they were hired. Eventually I had a car of my own but you could buy a car of your own for £15 and they were always old rattle traps. I used them for filming I know on *Cathedrals* and *Key to Scotland* in fact I went for London up to Scotland in such a car.

**MT:** And where would you stay do you think?

**MG:** Well staying with friends and relatives was the first thing, but where that was impossible we didn't stay in high class hotels we stayed in the smaller places. But it was understood and didn't bother us at all that we had to be economical, economical in shooting- to do a third shot was not well looked upon- if you didn't get it right second time you were seen as feeble. I think that's about all I know of the financial side.

**MT:** Tell us just a little about Strand Filming, because that became a very powerful unit right through until the sixties.

**MG:** Well during the war they did a lot films for the Ministry of Information, in what capacity I don't remember. I remember filming in Dorland Hall during the bombing raids at night because that was the only time you could film, for what film I don't remember. There was a film about the bringing up of babies I was supposed to then have known something about it.

**MT:** But mostly now you had stop being involved in film production and you were editing this new journal called *World Film News* which I gather had replaced *Cinema Quarterly* as a vehicle for the whole documentary ideal and movement and to review films that were coming out?

**MG:** Yes, *World Film News* was quite a job I was taught how to lay out by a famous layout man called Robert Harling<sup>18</sup>, although I had done a little bit of layout in Canada I hadn't done the extensive lay outs we did for this magazine.

**MT:** It was a very attractive magazine, I remember it well.

**MG:** Yes, well we made it as colourful as we could and used the best stills we could find and relied a lot on the Victorian effect. I rather enjoyed doing what I was skilled at, the great fun of it was meeting people like Alastair Cooke<sup>19</sup> and Richard Mason<sup>20</sup>, who, I don't know if you remember did *The Adventures of Susie Wong* eventually after he'd learnt Japanese during the war and Morris Carstairs<sup>21</sup> who became a professor at York University eventually, he was a psychiatrist- various people who became famous later on used to come in with articles and have interviews with us. And Vicky<sup>22</sup> of course was the cartoonist. We had at that time a very nice man who did the advertising. Vicky from the cartoons and the material was mainly derived from the people working at the unit as they were all good script writers, they were all quite literate. We even had a piece by Bernard Shaw<sup>23</sup>. I know there was some connection, I had a postcard by Bernard Shaw, it was probably an interview of the telephone

**MT:** And do I remember Priestley?

**MG:** Priestley had something to do with us, whether it was an interview or something he wrote for us I can't remember. Alastair Cooke was a regular contributor.

**MT:** It was monthly and it went on for about four years?

**MG:** Well I edited it for two years, and it was edited for a couple for months by a German who left because of the situation in Germany. After I couldn't do it because my baby was due, some time in October 1937 and I think I worked up until June 1937, Reg Groves took over me, by that time Espher Rommoly had left to fight in Spain, Carstairs was there only as a student - he had went back to take another degree and Richard Mason went to the war as an interpreter.

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<sup>18</sup> Robert Harling (1910-2008) was an English typographer, journalist and designer. He worked for publications including *The Sunday Telegraph*, *Sunday Times* and *Financial Times*.

<sup>19</sup> Alastair Cooke (1908-2004) was an English journalist, and broadcaster. Cooke was London correspondent for NBC and later presented CBS's *Omnibus* programme. He was also a foreign correspondent for *The Guardian*.

<sup>20</sup> Richard Mason (1919-1997) was an English novelist. His novels included *The Wind Cannot Read* (1946) and *The World of Suzie Wong* (1957).

<sup>21</sup> Morris Carstairs (1916-1991) was a psychiatrist who worked at Edinburgh University before taking up the position of Vice Chancellor at York University.

<sup>22</sup> Victor Weisz (1913-1966) was a German- British cartoonist who drew under the name Vicky. He was the chief political cartoonist for the *Daily Mirror*.

<sup>23</sup> George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) was an Irish playwright. His plays included *The Devil's Disciple* (1897) and *Pygmalion* (1913)

**MT:** Well it was a very exciting time wasn't it, all through to through to the war, but you now were mainly domesticated. But of course, being married to Donald, you were in it just the same.

**MG:** Yes, I was still meeting interesting people like, Lotte Reiniger<sup>24</sup> and Dylan Thomas<sup>25</sup>

**MT:** Didn't Dylan Thomas live with you for a while?

**MG:** Yes, he lived with us for part of one year during the war he then had one child in a boarding school and the second one was with us and also his wife of course. He used to go to town quite often and get back to this rural spot. But as soon as he was in the country he became the countryman. He got out his stick took the dog for walks, went down to the pub regularly, moderately drank came back feeling much happier and set down to work.

**MT:** Oh so it did him good then?

**MG:** It settled him except when he was wanting to meet people in pubs and then he had spells of being pretty irrational.

**MT:** I remember him in *The Highlander* from time to time, well Marion in retrospect I wonder if you have anything to wind up your time in films because really you didn't do a lot more after you had children

**MG:** Not really, except freelancing. I did a bit of scripting for Film Centre, I would have liked to have done more really, but the film business was moving rapidly at that time.

**MT:** So then, you made a terrific break into quite a different field, and that would be when?

**MG:** Well I had wanted to do something locally that wouldn't involve going up to town. I had done some volunteering in Buckinghamshire and had begun to realise the problems for children in adolescence. It was really to help teenagers that I worked with in the Buckinghamshire organisation. I was eventually doing paid work and when I broke up with the house in Buckinghamshire, I wanted to move back to Scotland. I liked Glasgow, I'd been a student in Glasgow, and I took a job working in the West of Scotland for young people. It was mainly organising events and eventually I got a Ski Centre which was an hour or so from Glasgow. We got 12 young people each weekend, put them up fed them and had Norwegian students teach them how to ski. It was a tremendous success, I think there was only one failure out of all the children who went there, they all wanted to stand on their feet and not fall down. We had a tremendous demand for these weekends but we did give priority to those who were in institutions and those from the slums. Though we did charge for the weekends, break even

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<sup>24</sup> Lotte Reiniger (1899-1981) was a German film director who pioneered the use of silhouette animation, her films included *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* (1926).

<sup>25</sup> Dylan Thomas (1914-1953) was a Welsh poet. His poems include 'Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night.' He also wrote *Under Milk Wood* and *A Child's Christmas in Wales*.

price, we did manage to get subsidies for those who couldn't afford it and helped those who had been in trouble with the police.

**MT:** Was this organised through a club, or was it more amorphous than that

**MG:** Well we didn't set up clubs we helped them once they were started through inter-club events but the clubs used to have terrible animosity with one another and I know one terrible when one club had all its bus windows broken by the club that they were visiting. There were a lot of gang animosity but it wasn't serious, there were a lot of really funny incidents.

**MT:** But among the big boys I imagine it was fairly tough, tough for you?

**MG:** It wasn't tough for me, I thoroughly enjoyed it. I enjoyed it because of the contact with people, I'd been seeing people through print and through lenses, and here I was seeing real people there was a tremendous impact, I felt I was really living at first hand instead of second hand.

Looking back fifty years to the phenomenon of British documentary, I recall the interests that aroused among notable people at the time. In the rickety lift at Oxford Street, one might find Augustus John<sup>26</sup>, Julian Huxley<sup>27</sup>, Doris Eames struggling with the mechanism. At the cutting bench one might be working alongside William Coldstream<sup>28</sup> who finally became head of the Slade or Hamish Lawrie<sup>29</sup>, a Scottish painter or Humphrey Jennings<sup>30</sup> or Raymond Spottiswoode<sup>31</sup>, among students of the film sent to train with us. After thirty or forty years of vigorous growth British documentary lost its identity as a school, the rise of television absorbed the talents, techniques and some of the personnel. Better pay and condition of work meant films became more expensive and sponsors shied off larger financial commitments the spirit of documentary lived on however, as can be recognised often in feature films and constantly in television. It has found new channels, reaches wider audiences and fulfils generously the purposes Grierson had in mind from the beginning. In 1939 Grierson was asked to set up a documentary film unit in Canada. It was adequately financed and backed by the Canadian Government and developed into a large and prestigious organisation. The talented Stuart Legge<sup>32</sup>, and Norman McLaren from Britain helped the unit get going and it is still going, now

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<sup>26</sup> Augustus John (1878-1961) was a Welsh painter who was involved in the Post-Impressionist movement in Britain.

<sup>27</sup> Julian Huxley (1887-1975) was an English evolutionary biologist. He was well known for his presentation of science on radio and television

<sup>28</sup> William Coldstream (1908-1987) was an English realist painter and Chairman of the British Film Institute (1964-1971)

<sup>29</sup> Hamish Lawrie (1919-1987) was a Scottish artist and cameraman.

<sup>30</sup> Humphrey Jennings (1907-1950) was an English documentary maker and one of the founders of the Mass Observation organisation

<sup>31</sup> Raymond Spottiswoode (1913-1970) was an English documentary director and producer. His films included *Voice of Action* (1942) as producer and *Wings of Youth* (1942) as director.

<sup>32</sup> Stuart Legge (1910-1988) was an English documentary film maker who worked with GPO before becoming head of Strand Films in 1937 before moving with John Grierson to launch *Canada Carries On*.

staffed by Canadians. Over the intervening years it has turned out some thousands of excellent films, distributed throughout the world.

**MT:** That is the end of the interview with Marion Grierson

**MG:** Addendum: I would very much like the opportunity to edit this material.