

For Those in Peril on the Sea: *Drifters* and the Trawler Film.

Sunday 18 April, 11pm

U.K. 1929

Director: John Grierson

80 min

For centuries the deep sea fishermen were a mainstay of our island nation and this is revealed by our fascination with the trade since the earliest days of film. Probably the best known of these was made at the very end of the silent era - John Grierson took the tradition of the trawler film and combined it with all the techniques of filmmaking that had developed over the decades to make his remarkable, lyrical film, *Drifters*, which heralded in a new era for the actuality film, the age of the documentary. Many people will know *Drifters* from its documentary movement context but few will know that there was, and is, a long tradition of trawler films from the earliest days of film and which continues to this day in TV series such as the BBC's *Trawlermen*. The early films established a pattern and mood for how we looked at this dangerous and vital profession which has been copied and passed down remarkably intact over more than a century.

This programme will show the whole of Grierson's film and, for the first time, will show it with extracts from its antecedents.

Bryony Dixon.

Mitchell & Kenyon 731: North Sea Fisheries, North Shields (1901)



An early example shows the herring girls at work gutting fish and the trawler fleet in harbour. The trawlermen were known for their fighting spirit when on dry land and the filmmakers try to introduce a play fight.

A Trip to the White Sea Fisheries (1909)

Rosie Film Company

A classic of the genre by Joe Rosenthal - the pattern that is established is structured as the 'trip' with the departure of the ship or the ship at sea, at sea fishing, usually some treacherous weather, hauling in the nets and landing fish and usually the return journey during which there is time for games which illustrates the camaraderie of the crew. Often the film will end with the return to port and the display of fish at the fishmonger to point up the excessive danger involved in delivering the product to our tables.

Drifters (1929)

Empire Marketing Board

Director/Editor: John Grierson

Cinematographer: Basil Emmott

B&W and tinted

Drifters is a very simple narrative record. It is the story of commercial fishing off the west coast of Scotland, from the sea to the supper plate. It gives an account of a fishing vessel going out to sea, putting down nets, hauling them back in a terrible storm and returning to port to sell their catch at market.

What makes it so special is that in its 80th year *Drifters* is still talked about, written about and studied by film scholars the world over. It is the pivotal point at which John Grierson, Stephen Tallents and the Empire Marketing Board came together and, as a result, propelled a filmmaking culture and movement with such momentum that it became a unique and much envied aspect of Britain's contribution to world film history. It set the mould for what we now call the 'Documentary'. Certainly, there had been factual study films before 1929, the British Silent Film Festival bears testament that factual films have a history going back further than that of its more lucrative fictional brother; but Grierson and *Drifters* gave the identifying term 'documentary' to the world.

"I suppose I coined the word "documentary" in the sense that I wasn't aware of it being used by anybody else. I mean, to talk about a documentary film was new, and I know I was surprised when I went over to Paris in 1927 and found them talking about "films documentaries". Now, I must have seen that before, but I wasn't aware of it. When I used the word "documentary" of Flaherty's 'Moana', I was merely using it as an adjective. Then I got to using it as a noun: "the documentary"; "this is a documentary". The word then became associated with my talking about this kind of film, and with me and a lot of people around me. There was a period when some of them tried to get rid of the word "documentary", because it was felt to be very ugly.

And Caroline Lejeune in The Observer kept saying, "Why the devil do we hang on to this gruesome word 'documentary'?" I said at the time "Well I think we'd better hang on to this word because if it's so ugly nobody will steal it". And that, of course, is what happened. It was so ugly that nobody would steal it." John Grierson

It was Stephen Tallents (Secretary to the Empire Marketing Board) who suggested the theme for Grierson's first directoral role. There were several reasons for choosing the Herring Industry as a theme, Tallents was aware that Grierson had served on minesweepers during the Great War and that he had had a love of the sea. He also knew that the fishing industry was badly in need of promotion by the E.M.B but more so, Tallents expected strong opposition from the Treasury when it was to be proposed that a Film Unit be set up within the Empire Marketing Board. Tallents knew that Arthur Samuel, later Lord Mancroft, Financial Secretary to the Treasury, had studied the history of the herring fisheries and had written a book; *The Herring: Its Effect on the History of Britain*. As expected, the proposals were furiously resisted by the Treasury and the concept of a Government Film Unit was heavily discussed in Whitehall. Samuel wrestled with the concept, noting that other commercial units could serve them instead, but after much deliberation conceded that he could probably help with the *Drifters* film! Tallents and Grierson were approved for £2500 and *Drifters* was completed within this budget and a film unit had been set up.

The prestigious platform for the launching of *Drifters* was the Film Society's Sunday afternoon performances held at the Tivoli Palace in the Strand. These were exciting occasions when new films challenged conventional conceptions of what might be achieved in the still young medium of the cinema. *Drifters* was partnered with Eisenstein's British premiere of *Potemkin* and screened on 10th November 1929 to a sophisticated audience who were said to have received it 'rapturously'!

Stephen Tallents sat beside Grierson at the Film Society screening and was delighted and relieved by the reception. To find a comparable relief from official anxiety, he said, he had to go back to a day in February 1918, when, having helped Lloyd George and Beveridge to frame the country's food-rationing scheme, he saw the ending of the food queues. The public triumph was all Grierson's, the quiet man who had made it possible was content and so began the British Documentary Movement.

Drifters notes and Introduction by Steve Foxon.
(stevenfoxon@hotmail.com)

With acknowledgements to Forsyth Hardy,
Elizabeth Sussex and The Grierson Trust.

Steve Foxon is a doctoral student of the 'British Documentary and its Application' at Durham University. He is a freelance moving image preservation consultant and has recently project managed the conservation and re-assessment of the GPO Film Unit Collection on behalf of the British Film Institute, Royal Mail and British Telecom. This work has resulted in several film discoveries of previously thought lost titles, a 3 x Volume DVD set, several HD restorations and new preservation material made for Grierson's classics including the monumental documentary *Night Mail* (1936). Steve is also a consultant archivist and historical advisor to The Grierson Trust.