CHILDREN IN THE NURSERY

British Silent Cinema

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If one were to pick a title from the early British film period that could sum up the nature of the British film industry at that time, Robert Paul's *Children in the Nursery* of 1898 would serve very well. It implies, on first sight, an underdeveloped industry that, according to the commonly accepted history of silent film, failed to understand cinema, that remained infantile. But it also can suggest growth and the propagation of ideas, which were peculiar to Britain alone and which needed to grow at their own pace. And, if one looks to the specific imagery of Paul's film with its pillow fight prefiguring Vigo and *Zéro de Conduite*, then one can also point to a spirit of anarchy and fun that found true expression on the screen.

It was no accident that the invention of cinema occurred in those countries that were most highly developed industrially in the late nineteenth century: America, France, Great Britain and Germany. There was not only the sophisticated industrial and economic base, but a pioneering spirit of invention encouraged by industrialisation and, crucially, widespread communication between interested parties that led to cinema's rapid development. Almost all those in the creation of cinema knew of each other's work and fed off an international network of ideas and product development. However, it was America and France, with the Edison and Lumière firms respectively, which found those pioneers with the patience, personnel and capital necessary to make motion picture film a reality. In Britain, where perhaps the romantic idea of the solitary inventor dazzling the world with his discovery remained dear, individuals such as William Friese-Greene, Wordsworth Donisthorpe and the Frenchman Augustin Le Prince struggled alone in the late 1880s and early 1890s, lacking the financial support to make their dreams a reality.[1]

1 For Le Prince, see Christopher Rawlence, *The Missing Reel: The Untold Story of the Lost Inventor of Moving Pictures*, London 1900; for Donisthorpe, see Stephen Herbert, *Industry, Liberty, and a Vision: Wordsworth Donisthorpe's Kinesigraph*, London 1998. A good book-length study of William Friese-Greene has yet to be written.

Thus it was that film first came to Britain by the back door. Robert Paul, the first British film producer, exploited Thomas Edison's neglect in not having his Kinetoscope invention patented in Europe, by constructing his own Kinetoscope viewers in late 1894 and then combined forces with a photographer, Birt Acres, to construct a camera and take their first films by February 1895. Acres and Paul soon broke up the partnership in acrimony. Acres took a motion picture camera to Germany and America in June 1895 before returning to Britain in January 1896 to give his first demonstration of projected film. The following month Paul also gave a demonstration of projected film, on 20 February, the same day as saw the debut of the Lumière Cinématographe in Britain.[2]

British enthusiasm for the new invention was immediate and widespread. In an age conditioned to expect new wonders and consume them rapidly before the arrival of the next sensation, audiences from high and low flocked to the films in variety theatres, lecture halls and fairgrounds. Royalty was filmed and was happy to attend film shows; every variety theatre and music hall throughout the land fitted moving pictures onto the evening's bill of fare; the country's working class found this latest thrill in fairground booths and shops hastily converted into rudimentary cinemas known as 'penny gaffs'. And the first filmmakers were there in abundance: entertainers, magic lanternists, phonograph salesmen, magicians and photographers who all saw the cinematograph as an adjunct to their current activities.

Such vitality is reflected in the films produced during this 1895-1900 'Victorian' era, a vitality expressed both in a vigorous new industry and creative filmmaking. Prominent in this period were Robert Paul, who successfully made the change from pioneer to profitable equipment supplier and film producer; Charles Urban, who developed the Edison agency of Maguire and Baucus into the renowned Warwick Trading Company and specialised in the production of actuality film with a world-wide coverage; and the British Mutoscope and Biograph Company, the richest and most prestigious British film company at this period, with financing from publishing interests and boasting the superior 70mm Biograph projector. Particularly notable, especially since their critical championing by Georges Sadoul as the 'Brighton School' ('L'Ecole de Brighton'), were a number of filmmakers in the Brighton and Hove area of southern England. These filmmakers, who included G.A. Smith and James Williamson, introduced such novelties as close-ups (*Grandma's Reading Glass* [1900 Smith]), parallel action (*Santa Claus* [1898 Smith]), editing (*The Kiss in the Tunnel* [1899 Smith]), and multi-shot narratives of continuous development (*Fire!* [1901 Williamson]). That such a grouping arose (the term 'school' is now becoming obsolete) was due not to some shared aesthetic, but rather more to the presence locally of gifted cinematograph engineer Alfred Darling, and the film processing business of G.A. Smith. Nevertheless, the fact that a comparatively close-knit group existed in such a defined area must have contributed to the fresh ideas and playful experimentation with form which Sadoul pinpointed as an alternative to that American tradition which saw Edwin S. Porter as the progenitor of cinematic narration. Others within this close-knit group were Esme Collings, William Friese-Greene and (as a regular visitor from London and distributor of most of their films) Charles Urban. [3]

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2 John Barnes, *The Beginnings of the Cinema in England 1894-1901 - Volume One: 1894-1896,* Exeter 1998, covers the Acres-Paul story in depth.

Other notable filmmakers at this period included the former magician Walter Booth, making creative trick films for Robert Paul and later Charles Urban; and Cecil Hepworth, an early writer on films, and now establishing his own film production, initially based on travel, news and trick films, at Walton-on-Thames, near London. Hepworth later became known for comedies and dramas of character and subtlety, but his early trick films are marked by comic violence, especially in his trio of films inveighing ironically against the new-fangled automobile: *How to Stop a Motor Car*, *Explosion of a Motor Car* and *How it Feels to be Run Over* (all 1900). The Bamforth Company of Yorkshire, with its homely comic narratives inspired by the company's established business of lantern slides and comic postcards, demonstrated a particularly clear link between earlier magic lantern culture (for which they were major producers and suppliers) and early filmmaking. The plots, the costumes, the actors and the narratives were all in place; the films slotted naturally into an established mode of production. However, Bamforth were to show a remarkable understanding of the potential of film form, with such innovative titles as *A Kiss in the Tunnel* (1899), with its intercutting to show a couple kissing in a railway carriage (a theme also covered by G.A. Smith) and *Women's Rights* (1899), with its apparent reverse angle shot (in fact the actors are moved into the reversed position, not the camera). Still more there is an infectious exuberance about Bamforth's fiction and non-fiction snippets of life that marks their output at this time as especially pleasing.[4]

It is often argued that from this initial position of great vitality, British cinema failed to progress alongside the international competition, retaining a 'cottage industry' outlook and cheapness of production up to the First World War that proved fatal. That the British film industry did not progress in the same way or at the same speed as its competitors is undeniable, but why this should be seen as a sign of failure needs to be analysed, and in any case the 'cottage industry' idea needs to be challenged. The British film industry was soon led by a number of well-capitalised and expansive companies: the British Mutoscope and Biograph Company, the Warwick Trading Company. These specialised in the production of actuality or news films. A native affinity for documentary coupled with a belief that the proper purpose of film was documenting (and commercially exploiting) reality was apparent from the very beginning. Equally, an indifference towards the fiction film, which elsewhere in the 1900s was beginning to take wings and flourish, began to make itself felt. The early British film industry built itself on documentary foundations; feeling that the thrill, the heart of filmmak-

3 For complete coverage of British production 1894-1901, see John Barnes, *The Beginnings of the Cinema in England 1894-1901*, five voumes, Exeter 1996-1998. For the 'Brighton School' see Georges Sadoul, *Histoire générale du cinéma*, Paris 1948 vol. 2, chapter 11 (pp. 155-76), and their redefined status in Frank Gray, *Hove Pioneers and the Arrival of Cinema*, Brighton 1996. Stylistic innovations in the Brighton/Hove films and other early British filmmakers are covered by Barry Salt, *Film Style and Technology: History and Analysis*, London 1992. A rewarding account of the social and industrial forces that helped form the cinema of this period is given in Michael Chanan, *The Dream That Kicks: The Prehistory and Early Years of Cinema in Britain*, London 1980.

4 Cecil Hepworth, *Came the Dawn: Memories of a Film Pioneer*, London 1951, pp. 51, 55; Richard Brown, *Notes on the Nomenclature and Dating of Some Early Bamforth Films*, 1994; Barry Salt, *Film Style and Technology*, pp. 37-8.

ing lay in its ability to reflect truthful reality. The different truths that lay behind the burgeoning art of the fiction film were not so easily understood.

Hence, as the exhibition of films became firmly established, British filmmakers began to lose their early lead. Films moved from the fairgrounds and variety theatres to rudimentary cinemas in converted shops, then to purpose-built cinemas constructed in a wave of optimistic speculation around 1908-1910. Such cinemas emphasised luxury, with uniformed attendants, potted palms in the foyers, and classical designs, a conscious attempt to lift filmgoing out of its 'penny gaff' and fairground low reputation, with the ultimate aim of attracting a more monied clientele. Major cinema circuits began to be formed, of which the richest and most widespread was Provincial Cinematograph Theatres. The film business matured from the general 'open market' system, to a separation of production, distribution, and exhibition, and the Cinematograph Films Act was passed in 1910, the first regularising of a previously somewhat anarchic business.

At the same time, British fiction film producers were failing to stay in step with the product of their foreign competitors. The original pioneers had mostly bowed out of the business: some having made their fortunes and quitting when they sensed that events were moving beyond them (Robert Paul, G.A. Smith), some moving from production to equipment manufacture (James Williamson, the Walturdaw company), some ruined (Birt Acres).[5] Those that remained of the pioneers were now leading figures in the industry. Cecil Hepworth built up his Hepworth Manufacturing Company at Walton-on-Thames to become a reliable supplier of quality films of all kinds, sensitively if not lavishly produced, with a stable of actors who were becoming public favourites, notably Alma Taylor, Chrissie White, Gladys Sylvani, Jack Hulcup and Hay Plumb. Charles Urban, an American of German antecedents who became a naturalised Briton, had little time for or understanding of fiction films, but his cameramen toured the world to bring back news and travel pictures, and he dazzled audiences with the results of his colour film system, Kinemacolor (invented by G.A. Smith), which was launched in 1908. Urban's colour films of the opening of the Panama Canal (1912), the Coronation of King George V (1911), and above all the two and a half hour record of the Delhi Durbar (1911), held to celebrate the coronation of the new King Emperor, were the most acclaimed and talked-about films of their time. Urban's genius for publicity raised the profile of British film production considerably in the pre-war period.

But Hepworth and Urban were the exceptions. Most British film producers remained firmly wedded to a cheap and primitive level of production that could appeal only to the least sophisticated of audiences. The raw spirit of the fairground and the penny gaff hung heavily over the crude output of Bamforth, Graphic, Cricks and Martin, British and Colonial, Precision, Alpha, Wrench, Mitchell and Kenyon. There was evidently a market for such humble fare, enough to support the ambitions of such filmmakers as H.O. Martinek, Dave Aylott, Ethyle and Ernest Batley, whose coarse and sometimes lively output featured such staples as

5 The lives of the pioneers are recorded in Stephen Herbert and Luke McKernan, *Who's Who of Victorian Cinema: A Worldwide Survey*, London 1996.

child-stealing by gypsies, chase comedies featuring tramps, naughty children or enterprising animals, and criminals apprehended by intrepid Boy Scouts. A number of these companies served regional audiences only, most significantly the Mitchell and Kenyon firm of Lancashire, whose naive dramatic style came purely from magic lantern slides or illustrated journals, but which specialised in producing local news items, especially football matches, that had considerable local popularity.

Standing out among these sometimes vigorous but wilfully unambitious films were those produced by Will Barker. Barker had taken over at the Warwick Trading Company after Charles Urban left it in 1903, and he built up the company as a producer of quality documentary and news film in opposition to the new Charles Urban Trading Company. The rivalry between the two was intense, and while the fearsome Barker had none of Urban's style, he was able to dazzle the film trade with his own publicity coups. He formed his Barker Manufacturing Company in 1909, with studios at Ealing in London (the site of the famous Ealing Film Studios decades later), and moved into fiction film production with a bang. In 1911 he announced that he was filming the great actor Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree in his production of Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*, at an unheard of fee of £1,000 to the actor, and at the equally unheard of length of an hour. Barker's genius, however, was to proclaim the film's exclusivity by promising to have all copies of the film publicly burnt six weeks after release. The price of the film naturally soared, and thus a stilted and wholly uncinematic pageant that would probably have struggled to find an audience naturally, found instant bookings and became the sensation of the hour.[6] He went on to produce ever longer films that mostly turned to British history or literature for their subject matter, and it was the solid Britishness of such productions as *East Lynne* (1913), *Sixty Years a Queen* (1913) and *Jane Shore* (1915) that Barker promoted. Threatened, even mystified, by the more sophisticated, and certainly more popular with British audiences, output of foreign firms, Barker and his kind fell back on nationalism as their defence. A film was of value purely because it depicted British history or British scenery. Of the true illusion of luxury, of the advances in film production technique, and of stars with appeal, all the factors that were drawing audiences to American films in particular, Barker and his kind remained profoundly ignorant. Barker's great film star was Blanche Forsythe, a heavily-built actress adept only at basic melodrama, whose appeal to audiences could only have been nil. Such wilfulness in the face of reality, an inability to come to terms with a changing industry that was being led by forces beyond its control, came to typify British film production not only at this time, but periodically ever since, and mirrored a general British muleheadedness in the face of a waning Empire and a world where Britain need not nor could not always come first.

Among the smaller film producers at this time, a notable exception to the unsophisticated product that was starting to give British films a bad name was the Clarendon Film Company. Founded by Percy Stow, formerly with Hepworth, this company neglected to promote its actors as stars in the way that Hepworth was successfully doing, but in every other respect their one-reel farcical comedies were delightful. Percy Stow's speciality was socially-aware comedies, such as *Milling the Militants* (1913), a satire on the Suffragette movement, the cheeky

6 Robert Hamilton Ball, *Shakespeare on Silent Film: A Strange Eventful History*, London, 1968, pp. 78-82, 320-22. Rumours persist that some copies of *Henry VIII* survived the conflagration, but the film remains lost.

cross-dressing farce *Love and the Varsity* (1913), or ingeniously sustained comedies of the absurd, such as *A Glass of Goat's Milk* (1909). Although the company's speciality was comedy, they also produced a successful miniaturised adaptation of William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1908), and produced a popular series with the naval hero Lieutenant Rose, to be imitated by British and Colonial's still more popular Lieutenant Daring. Clarendon's films are now some of the most pleasing, adept, and undervalued British films of the period.

In the period just before the First World War, there seemed to be a small renaissance in British film production. Barker's spectacular *Sixty Years a Queen*, a biography of Queen Victoria produced with a newcomer to the film scene who would soon grown in importance, G.B. Samuelson, was a popular success for its loyal pageant of recent history. Hepworth was producing films of a quality to match foreign competition, and was moving into feature production with versions of Charles Dickens novels directed by Thomas Bentley, such as *Oliver Twist* (1912) and *David Copperfield* (1913), and a bold experiment filming Sir Johnston Forbes-Robertson's production of *Hamlet* (1913). His stars Alma Taylor and Chrissie White were also genuinely popular with British audiences, especially in the cheerfully anarchic *Tilly* series. A new director of uncommon sensitivity and intelligence, George Pearson, was working at Pathé and was about to join Samuelson. Dr. Ralph Jupp, founder of Provincial Cinematograph Theatres, moved into production with London Films, a venture he was prepared to finance properly, and to support artistically by bringing in American directorial talent, namely George Loane Tucker and Harold Shaw. His first production, *The House of Temperley* (1913), was an encouraging success. British comedy was lowbrow and made by music hall comedians clumsily unaware of the change in medium, but the 'Pimple' comedies made by and starring Fred Evans, were nevertheless a popular attraction, and at their best had a winning, anarchic, child-like quality, and a growing assurance with absurd parody. Yet while Britain had Pimple, it had given America Charlie Chaplin. Britain had Cecil Hepworth; America had D.W. Griffith. Britain had Blanche Forsythe; America had Mary Pickford; Britain had *Sixty Years a Queen*; America had *Birth of a Nation*. The battle had been lost.[7]

Why there should be a native aptitude for actuality film is hard to say without going into vague analyses of the national psyche, but throughout British film history this has been a notable trait. On one level it may simply be a case of simple reality being easier - and far cheaper - to record than the illusions of fiction. But it is equally clear that many, and the best of British filmmakers were far happier dealing with what they could present as reality. This, it was deeply felt, was the true purpose of film as a medium, and it is difficult not to sympathise with someone such as Charles Urban, who invested such pride in his records of the real world and loudly proclaimed their educational value, being frustrated by the public's preference for trivial stories and the nebulous appeal of film stars.

Thus parallel with an early history of immature fiction film production is a history of non-fiction production that was notable from the start. While no British producer was to use non-fiction film in any kind of analytical way until the 1930s, thus generally failing John Grierson's famous definition of documentary as the 'creative treatment of actuality', the variety and ex-

7 Rachael Low, *The History of the British Film 1906-1914*, London, 1949. This is still the best account for all aspects for pre-war production. See also Ricardo Redi, *Il primo cinema inglese*, Rome, 1990.

tent of their output was considerable. Urban dominated the market; indeed, in the 1890s he was responsible for the production or distribution of nearly three-quarters of all films being shown in Britain, and the bulk of his product was actuality film. Urban cameramen such as Joe Rosenthal, Jack Avery, Frank Ormiston-Smith, George Rogers and H.M. Lomas scoured the globe for travel scenes to make the Urban film catalogues veritable visual Baedekers, and made clear the proud boast of Urban's slogan for his 'Urbanora' shows: 'We put the world before you'.

The Boer War of 1899-1902 provided a fine opportunity for the actuality specialists, and Urban had three cameramen in South Africa, Edgar Hyman, John Benett-Stanford and Joe Rosenthal. Robert Paul likewise had two cameraman, and the British Mutoscope and Biograph Company, with its hefty Mutograph camera shooting 70mm film, sent W.K-L. Dickson with two assistants. Fiction films depicting scenes from the war were common, and were frequently advertised as depicting reality, and the proto-newsfilm companies were keen to promote the veracity of their product, and the struggles the cameramen had had to overcome to secure such pictures. The process of the films' production, as much as the end result, became an important selling point, a greater indication of their 'truth', and by inference of the inferiority of the story film.[8]

The years immediately after 1900 produced less in the way of such dramatic news stories, although Urban sent Joe Rosenthal and George Rogers to film the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-5, but non-fiction films kept on being produced in the form of travelogues, industrials (films showing industrial processes that acted as advertisements for the end products), royalty and sports. The exclusive rights for such nationally popular sporting events as the Football Association Cup Final, or the two most famous horse races, the Derby and the Grand National, were hotly, even violently contested, and became highlights of the film year in Britain. Such keenness for hot news found a natural outlet in the newsreel, introduced by Charles Pathé in France in 1908, and adopted by the British in 1910 with enthusiasm. The newsreel, with its collection of short actuality items covering stories vital and trivial alike, rushed to the cinemas twice weekly, was the perfect vehicle for an obsession with self-documenting, and six newsreels were on the market by the time of the First World War: *Pathé's Animated Gazette*, *Warwick Bioscope Chronicle*, *Gaumont Graphic*, *Topical Budget*, *Eclair Journal* and *Williamson's Animated News*. Only three were to survive the war - Pathé, Gaumont and Topical - and to flourish still further in the nineteen twenties.[9]

Such was the enthusiasm for, or the comfort with, actuality, that producers of fiction films were frequently similarly inspired. Will Barker produced a series of melodramatic crime films with a London setting, such as *The Lure of London* (1914) and *Trapped by the London Sharks* (1916*)*, which incorporated extensive scenes of the capital that were meant to emphasise the films' truthfulness. One of the most notable feature films of the period, British and Colonial's *The Battle of Waterloo* (1913), told the story of the famous battle against Napoleon,

8 William Kennedy-Laurie Dickson, *The Biograph in Battle*, London 1901; Stephen Bottomore, *Joseph Rosenthal: The Most Glorious Profession*, in "Sight and Sound", Autumn 1983, vol. 52. no. 4, pp. 260-65.

9 Luke McKernan, *Topical Budget: The Great British News Film*, London 1992.

but instead of shaping the material as a drama, chose instead to present it as near as possible as a recreation of the actuality as could be achieved in five days on a budget of £1,800 with the inhabitants of a nearby village and a local regiment making up the armies. The film presented a series of elaborately recreated scenes from the battle, ostensibly from the point of view of an ordinary soldier, and did indeed achieve a striking sense of being surrounded by confusing charges and explosions, with dramatic or human interest almost nil. It was history presented as newsreel, and at an hour and a half it certainly caused a sensation (British rights alone were sold for £5,000) and thrilled certain audiences, while boring others.

As well as news, travel, industrial and sports, films with a scientific or educational basis were also encouraged, especially by Urban. He encouraged the blending of serious observational work with populist presentation in the films of naturalists such as Oliver Pike, Cherry Kearton and Percy Smith, whose patient use of stop-motion photography, micro-cinematography and other techniques produced such marvels as *The Strength and Agility of Insects* (1911) and *The Birth of a Flower* (1910). The latter film, showing a flower growing from seed to full bloom, was also produced in Kinemacolor. This two-colour system, with its subjects filmed and then projected at double speed through a rotating red-green filter, was the cinema's first true colour film system, and although naturally unable to produce the full spectrum and always plagued by colour fringing, it was acclaimed as a genuine marvel, and one step nearer the perfect apprehension of reality which was the aim of a producer such as Urban. A court case in 1914-15 raised by a rival colour film system taught Urban that no-one could claim a monopoly on colour, and helped bring to an end the British career of the most notable figure in pre-war British films.[10]

The First World War broke a British film industry that was already on its knees, although production continued almost unabated during the first two years of the war, and saw the arrival of a major new producer, G.B. Samuelson. Samuelson was a film renter who had come to Will Barker with the idea of producing a spectacle on the life of Queen Victoria, and the success of *Sixty Years a Queen* (1913) led him to go into production himself, with studios at Isleworth and George Pearson as his director. The first Samuelson production was *A Study in Scarlet* (1914), a highly popular Sherlock Holmes drama, and set a pattern for Samuelson productions of ambitious, moderately well produced dramas, generally based on literary properties, with a preference for romantic scenes from the past. The declaration of war saw a typically bold response from Samuelson, who produced *The Great European War* (1914) within days of the declaration of war, though speed of production was really its only virtue, and then throughout the war years such notable titles as *John Halifax, Gentleman* (1915) *Little Women* (1917), *Hindle Wakes* (1918), and his probable masterpiece, *Milestones* (1916), a family history drama with the type of multiple narrative that particularly appealed to Samuelson.

George Pearson left the enthusiastic but often exasperating Samuelson after *John Halifax, Gentleman*, and went to Gaumont at their new Lime Grove studios, where he continued to produce some of the most interesting and sensitively handled films of the period, including

10 D.B. Thomas, *The First Colour Motion Pictures*, London 1969.

Sally Bishop (1917), the war films *Kiddies in the Ruins* (1918) and *The Better 'Ole* (1918), and most notably a series of mystery dramas featuring the character Ultus (played by Aurele Sydney) that aimed to produce a British rival to the French Fantomas. The Clarendon Film Company moved on from its earlier charming comedies to specialise in historical epics such as *Old St. Paul's* (1914), hoping to match the comparative success with recreations of scenes from British history that Will Barker was achieving with films such as *Jane Shore*. Cecil Hepworth continued to develop his production of feature films, enjoying success with *Comin' Thro' the Rye* (1916) and establishing a new star in Henry Edwards, who also proved to be a talented director who made a series of feature films which exploited the particular persona he had developed of a touching hero prevented from true love by some hidden sorrow, a dilemma successfully exploited in *Broken Threads* (1918), *Towards the Light* (1918) and *East is East* (1916). The heroine of the latter was Florence Turner, the former star of Vitagraph films in America, who came to Britain in 1913 and made films with American director Larry Trimble for her own Turner Films, a subsidiary of Hepworth.[11]

However, the loss of world markets owing to the war, and the effect of key staff being called up for the war effort once general conscription was in force by early 1916, meant that British film production in the latter half of the war dwindled to almost nothing. The filming of the war itself, however, was a very different matter. After a brief period of enthusiastic recording of scenes behind the lines in Belgium and France by the news cameramen in late 1914 and early 1915, a general ban was enforced preventing all still and moving picture cameramen from working at the front, and severely restricting their operations anywhere, even in Britain. The film trade, headed by J. Brooke Wilkinson of the newly-formed British Board of Film Censors, lobbied the War Office for permission to film at the front under official supervision. Agreement was reached by late 1915 and the first two Official cameramen, Teddy Tong and Geoffrey Malins, were sent out to the Western Front. Initial results were disappointing, but after Tong was invalided out and replaced by J.B. McDowell, the system and the cameramen began working with marked effectiveness throughout 1916. The film Malins and McDowell returned covering the battle of the Somme was so remarkable that it was agreed to release the material as a full-length feature film instead of the shorts that had been the pattern up to that point. The film was edited by Charles Urban, who was now resident in America representing British propaganda films abroad, but who had returned for a short while and had recommended that the Somme films be released as a whole. The result stunned everyone. It is estimated that the film, *The Battle of the Somme* (1916), was seen by half the British population. It was the first film to show audiences something of the reality of war, not hesitating to show the squalor of the trenches, the wearied looks of the troops, the wounded and the dead, and most astonishingly pictures of British soldiers being shot dead. That this famous scene, where troops go 'over the top' and some are shot down, was in fact a recreation filmed behind the lines has not lessened the power of the film subsequently, nor does it change the remarkable acceptance of such a scene by film audiences, who were frequently appalled but generally riveted by what they saw. *The Battle of the Somme* is unquestionably the greatest film of the war, and the ultimate product of a special kind of British treatment

11 Rachael Low, *The History of the British Film 1914-1918*, London 1950, pp. 199-201.

of actuality, modestly letting the pictures speak for themselves. They have never ceased to speak any the less eloquently than they did in 1916.[12]

The film propagandists of the war faced a dilemma. They had to put over the message that Britain was fighting a just war and fighting it well, but they had also to sell such films in the market place. *The Battle of the Somme* was sensationally successful, but follow-up feature films made along the same lines did less well at the cinemas, and the new government and film trade committee, the War Office Cinematograph Committee (WOCC) had to look to other means to get its message across. The actuality film material was compressed from the feature film format to a newsreel, the *War Office Official Topical Budget*, which was issued twice-weekly from May 1917, but while this proved to be a modest but ultimately consistently effective propaganda tool, the greater ambition was to produce propagandist drama. It was evident to all but British producers themselves that the necessary talent for a major feature film did not exist in the country, and so two American film directors were invited over: Herbert Brenon and D.W. Griffith.

Griffith was invited to Britain by the head of the WOCC, Sir Max Aitken (later the newspaper magnate Lord Beaverbrook), simply because Aitken was hoping for a British *Birth of a Nation*. The film Griffith made, *Hearts of the World*, starring Lillian Gish, was filmed during 1917, mostly in Hollywood despite brazen publicity claims that much of its was shot in France close to the fighting, and released in 1918. Griffith was, however, filming at the WOCC's invitation and not to its specific instructions, and it is unlikely that *Hearts of the World*, a melodramatic romance with the war as a backdrop, is quite what they were looking for, even if it did make a sizeable amount of money for war charities.

Herbert Brenon was hardly less celebrated a director than Griffith, after the great success of his pacifist production *War Brides*, and he was approached by a separate organisation, the National War Aims Committee, to film a drama that might bring home to the ordinary British working man (now increasingly resentful towards a seemingly endless war) why Britain was fighting. With a scenario by prestigious novelist Hall Caine, *The Invasion of Britain* (later known as *Victory and Peace*), envisaged a German invasion of Britain. The production was singularly ill-fated, no more so than when the completed negative was destroyed in a fire at the London Film Company in June 1918. Undaunted, and deeply emotionally involved in his work, Brenon returned immediately to make the film all over again, but it took another four months and the war was coming to a close. Tragically the film was now completely redundant, despite costing nearly £25,000, and Brenon in particular was devastated, having struggled so hard against what he described as 'the undramatic, phlegmatic temperament of the British' and their 'bad photographic climate', endless production difficulties, and fire, and then worst of all, the war ending. The film was never shown, and two years later was destroyed on official instruction.[13]

12 Roger Smither, *'A Wonderful Idea of the Fighting': the question of fakes in The Battle of the Somme*, "Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television", 1993, vol. 13 no. 2, pp.149-168; Kevin Brownlow, *The War, the West and the Wilderness*, London 1978, pp. 61-68.

Ironically, the talent to produce the sort of patriotic epic the British propagandists sought from Griffith and Brenon but did not get, existed in Britain after all, and was involved in its own, independent production. The Ideal Film Company, with director Maurice Elvey, was engaged throughout 1918 on an epic production on the life of the British Prime Minister David Lloyd George. Initially conceived of as a serial, and consequently somewhat episodic when it was converted into a feature, *The Life Story of David Lloyd George* was nevertheless an astonishing achievement. Three hours in length, it traced the life of the politician from his humble Welsh beginnings, through to his early political crises and triumphs during the Boer War, followed by the revolutionary 'People's Budget' of 1909, through to his custodianship of the country during the latter half of the war. Clearly inspired by Griffith in its use of the epic sweep of history, it was unique in using such narrative methods to tell a contemporary story, and in its passionate engagement with the issues of the day. Showing nothing of the meanness of production that so characterised most other British films of the period, handsomely shot by an uncredited cameraman, *The Life Story of David Lloyd George* was mysteriously suppressed for political reasons in November 1918, before it could be released, and was never shown. Its recent rediscovery has seen it acclaimed as one of the few genuine masterpieces among British silent feature films, and what effect it might have had on British production had it only been screened at the time is a matter of intriguing speculation. It shows at the very least that when the passions were engaged, the available talent could rise to the occasion.[14]

The post-war era opened with British screens totally dominated by American product. British films were almost entirely without any appeal. Americans films had the technical talent, the production values, the conspicuous expense and the stars that naturally drew British audiences. Distributors and exhibitors saw no sense in handling local product which almost wilfully showed no progress from the pre-war period. Even where British films of some quality were produced, their chances of reaching an appreciative audience were severely restricted by the ubiquity of American product and the iniquities of the block booking system. The major distributors, operating from a position of unassailable strength, would force exhibitors to accept packages of films (including some not yet made) that would include a few promised major titles among the more general dross. British cinemas were therefore booked up for months in advance, making smaller producers (generally of British product) unable to find bookings, or if they did, then having to wait sometimes well over a year before getting any return on their investment. The effect of British production was naturally catastrophic, and only added to the downward spiral of meanly produced films, not wanted by audiences, who in any case rarely got to see them.[15]

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13 Kevin Brownlow, *The War, the West and the Wilderness*, pp. 144-158. A fragment of a few hundred feet from the film survives at the National Film and Television Archive, London.

14 David Berry and Simon Horrocks (eds.), *David Lloyd George: The Movie Mystery*, Cardiff 1998.

15 Rachael Low, *The History of the British Film 1918-1929*, London 1971, pp.86-89. The basic information for British film production in the 1920s in this essay comes largely from Low.

In such a climate, it is a wonder that any British films were produced at all. There was almost no fresh talent available, such had been the diminution of film production during the war, and of the major producers only Cecil Hepworth and relative newcomer G.B. Samuelson were active. The fate of each during the early twenties was symptomatic of the period. Hepworth's films continued to have a small following, and his leading lady Alma Taylor remained popular to a degree, and he had modest successes with such titles as *Tansy* (1921), *The Amazing Quest of Mr. Ernest Bliss* (1920), and especially the farcical comedy *Alf's Button* (1920), starring Leslie Henson. Hepworth decided to fight the industry's doldrums by expanding his business, but in seeking finance to launch a public company the share issue was greatly under-subscribed, and Hepworth was heading for bankruptcy. His final film, *Comin' Thro' the Rye* (1923, a remake of his earlier 1916 success) in many ways typified British production of the early twenties. Starring Shayle Gardner and Alma Taylor, it was a hopelessly antiquated if occasionally charming Victorian romance, marred still further by Hepworth's stubborn preference for fades instead of straight cuts on changes in action, which his films appear all the slower. The film was an artistic and financial failure, and Hepworth became bankrupt.[16]

Samuelson similarly faced the crisis of the early twenties with boldness. For a while, indeed, it appeared that he could be the saviour of the industry. He produced a flurry of films in the 1919-1920 period, including an enterprising venture taking a company to Hollywood, where he produced six features and hoped for an exchange agreement with an American production unit. But his films were too shoddily produced, lacked stars, and showed little understanding of what it was audiences wanted to see. He selected some bold subjects, such as venereal disease, in his version of Eugene Brieux's *Damaged Goods* (1919), and birth control in *Married Love* (1923). But although these films gained some notoriety, they were no solution to the problem, and after diminishing returns from succeeding films Samuelson had a disastrous experience producing *She* (1925) in a German studio. A fiasco in every sense, Samuelson was also sued by the leading lady, Hollywood's Betty Blythe. He was made bankrupt in 1929, but by then had long since ceased to be of any account in the film industry.

In a sense, the early nineteen twenties saw British films having to start from the beginning once again. The earlier efforts of British filmmakers had left virtually no bedrock of talent or experience, and while those such as Hepworth and Samuelson headed for their inevitable fall, the scene was set for new production talent to emerge. Names such as Adrian Brunel, Graham Cutts, Leslie Howard, Clive Brook, Ronald Colman, Victor McLaglen, Alfred Hitchcock, Victor Saville and Michael Balcon were starting to appear in British studios. Drawn to movies by the glamour of American films, some of this talent would soon move to Hollywood, but others would lay the groundwork for the establishment of a reborn film industry in the latter half of the decade.

The loudest and most confident newcomer attracted by the vacuum of the early twenties was Sir Oswald Stoll. Stoll was a highly successful theatrical impresario who looked to the position of British film as a thing of shame as well as a clear opportunity for someone to step

16 Cecil Hepworth's memoirs are a charming and intelligent account of the whole period of British silent films. Cecil Hepworth, *Came the Dawn.*

in with the right ideas. After the reasonable success of some initial productions, the war drama *Comradeship* (1919) and stage celebrity Matheson Lang in his pre-war hit *Mr. Wu* (1919), Stoll Picture Productions was registered in 1920 with the considerable capital of £400,000, new large studios at Cricklewood, the reliable Maurice Elvey as its chief director, and a highly ambitious programme of production largely based on popular novels which it was reasoned would have a guaranteed public.

The lesson behind the Stoll story is that money alone does not produce good films. Stoll was not profligate, and worked hard to match costs to anticipated revenue, but as with Samuelson, Hepworth and so many other filmmakers, there was lacking the basic understanding of what made a good film. Mystified by what it was that drew people to the screen, they turned to what were proven successes in the other arts. Hence Samuelson chose the novels of Ethel M. Dell, Marie Corelli and 'Rita', and employed such popular stage actors as Matheson Lang, Owen Nares and George Robey. Stoll did produce some films of popular appeal and lasting quality. *At the Villa Rose* (1920), directed by Elvey and adapted from a detective novel by A.E.W. Mason, is a handsomely staged and engrossing mystery, with a villainess of intriguing malevolence. A series of short films based on the works of Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, and the feature film *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1921), again directed by Elvey, with its phosphorescent hound haunting the night, capture the right Holmesian spirit. George K. Arthur performed with charm as the hero of H.G. Wells' *Kipps* (1921), directed by Harold Shaw. The American J. Stuart Blackton, formerly of Vitagraph, came to Britain to produce the moderately spectacular historical drama *The Glorious Adventure* (1922), filmed in Prizmacolor, with society beauty Lady Diana Manners as the heroine imperilled by the Great Fire of London, though the picture was stolen by the comic ruffian played Victor McLaglen, soon bound for Hollywood.

But the leaden failures outweighed the occasional successes. Two wearisome and quaint Scottish dramas directed by W.P. Kellino, *Rob Roy* (1922) and *Young Lochnivar* (1923), had only Scottish exteriors to recommend them. *The Wandering Jew* (1923), directed by Elvey and starring Matheson Lang, was a historical pageant of deadly slowness; *The Chinese Bungalow* (1926), with the same actor and director Sinclair Hill, still worse. Stoll films seldom attempted humour; *The Prehistoric Man* (1924), with music hall star George Robey, was a woefully mishandled exception. The nadir of Stoll's production throughout the nineteen twenties was *The Prodigal Son* (1923) directed by A.E. Coleby, a negligible talent who somehow had survived from the pre-war period. Based on a novel by Hall Caine, set (and partly filmed) in Iceland, the film lasted an unbearable four hours, though with nothing in the handling that understood concepts of pacing, scale, characterisation or subject matter appropriate to a film of such length. The industry phrase of the time was true: "A Stoll film is a dull film".[17]

There were some interesting talents in the studios at this time who seemed to offer promise, but who failed either through lack of genuine ability, poor scripts, or maybe just inadequate production support. Kenelm Foss was a writer and actor with inventive ideas and ambitions to create imaginative films, but his own ideas were largely dissipated among a series of in-

17 Rachael Low, *The History of the British Film 1918-1929*, pp. 123-127.

consequential short comedies for Catford Films. When he did get the opportunity to direct feature films, first for Astra Films and *The Breed of the Treshams* (1920) (the first production of Herbert Wilcox, soon to be a figure of great significance in British films), and then several titles for H.W. Thompson Productions, all pseudo-literary adaptations of restricted appeal. More able to translate some of his artistic pretensions to the screen was Guy Newall, who made a number of intriguing films for producer George Clark, starring himself and his wife Ivy Duke, with handsome photography by Hal Young. *The Lure of Crooning Water* (1920), *Fox Farm* (1922) and *The Starlit Garden* (1923) had a realism and an artistic sensibility that faltered before the choice of unsuitable, hackneyed melodrama. Humbler in his ambitions, but ultimately more successful commercially, was Walter West, whose Broadwest company, with popular leading lady Violet Hopson, made entertaining racing dramas such as *Kissing Cup's Race* (1921) and *The Lady Owner* (1923), films of modest attainments but at least products that audiences were keen to see.[18]

Another producer with an individual and successful approach, indeed unique, was Harry Bruce Woolfe. He became the leading champion of the British documentary film throughout the twenties, having formed his British Instructional Films (BIF) in 1919. Woolfe's ambition was to recount battles from the First World War in the form of actuality film taken by the Official cameramen, maps, animation, and some re-enactments. Beginning with the three-reeler *The Battle of Jutland* in 1921, its success led him to follow it with *Armageddon* (1923), *Mons* (1926) and the much praised *Battles of the Coronel and Falkland Islands* (1927), the latter two being directed by Walter Summers, who continued in a similar vein with *The Somme* (1927) for New Era. BIF's speciality, however, lay in short, scientific films, most notably the *Secrets of Nature* series, which began in 1922. As a series which carried on from where cinema's early educationalist, Charles Urban, had left off, it was fitting that the leading light behind the *Secrets of Nature* was Urban's former collaborator, Percy Smith. These simple one-reelers, showing aspects of natural history and made in a painstaking fashion that neither compromised the science nor failed to entertain the audience, the films were both popular and given much acclaim. For several critics they were the best that British films of the twenties had to offer. Prominent in their production were Percy Smith, Charles Head, Oliver Pike, Geoffrey Barkas, C.W.R. Knight and Mary Field, who was chiefly responsible for their production after 1927. Woolfe ran BIF astutely throughout the decade, eventually phasing out all the documentary work except *Secrets of Nature*, and turning to the production of fiction films.[19]

British fiction films of the early twenties lacked what they have frequently lacked ever since: popular stars and good scripts. The script problem was simply not understood, but the lack of stars was more obvious, and seemed more easily remediable. The first option was to import stars from the stage, and Matheson Lang and Owen Nares did have their following throughout the decade, and Ivor Novello was soon to become the most popular British leading man. A second option was to import stars from America, a tactic that would frequently

18 Rachael Low, *The History of the British Film 1918-1929*, pp. 149-152.

19 Mary Field and Percy Smith, *Secrets of Nature*, London 1939; Irene Wilson, *'His Name was Smith'*, "The Cine-Technician" May-June 1945, pp. 56, 62-3.

resorted to by British producers in decades to come, though usually the only stars who could be afforded were those whose careers were on the downward slide in Hollywood. G.B. Samuelson had had a terrible time with the unhappy Betty Blythe in *She*, but one of the first Americans to be invited over, Betty Compson, enjoyed success not only in Britain, but to a small degree in the USA as well, with *Woman to Woman* (1923). A competent weepie, it was produced by two men who were soon to be at the forefront of the renaissance in British films, Michael Balcon and Victor Saville. Other American stars to make films in Britain during the twenties were Anna Q. Nilsson, Mae Marsh, Syd Chaplin, Lionel Barrymore, Will Rogers and Dorothy Gish.

The third and wisest option was to find new British stars on home ground. There were efforts to do this by the simple expedient of running competitions through newspapers - Gaumont, Pathé, Samuelson and Film Booking Offices all organised such competitions. Margaret Leahy, winner of the latter competition, was acclaimed as the 'new British film star' and was sent off to Hollywood to appear opposite Buster Keaton in *The Three Ages* (1923), but her career went no further. In 1920, however, George Pearson, one of the most interesting filmmakers of the period, even if his thoughtfulness did not always translate itself with complete success onto the screen, discovered Betty Balfour. A bubbly, bright-eyed eighteen year old, she played second lead in the Welsh-Pearson production *Nothing Else Matters* (1920) and gained all the good notices. Her chirpy character seemed somehow quintessentially British, and she was given a succession of star vehicles that played on a pert, Cockney charm, and an ability to play for both tears and laughter that made her Britain's most popular actress of the twenties. The film also starred another first-time actress, Mabel Poulton, who went onto greater success in poignant roles, though not with the Welsh-Pearson company, which chose to concentrate on Balfour. They had considerable success with a series of films in which Balfour played a Cockney flower girl Squibs, opposite Hugh E. Wright, a stage comedy actor far less at ease in front of the camera. *Squibs* (1921), *Squibs Wins the Calcutta Sweep* (1922), *Squibs MP* (1923) and *Squibs' Honeymoon* (1923) were undemanding but populist fare with a clear British character to which audiences responded. The triumph of the Pearson and Balfour team, however, was *Reveille* (1924), a sentimental, thoughtful account of how the war had affected a group of ordinary people, which dealt in individual anecdotes rather than an overall narrative, and ended in performance with the artistic coup of total silence during the Remembrance Day sequence, the camera catching expressions, the swaying of a curtain in the breeze, a tear in the eyes of those who remembered, a spellbinding two minutes of film. Thereafter Balfour's contract came to an end, and she and Pearson parted company.[20]

Woman to Woman (1923) was probably the most important British film of the early twenties. It was produced by Michael Balcon and Victor Saville, two ambitious and astute young men from Birmingham. Balcon, encouraged by the success of the film, went on to form Gainsborough Pictures with director Graham Cutts, with studios at Islington, and to remain a major figure in British films until the nineteen fifties, chiefly as the head of Ealing Studios. Saville proved to be a producer and director of genius, responsible for some of the most pol-

20 George Pearson, *Flashback: An Autobiography of a British Film-Maker*, London 1957. A most thoughtful memoir of the period.

ished and popular British films of the thirties, before a less happy time in Hollywood. Graham Cutts, a former exhibitor from the north of England was the director of *Woman to Woman*, and replaced Maurice Elvey as the most significant director in British films, before he too was replaced in the pantheon by the film's scriptwriter and art director, Alfred Hitchcock. Part of the funding for the film came from financier C.M. Woolf, soon to become chairman of Gainsborough Pictures and then of the powerful Gaumont-British company; further funding came from another Birmingham businessman, Oscar Deutsch, destined to become Britain's leading cinema exhibitor with his Odeon chain. In front of the camera were American star Betty Compson, who guaranteed the film some success in the States, and the suave Clive Brook, soon bound for Hollywood himself.

There was no instant success for this teaming of new talent, as the second film produced by Balcon and directed by Cutts, *The Prude's Fall*, was a flop. But the talent was now on the scene; people with an altogether far more astute and sophisticated approach to filmmaking than Hepworth or Samuelson, or even the dedicated George Pearson. Gainsborough Pictures began to flourish from the mid-twenties, when Alfred Hitchcock took over from Cutts as its leading director, starting with two promising films made in the Emelka studios in Munich, *The Pleasure Garden* (1926) and *The Mountain Eagle* (1926). Cutts was to have his greatest success with Ivor Novello, a composer and star of stage musicals whose look of glamorised suffering appealed to contemporary audiences and made him Britain's leading male star of the period. The hit film for the pair was *The Rat* (1925), in which Novello played a Parisian apache, and it was followed by the sequels *The Triumph of the Rat* (1926) and *The Return of the Rat* (1929).

Graham Cutts was also significant in introducing another major figure to British films, Herbert Wilcox. Wilcox entered the business with his Astra Films in 1920, before meeting Cutts, an exhibitor keen to direct films, who had debuted with a film with the sensational title of *Cocaine* (1922). Cutts directed two hits for the newly-formed Graham-Wilcox company, *Flames of Passion* (1922) and *Paddy-the-Next-Best-Thing* (1923), both starring Mae Marsh, the former D.W. Griffith actress. The latter film in particular was a crowd-pleasing romance, which with its technical competence allowed it to become a modest success in America. Wilcox thereafter decided to direct films for himself. He was never a director with a light touch, but his stolid style was matched by a sure sense of what the public wanted, and a sensible investment in star power. Starting with adaptations of stage hits, such as *Chu-Chin-Chow* (1923), *Decameron Nights* (1924) (with both Lionel Barrymore and Werner Krauss) and *The Only Way* (1925) (based on Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*), he found largest audiences with the saucy historical piece *Nell Gwynne* (1926), starring Dorothy Gish, who also appeared in Wilcox's *Madame Pompadour* (1928), *London* (1927) and *Tip Toes* (1928). Wilcox most successful film of the period, *Dawn* (1928), starring notable stage actress Sybil Thorndike as Nurse Edith Cavell, executed by the Germans for helping escapees in Belgium during the First World War, which ran into censorship troubles but them became a popular success. Wilcox was to continue as an assured provider of popular hits for years to come, usually starring his wife Anna Neagle.[21]

21 Herbert Wilcox, *Twenty-Five Thousand Sunsets*, London 1967.

Against this background of a gradual production renaissance, there was still the problem of film booking abuses and the struggle simply to get British films seen on British screens. In 1926 just five per cent of films shown in British cinemas were British in origin. While British films were of negligible value there was scarcely a strong argument for remedying the situation, but with the revival in production and the existence of a number of producers of sound and bankable abilities, calls for a change were far more likely to be heard. The industry was divided on what remedy should be applied, the dividing line naturally coming between the distributors and exhibitors (who were profiting from the situation) and the producers (who were suffering). A Board of Trade enquiry recommended that if the industry could not rid itself of such iniquities as the block booking system, then a quota system would be introduced, a guaranteed minimum percentage of British films to be shown on British screens in any one year. Exhibitors protested at being forced to show British films when the money was to be made from American product, but when the industry proved unable to agree to a voluntary scheme, the government introduced in 1927 the Cinematograph Films Act, which guaranteed a quota of five per cent in the first six months, thereby rising by stages to twenty per cent in 1935. It was also made illegal to block-book films or to book a film more than six months ahead.

The great fear behind the introduction of a quota was that it would facilitate the production of worthless films that would be guaranteed a screening. That was indeed to prove to be the case, and so called 'Quota Quickies' became notorious throughout the 1930s, but in the late twenties it had a liberating, indeed lifesaving effect. In 1926 just twenty-six feature films had been made in Britain; in 1928, the year after the act, there were 128. Money was coming into the industry, as new companies were formed, and vertically-intergrated combines began to move into production, distribution and exhibition, heralding a new sophistication in the British film industry. Most significant was the Gaumont-British Picture Corporation. Formed in 1927 from a merger of Gaumont, Ideal Films and the W. & F. Film Service, backed financially by the brother Mark and Isidore Ostrer, it absorbed the old Provincial Cinematograph Pictures circuit and Gainsborough Pictures, under the chairmanship of C.M. Woolf. Equally powerful was Associated British Cinemas, formed by John Maxwell, an exhibitor turned renter who moved into production with British International Pictures in 1926. He acquired the Elstree Studios and branched out further into distribution by acquiring and merging the First National and Pathé firms. The industry had at last achieved some maturity; it had grown up.[22]

It would be a mistake to make grand claims for British films in the latter half of the nineteen twenties. Hollywood was at its peak, and British audiences knew what they liked. Budgets and creative vision were both humbler. Technical talent was still lacking, and often had to be imported. Nevertheless there is a palpable sense of liberation and discovery, after two decades of stagnation. The chief talent of the period is of course Alfred Hitchcock. Hitchcock had entered the film industry in 1920 as a title designer for the London branch of Famous Players-Lasky, which had studios in Islington, but had found that the British weather and a

22 George Perry, *The Great British Picture Show*, London 1974, pp. 53-56.

dearth of production talent prevented them from making films to anything like a Hollywood standard. The studios were sold to Michael Balcon, who acquired Hitchcock along with the deal. The talented young man worked as art director and screenwriter on several Balcon productions, with Graham Cutts as director, before directing his first feature film *The Pleasure Garden* in 1925. It was, however, his third film, *The Lodger* (1926), which announced a new and distinctive talent. A suspenseful drama about a London lodger (played by Ivor Novello) who is suspected of being the notorious murderer Jack the Ripper, its ease with telling a story visually and its classic Hitchcockian theme of an innocent man accused of a crime he did not commit makes the film stand out from all that had gone before. Hitchcock's subsequent silent films were not always of subjects conducive to his particular style and concerns (for instance, the 1927 public school drama *Downhill*, with Ivor Novello, or the 1928 frothy comedy *Champagne*, with Betty Balfour), but he brought a keen visual intelligence and a love of the set piece situation to each film, and his best silent work ranks with the best of his films from any period. *The Ring* (1927) was an entertaining melodrama with a boxing background; *The Manxman* (1929) was a harrowing, stylistically pure account of a doomed romantic triangle; and the quintessentially Hitchcockian crime drama *Blackmail* (1929) was first made a silent, before being remade as a sound film.

Another exciting new talent was Anthony Asquith, the son of former British prime minister Herbert Asquith. Asquith was a representative of an intellectual interest in cinema in the late twenties that had started to flourish in some British circles. When the Soviet masterpieces of Eisenstein and Pudovkin were banned by the British Board of Film Censors as dangerous propaganda, writer Ivor Montagu and actor Hugh Miller set up the Film Society, a private club for the screening of films either banned by the BBFC for general exhibition, or other 'artistic' work denied a release simply by being thought too difficult. Founded in 1925, the screenings of the Film Society were enormously influential among a select crowd that included Adrian Brunel (an interesting if seldom successful director who often worked with Montagu), Sidney Bernstein (exhibitor), George Pearson, Victor Saville, Michael Balcon, Ivor Novello, H.G. Wells, George Bernard Shaw, J.B.S. Haldane, Virginia Woolf, Maynard Keynes, John Gielgud, Ellen Terry, Roger Fry and Julian Huxley, a remarkable selection of the British intelligentsia of the time.[23]

Anthony Asquith was likewise a member of the Film Society, and the influence of the German and Soviet masterpieces of the era can clearly be seen in his own work. On his first film, *Shooting Stars* (1928), made for Harry Bruce Woolfe's British Instructional Films, he is credited as assistant director, with the director being the journeyman A.V. Bramble, but it is patently clear from the film that Asquith took over the whole production, and produced something with a brio and self-conscious wit that was excitingly new. The film tells of a love triangle between three film actors (Brian Aherne, Donald Calthrop, Annette Benson), one of whom accidentally kills another, and throughout plays with the borderline between illusion and reality. Notable scenes include the opening tracking shot through an active film studio; the fatal shooting of one of the actors (Calthrop) during a scene, with everyone continuing to play out the comedy, unaware that the man swinging above them on a chandelier is dead;

23 Jen Sansom, *The Film Society, 1925-1939*, in C. Barr, *All Our Yesterdays: 90 Years of British Cinema*, London 1986, pp. 306-313.

the despondent hero (Aherne) visiting a cinema to cheer himself along on the screen in a role where, unlike in real life, he is able to get the girl; and the memorable finale, where the repentant actress (Benson) is seen praying in a church, which is revealed to be a film set, before departing, unnoticed by those working on the new film, into the far distance.

Asquith's other silent films included *Underground (1928)* and *A Cottage on Dartmoor* (1930), both adroit melodramas filled with homages to German expressionism. *Shooting Stars* was less of an exercise in style, and more of a joke on Hollywood, as well as an acknowledgement of the hypnotic power of the cinema. The huge leap in artistic ambition and understanding that *Shooting Stars* represents, in its ability to analyse the filmmaking process, may be seen by comparing it with a two-reeler comedy of only a few years before, *Walter Makes a Movie* (1922). Made by and starring Walter Forde, Britain's only popular comic actor of the twenties, *Walter Makes a Movie* features Walter creating chaos in a film studio. What is noticeable is that all of the gags are theatrical ones, such as some protracted business with a stage trap door and lift. It might be argued that not until 1927 did the majority of British filmmakers realise that what they were making were films, and not filmed theatre. Hence Forde, in his parody, was blind to the very processes that surrounded him. Forde, however, had a genuine talent, though little in the way of a distinctive comic presence as an actor. After a number of two-reelers made throughout the decade, he turned to feature films and made three comedies of some style and inventiveness, *Wait and See* (1928), *What Next* (1928) and *Would You Believe It?* (1929), with Forde playing a determined if somewhat baffled young man somehow coping with a succession of homely mishaps. Forde would go on throughout the thirties to become one of Britain's most accomplished, and still underrated, directors.[24]

Not every successful film of the mid to late twenties was made by one of the new talents coming to the industry. Maurice Elvey had been directing commercial hits since his debut in 1913, had become house director for Stoll, then had spent a short, unhappy time working in Hollywood for Fox, before returning to Britain in 1926 to enjoy his period of greatest popular and artistic success. *The Flag Lieutenant* (1926) made for Astra-National, was a rousing naval drama featuring Henry Edwards, a star from an earlier era but still with a popular following, and it was widely acclaimed as being good as anything Hollywood might have to offer. Elvey joined Gaumont, and capitalised on the new interest in sentimental war films inspired by the success of *The Big Parade* to produce *Mademoiselle from Armentières* (1926), starring the delightful Estelle Brody and a new reliable leading man, John Stuart. It was a huge hit with the public, established Elvey as Britain's leading commercial director, and teamed him with the astute producer and scriptwriter Victor Saville. A sequel naturally followed, *Mademoiselle Parley Voo* (1928), and other Elvey hits included another war films, *Roses of Picardy* (1927) and the romance *Palais de Dance* (1928), with John Longden and Mabel Poulton. Elvey and Saville's greatest artistic success, however, was *Hindle Wakes* (1927), based on a stage play that Elvey had first filmed for Samuelson in 1918. Estelle Brody played a Lancashire millhand who refuses to marry her employer's son after a holiday fling, defying family, class and convention. It is a superb film, delighting in its scenes of working life and the ex-

24 Geoff Brown, *Walter Forde*, London 1977.

uberant holiday scenes, and offering Brody a role of great emotional power. Saville himself was now to turn to direction, including an impressive weepie, *Kitty* (1928), starring Estelle Brody and John Stuart, that had its final reel reshot for sound, but his great period as a director and producer would come in the thirties.[25]

Another director who had come through the trough of the early twenties was Adrian Brunel. An intriguing, independent character, whose talents never quite translated themselves onto the screen, he had delighted specialised audiences throughout the decade with witty short comedies, first made by Minerva Films, with future Hollywood luminaries Leslie Howard and C. Aubrey Smith appearing in such wistful fantasies as *Bookworms* (1920) and *The Bump* (1920) Brunel made newsreel parodies, shadowgraph skits, and wrote scripts for *Bonzo*, Britain's most successful animation series. He made his first feature film, *The Man Without Desire* (1923), for Atlas Biocraft, a company he had formed in 1923 with actor Miles Mander. Starring Ivor Novello as an eighteenth century Venetian who reawakes in the twentieth century, it was typical of Brunel in being a film constantly on the edge of promise before sliding back. Other Brunel features, such as the war film *Blighty* (1927), made for Gainsborough, and the Noel Coward drama *The Vortex* (1928), similarly offered as much disappointment as they did encouragement.[26]

A particularly notable feature of the late twenties was the input of foreign directors, especially German. British International Pictures (BIP) became most notable for their habit of buying in the best talent from abroad, when they secured the services of E.A. Dupont, whose *Varieté* had been much acclaimed. He made two spectacular silents for BIP at the Elstree studios, *Moulin Rouge* (1928) and *Piccadilly* (1929), but although both were much admired for their undoubted style, they were criticised for their alien content, with commentators complaining that they were British in name only. Dupont had brought with him art director Alfred Junge and cameraman Werner Brandes, but the complaints were more a product of a continuing sense of national self-doubt than any sort of sensible criticism of films which were highly commendable in their own right. Another BIP import was Arthur Robison, renowned director of *Schatten*, who made the highly impressive *The Informer* (1929) with Junge and Brandes once again contributing, and the leads for this ostensibly Irish drama played by Lars Hanson and Lya de Putti.[27]

Moulin Rouge, *Piccadilly* and *The Informer* all appeared on the cusp of sound, with the first two being released with music soundtracks, and the latter being also issued as a part talkie. Victor Saville's *Kitty*, released as a silent in 1928, had a music track added and the final reel reshot for sound in Hollywood for re-release in 1929. Several other films were released in both silent and sound versions, with Alfred Hitchcock's *Blackmail* (1929) being given the credit for being the first true British talkie, as well as in its earlier version being the finest ex-

25 Linda Wood, *The Commercial Imperative in the British Film Industry: Maurice Elvey, a Case Study*, London 1987.

26 Adrian Brunel, *Nice Work: The Story of Thirty Years of British Film Production*, London, 1949.

27 Rachael Low, *The History of the British Film 1918-1929*, pp. 190-194.

amples of the later flowering of British silents. The studios were all converting for sound, preparing for a new era in film production that seemed to offer renewed hope for British production, since the trained stage voice of British actors was seen as being a considerable asset. A few producers, notably John Argyle, stubbornly stuck to silents for a while, just as the smaller British production concerns had always refused to move with the times, but by 1930 only a handful of features and silent versions of the newsreels remained of an art form fast disappearing.

The most damning account of British silent films is given by Kevin Brownlow: "The English films of this period form the basis for the illusions that surround the silent era. English films, with few exceptions, were crudely photographed; the direction and acting were on the level of cheap revue, they exploited so-called stars, who generally had little more than a glimmer of histrionic talent, and they were exceedingly boring. The silent-film industry in Britain never advanced beyond the atmosphere of the barns and glass houses in which it began. It never outgrew the boyish enthusiasm of those early days..."[28]

This damning dismissal of British silent film production has been generally repeated by most established histories. As Rachael Low, a sympathetic chronicler of the whole period, states: "It was widely accepted at the time, and has been so ever since, that few of the films made in England during the twenties were any good".[29] And the general view of the films made before the twenties is that they were just as bad, if not worse. In such a climate, British films of the silent era have suffered an almost total critical neglect, save for the notable period of stylistic innovation and exuberant production that marked the 1896-1906 period. They have been the films that no-one wants to see.

Latterly, however, in tandem with a revival of critical interest in British cinema history as a whole which has arisen since the 1980s, some critics are starting to evaluate British silent films from positions other than those which damned them for not being commercially successful or modelled on classical Hollywood lines. Andrew Higson in particular has analysed such title as Maurice Elvey's *Nelson* (1918) and Cecil Hepworth's *Comin' Thro' the Rye* (1923) within a concept of 'heritage cinema'; films whose aesthetic calls for the clock to be turned back or stopped still, where the impulse is to fight against the narrative drive of American cinema. Hepworth may, as Higson suggests, have employed a "*mise-en-scène* of authenticity and display", or he may have sought stubborn refuge in nineteenth century photographic conventions, but the way forward has to be one of critical sympathy, and of setting up frameworks within which these films may be understood. Just as Higson turns traditional criticism of British silents on its head by finding most interest in those aspects that are supposed to denote the films' failures, it will be necessary to look with a more generous and more informed eye on the theatricality, the maladroitness, the sometimes anarchic spirit, the wilful unconformity, that marks British silent cinema.[30]

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28 Kevin Brownlow, *The Parade's Gone By*, London 1968, p. 591.

29 Rachael Low, *The History of the British Film 1918-1929*, p. 215.

30 Andrew Higson, *Waving the Flag: Constructing a National Cinema*, Oxford 1995.

British silent cinema was, after a brilliant beginning, for the most part a failure by classical standards, but it was still more a cinema of exceptions. To anyone sympathetic to a cinema struggling against overwhelming opposition and generally confused at the appearance of this new medium, British silent films offer small treasures troves of intriguing talents, brave ideas, distinctive follies, films that simply do not recognise the rules, as well as a good number of films that are simply excellent by any standard. Furthermore, if there existed for too long a national incomprehension at the deeper arts of the fiction film, then there was from the very outset a sincere appreciation of the value of film as a medium of record. The stories that films tell must fade, as the art of silent film as faded, but the simple truth of the film document lives on. *Hearts of the World* belongs to history; *The Battle of the Somme* has become eternal.