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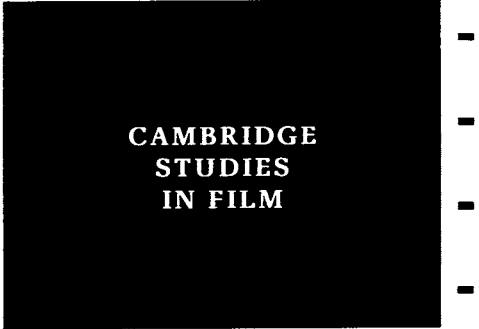
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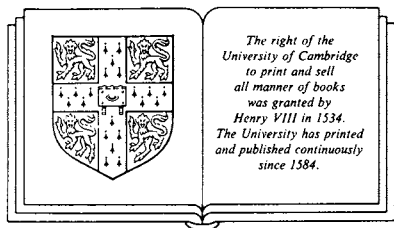
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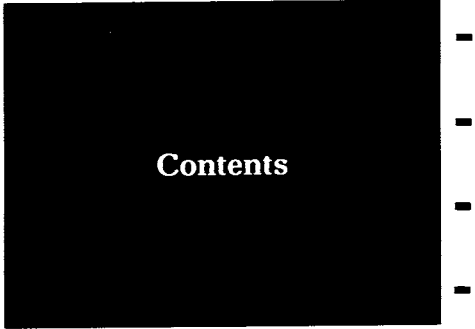
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## Preface

This book is a political and social history of the British documentary film movement. It investigates the development by John Grierson and his followers of the actuality-based film as a means of public education and as an art form. The activities of Grierson and his colleagues are the focus of this book, which is not a comprehensive history of British nonfiction film. This is not intended as an extended piece of formal film analysis, although inevitably a discussion of mode of production demands some explanation of style in specific films. Primarily this is an examination of how and why documentary films were made by the British government in the 1920s and 1930s, and how and why it went into the filmmaking business.

The production and distribution of these documentary films developed outside the commercial film industry. Politically, documentary filmmaking was tied to the civil servants in Whitehall rather than the politicians in Westminster. John Grierson's dealings with senior civil servants often figure more prominently in this narrative than the policies of whichever party was in power. Films were commissioned by government departments, semipublic bodies, and private enterprise concerns as direct or indirect publicity. Commercial renters and exhibitors generally declined to display these films, which they thought propaganda or unpaid advertisements, disliked by themselves and their audiences.

The question of audiences for documentary films in Britain is one I attempt to address. The state became involved in film production largely because of a belief that motion pictures could have an impact on a mass audience thought to be immune to other types of appeal. Recently, there has been some good work on the experience of the commercial cinema audiences in prewar Britain; however, there has been less interest in audiences for documentary films. Initially, officially sponsored documentary films were primarily targeted at commercial audiences, and when this policy produced mixed results, the emphasis shifted to nontheatrical audiences. It is difficult to gauge the numbers of people who saw officially sponsored documentary films in the interwar years and perhaps even harder to assess the effect these films may have had.

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**Preface****viii**

This history begins with the founding of the Empire Marketing Board in 1926. The Board took an immediate interest in film, which was then widely believed to be the most potent means of mass persuasion. There, Grierson gathered together the first recruits for his school of purposive filmmaking, which was subsequently called the "documentary movement."

The publicity methods developed by the Board, among which the use of documentary film was prominent, spread to many other government departments and outside bodies. The documentarists moved into independent production when Treasury sanctions threatened to limit severely the activities of documentary filmmakers directly employed by government departments.

During World War II, documentary filmmaking was centralized under official control at the Films Division of the Ministry of Information. The war led to a massive expansion of the opportunities and activities of the documentarists. My brief concludes with the abolition of the Ministry of Information in 1946.

This book is based upon a range of unpublished government documents, the Grierson papers at the University of Stirling, the Paul Rotha papers at the University of California, the cinema periodicals, and the film trade and lay press of the period.

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I would like to thank the staff of the following institutions: the Paley Library, Temple University, the Public Records Office, the General Post Office Records Department, the British Film Institute, the National Film Archive, the Free Library (Philadelphia), the Brotherton Library at the University of Leeds, and the Research Library and Film Archive at the University of California at Los Angeles. They have been very helpful, courteous, and unstinting with their time and knowledge during my research. The staff of the Grierson Archive at the University of Stirling, the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, New York, and Hammersmith Public Library, London, also rendered me invaluable assistance.

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Paul Swann

*Associate Professor, Communications*