

## **‘Proof Positive of Things as They Are’: British Newsreels and Official Propaganda in the First World War**

**Luke McKernan**

The First World War was the making of the British newsreel, in its form, content and social impact. The first newsreels (that is, regularly-issued packages of news stories shown in cinemas) appeared in Britain in 1910. By the outset of the war, there were six of them on the British market: *Pathé’s Animated Gazette*, *Warwick Bioscope Chronicle*, *Gaumont Graphic*, *Topical Budget*, *Éclair Animated Journal* and *Williamson’s Animated News*. Six newsreels was too many for an overcrowded British market, and by the end of the war there would be three, and each would have developed significantly in the sort of news they depicted, the manner in which it was presented, and in the extent of their influence.

The British newsreel experience of the war falls into two halves: 1914-1917, when the newsreels were working independently and often struggling to secure any sort of meaningful coverage of the conflict; and 1917-1918, when one of the newsreels, *Topical Budget*, was taken over by the British War Office, with access to Officially-shot war film and with a clear directive to propagandise as well as to entertain.

In August 1914 there was no hint of the official recognition that the newsreels would later obtain. On 10 August the War Office announced its intention to suppress all topical films with a ‘bearing upon the war and its preparations’, an action promised on the same day that a Press Bureau had been formed to control war information to journalists.<sup>1</sup> The film trade was alarmed at this prospect of a total ban, which was bred of a fear of films revealing any information on the movements of the British Expeditionary Force. It responded with self-censorship. The British Board of Film Censors (BBFC), formed in 1913, assumed censorship of war films from early September, with the approval of the Press Bureau and the War Office.<sup>2</sup> Topical films and newsreels, hitherto exempt from censorship, now all carried an opening title

---

<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Hiley, *Making War: The British News Media and Government Control, 1914-1916* (PhD thesis, Open University, 1984), p. 369.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Trade Topics’, *The Bioscope*, 3 September 1914, p. 861.



reading, ‘The sections of this film dealing with the National Crisis have been passed by the British Board of Film Censors’.<sup>3</sup>

Censorship existed not only in Britain, but effectively in Belgium and France, where attempts by British cameramen to film were repeatedly frustrated by local military authorities. No access was granted to the war fronts, and scarcely any footage was obtained of the British forces. Nevertheless, owing to some permits granted by the Belgian army or police, a substantial number of British, French and American cameramen made their way into Belgium during the German invasion, and worked extensively on the continent for a number of months. All of the British newsreels, with the exception of *Williamson’s Animated News*, sent operators into Belgium and France, or received such films from their French parent companies. British newsreel cameramen known to have filmed in Belgium and France during the first few months of the war include Frank Bassill (Pathé), M. Bizeul (Éclair), Alec Braid (Gaumont), Bertram Brooks-Carrington (Gaumont), J.M. Downie (Trans-Atlantic), Frederick Engholm (Topical), Cherry Kearton (Warwick), Geoffrey Malins (Gaumont), J.C.B. Mason (independent), Henry Sanders (Pathé), Tommy Scales (Pathé), George Woods-Taylor (Topical) and Frank Danvers Yates (Warwick).<sup>4</sup>

The newsreel companies made comparatively poor use of such footage – in their newsreels, at least. This is the content of *Topical Budget* number 165-2 (first released 24 October 1914), a reasonably typical British newsreel issue of the period:

#### GALLANT DEFENDERS

“The arrival of allied troops at Ostende after evacuating Antwerp”. Shots of a street along which pass pedestrians, horse-drawn carts, army motorcars, a British motor bus and two columns of Belgian troops. (60 feet)

---

<sup>3</sup> Luke McKernan, *Topical Budget: The Great British News Film* (London: British Film Institute, 1992), p. 22.

<sup>4</sup> Information from ‘Who’s Who of British Newsreel Staff’, compiled by the British Universities Film & Video Council in support of its News on Screen database ([www.bufvc.ac.uk/newsonscreen](http://www.bufvc.ac.uk/newsonscreen)). Additionally, Pathé cameramen George Ercole is known to have operated in Russia at this time, while Trans-Atlantic (British division of the American Universal company) employed Thomas ‘Tiger’ Sarll in Brussels, but his footage was not used. Warwick claimed to have sent out three cameramen, as did the Topical Film Company; additionally, Jury’s Imperial Pictures, which did not produce a regular newsreel, claimed that it had sent out six cameramen, but their names are not known. McKernan, *Topical Budget*, p. 20.



### SONS OF THE EMPIRE

“Canadian troops arrive in England prepared to defend the Empire”. Troops on baggage wagons. Washing themselves in the open air. Close shot of a Canadian soldier writing a letter. Group of men displaying a Union Jack bordered by miniatures of Allied flags. (59 feet)

### OSTEND IN WAR-TIME

“Refugees of all sorts and conditions pour into Ostende and crowd the steamers leaving for England.” Shots of two street scenes; refugees passing by on foot and in wagons. Tracking shots of the quayside taken from a ship, with people assembling on the quay. (64 feet)

### ENGLAND EXPECTS

“London pays a silent tribute to Nelson's memory in Trafalgar Square”. Trafalgar Day. Crowds around Nelson's Column. Banners exhorting patriotism. (63 feet)<sup>5</sup>

The absence of any footage of British troops, apart from a fleeting shot of a motor bus, is notable. Instead, British audiences were offered scenes of Canadian troops (with the expected reference to the defence of Empire), Belgian refugees, and calls to patriotism evinced in the display of Union Jacks and the crowds around Nelson's Column, summoning up nationalist feelings expected to be evoked by memories of past great victories. There is footage from Belgium, but it is uninformative and quick lacking in the drama of the moment.

The poverty of the material was in some respects due to the difficulties of the cameramen in obtaining sufficiently dramatic footage, then reasons for which were not simply the hostility of the British officials and the absence of war front footage, but simply the logistical headaches operating in Belgium at all. Trans-Atlantic's J.M. Downie reported:

It seemed very nice and exciting at first to be sent to the front. We had wonderful illusions, magnificent ideas of snapping reels and reels of battle scenes, with shells and bullets flying all around. But we were sadly disillusioned before we reached a point thirty miles from the firing line, to wit,

---

<sup>5</sup> Description of print held in Imperial War Museum Film Archive, catalogue number NTB 165-02.



Brussels. The capital of Brussels was to be our base, from which we should push out to the front. We remained there days before we dared poke our noses out of doors with a camera. In vain we pleaded with police and military authorities. They were adamant. Polite, indeed, when we proved we were Britishers, but with faces dead set against picture taking, even in Brussels itself, before the roving bands of Uhlans spread out over the country. The reason - or rather one of the chief reasons - for this was the spy fever which was rampant. The camera was the badge of the spy, and it was extremely dangerous to be seen with one. If not immediately arrested by the civil guard, one stood a very good chance of being torn to pieces by the crowd.<sup>6</sup>

The other reason for the relative poverty of the war footage in the newsreels, was that the main companies were reserving their strongest footage for elsewhere. The simple newsreel form of the mid-teens was proving to be inadequate to the task of reporting a world war. Four of the newsreel companies responded with an alternative identical strategy, slavish imitation being always a common trait of the newsfilm industry. Pathé, Gaumont, Topical and Warwick, all issued a complementary and longer ‘war topical’, usually weekly, alongside their regular newsreel, where more extensive film of the war could feature. Most notable among these was that issued by Warwick. Its series was entitled *The Whirlpool of War*, of which some twenty or so issues were released alongside the regular bi-weekly newsreel, starting in August 1914. Long than the conventional newsreel, *The Whirlpool of War* should more accurately be described as a war cinemagazine, describing the war from behind the scenes, through interlocking news stories.

It was produced by Cherry Kearton, a noted wildlife photographer and cinematographer. Kearton was not only the owner of the Warwick Trading Company (producers of *Warwick Bioscope Chronicle* and *The Whirlpool of War*) but he was also one of the three cameramen operating for the company in Belgium, in particular making creative use of the extraordinary Aeroscope camera, invented by the Pole Kasimir Proszynski, which did not need handcranking but was instead a portable camera with gyroscopic attachment, driven by compressed air which was supplied by a foot-pump. Though temperamental and in need of constant attention, the Aeroscope

---

<sup>6</sup> ‘Under Fire! Camera Men at the Front. Thrilling Experiences of Trans-Atlantic Photographers (Told by One of Them)’, *Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 3 September 1914, p. 10. Downie is the probable author of this piece.



proved to be a light and extremely effective camera, ideal for Kearton's purposes for the filming of wildlife or warfare, its hand-held flexibility adding significantly to the spontaneous feel of *The Whirlpool of War*.

As free-flowing and creative as *The Whirlpool of War* and the special series also issued by Topical, Gaumont and Pathé could be, they showed very little of what British audiences most wanted to see – British troops, preferably in action. The occasional shot of British troops does appear in the surviving films, but for the most part what are shown are the Belgians or the French, and if so much as a British horse goes by then the intertitles are quick to mention it. Moreover, they were of course nowhere near the front, and one sees for the most part only training exercises or the aftermath of military activity. Indeed had they secured war front footage, they would not have been able to screen it, as this trade paper article makes clear:

... it was not to be thought that the military authorities, while keeping the war correspondents well in the rear, would allow cameramen to creep up to points of advantage. We have heard on all sides accounts of operators stopped and clearly given to understand that any attempt to proceed would be fraught with dire consequences ... There is an interesting story in the efforts of the various camera men to get to the front ... on all hands, however, one hears the same story – ‘There are no pictures from the actual fighting line’. Supposing films were actually secured of a battle in progress, it is safe to say that the authorities would never let them be put out. If they were defied, a military censorship would immediately be instituted and matters would be far worse then.<sup>7</sup>

The newsreel cameramen were looked on as heroes for their nerve in bringing home war footage, and a number were interviewed in film trade papers and newspapers. Such accounts tend to be rather highly coloured and suspiciously dramatic, probably the fault of the journalist. Only one of the cameramen, Gaumont's Bertram Brooks-Carrington, was ever interviewed by a modern researcher (namely Kevin Brownlow for his book *The War The West and the Wilderness*) but two of them wrote books giving accounts of their experiences. Geoffrey Malins, author of *How I Filmed the War*, later found fame as one of the Official cameramen who filmed *The Battle of the*

---

<sup>7</sup> ‘The Difficulty of Obtaining Pictures From the Front’, *Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 3 September 1914, p. 85.



*Somme* in 1916, but he also filmed in Belgium and France for Gaumont during the first few months of the war. His is a vain and boastful account, in contrast with Cherry Kearton's measured and thoughtful chapters on his war filming in his book *Adventures with Animals and Men*. Here he recounts a touching scene from amid the shelling of Antwerp (it should be noted that just before the war Kearton had been filming wildlife scenes in Africa):

I went forward ... towards the firing-line, following our own fellows as they went hastily into action. My pass let me through and I had no difficulty in getting the photographs I wanted. But the guns were firing a bombardment and it soon became clear that further south very heavy firing was in progress. I tried to get news but no one seemed much clearer that I was as to exactly what was happening. Then I tried my luck with staff officers, but they were short with me, being apparently far too much preoccupied to consider my questions. ... [I]t became apparent that things were going ill. Little groups of weary 'walking wounded' limped past me, and when I asked for news they just shook their heads and limped on without an answer. ... An air of depression settled everywhere and it became certain that the day was lost. ... A little further down the road, in the middle of a bridge, I came upon a black soldier and addressed him in Swahili. His eyes stared and his mouth opened at that, for I don't suppose he had heard his own tongue for months. Then his face lit up with joy. ... He came from the Congo and knew Irimu, where I had been a few months previously. 'Irimu very good', he said, 'Belgium very bad'. And as that moment a shrapnel shell burst a few yards from us, just at the side of the road, I was definitely inclined to agree with him.<sup>8</sup>

By March 1915 the war topicals produced by Warwick, Pathé, Gaumont and Topical had come to an end. Belgium had been mostly overrun, and the fighting had turned into a bitter, static war of attrition along the trench lines of the Western Front. All the permits dried up; the cameramen all went home. They had had a remarkably productive few months, filming not only one or two war topicals a week, but items for the bi-weekly newsreels as well, regularly returning to London with their films and then heading out once again, and managing overall to give British audiences some worthwhile picture of conditions in Belgium and France.

---

<sup>8</sup> Cherry Kearton, *Adventures with Animals and Men* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1935), pp. 191-193.



By May 1915, the British newsreels were reporting the war from the home front only. Even here, huge hurdles were placed in their way by a military blind to the possibilities of propaganda through a popular medium such as cinema, as the editor of *Topical Budget* indicates here:

The present time ... is an extremely bad one for securing subjects, as to be topical they must be of a military nature, and nearly all the big military reviews are held almost in secret. Permits can, as a rule, be obtained, but the difficulty is to find out in time when and where they are being held. Even when you have secured the negative the trouble does not end there. The film has to be passed by the Censor. I'll give you an instance, we filmed H.M. the King and Lord Kitchener reviewing the Canadians on Salisbury Plain, but it was over seven weeks before this film was released for exhibition by the Censor. Of course, we quite appreciate that it is necessary to censor topical films, but that does not make the task of obtaining subjects any the easier.<sup>9</sup>

An event both innocuous and of simple propaganda value such as a military review is not advertised in advance to the newsreels, while the obvious power of images involving King George V and Lord Kitchener is withheld from audiences by the military censor and the film industry's very own organisation (the BBFC was film industry-owned, not state controlled).

Efforts to change this situation, however, were now underway. The British film industry was naturally frustrated at not being able to report the major news story of the day, as well as being keen to show the patriotism of the industry as a whole. To this end they presented an unusually united front by forming in March 1915 the Cinematograph Trade Topical Committee, made up of representatives of all the major British film companies, and headed by J. Brooke Wilkinson, Secretary of the BBFC and of the Kinematograph Manufacturer's Association (KMA), to lobby the government to allow supervised filming at the front.<sup>10</sup> Those represented were Barker Motion Photography, British and Colonial, Eclair, Gaumont, Jury's Imperial Pictures and the Topical Film Company. It was decided that the KMA should make a

---

<sup>9</sup> 'Running the Topical Films', *Cassell's The Saturday Journal*, 29 May 1915, p. 2.

<sup>10</sup>

<sup>?</sup> Hiley, *Making War*, pp. 370-371, 398; J. Brooke Wilkinson, *Film and Censorship in England*, Chapter XI, 'The War Years', The National Archives, INF 4/2.



collective representation to the War Office, in the person of Wilkinson. The KMA’s timing was fortunate, as calls had been growing from GHQ in France, from Wellington House, from the Parliamentary Recruiting Committee and from the press, as to the desirability of officially-sanctioned filming at the Front.<sup>11</sup>

On 12 May 1915 the War Office informed Wilkinson that the Army Council was ‘not averse’ to filming in France, subject to appropriate controls, and if ‘a substantial contribution’ was made to military and naval charities. Wilkinson submitted an outline plan to Sir Reginald Brade, Secretary of the War Office and Army Council, and had a succession meetings with the War Office and Topical Committee members before a final proposal from the Army Council was put to the trade on 20 July 1915.<sup>12</sup>

The Army Council proposed the nomination of two operators, to take films for immediate exhibition and for the purposes of historical record. The operators were to be employed by the Topical Committee; had they been paid by the War Office this would have constituted a fully official system of film production, as was not yet the case. Of the seven members of the Topical Committee an ‘operating committee’ of three was established, consisting of Charles Urban (whose Kineto company had been invited to join), William Jury, and Tommy Welsh of Gaumont, with Urban and Jury assigned to supply the cameramen.<sup>13</sup> But all of this activity in August was then followed by two months of inactivity, as the negotiations broke down., partly owing to Urban’s intransigence over use of his Kinemacolor colour cinematography system, which he was anxious to have employed by the War Office. However, the War Office and Army Council, having been previously chary of allowing filming at all, now wanted the results to be employed as widely as possible, and Kinemacolor required special projectors. Hence, when the final agreement was made on 25 October 1915, it specifically stated that the films would have to be ‘in black and white for cinematograph projection in monochrome’. Gaumont and Jury were now the leading partners in the agreement, with Urban having dropped out (though he was at the same time lobbying successfully with the War Propaganda Bureau, as separate

---

<sup>11</sup> Hiley, *Making War*, p. 418.

<sup>12</sup> Wilkinson, *Film and Censorship in England*, pp. 292-294.

<sup>13</sup> Charles Urban, *How the Somme Battle was Photographed*, manuscript, [1916], p. 1, Charles Urban papers, National Science and Media Museum, URB 4/1-106.



organization, to have a feature-length documentary feature to be made about Britain’s military preparedness).<sup>14</sup>

In November 1915 the first two British official cameramen, Geoffrey Malins and Edward Tong, were sent out to the Western front under the auspices of the now-named British Topical Committee for War Films. What happened thereafter is of limited interest to the newsreel history of the war, as none of what was shot was released to the newsreels. It was shown in a number of short, medium and feature length films, of which the most successful was the feature-length *The Battle of the Somme* in 1916. Its success led to the creation of the War Office Cinematograph Committee, run by William Jury (representing the film trade), Sir Reginald Brade, and Max Aitken (the future Lord Beaverbrook), of the Canadian War Records Office. The WOCC took over the control of the official war filming from the British Topical Committee for War Films, both to institute stronger control, and to retain profits which were seen to be going to the film trade. *The Battle of the Somme* was a triumph for the official film propaganda campaign, but the success was not repeated by later such films.<sup>15</sup> It was all very well to allow official cameramen to operate at the front and to produce films to be made of such footage - the results still had to be released on the commercial market and had to find an audience. And by 1917 the War Office was finding that people were losing interest in war films just as they were growing weary of the war itself. How to get the message over, get the films seen regularly, not lose the interest of the audience, and make the cinema exhibitors happy?

The answer was a newsreel. Newsreels were an established part of the cinema programme, they had a guaranteed audience, they were looking for war footage, and they were in constant need of new material. Any new War Office newsreel launched on the market would have been very difficult to get established, but it should be easy to come to terms with an existing firm. This they did with the Topical Film Company, producers of *Topical Budget*, and in May 1917 the first issue appeared of the *War Office Official Topical Budget*. At this period there were four newsreels on the British market, and the fact that the other three were French-owned - *Éclair Animated Journal*, *Gaumont Graphic* and *Pathé’s Animated Gazette* - would also have

---

<sup>14</sup> House of Lords Record Office, Beaverbrook Papers BBK E/2/1.

<sup>15</sup> The two feature-length documentaries released after *The Battle of the Somme* were *The Battle of the Ancre and the Advance of the Tanks* (released January 1917) and *The German Retreat and the Battle of Arras* (released June 1917).



influenced the War Office’s decision.<sup>16</sup> The agreement between the War Office and Topical was that the newsreel continued its operation as usual but carried the ‘official’ tag and had exclusive access to film shot on the various war fronts by the official cameramen, four of whom were in operation at this time.<sup>17</sup> The newsreel was chiefly intended for a home audience, although there was to be a limited overseas distribution, which expanded during 1918.

The official newsreel was undoubtedly a strong idea. Initially, however, it was not a success. Having set a newsreel in motion, and despite the experience of falling sales of previous official films, the War Office Cinematograph Committee clearly felt that such a good idea would sell itself. It did not. In the first six months of its existence sales rose not at all, and when the deal was struck with *Topical Budget* it was a far from successful newsreel, coming a lowly third in market share behind Pathé and Gaumont. Somewhat casually the War Office had let the Topical Film Company run things as they knew how, which they proceeded to do - fine for an unambitious newsreel, not enough for an effective propaganda newsreel. Quite simply, no one was noticing it.<sup>18</sup>

The War Office Cinematograph Committee was headed by Lord Beaverbrook, the future newspaper magnate, and he brought in a journalist from his own team, William Holt-White, to bring some journalistic rigour and organisation to the somewhat lackadaisical *Topical Budget*. Holt-White set up a genuine editorial department, sharpened up the style of intertitling, took greater notice of what their rivals on the newsreel market were releasing, and most importantly made proper use of the Official footage exclusive to the newsreel. Early issues of the newsreel were competent enough, but very unbalanced for a commercial newsreel. Paradoxically, there was far too much of the war. The propaganda newsreel had to leaven its precious war footage with more regular newsreel fare, both to sugar the pill and to make the *War Office Official Topical Budget* a stronger commercial proposition.

---

<sup>16</sup> Of these three, *Éclair Animated Journal* was in a poor state and closed as a newsreel soon afterwards.

<sup>17</sup> Frank Bassill, Oscar Bovill, J.B. McDowell and Geoffrey Malins, all of whom operated on the Western Front. Other cameramen operating during 1917-18 whose work went into *The War Office Official Topical Budget* were Bertram Brooks-Carrington (Western Front), Walter Buckstone (Western Front), Walter Evan Davies (Britain), Frederick Engholm (Navy), John Hutchins (Britain), Harold Jeapes (Egypt and Palestine), Harry Raymond (Western Front and Italy), Ariel Varges (Serbia and Mesopotamia), Fred Wilson (Western Front) and George Woods-Taylor (Britain).

<sup>18</sup> McKernan, *Topical Budget*, pp. 40-41.



Gradually the newsreel improved in style and authority, although Holt-White faced continual battles with the Topical Film Company's management, who resented any interference with the way they ran the newsreel. In November 1917 Beaverbrook had had enough and stepped in to buy up the company.<sup>19</sup> The War Office now owned and had complete control over its very own newsreel. Sales began to rise dramatically and very soon the newsreel was challenging the market leader, *Pathé's Animated Gazette*. From a lowly 500,000 in May 1917, the official newsreel's weekly audience was to rise to 3,000,000 by the end of the war.<sup>20</sup>

*War Office Official Topical Budget 324-1* (released 7 November 1917) shows the newsreel in a newly-confident mode. To be noted in particular is the witty style and confident construction of the first item, the way in which a Europe-wide conflict is suggested by careful selection of items and titles, and the inclusions of shots showing explosions and views of no-man's land, indicative of the now classical scenes of First World War terrain:

#### PIGEON AS POSTMAN

“Taken up on motor cycles to the trenches the birds except for casualties, never fail to reach 'home' behind the lines where the telegraphist sends on the message.” Soldier puts pigeon into basket. Two motorcyclists with baskets on the back driving down country road. View down at officers inside trench as soldier arrives with basket. Close-up of officer in trench writing in notebook. Close-up of soldier attaching note to pigeon's foot. Soldier releases pigeon. Pigeon landing on roof of large coop. Soldier brings message to telegraphist, who taps it out. Final shot shows the ‘message’ received, on an official form: “From ADAS Place. SA 31.10.17. 2.30 pm. Pigeon Service. To Blue Force. Notice - Please do not shoot homing pigeons. They are performing valuable national work. Captain H Dickinson. No of copies sent by PS – 2.” (77 feet)

#### GREAT ITALIAN STAND

“It is believed that when the Germans advance again Italy with her British and French Allies will put up one of the greatest battles in history. One of the big Italian guns which will keep the enemy at bay.” Italian troops loading large

<sup>19</sup> House of Lords Record Office, Beaverbrook Papers, BBK E/2/13, 19 November 1917.

<sup>20</sup> McKernan, *Topical Budget*, pp. 46-47.



gun. Foggy scene of troops among rocks, trees and sandbags. Troops around large gun. Shot of gun on its own as it fires. Long shot of explosion on wooded hillside. Men return to gun. (63 feet)

#### POLISH LEGION IN FRANCE

“General Archinard distributes honours to the gallant survivors of the Polish Legion which marched from Bayonne to fight beside the French in 1914.” General inspects men and awards medals, including one to man with his eyes fully bandaged. Men show flag of the Legion to the camera. They march off. (66 feet)

#### PUSHING ON IN FLANDERS

“Enemy bombarding territory wrested from them by the French. Striking specimen of a shell crater and abandoned German blockhouse.” Flat, open country with branchless trees in the background, a few small crosses in the foreground, and in between a few small explosions (with jump cuts). Lorry visible in long shot passing down road across the picture just after one explosion. View down at French soldier at bottom of huge shell crater. He climbs out. Two French soldiers coming out of ruin of part of German blockhouse. Two shots of the ruined structure. (66 feet)

#### WATCHERS AND WORKERS

“While the guns never cease observation is kept while pioneers and engineers reorganise the hard won ground as a jumping off place for the next push.” French troops carrying shovels pass down road in Western Front area amidst mud and tree stumps. Men digging fortifications. Close shot of two men, one looking through binoculars. Long shot over open land with branchless trees in distance and smoke from mid-air explosion. Men standing and sitting beside fortification. Shot over open land again; explosion in sky to left of picture. Men continue work. (67 feet)<sup>21</sup>

Around the time of the release of this issue the newsreel changed its name to the rather cumbersome *War Office Official Topical Budget and Pictorial News*, a stepping stone on the way to changing the name completely in February 1918 to *Pictorial News (Official)*, in imitation of the popular American newsreel *Hearst-Selig News*

---

<sup>21</sup> Details taken from print in Imperial War Museum Film Archive, catalogue number NTB 324-01.



*Pictorial*. Dropping the War Office's name was a further step down the road to making the newsreel at one with any other title on the market. Beaverbrook told his superiors: 'It is sometimes found desirable to produce and distribute films which have no apparent propaganda value. This applies more particularly to The Pictorial News, which as a bi-weekly news service must necessarily include many pictures having no direct bearing on propaganda aims. As a whole, however, The Pictorial News is an instrument of undoubted propaganda value'.<sup>22</sup> Exclusive access to Official war footage was not enough; the newsreel had to be a commercial prospect, even to the degree of issuing films that had no discernible propaganda value.

The change in name for the propaganda newsreel was accompanied by a change in overall management. On 4 March 1918 the Ministry of Information (MOI) was created, headed by Lord Beaverbrook, who effectively brought all of the numerous and often conflicting strands of British propaganda, and British film propaganda, under one roof.<sup>23</sup> This included the War Office Cinematograph Committee, and hence *Pictorial News (Official)*.

The newsreel's time under the Ministry of Information was one of considerable success. Success firstly as a commercial entity, success as a mean of providing a regular outlet for film taken by the official cameramen, and occasional success as a organ of official propaganda. The note of qualification is necessary, because as Beaverbrook noted, it was essential to have a number of items within what aimed to be a conventional newsreel that had little bearing on the war, and because those propaganda aims were not always clear cut. What is noticeable throughout the output of the official newsreel is the desire to let the picture speak for themselves. There had been some marked advances in presentation since May 1917, but there was still that deep-rooted belief that the newsreels held, that their duty was not to comment but to supply pictures of what other agencies - meaning newspapers - had made news. Its very place at the rear of the news chain led the newsreel to prefer illustration to comment, and it is only in some of the newsreel's output towards the end of the war that we see the sort of overtly propagandist language in the intertitles that we might otherwise expect.

---

<sup>22</sup> House of Lords Record Office, Beaverbrook Papers, BBK E/2/18, draft report (undated).

<sup>23</sup>

<sup>?</sup> Nicholas Reeves, *Official British Film Propaganda During the First World War* (London: Croom Helm, 1986) pp. 32-33.



Advances in presentation are most evident in those newsreels released as the war came to a close. One notable film, entitled *The Deliverance of Lille by Haig's Men*, part of *Pictorial News (Official)* 374-2 (released 24 October 1918), shows British troops entering the French town of Lille.

#### THE DELIVERANCE OF LILLE BY HAIG'S MEN

“After four years of Hun rule, brutality and plunder, the joy and gratitude of the brave inhabitants knew no bounds when they saw their British liberators of the 5th. Army, Liverpool Irish and Lancashire troops.” British troops march through town past camera carrying French flags and flowers along with their guns. Second batch of troops accompanied by young children. “A British Officer is assailed with grateful attention and cries of ‘Vivent Les Anglais’”. Close shots of women smiling at camera. Car containing British troops passes by slowly and is greeted enthusiastically. (89 feet) <sup>24</sup>

Here the intertitles say far more than the previous simple descriptions. It is commentary, albeit a silent one, intercut within the pictures, and intended to complement or guide the reactions of the audience. There is a rare review of this particular issue of the newsreel which gives some idea of how the film is likely to have been received in the cinemas at the time:

Down the centre comes a laughing, waving and gesticulating crowd. Everyone is smiling - smiling - smiling sometimes, it is true, through the sadness of the years of suffering, but smiling all the same. It is a picture which no-one could watch unmoved. Then the Liverpool Irish and the Lancashires marching in, laden with posies and all sorts of gifts, petits gamins, marching proudly in step. More flags, more delighted smiles - joy on every hand at the advent of the liberators. The look on the face of the officer who rides, erect, at the head of the column is a study. Each man's face (which master-photography has reproduced with amazing clarity) tells its tale of suffering, both seen and experienced, and of pride in the glad honour of being among the liberators. The ‘place’ is thronged with a seething, swaying mass of townsfolk - arms, hats, handkerchiefs, flags, all fluttering on high. The men-folk are absent, but the women and children are there en masse to give the victors a greeting. The whole is a silent tribute to the glory, the worth, and, above all, the power of the

---

<sup>24</sup> Description of print in the BFI National Archive.



kinematograph for the purposes of propaganda. The enemy may scatter broadcast his lying messages of reassurance and denial, but the kine-camera is there on the spot all the time - proof positive of things as they are.<sup>25</sup>

The film certainly shows all these things, but it also shows something else - the fascination of the camera, even when your town is being liberated. Particularly notable in viewing the film now is how the cameraman (who was Walter Buckstone) knows what makes the best pictures and pans away from the officer, the ostensible subject of his shot, to focus on the happy women of Lille, whose delight in being filmed seems every bit as great as their delight in being liberated.

At the time that *Pictorial News (Official)* was flourishing, it was nevertheless facing strong competition from the two other newsreels on the market, *Gaumont Graphic* and *Pathé Gazette*. Although handicapped by a lack of access to Official film, both newsreels were well-established across Britain distribution and exhibition networks, and reached higher audiences – *Pathé’s Animated Gazette* probably had a weekly audience of eight million.<sup>26</sup> Their combination of war front footage obtained through French and American sources, and conventional home coverage, set the popular standard to which the propaganda newsreel had to aspire, if it was going to reach the same market. This issue of *Gaumont Graphic* from March 1918 is typical of the range of coverage:

#### ROYALTY AND WAR WORKERS

“The Queen accompanied by the Prince of Wales and Prince Henry, visited Messrs Gwynne's aeroplane engine works”. Queen Mary, Prince of Wales and Prince Henry (Duke of Gloucester) greeted. Queen on tour of factory, talks to workers. Prince in open car through crowd. (114 feet)

#### WEDDING OF BRIGADIER GENERAL WALTER MAXWELL SCOTT AND MISS MAIRI MACDOUGAL AT BROMPTON ORATORY

---

<sup>25</sup> *Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, 31 October 1918, p. 58.

<sup>26</sup> A figure of ten million was regularly claimed by the newsreel, which included the figure on its pre-war title designs, though the total British cinema audience figure just before the war was probably no more than ten million (and at a time when probably only two-thirds of British cinemas took a newsreel). Hiley, *Making War*, pp. 382-383. By the end of the war, the audience figure had risen to nearly twenty million, from which Pathé might have been able to claim a figure around eight million per week.



Bride, groom and bridesmaids. (24 feet)

#### UNDETERRED BY AIR RAIDS

“This large boot factory at Nancy still turns out supplies for the Army in spite of the many recent raids”. (39 feet)

#### CAMOUFLAGE

“Things are not always what they seem”. Howitzer hidden under leaves being fired. (44 feet)

#### WOMEN DRIVE THE PLOUGH

Women land workers driving motorised ploughs. (66 feet)<sup>27</sup>

The mixture of royalty, weddings, glimpses of war film from varied sources (the howitzer may have been training film from the United States) and the always popular scenes of women war workers, demonstrates the easy, effective form to which the British newsreel had evolved by this stage. Neither Gaumont nor Pathé were greatly affected by the absence of Official war film. The three newsreels were not exactly indistinguishable, given Pictorial’s strong emphasis on military exclusive, but they all demonstrated the amalgam of passing topicality and varied subject matter that audiences welcomed.

Those audiences were predominantly home audiences. There were hopes expressed among the propagandists that the newsreel would have some effect overseas, but any news medium has to have as its prime target the people to whom its news stories matter most as news, and it was as a morale lifter for the home audience that *Pictorial News (Official)* was held to be its most effective. Nevertheless, items from the newsreel were distributed to neutral European territories, to America, to parts of the British Empire (Australia, Canada, New Zealand), and in exchange for items from the equivalent French Official newsreel, *Annales de la Guerre*. A specific foreign edition was produced from September 1918, which would re-order items from one or two of the bi-weekly editions, making small changes in the intertitles for the clarification of foreign audiences, but not otherwise changing the content of the films.<sup>28</sup> Official

---

<sup>27</sup> *Gaumont Graphic* issue 731, release date 25 March 1918. Details from print held in BFI National Archive.

<sup>28</sup> McKernan, *Topical Budget*, p. 59.



records for the newsreels proudly report in April 1918 that the newsreel was being distributed to Brazil, Canada, China, Denmark, France, Holland, Japan, Mexico, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and the United States.<sup>29</sup> However, this usually meant no more than four copies of the newsreel being sent to such territories, and with no guarantee of the films being exhibited at all. In America, copies were sent to Official Government Pictures Inc., an independent company run by Charles Urban which integrated the footage with American stories, with the stipulation that the resultant newsreel (called *British War Office Official News Film*) had to have 60% British content.<sup>30</sup> Some footage may also have found its way into the American Official newsreel, *Official War Review*.

The *Pictorial News (Official)* continued production after November 1918, although the Ministry of Information relinquished its interest in the newsreel in December. The owners continued to be the War Office Cinematograph Committee, and the newsreel retained its Official status until February 1919 when it was offered up for sale and was purchased by the newspaper owner Edward Hulton. The name reverted to *Topical Budget* and it prospered throughout the 1920s, offering strong competition to the continued market leaders *Gaumont Graphic* and *Pathé Gazette*.

To judge the success or failure of the British propaganda newsreel of the First World War, one needs to know what it was trying to set out to do. Clearly, it was a propaganda tool that sought to present the British and Allied war effort in the best possible light. What it did not do, for most of the time, was to hammer the message home. Partly this was due to the accepted newsreel style of the time, which was to show the pictures and to keep comment to a minimum. Partly it was due to the newsreel's appearance at a time when the British audience was particularly dispirited and weary of the war. The newsreel was a way of getting the message over unostentatiously in short chunks while blending it with other material. Partly it was simply that the propagandists believed that the pictures alone told the story, indeed that their duty was merely to show the documentary evidence of the war - proof positive of things as they are. There seems to be a lot of truth to this, and those at the War Office and later the Ministry of Information became absorbed simply in running an effective newsreel that audiences were happy to see.

---

<sup>29</sup> Northam to Gaselee, 17 April 1918, The National Archives, FO 395/233 file 68245.

<sup>30</sup> House of Lords Record Office, Beaverbrook Papers, BBK E/2/17 20 January 1918.



Certainly they believed in the rightness of their task, and of the newsreel's effectiveness. Beaverbrook even went so far as to state: ‘The Topical Budget shown in every picture palace was the decisive factor in maintaining the morale of the people during the black days of the early summer of 1918’.<sup>31</sup> There must be some exaggeration here, and the newsreel was not shown in every cinema as there others on the market, but it undeniably played a part, and an important one. It was also a key advance in the presentation of war information on film. From trying to show major battles in feature length films that eventually palled with the audience, the propagandists turned to short newsreel items, that showed snippets of the war, concentrating on the highlights. These concentrated images put over the essence of the story with the greatest economy. You do not need to give the whole story. Select the memorable image or phrase with care, and that is what your public will remember. This was the lesson of the *War Office Official Topical Budget*, ultimately the most successful aspect of the British filmed propaganda campaign of the First World War.

---

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in A.J.P. Taylor, *Beaverbrook* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1972), p. 144.