Once the agreement was signed with the Americans in February/March 1949, Foster faced two urgent tasks. One was to revise the June 1948 script (the subject of the last chapter); the other was to put together a film crew. To that end, he assigned two NFB employees to oversee the movie: Guy Glover, newly returned from the United States, would be its producer; and the thirty-year-old Morten Parker would be director. Together Glover and Parker set out to recruit a team to make the movie. Parker recalls meeting with Glover to figure out who in the NFB was available and who they wanted, and then arranged for them to be assigned to the project.1

Glover’s and Parker’s approach to the film—and the sponsors’ demands—was informed by their long experience of working at the NFB, and especially by the ideas of the founder of the NFB, the documentary filmmaker John Grierson (figure 3.1). Grierson believed that the goal of documentary film was not to capture the phenomenal—the mess of events that paraded before a camera—but to use the phenomenal to reach a more abstract or generalizable reality. To this end, he advocated what he called “the creative treatment of actuality,”2 the use, for example, of dramatic recreations and animation to tell a story about something much bigger than the details that the camera captured. Thus, the goal of documentary filmmaking to Grierson was not to record every detail of a subject, but to present a broader argument, which meant, when the idea was extended to Challenge, the presentation of an argument for making the body, cancer, and the cell objects of science, subject to its interventions, and for enticing audiences to think of cancer as a possible scientific career.

This approach to filmmaking had been there in embryo in the narratives outlined in the shooting script. This was to be a film that would use symbols to evoke the character of the patient and scientist, the wonder of the body and cell, the excitement of the opportunities open to investigators, the vast scale of the cancer problem for science, and the hope the latter offered—all to show how science approached the body, cell, and cancer, the potential of future research,
and to tempt people into studying cancer. Glover and Parker had been involved in the development of this script, but once written their task was to turn paper into celluloid, and this meant bringing in other technologies of filmmaking—cameras, animation, ambient sound, narration, music, special effects, and editing—to conjure up these themes. Guided by the script, Glover and Parker would seek to coordinate these technologies to present the film’s argument through the creative treatment of actuality. The sponsor’s hopes of using this film to tempt new young scientists into cancer research would be framed by the hand of Grierson and those who followed him.

Glover and Parker

That Glover and Parker interpreted this commission through the lens of the NFB’s filmmaking culture and practices should come as little surprise. Both had long worked for the NFB, including for Grierson before he left in 1945. Thus, when Foster assigned them to this film, he was appointing people steeped in the filmmaking culture of the NFB. He was also appointing people whose skills complemented one another. Glover had a background in animation, about which Parker was less knowledgeable, so he oversaw much of the animation work. Glover’s roles thus blurred the boundary between producer and director, especially in the animation sequences, while Parker was to concentrate on shooting the live-action sequences, before joining with Glover to oversee how the two—animation and live action—should be stitched together in the editing room, along with the musical score and the narration.

(Herbert) Guy Glover (1909–88) had joined the NFB in 1942 as the production assistant to Norman McLaren (also his life partner), one of the first hires in McLaren’s new animation unit, before he moved on to directing and producing at the NFB (figure 6.1). After a time away from the NFB (1946–49), he returned as producer in Unit A, one of four NFB production units (A, B, C, and D), each run by an executive producer. Challenge was his first production after his return. The specific reasons for his assignment to the film are unknown, but he had two skills that were particularly useful to this movie: like Constant he had had an early training in biology; he also had a background in animation.

As producer of Challenge, Glover’s role was to bring the film in on budget and on time, as well as overseeing the writing, directing, editing, sound and musical composition. He may also have consulted with Foster over who to hire as director, alongside his work of figuring out who else to hire for the film. Thus, Glover was also involved in the rewrites of the script that Constant, Parker and
others made after June 1949; he contributed to the live-action scenes when he got involved in selecting locations for the filming (though he does not seem to have traveled to the shoots); and later he had input into the editing of the movie, its sound effects, and its music. All these roles were part of his task of keeping Challenge to schedule and to budget (though the schedule set out in the 1949 agreement slipped, and he failed to control costs when the animation budget spiraled up, and the NFB had to ask the Americans for more money). In this last task, he was answerable to Ralph Foster, who kept a close eye on the movie until he left the NFB in January 1950.

Glover’s involvement, then was much more than as someone who coordinated and kept an eye on the books and the clock. He had an important creative role, especially in the animation sequences of the movie. Indeed, according to Colin Low, one of the two animators on Challenge, Glover was the cohesive artistic figure behind the movie. Part of the reason he said this was probably Glover’s background in animation. Glover himself emphasized this, and in later years claimed that he brought an animator’s perspective to live-action films. Where the non-animator viewed the shot, he noted, the animator drew the frame, and so learned a lot about the nature of cinematographically synthesized motion, and therefore also about relative speeds, pacing, rhythm and about what the camera does to the material it captures. The animator’s perspective was thus not simply about animation, but an approach to filmmaking more generally.

The animator’s perspective, to Glover, informed filmmaking in several ways. Glover claimed that the animator’s need to give life to his drawings—to create a “film organism,” as he described it—meant that when he turned to live action, he or she was acutely aware that film was so much more that what was seen through the camera. Thus, Glover claimed that the animator knew better than most that great care had to be taken with the planning of the live-action shoots to ensure that it worked as a film when it came time to put all the sequences together. Filmmaking—including documentary and educational filmmaking—was a creative process, not simply a faithful reproduction of what the camera recorded, he claimed, echoing Grierson. The animator recognized—perhaps more than other filmmakers, according to Glover—that it was crucial to avoid what he called “the most treacherous artifice of all—the artifice which maintains that to ‘bring ‘em back alive’ is gospel truth.” Put another way, what the camera brought back, imprinted on film, was only the beginning of the creative process, and not everything needed to be brought back.

Such comments about the animator’s perspective on filmmaking helped to rationalize Glover’s involvement in the live action as well as the animation. I
have noted that he was involved in planning the locations for the live-action sequences of *Challenge*. He also saw a role for himself in overseeing the scripting and shooting of the live action that Morten Parker was to direct. For Glover, such oversight alongside careful planning would also facilitate later parts of the film’s production—the editing and special effects necessary, for example, to the transitions between live action and animation. Thus, he inserted his views on how the film should be directed and shot as part of his role as producer, helping Parker figure out what was financially feasible and how to get it done on time. Crucially for a producer concerned about costs, Glover claimed that the nature of their work taught animators to be concise, and having learned brevity, they carried this perspective into situations where conciseness was not so necessary. Brevity and planning would be essential to controlling the costs of a film, and they also gave the producer a reason for interjecting his ideas on how the film should be made.

This animator’s perspective on filmmaking was no doubt congenial to Low, but there were also other reasons he might have seen Glover as the creative force. As part of his effort to keep *Challenge* on schedule and within budget, Glover had to pull the various aspects of the movie together. He was involved in recruiting people to the film, including Low and his co-animator, Evelyn Lambart. His efforts to oversee the budget and schedule gave him many opportunities to talk to all those involved in production about issues beyond his formal remit. Given his long experience and interest in the imaginative aspects of filmmaking it was almost inevitable that these discussions blurred into creative issues, more formally the province of the director. Perhaps with different people or circumstances this blurring of the boundaries between producer and director could have been a problem. But Glover and Parker seem to have had a good working relationship, and if this blurring of their roles raised any tensions between them, they do not surface in the archives or the recollections of those I interviewed.

Low’s perception of Glover’s role may, however, overstate the case, for the animation was carried out quite separately from the rest of the movie. Buried away in the animation studios on Sparks Street in Ottawa, some distance from the main NFB buildings on St. John Street, Low would have been unaware of much else going on with the film. He had close connections with Glover, who had considerable interest in and experience with animation, and who provided Low and Lambart with suggestions as to the style of animating the body and cell they adopted. By contrast the director, Morten Parker, had relatively little knowledge of the technicalities of animation. Before the animators set to work, he talked to them about the subjects that needed to be animated and the length of each sequence. But then he left them to get on with it, except for periodic consultations.
and progress reports. His focus was on the live-action and location work, which Low would have been only dimly aware of. Parker would turn his attention to the animation again when the location shots were done, and it was time for the editor, Douglas Tunstell, to piece the live action and animation into a coherent narrative.

Morten Parker (1919–2014) was born in Winnipeg, Manitoba (figure 7.1). He graduated from the University of Manitoba, worked as a journalist on the Winnipeg Tribune, wrote for radio, and published an entertainment paper in Winnipeg before joining the NFB on June 5, 1943. In an interview, Parker recalled that he moved to Ottawa because Gudrun, his wife, had obtained a job at the NFB, one of several women filmmakers recruited to the NFB during the war, along with Evelyn Spice Cherry (1906–90), who had made the Saskatchewan Cancer Commission’s That They May Live in 1942. At the NFB, he learned the art of filmmaking on the job, and within a few years was writing and directing NFB movies, including Maps We Live By, 1947 (co-writer with Gudrun Parker), The Postman, 1947 (director), The Home Town Paper, 1948 (director), and Family Circles, 1949 (director; co-writer with Gudrun Parker), before being assigned to Challenge. For Parker, Challenge was simply another assignment: he had no prior interest in subject as a filmmaker, though he noted that his father had recently died from cancer. Within the NFB he had a growing reputation as a safe pair of hands and, because of the American connection, Challenge needed a safe pair of hands. This was to be one of the big NFB productions of the year.

The Hand of Grierson

Given Glover’s and Parker’s training within the NFB, it should be no surprise that Challenge drew on NFB approaches to filmmaking in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Its mix of live action and animation was strung together with the voice-of-god commentary that many NFB documentaries used to pull together the narrative. It used dramatic recreations and animation to tell its story, Grierson’s “creative treatment of actuality.” And it sought to target a relatively well-educated, technically skilled group of people; individuals whom NFB leaders felt might be expected to play a significant social or political role, in this case through cancer research. These approaches—albeit first applied to documentary film—had been embodied in Maurice Constant’s June 1948 script before Parker and Glover became involved, and they remained in the rewrites of 1949.

Both Parker and Glover had trained and worked under John Grierson until his resignation in 1945, and the film contains inflections of Grierson’s filmmaking philosophy. The first has already been mentioned—the creative treatment
of actuality. As Ian Aitken notes, the roots of this approach can be traced to Grierson’s interest in philosophical idealism, and its impact on his vision of film as an instrument of social persuasion. For Grierson, an idealist approach to filmmaking meant that naturalistic representation had to be subordinated to symbolic expression. The task of the filmmaker was not to represent the particular and superficial phenomena of empirical reality, but to use the phenomena to reach a more abstract, generalized reality, the essence of the age, its underlying historical forces: a view that meshed well with Glover’s animator’s perspective of documentary filmmaking as a creative process, not simply a faithful presentation of what the camera recorded. This meant that there was no necessary contradiction between documentary and drama—drama could reveal the essence of the age, more than a focus on documenting what Grierson called the “bank holiday of frenzied events,” the mess of details that might appear before the camera. Dramatic recreations were thus central to Grierson’s vision of the documentary film, and found an inflection—albeit, perhaps, stripped of its philosophical idealism—in Challenge, which used dramatic recreations and animation to represent the nature of research, the character of the scientist, the scale of the scientific problem, and the wonder of nature. Thus, Mr. Davis is described as a “symbolic patient.” “He is symbolic of hundreds of thousands of patients with a disease that presents one of the most baffling problems of science—the challenge of cancer.” So too, scientists and physicians such as Dr. McVicor were symbolic of the many scientists and physicians working on cancer, with their selflessness, lack of interest in material reward, and commitment to research. As Brian Winston argues regarding documentary film, individuals within the movie stand both for themselves and the group of persons of their type; the part stands for the class.

But symbolism was not simply asserted in the script or the pamphlets that publicized the film. It was also created in the course of the making of the film by the actors who served the roles of symbolic scientists and patients; by the editing that helped determine the rhythm of the movie (for example, slow unhurried pacing to symbolize hope; faster cuts to symbolize urgency or concern); by the camera work and lighting (such as high-angle shot and bright lighting in the opening sequence [see table 4.3, sequence 1] used to emphasize the calm and hope of the symbolic “houses of healing” or the low-angle shots that help to emphasize the threat posed by cancer to Mr. Davis when he first enters as the symbolic patient [sequence 1]); and through the soundtrack and music (as when the noise of scientific equipment represents the unceasing work of science [sequence 9], or the music seeks to depict normal and abnormal growth [sequence 2]). Attempts to
use sound to create symbolic meaning had been part of scripts from the very beginning (recall the woman’s whine in Constant’s June 1948 script, when it transforms into the sound of an animal) and they remained (even without the animal whine) in later iterations of the script and in the filming itself.

The second example of Griersonian philosophy in *Challenge* concerns his suspicion of the capacity of mass communications to reform the public. As Aitken shows, in the 1920s Grierson’s engagement with the Chicago School of Sociology and the work of Walter Lippmann made him skeptical about the capacity of the “rational citizen,” of democracy itself, and of mass communications to offset what he saw as the inadequacies of mass society. While he saw film as a tool of social action (a view echoed by Parker), he also was influenced by contemporary beliefs that society must be governed and guided by elites. In his view, documentary films were most effective when directed to the middle classes, the educated, who might, in his view, play a significant role in democratic processes. He distinguished between a “rational” and “mature” citizenry, the latter of which could be created by informing audiences of the significant generative forces in a society, and achieved through mass communications practices aimed at an intuitive, nonintellectual level. *Challenge* was consonant with such a view. Its target audiences were not the masses, but the small group of science students who might one day become cancer researchers, and as a secondary audience, the educated public who might be persuaded to support cancer research, and the film used practices such as dramatic recreations that aimed as much at the nonintellectual level as the rational. Its aim was to create a cadre of scientists who might one day lead the fight against cancer, much as Dallas Johnson had imagined consumer organizations as leaders of a relatively passive public, and Grierson imagined the middle classes as leaders by virtue of their involvement in the democratic process. From all these perspectives, the less-educated public (as consumer, politically active, or concerned about cancer) was imagined as relatively docile or (if active) unreliable, and in need of expert leadership, which in the case of the film would be provided in part by the voice-of-god narrator who explained to the viewer what was going on in the screen.

Third, *Challenge* also reflected Grierson’s vision of the social as superior to the personal and individual. Grierson saw the state as a positive force, the highest level of the social, a view that would have been congenial to the founder of the state-financed NFB, who saw a trend away from laissez-faire toward government planning, coordination, and leadership of national social and economic life, and a consequent need for state involvement in public education to support these activities. In the narrative of *Challenge*, the state has no role, except for the
mention of the government sponsors of the film in the titling, the supporters of most research. Instead, individual scientists—as they emerged in the narratives of later iterations of the scripts—are subordinate to another social organization, the broader international community of scientists. They were part of a vast international scientific effort to understand and defeat cancer, each scientist contributing day-by-day, hour-by-mind-numbing-hour small pieces of knowledge to the emerging picture of this group of diseases. They were ciphers in a vast war being waged against these diseases, but paradoxically also persons of special character—people so absorbed in their work, so committed to solving the scientific conundrum of cancer that they revealed a selfless quality. They were uninterested in material reward, willing to subordinate themselves to a higher, humanitarian goal of defeating cancer, and to play their small part in the enormous effort.

These inflections of Grierson’s philosophy were present in all of Challenge’s many scripts, though Parker and Glover sometimes saw other factors than Grierson as shaping the film. Thus when, for example, I write that dramatic recreation in Challenge was “perhaps, stripped of its philosophical idealism,” it was because while the filmmakers used dramatic recreation, they generally did not appeal to such a philosophy, and they sometimes invoked other explanations for its use. Parker, for example, explained the turn to dramatic recreation in the 1940s and 1950s not in terms of philosophical idealism but because many documentary filmmakers wanted to move into narrative cinema. Grierson’s idea of the creative treatment of actuality provided a useful justification for incorporating such narrative techniques into their films. Glover, as I have mentioned, saw dramatic recreation from the animator’s perspective.

Glover himself later noted that the “creative interpretation of reality” as he put it, was central to a Canadian approach to short films that emerged after 1946, which at its best also involved the orderly exposition of the film material, neat and economical cutting, and exacting technical standards. And he, retrospectively, included Challenge among these types of film, its combination of elaborate animation and conventional live action a contrast to the workaday “simple film idioms” of the majority of the NFB’s informational, instructional, and educational movies. Many Canadian short films had serious faults, he complained, echoing and expanding on the concerns of the Canadian Cancer Society about the quality of wartime films. Subjects were not well researched, “the main cause of a superficiality of treatment and a distressing lack of humility before the facts.” He also complained of the tendency of the films of the NFB to add a partial or safe view of controversial material; for the commentary in a film to overinflate the importance of the material; and he noted “even when over-writing was absent,
lack-lustre verbal material often weighed down the visuals.” Few directors, he claimed, showed strong instinct for pure cinematic treatment, a situation not helped by the dependence of many films on sponsors who felt impelled to interfere so that most films suffered from an indifferent handling of the subject in terms of planned or “choreographed” movement, and from imposed forms which seemed, he noted, to be accidental. “Little grasp was demonstrated of the principle of the pacing,” he claimed, “either of action within the frame or of cutting (the control of the rhythm in which the shot or scene is changed). The rhythmic structure, therefore, was often slack and arbitrary.” In addition, he complained about poor dramatic writing and direction of actors.

It should be noted that these criticisms—surprisingly (for an NFB insider) made in public—were published in 1958, well after Challenge was released, but Glover had been mulling them for some time, and they are suggestive of the concerns that he brought to this film. While Grierson’s notion of “creative treatment of actuality/reality” was praised, the institution that he created—the NFB—had produced countless films that had not lived up to the ideal, and the risk was that Challenge would succumb to such problems. Given the resources thrown at it, this was not a film that would suffer from a lack of research. But the filmmakers had to struggle against the board’s tendency to play it safe and for sponsors to interfere—this in addition to all the other problems that Glover noted. These may have been the consequence of filmmaking culture at the NFB as much as the fault of the filmmakers themselves. Challenge, for Glover, was not only about the challenge of cancer, but also the challenge of making a quality film within the constraints imposed by the culture of the NFB and its filmmakers.

Finally, it is likely that Glover would have had problems with elements of the moral perspective through which Grierson viewed the underlying historical forces, the essence of the age. As Aitken shows, Grierson defined positive ethical values (strength, simplicity, energy, directness, hardness, decency, courage, duty, and upstanding power—some of which were part of the character of the scientist in Challenge) and negative ones (sophistication, sentimentality, lounge-lizards, excessive sexuality, homosexuality, nostalgia, bohemianism, status-seeking and social climbing—none of which appear in the character of the scientist in Challenge). It is, however, likely that Glover would have rejected Grierson’s definition of negative values. Both he and McLaren were guarded about their sexual preferences, but they were well known as a couple within the small world of the NFB, discreet if open. By 1949, they were living together in a flock-wallpapered apartment in Ottawa, where they held regular parties attended by many senior NFB people, including Ross McLean, the commissioner of the NFB. (Colin...
Low, then quite junior, recalls some of these parties, with Louis Applebaum, the composer on Challenge, playing the piano. He also continued a love affair with ballet, the theater, and other arts. Grierson was a mentor to Glover, encouraging his interest in production and direction. He and McLaren would attend parties at the Griersons’, and Glover noted that Grierson himself “never stood on formality—even after hours he was apt to drop in at their homes for a drink and chat.” But Glover embodied many of the qualities that Grierson publicly questioned.

Glover’s love of theater, ballet, and the arts, and his connections to networks of gay men, were an asset when it came to the “creative treatment of actuality” in Challenge. But they also helped to subvert Grierson’s moral compass, and to create an ironic subtext to the movie. Perhaps as a consequence of his interest in the arts, Glover helped to introduce into Challenge the work of the prominent homosexual artist, Pavel Tchelitchew. Glover himself had been questioned by the RCMP in its investigations of subversion within the NFB, and there was an irony in the fact of a homosexual producer and homosexual artist shaping a work intended for two governments—Canadian and American—that saw homosexuality as a Cold War threat to national security. There was also an irony in a homosexual producer producing a movie in which the character of the scientist—at least the male scientist, even if he embodied some of Grierson’s positive characteristics—is portrayed as suburban, married, and (presumably) heterosexual, albeit keeping his love at home while he attended to his other love, his science.

Meetings

Parker’s remembrance is of a series of meeting with Glover where they discussed not only who was available within the NFB, but also how the film might be put together. The shooting script had already created a structure for the film, which would help with the planning both he and Glover expected. It also provided some of the key symbolism that would help them structure the creative interpretation of reality—the symbolic patient and scientist, the image of the cell as universe, and other symbols they could use to subordinate naturalistic representation to symbolic expression, and so rise above the mess of details on screen: the creative interpretation of reality as Glover echoes Grierson. But the shooting script was only a start. Glover and Parker would meet regularly during the making of the film, discussing what worked and what did not, changing the script along the way, with Constant’s input and that of the animators, cameraman, editors, and special effects people. However, attention had now begun to shift from the paper technologies of the script to the other technologies of the film.