

THE NATIONAL FILM BOARD began as a propaganda agency on the brink of World War II.

The House of Commons passed the National Film Act on May 2, 1939, creating a Board to ". . . initiate and promote the production and distribution of films in the national interest . . . to interpret Canada to Canadians and to other nations . . ."

The Board was built on the foundation of John Grierson, who had successfully created two government film boards in England. He was all his life a contradiction, a bureaucrat who served governments well by doing only what he, not necessarily they, wanted to do.

By 1940, the NFB had a staff of ten. Its companion agency, the Motion Picture Bureau, which had had a thin existence since 1914, made actual films with a full-time staff of twenty-nine. Together they produced training films for the armed forces, promoting films to sell war bonds, and explanatory films telling people why gasoline and meats and other things were in short supply.

The NFB also made two film propaganda series: "Canada Carries On" emerged in 1941, and one of the series, "Churchill's Island," won Hollywood's Academy Award. A series of shorts, "World in Action," was introduced in 1942 — it dealt with global strategy and Canada's real if modest role. These films, the product of a time when even to the sophisticated, some truths seemed absolute, were in the NFB's own later phrase "humble and honest." The words are not idle. Humble, in terms of technical facilities and production costs, they certainly were. They reflected Grierson's evangelical belief that facts, in Norman McLaren, in "Opening Speech."

the hands of artists, speak for themselves. Neither lilies nor the lives of soldiers should be gilded.

One short, "War Clouds in the Pacific," was released ten days before the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, and it not surprisingly became the first NFB film to be shown in U.S. theaters.

To show its films in the isolated villages, the NFB set up thirty rural circuits, each with a score of screening points. These were followed shortly by "industrial" circuits and National Trade Union circuits. Films were also distributed through regional libraries often attached to university extension departments and other public or semi-public institutions. This was most important. If Canada was to show itself to Canadians in film, it had to create the windows as well as the pictures.

By 1945 the NFB had a staff of 739.

It would, shortly, not include John Grierson. The Gutzenko spy case broke in Ottawa. A secretary in Grierson's office was found to have been a courier for the spy ring. Grierson had over the years won some enemies in fairly high places who were not reluctant to use the secretary's treason to attack the boss' reputation. Grierson resigned and left Canada under a cloud no bigger than a small man's envy. He became Director of Mass Communications and Public Information for UNESCO in Paris and, later, Film Controller for Britain's Central Office of Information. The NFB sailed on. Someone has since described the Board as a rudderless ship afloat in a sea of talent, but that is more fanciful than true. Grierson, the original rudder, was succeeded by men of sufficient strength to keep it steady on its imaginative courses.

