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**Grierson, Ruby Isabel (1903–1940)**

Grierson, Ruby Isabel (1903–1940), documentary film-maker and schoolteacher, was born at the School House, Cambusbarron, Stirling, on 24 November 1903, the fifth of six daughters (there were also two sons) of Robert Morrison Grierson (1860–1928), a schoolmaster, and his wife, Jane, *née* Anthony (1865–1936), a former teacher who instilled into her daughters the importance of education and social service. The documentary film-makers John Grierson and Marion Grierson were her elder brother and younger sister respectively. Like her siblings, Ruby attended her father’s school in Cambusbarron and studied at the University of Glasgow. Following in the footsteps of her parents, she began her career as a schoolteacher, joining the English department at George Watson’s Ladies’ College, Edinburgh, in 1928.

In 1935 Ruby began working in the film industry as an assistant on *Housing Problems* (1935), a landmark social documentary, which has frequently been highlighted by film historians for its powerful to-camera interviews with working-class women sharing their experiences of the daily labour and inhospitable conditions of slum housing in Stepney, London. Marion Grierson later spoke about how Ruby prepared the ground for interviews by getting to know the women involved and ‘rehearsing them a little bit’ (BEHP, 1989). Although Ruby was uncredited, and there aren’t extant production documents to verify her work (Haggith, 2021), her role in working with the interviewees was subsequently recognized by her contemporaries including Roger Manvell (Manvell, 247) and Paul Rotha, who emphasized her ‘ability to win people’s confidence [which] gave a spontaneity and an honesty to the “interviews”’ (Rotha, 195).

Ruby Grierson became a respected member of documentary film teams, and was often praised as a socially conscious film-maker with strengths in working sympathetically with the subjects of her films. She was an assistant on *Give the Kids a Break* (dir. Donald Taylor, 1936), which promoted holiday camps set up for children living in Glasgow slums, and was described by film historian Rachael Low as ‘outstandingly spontaneous and unsentimental’ (Low, 102). Ruby’s film *Today and Tomorrow* (1936) explored the work of the National Council for Social Service (NCSS) in encouraging ideals of citizenship and community in an increasingly ‘impersonal’ Britain—in modern housing estates, depressed areas, and rural villages, and—like *Housing Problems—*was commended for its use of direct interviews. *Today We Live* (1937), co-directed with Ralph Bond, was also sponsored by the NCSS and covered similar themes, focusing on a group of unemployed miners in Pentre, south Wales, and a group of women in the village of South Cerney, Gloucestershire, played by non-professional actors, who set up thriving community centres in distressed industrial areas and remote villages.

Ruby was described by her sister Marion as having ‘got the impression that films could change the world’ (Adams, 1994), especially in the case of her work on *The Peace Film* (1936), a ‘cine-poster’ or short promotional film, which was otherwise referred to as *People of Britain*. Released at a time of rearmament, *The Peace Film* presented a radical pacifist message using to-camera interviews with four ‘ordinary’ people and encouraged people to demand peace by writing to their local MP. It was initially banned by the British Board of Film Censors but, following press screenings, coverage in the national press, and discussion in the House of Commons, the film received a wide distribution in cinemas: it reportedly met with applause in the Empire Cinema in Leicester Square, London, and thousands of people protested against a local decision to ban it in Bristol.

Ruby’s first film as director, *London Wakes Up* (1936), was ‘singled out for her warm observations of Londoners’ (Easen). It was followed by two experimental films for a zoological series, *Animals on Guard* (1938) and *Animal Kingdom—the Zoo and You* (1939), shot from the point of view of the animals. *Cargo for Ardrossan* (1939), a quietly captivating portrait of changing ways of life on the island of Islay, made for the Realist Film Unit, was a finely crafted meditation on modernity, tradition, and community life on the west coast of Scotland. Her wartime films—*Choose Cheese* (1940), *Green Food for Health* (1940), and *What’s for Dinner?* (1940)—brought levity to subjects of nutrition, rationing, and cooking. Her story-documentary film, *They Also Serve* (1940), celebrated ‘an ordinary housewife’, following her daily, domestic routines and internal thoughts in wartime. Sponsored by the Ministry of Information and intended to function as wartime propaganda, it also attested to an attention to women’s lives and domestic labour that was woven throughout Ruby’s films, and can be considered an important precursor to feminist film-making of the 1970s.

Ruby Grierson was killed on 17 September 1940, when the SS *City of Benares*, a liner carrying evacuated British children from Liverpool to Canada, was torpedoed in the Atlantic. She was working on a documentary about the children evacuees, which was later completed and released as *The Children from Overseas* (1940). Her untimely death not only cut short a promising career, but was felt as a major loss to the documentary movement. It greatly affected her brother John Grierson, leading him ‘to set right [Ruby’s] marginalisation by emphasising her contribution whenever he could’ (Neely, 30). The radical warmth and social commitment of her film work, with its intimate, sympathetic representations of ordinary people, was acknowledged as forming the ‘main artery of documentary progress’ (*Documentary News Letter*, 2), and in recent decades has increasingly been recognised and explored by feminist film historians as having played an important role in Britain’s documentary tradition.

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