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"That Slick Salesman in the Silk Hat": Charles Urban Arrives in Britain

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On the 23rd of August 1897, at 8.45am, a smartly dressed man in a silk hat and frock coat knocked on the door of Maguire and Baucus, film sales agents, at Dashwood House, New Broad Street in the City of London. There was no reply. It was another forty-five minutes before a member of staff turned up to open the door and let in the silk-hatted gentleman, remarking that it was nice to see him, but they had hardly expected him to arrive so early. The newcomer was Charles Urban, a thirty-year old American who had been brought over to wake up the company's happy-go-lucky London business. This he was to achieve in no small measure.

Charles Urban very swiftly became the most prominent and influential person in the British film industry, and his company, renamed the Warwick Trading Company, became responsible for the production or distribution of perhaps as much as three-quarters of the film titles in Britain at the turn of the century, as well as supplying many of the cameras and projectors that fuelled the emergent British cinema industry. His first day in Britain illustrates in microcosm his effect on the native industry: a go-as-you-please, underachieving business, content to ride the tide of the new craze, motion pictures, while it lasted, woken up by the American in the silk hat knocking at their door while they were still sleeping.

The silk hat is important. Terry Ramsaye, cinema's first historian, described the young Charles Urban as "*that slick salesman in the silk hat*",¹ and people were invariably impressed by their first sight of the immaculately-dressed man, invariably with cigar in hand, with a look about him that a contemporary described as "*the quiet*

¹ Terry Ramsaye, *A Million and One Nights: A History of the Motion Picture* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1926). p. 361.

twinkling confidential air of one letting you in for a good thing".² His appearance of quality was the best advertisement for the quality of the goods he had on offer. He was someone who knew his business and where it was going. He used his super-salesman's image of superiority and quality to shape a cinema based on information, science, education and wonder at what was natural. That he ultimately failed in this vision is another story: today I hope to try and say how he got to this point.

It is common in the study of early film to trace the roots of these motion pictures in earlier forms of moving images, in optical toys, magic lantern culture, chronophotography and so forth. What is not so common is to similarly trace the roots of those men and women whose genius or fortune led them to create a motion picture industry. None of them trained for such a business, naturally - they came from all manner of different backgrounds, and brought these experiences to bear when they sought to understand and profit from motion pictures. Not every such figure is going to have a past worth uncovering, or will have left sufficient documents to build up such a picture, but in Charles Urban we have a figure with a rich background who left plenty of documentation behind him, including his only recently discovered unfinished memoirs. So, let me take you back thirty years from when that slick salesman in the silk hat knocked on the door of Maguire and Baucus, and trace how he got there, and what he brought with him to Britain.

Charles Urban was born Carl Urban on 15 April 1867 in Cincinnati, Ohio, the second-born child and eldest son of Austro-Prussian immigrants.³ His father, Joseph Urban, came from Bohemia, was educated in Vienna, and emigrated to the United States in 1864. His mother, Anna Sophie Glatz had emigrated to America from Königsberg in East Prussia, and like Joseph Urban had settled among the extensive German community of Cincinnati. At the time of their marriage in 1867, over thirty per cent of the population of Cincinnati were German or of some German descent, the study of German was compulsory in schools, and German newspapers, *Turner* gymnastics, music concerts and other German cultural activity all flourished.⁴ Cincinnati Germans

² G.A. Smith, 'Charles Urban', *The Cine-Technician*, November-December 1942, p. 124.

³ Much of the following personal information comes from the Charles Urban memoirs: Charles Urban, *A Yank in Britain: Recounting Behind the Scenes of the Motion Picture Industry - Facts not generally known (Who's Who and What's What in the Early days of the Motion Picture Industry)* [1942]. These have been published as Charles Urban (ed. Luke McKernan), *A Yank in Britain: The Lost Memoirs of Charles Urban, Film Pioneer* (Hastings: The Projection Box, 1999), and page references are to this transcription, but with Urban's original misspellings and other textual anomalies retained.

⁴ La Vern J. Rippley, *The German-Americans* (Boston: Twayne, 1976). In 1860 thirty per cent of the 161,044 population of Cincinnati were of German stock. In 1870 this figure had risen to 75,000 out of 216,239, or thirty four per cent of the city's population. A considerable influx of German immigrants in the 1880s saw the proportion rise to a peak 57.4 per cent, out of a population of 296,908, by the time of the 1890 Census. Don Heinrich Tolzmann, *The Cincinnati Germans After the Great War* (New York:

were largely concentrated in an area nicknamed 'Over the Rhine', and immigrants such as Joseph Urban found German speakers, familiar European architecture, one evening and three morning newspapers in the German language, and a culture of support and fraternisation from the saloons, beer gardens, churches, financial institutions and numerous clubs and societies that characterised the German immigrant community.⁵ It is the first mark of Charles Urban that he was by instinct an internationalist: of Bohemian and Prussian parentage, raised in a German community, a quintessential American who became eventually a naturalised Briton, and whose film catalogues embraced all peoples and places, with the proud slogan "*We put the world before you*".

Charles Urban and his father were two opposite examples of the American immigrant experience in the nineteenth century: the one, the familiar story of the young man without advantages rising to success through drive and initiative; the other, the less frequently told story of humbling failure in a foreign land. Joseph Urban was a wall-paper designer, who when Charles Urban was aged only five faced financial ruin when his business partner absconded with all available funds, leaving Joseph with nothing but the liabilities of the unincorporated business. The experience entirely altered the character of Joseph Urban, who became a morose and irritable man thereafter, with a bad-temperedness that sometimes slipped into a sadistic treatment of his many children.⁶ The unhappy Urban family now endured years of poverty and a poisoned home atmosphere, out of which Charles found that he had to grow up quickly and to assume financial responsibility over his feckless and stubborn father.

Little is known of his schooling before he first found work aged fifteen, but a further traumatic event occurred at the age of twelve, when he lost the use of his left eye in a baseball accident. It is perhaps noteworthy, therefore, that Urban's future enthusiastic encouragement of technical progress in the cinema would be for colour, and not for that equally sought after goal of the inventors, stereoscopy, for which two eyes are usually (if not invariably) required.⁷

Peter Lang, 1987), pp. 5, 7.

⁵ Guido Andre Dobbert, *The Disintegration of an Immigrant Community: The Cincinnati Germans, 1870-1920* (New York: Arno Press, 1980). pp. 7-15.

⁶ Urban, *A Yank in Britain*, p. 11.

⁷ Urban did eventually pursue one form of stereoscopic cinema with the inventor Theodore Brown, whose work he helped finance, but most unusually it was of a kind that could be observed with only one eye. Most forms of stereoscopy, or three dimensions, require both right and left eye. Brown's invention, which he suggested to Urban in 1903, employed a single-lens, unmodified projector, with a specially-prepared film bearing an impression of a relief, and in one version an oscillating camera that moved forward and backward on parallel bars. Brown worked on this speculative system of 'Oscillat-

The accident left Urban with his eyes bandaged for two months and his confinement in a totally dark room for three months. For two years he was obliged to wear a dark shade over his eye, and the whole affair naturally had a great effect on his schooling, as well as ruining any chance of a proposed apprenticeship with a lithographic company. There is plenty to suggest a boy of great initiative and enthusiasm for experience, being deeply frustrated at this setback to his education and to his progress through life in general. It would only have added to the frustration that he was obliged to leave school at the age of fifteen to help support the family. Among the most distinctive characteristics of the adult Urban were a passion for achievement, for technical mastery, and for what he understood to be education, but which might be defined as a fascination with a world of facts and wonders. An unhappy, frustrating childhood drove on the young Urban to a goal of which he, and indeed no-one at that time, could have had any conception.

Urban left school in 1882, aged fifteen, and promptly found work as an errand boy for the Cincinnati News Company at two dollars a week, humble but essential in helping support a family whose despairing and idle breadwinner had turned to drink and cards. The action, bustle and urgency of working for a newspaper dealer greatly appealed to the young Urban, who made the best of his situation to observe the people and the condition of the business. He soon worked his way to higher positions and salaries among the stationery stores and booksellers of Cincinnati, taking over as family breadwinner in 1885 (aged 18) when his father left home for good.⁸

Charles Urban was now finding his niche in the world of books and stationery goods. A travelling salesman told him of a promising opening as a sales clerk in the stationery department of the Eaton and Lyons book store in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and with his younger brothers now of an age to support the family, he left for the new state in November 1886.

Grand Rapids was a marked change from the urban sophistication of Cincinnati. Its business came from the logging camps up river and the construction of furniture, and its unpaved streets indicated its pioneer status. Urban greatly enjoyed this first period of personal independence, the unvarnished town and the outdoor pursuits

ory Projection', or 'Direct Stereoscopic Projection' for nearly thirty years, but audiences at trial screenings in 1904 found the oscillation of parts of the image detracted too greatly from the sense of depth that was certainly achieved, inducing in at least one viewer 'a feeling of sea-sickness'. It is not known if Brown was aware of Urban's affliction, but the coincidence is intriguing. Stephen Herbert, *Theodore Brown's Magic Pictures: The Art and Inventions of a Multi-media Pioneer* (London: The Projection Box, 1997), pp. 48-55.

⁸ Urban tried to make contact with his father in 1919 when he learned the previous year that he was still in Cincinnati, was working and had made a success of his new business. His letter was not answered, and the date of his father's death is not known. Urban, *A Yank in Britain*, p. 19-20.

around Lake Michigan. It was here that he met Julia Avery, organist at the First Congregational Church, who was to become his first wife. The Avery family and their circle welcomed the young man, and Julia's half-brother Jack became a particular friend, one who would follow Urban to Britain ten years later as a cameraman for the Warwick Trading Company.

Urban's mother Anna died in April 1887, aged just forty one. The Urban family had now broken up, and Charles was free of all responsibilities. After two years at Grand Rapids, he moved to a better paid position at the De Forges & Company book store in Milwaukee, and it while he was here that he was invited to take up a form of occupation to which he was greatly suited, as his memoirs record:

Here I made the acquaintance of a young man, whom I used to oblige by keeping his sample overnight at the shop. We had frequent talks and I learnt that he was a book agent who sold Rand McNally's Railway Guide and World's Atlas on Commission. His name was Carl Bleiler. He was well educated, well dressed and convinced me that he had a freer life and made more money at his occupation than I would make "back of the Counter" in years. This would teach real sales-manship. It was a different matter, selling a person something they never intended buying - compared with wrapping up a book which a person came into the shop to buy. He would arrange to let me have a section of Milwaukee to canvas. I paid him \$10 for a flexible leather covered sample copy of the Atlas, took a few lessons "on approach" to people and the kind of sales talk &c. He would give me 15% of the price of the book on subscription and 15% on Cash delivery of same. As I grew in Confidence and full appreciation of the Value of the Book I was selling, I took a real pleasure in the work and by working about six hours per day, I averaged about \$40 per week - twice the wages of the Book Shops with double the hours. I never again entered the employ of any person or firm at a fixed wage.⁹

He was thus introduced into a world for which he was eminently suited, that of the travelling salesman. This distinctive and compelling figure came to exemplify much that was characteristic of the American economy of the post-Civil War period, in his method and his character. Flourishing in the new market economy that rode on the back of an expanding railroad system, the travelling salesman frequently provided the link between manufacturers and retailers, before the large retailers began to buy direct from suppliers, manufacturers started to employ their own sales forces, and mail order forms introduced direct selling.¹⁰ A more sophisticated economy brought in 'scientific' sales techniques and led to the triumph of advertising. American historian

⁹ Urban, *A Yank in Britain*, p. 22.

Daniel Boorstin sees this as "*a victory of the market over the marketplace*", detecting in this victory "*a defeat of the seen, the nearby, the familiar by the everywhere community*".¹¹ But when Charles Urban joined the ranks of the 'drummers', as they were popularly called, in Des Moines, Iowa (a regular stopping-over point for commercial travellers heading West), the profession was at some sort of peak, and he himself was to bridge that gap between the nearby and the everywhere.

Urban was never an ordinary drummer with his pack of samples, and his own career was to illustrate the evolution from face-to-face selling to the blandishments of the modern salesman, the persuasiveness of advertising, trademarks and the brand name. He was immediately drawn not merely to selling, but to the selling of an exclusive, quality product. He took pride in the '*Value of the Book*'. Beginning with the Rand McNally's *Railway Guide and World Atlas* he obtained from Carl Bleiler, he moved to Chicago, but found the territory already well supplied with atlases and railway guides. He picked up exclusive rights for Oran's atlases and maps in Iowa, invested in a good stock of these, and moved his base of operations to Des Moines. This first concerted attempt at salesmanship was a disaster, which he put down to Iowa state having passed a prohibition bill only the month before. It may be more probably put down to the usual early failures of the novice salesman. His stock he could sell only as scrap paper.

Stranded in Des Moines, he was helped out by a friendly businessman, enough to get him to St. Louis, Missouri, where there was a branch of Gebbie and Company, American agents for the renowned French fine art publishers Goupil et Cie. Here Urban encountered a product to which he was naturally suited, and where he could begin to make his mark. The product which he first arranged to sell on commission was a part-work, *The World's Masterpieces*, issued in twenty-five weekly parts, at a dollar each. Urban recalled with pride in its quality, "*Each part contained four Photogravure Copies of the finest Art works & Paintings besides letterpress & woodblocks, drawings &c. The De Lux [sic] Edition cost \$125, was partly in Color and printed on India and Parchment paper*".¹² However, the Gebbie product with which Urban became most strongly associated was a complete work, *The Stage and its Stars*, in two volumes. Written by Howard Paul, this luxurious work featured 128 photogravures of the most celebrated actors and actresses of the American and British theatre,

¹⁰ See Timothy B. Spears, *100 Years on the Road: The Traveling Salesman in American Culture* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1995).

¹¹ Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Americans: The Democratic Experience* (New York: Random House, 1973), p. 135.

¹² Urban, *A Yank in Britain*, p. 23.

naturally appealing to a star-struck young man who had seen many of these greats when they appeared at the Cincinnati Music Hall on their theatrical tours. The plain edition was available for twenty-five dollars, on which Urban got seven dollars fifty cents commission. The de luxe edition was a princely \$135, with thirty-five dollars commission.¹³

Confident in the special value of his book, Urban enjoyed immediate success with *The Stage and its Stars* and other fine art publications from Gebbie and Company. He established connections with St. Louis clubs and societies that had links to the theatrical world, finding that the frequently German members would often assist him in his business by providing letters of introduction to other members, or simply by recommending the product to their friends. Urban enjoyed four months of profitable selling in St. Louis before returning to Grand Rapids to marry Julia Avery on 20 December 1888.¹⁴ Urban then moved his business operations to Chicago, a prize territory awarded to him by Gebbie and Company on account of his St. Louis success.

The book agent was a familiar, if not always welcome figure of the period. The end of the Civil War provided both a rich subject for the reading public and any number of invalid veterans forced into trying to hawk such books. The profession of book agent grew from this point onwards. Books were available in stores, but it was estimated that ninety per cent of potential buyers never entered such a store and would never think to buy a book unless pressed to do so. With book store sales likely to be in thousands, whereas a good subscription sale could yield sales of 100,000, specialist subscription publishers readily sprang up. The regular book trade decried the general contents and cheap quality of subscription publications, and book agents themselves were looked upon as ubiquitous nuisances, pressurising people into buying what they did not wish to buy. Typical products were bibles, biographies, histories, travel books and moralistic guides to life. Publishers recruited agents through newspaper advertisements, and allotted them a territory to canvas. Each agent was given instructions on the correct sales technique and a sample dummy or prospectus. This featured sample pages of texts from the book, the full page illustrations, the list of contents, strips of alternative, higher priced bindings, and blank pages for the signatures of prospective customers. No book was handed over on first meeting; instead

¹³ Howard Paul and George Gebbie (eds.), *The Stage and Its Stars Past and Present: A Gallery of Dramatic Illustration and Critical Biographies of Distinguished English and American Actors from the Time of Shakespeare Till To-day* (Philadelphia: Gebbie & Co., [1889]). The photogravures are credited to either Gebbie & Co. or Gebbie and Hudson, and are copyrighted individually as 1887, 1888 or 1889.

¹⁴ The National Archives J78 HD7930 (1907) Urban (Charles) v Urban (Julia Lamereux) and Lawbaugh (Elmer Arthur).

orders were made, and deliveries made on a second visit, when the agent was dependent on the subscriber keeping his word and paying up. The agent got a percentage of the retail price, typically forty per cent on regular books retailing at two to three dollars. It was a humble profession, with its practitioners often viewed as good-for-nothings too idle to take up honest work, and it was hard to make a living wage hawking the cheaper publications. Nevertheless, some prospered and wisely took pride in their work. There were many women book agents, and the profession was probably unique at the time in allowing them equal remuneration for the same amount of labour as men. It was further claimed that "*the sale of books by subscription pays better to the capital invested, than any other legitimate business*".¹⁵ The reality for many was, as Urban discovered in Iowa, days of no subscriptions at all as the agent struggled to make the first mark on his territory.

The publishers' instructions to their agents are noticeably consistent in their arguments. One such pamphlet breaks up successful canvassing into five basic steps:

- First: - Thorough preparation.*
- Second: - Securing influence.*
- Third: - Gaining a hearing.*
- Fourth: - Creating a desire.*
- Fifth: - Taking the order.*¹⁶

The good book agent had not only to know his book well, but to be truly interested in it, able to speak from the heart in giving an enthusiastic account of its merits. A book agent passing on advice to those new to the profession puts a strong, quasi-religious emphasis on this:

One thing is certain that in attempting to persuade, if we don't believe the statements we make ourselves, we shall find it hard work convincing others ... My policy in canvassing has been always to take hold of a book in which I have strong confidence that it will benefit the reader, and one in which I myself can confide. Satisfied of this and my own faith centred in the work, after getting fa-

¹⁵ *A Plea for the Book Agent Embodied In A Lively Discussion Between Farmer Brown and Book Agent Smith; Including Directions as to The Most Successful Manner of Conducting the Book Agency Business. By An Old Canvasser* (Saint John, N.B.: R.A.H. Morrow, 1903), p. 31.

¹⁶ *The Successful Agent* (Chicago, 1887), given in Hamlin Hill, *Mark Twain and Elisha Bliss* (Columbia: University of Missouri, 1964), pp. 170-182.

*miliar with its contents, so as to be able to intelligently describe the book to others, I go forth like Caesar crossing the Ribicon [sic], to take possession of my allotted territory, assured that my truth is mighty and must prevail.*¹⁷

All guides to being a successful agent and reminiscences of agents stressed the importance of securing influential names, an essential policy in a society where the example given by civic notables was often imitated, and a lesson that Urban would particularly take to heart:

*Influential Names to Head Your List. These you must secure, cost what effort it may. Right here is the GREAT TURNING POINT OF SUCCESS. Every old Agent understands this perfectly. Do not imagine that you are smart enough, or lucky enough to prove an exception to the invariable rule. You are not. Start right. Get a few leading names to head your list, and your success is assured. This is not a theory. It is a fact, philosophy, UNIVERSAL EXPERIENCE. Society everywhere follows its leaders. The great majority of people are afraid to trust their own unaided judgment about buying a book; but show them that Dr. A. and Rev. Mr. B, or Judge C. and Professor D., or Colonel E. and Esquire F. - or better still, all of these - have taken your work, and you will decide them immediately. They will feel really proud to be on your list in such company.*¹⁸

The guides emphasise working a territory thoroughly, not leaving out a single family, store or office, and give such practical advice as how to hide the outfit in an inside pocket of the coat ("*This will not only be very convenient, but serve to keep out of sight what might excite prejudice*"). The agent's bearing had to be "*open, frank, and manly, as of one who feels the true nobleness of his calling*". It was important to dress well, especially when canvassing in towns or cities. The agent had always to be positive, never asking the person "*Don't you want to subscribe?*", which of course none wished to at the outset, but to speak persuasively and judiciously until the customer was in a position to tell the agent that he did want it. Objections would be raised, naturally, but every objection would have its answer, and the good book agent had to be quick witted, parrying every argument with a reply that propelled the sale forward. Quick wits, confident manner, smart appearance, and absolute faith in the value of the book - these made the ideal book agent.

Urban would have read such publisher's instructions, and there is no doubt that they express his very philosophy, although he had himself become a specialist in the field

¹⁷ *A Plea for the Book Agent*, pp. 26-27.

¹⁸ *The Successful Agent*, p. 17.

by selling expensive fine art publications with a consequently wealthy prospective clientele. There was a code of ethics that bound salesman with customer, an "*essentially pragmatic business morality*", in Timothy B. Spears' phrase.¹⁹ The code of honest business dealings, of serving both the product and the customer well, within the defined territory that determined and confined the salesman's power, offered some kind of guide to the conduct of life that was made for its times. The fair deal offered the greatest good. Such lessons governed the whole of Urban's successful career, and in all his writings and interviews it is the language of the successful salesman that he speaks. The evidence for all this can be seen in a story from Urban's time selling *The Stage and its Stars* in Chicago. It is told in Terry Ramsaye's enthusiastic, anecdotal and romantic *A Million and One Nights*, first published in 1926, and still the essential history of the early years of cinema, even after many years of more sober and balanced research from other hands.

Ramsaye, in his earlier chapters, is remarkably assiduous in tracing the complex history of cinema's invention, but then turns to the businessmen who were essential in exploiting this new phenomenon for the benefit of an unpredictable public. Ramsaye sets the scene by taking the reader back to Urban the book agent:

Among the first important exploiters of the motion pictures came Charles Urban, whose name became of international prominence in film affairs, and at times the symbol of considerable power. Turning back a few years prior to the screen period under consideration, we discover this Urban, young, dignified, silk-hatted and frock-coated, evasively parleying for an interview with Marshall Field, the merchant, at his Chicago establishment.²⁰

The Marshall Field story, elaborated by Ramsaye, was evidently a great favourite of Urban's, who often mentioned it in American interviews and press releases, and recounts it again in greater detail in his memoirs. A letter of introduction (probably thanks to a German connection) had gained him a brief audience with Otto Young, director of The Fair, a huge Chicago department store founded by the German-born Ernest J. Lehmann in 1875.²¹ Department stores were the new wonder of the age, displaying a world of all imaginable goods, and democratising the very act of shopping by making all products open to anyone who had reason to enter the store. It would not be too idle to speculate that in the grand department stores of Chicago

¹⁹ Spears, *100 Years on the Road*, p. 60.

²⁰ Ramsaye, *A Million and One Nights*, p. 358.

²¹ Bessie Louise Pierce, *A History of Chicago: Volume III, The Rise of a Modern City 1871-1893* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957), p. 181.

there was inspiration for Charles Urban, the future purveyor of the world's offerings in his film catalogues, the inspiration being not so much the revolutionary fixed pricing and the display of quality in the assumption that anyone might be a buyer, but the compartmentalised world on sale.²² Otto Young was everything that Urban admired, and he gave him enough of his time to listen to the spiel, before saying that he would subscribe to *The Stage and its Stars* if only Urban could secure the subscription of Marshall Field likewise.

Marshall Field was the richest man in Chicago. His estimated personal wealth in 1890 was \$25 million. Starting from a humble clerkship paying \$400 a year in 1856, Field had risen to control the largest dry goods business in the United States, and probably the world. His department store was one of the physical and cultural landmarks of the city, revered by Chicagoans and visitors, and he wielded an influence on local affairs that far exceeded his role as a wholesaler and retailer.²³ He was not an easy man to meet, an act supposedly impossible without a letter of introduction, when every book agent or other salesman in town wanted his name at the top of their list of subscribers. Armed with his long coat, silk hat and book of sample plates bound in Morocco leather hidden within the loose lining of his coat, Urban boldly approached the offices of Marshall Field & Company. Porters and elevator men were supposed to be on the lookout for salesmen, not to mention cranks or potential assassins.²⁴

²² Thomas J. Schlereth, *Victorian America: Transformations in Everyday Life, 1876-1915* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), pp. 141-147; Boorstin, *The Americans*, p. 107.

²³ Bessie Louise Pierce, *A History of Chicago: Volume III, The Rise of a Modern City 1871-1893* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957), p. 181.

²⁴ Assassination was a real threat. Terry Ramsaye alludes lightly to Field's fears of 'dynamiters, blackmailers, cut-throats and gunmen', but this underestimates the alarm that Urban's presence may have caused. In May 1887 Chicago had witnessed the notorious Haymarket bombing. The city's industrial struggles, and the brutal police response to them, had come to a head over the McCormick Harvester Works, which was employing blackleg labour guarded by Pinkerton men. On 3 May the police opened fire on the crowd outside the works, and several were killed. A protest meeting in Haymarket Square the following day, organised by the German-born August Spies, a prominent anarchist, was breaking up peacefully when the police started to intervene and a bomb was thrown. Revolver shots were exchanged and ultimately seven policemen died and perhaps three times as many demonstrators. The resultant trial aroused (and continues to arouse) much controversy, with four of the anarchists, including Spies, being hanged. Marshall Field was prominent among the Chicago Citizens' Association, which subsequently offered its services in suppressing labour agitation and subversive activity, and local businessmen sympathetic to those who were protesting at the trial's injustices held back through fear of offending Field, who strongly opposed any leniency. American anarchists were predominantly German or Czech, and anti-foreigner sentiment at this time was rife. A stranger of German-Bohemian origin with an unknown package hidden about his person entering his private office would have been Field's greatest fear. The look of wry amusement Ramsaye records when Field learnt that he had been trapped by a mere book agent may simply have been one of relief. Pierce, *A History of Chicago*, pp. 275-287; George Woodcock, *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1963), pp. 436-438.

Nevertheless, Urban made his confident way unchallenged past the parcels checking clerk, the elevator staff and the outer offices, before being halted outside Field's private office. A clerk demanded to know his business. Urban replied that it was "*important, urgent and private*", and presented his card, on which he had written that Mr. Otto Young had requested him to have a private interview with Mr. Marshall Field. Everything about him convinced, and after a short wait, he was granted an audience with the august 'Merchant Prince of Chicago'. Field rose to greet the young stranger, and Urban acted like the very model of a book agent suggested in the publisher's guides. He introduced himself in a courteous and business-like fashion, then swiftly explained the purpose of his visit and proceeded to wax eloquent on the inestimable pleasures to be had from subscribing to *The Stage and its Stars*, de luxe edition, and before Field could react any further, told him of Otto Young's challenge. Whether in admiration at Urban's cheek, sales technique, or desiring to make Young pay up, Field produced the \$125. Urban thanked Field for his time, congratulated him on the soundness of his choice, and with a touch of his silk hat retired. The words of the instructional manuals for book agents come to mind here:

"Introduce yourself in a pleasant, easy business-like manner, and after the usual compliments show him your book, giving an honest, earnest and comprehensive description of its contents. Then show the list of names you have obtained for it, which is a powerful persuasive, being the example of others. As soon as you find your customer interested and willing to subscribe, secure his order without further delay. After the order is taken, let your customer's last impression of you be a good one. Thank him for his kindness in affording so much of his valuable time and for his order, and assure him that he will be more than satisfied with the book after he has read it. If he is busy, make your bow, or touch your hat and retire forthwith".²⁵

Urban returned in triumph to Otto Young, who likewise subscribed to the de luxe edition. Urban called this small triumph, "*a day that I never forgot, as it inspired me with confidence as to my sales ability*".²⁶

This was in the year of 1889, and we may take a step back and look at the picture presented to us by the young Charles Urban. He was twenty-two, of more than average height and powerful build, with an imposing sense of character and strength.²⁷

²⁵ *A Plea for the Book Agent*, p. 36.

²⁶ Urban, *A Yank in Britain*, p. 26; Ramsay, *A Million and One Nights*, pp. 358-360.

²⁷ Personal details taken from passenger records for Charles Urban listed on the American Family Immigration History Center site, www.ellislandrecords.org.

He was open in himself, and accepting of others where they were not standing in his way. He dressed immaculately. He was perfectly confident in himself, and determined to make his mark on the world, in a way that had yet to reveal itself to him. He is nevertheless at this stage unremarkable, a pushy young man of some ability rising from a difficult upbringing, and that is all; a talent waiting for an outlet that does not as yet exist. There are aspects of his life so far that can be seen to prefigure the fortunes of the older man, without having to stretch analogies too far, and in his faith in the '*Value of the Book*' we have the younger and the older man conjoined. To be associated with quality, a world of riches, to possess it, control it, and then to be able to sell it: this marks out Charles Urban the man, and was the cue for his own distinctive and important contribution to the growth of motion pictures.

Disliking the stifling summer heat of Chicago, Urban moved to Detroit, Michigan in 1889, where he was destined to encounter motion pictures for the first time. He had not been long in the city when he came across a stationery shop at 141 Griswold Street, opposite the City Hall. It carried the legend "*United Typewriter & Supplies Co. Typewriters and Stationery. John T. Doan M'gr*".²⁸ Urban had known a John T. Doan who had worked with him at Eaton and Lyons' stationery store in Grand Rapids. It turned out to be the same man, who was running the business with his wife. Urban was tiring of the peripatetic life of a salesman, and made a proposition to Doan to join him in a partnership if he added \$500 to the capital. Though it is possible that the vocation of book agent was not as lucrative as Urban boasted, it seems more likely that he was indeed looking for a more settled occupation. He was now a married man, and had made enough money to consider investing in a business of his own. The business with which he was most familiar was the stationery business, and the steady Doan was probably overwhelmed by the ambitious old acquaintance with any number of ideas for expansion. The terms of the partnership were soon agreed, and Urban's first major contribution to Doan & Urban Stationers was to secure the Michigan agency for Densmore typewriters.²⁹

²⁸ Photograph of the Doan shop in Charles Urban papers, National Science and Media Museum, URB 11/2, p. L2. This is dated 1893, with a photograph of the subsequent Doan and Urban shop dated 26 August 1893 (p. L verso). The Urban memoirs suggest that the partnership was dissolved by 1892, but Urban's contract with the North American Phonograph Company was from 1 September 1893. It seems unlikely, however, that Urban would have taken three years or more to discover the Doan shop, and a clipping from a 1911 Detroit newspaper states that Urban 'for several years kept a stationery store on Griswold Street'. URB 3/1 p. 34. Both photographs are reproduced in John Barnes, *Filming the Boer War* (London: Bishopsgate Press, 1992), p. 161.

²⁹ There is a problem with the photograph of the United Typewriter & Supplies Co. stationery store in URB 11/2 p. L2, which displays advertisements for both Densmore typewriters and Edison phonographs. This would seem to indicate that Doan was dealing in both products before Urban joined him, but as every other piece of evidence agrees with Urban's account of events, it must be followed. It is possible that the photograph shows the shop after Urban left, or that the change of name to Doan & Urban was not an immediate one.

The stationery stores that Urban had worked for, and the one that he now co-owned, existed to cater for the needs of the expanding number of business offices, and could offer them a growing range of novel devices of automation. Foremost among these was the typewriter, first developed in the United States by Christopher Latham Sholes in 1872 with financial backing from James Densmore. The model went into mass production in 1874, produced by the Remington Small Arms Company of New York. By the following year the first advertisements were being placed for women typists, and the typewriter thereby served to bring women in numbers to the world of commercial affairs.³⁰ By 1890 the Densmore firm, producing its own machines, was in competition with Remington and Smith-Premier. Although book selling was the occupation which most influenced the young Urban in the value and promotion of a quality product, it was the typewriter that was the first in a chain of inventions that exemplified the technologies that were driving on the modern world which Urban found it was his vocation to sell to that world.

One of the Densmore typewriters that Urban sold was to one Robert L. Thomae. Thomae is a minor but intriguing figure at the very start of commercial exploitation of motion pictures.³¹ At the time he met Urban, probably mid-1893, he was working for the North American Phonograph Company, a company which owned the North American patent rights to the Edison phonograph and were franchisees for the sole exploitation of the phonographs produced by the Edison Works in North America.³² After the North American Phonograph Company went into receivership in mid-1894, Thomae became secretary and treasurer of the Kinetoscope Company, one of three companies which obtained the franchise to market the Edison kinetoscope when it first became available in April 1894. The other companies were the Kinetoscope Exhibition Company and the Continental Commerce Company, whose proprietors Franck Z. Maguire and Joseph D. Baucus would soon come to know Charles Urban very well. Thomae was temporarily in Detroit to oversee the absorption of the Michigan Phonograph Company into the North American Phonograph Company. He was looking for a new representative for the phonograph in Michigan, and Urban was his man.

³⁰ Boorstin, *The Americans*, pp. 398-399. Doan and Urban were also agents for the Edison mimeograph, the basic but popular copying device that combined the stencil process with a rotary drum.

³¹ Thomae is best known for his one film acting appearance, playing Queen Mary, who by the novelty of stop-motion photography is seen to lose her head in the 1895 Edison film *The Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots*. Charles Musser, *Edison Motion Pictures, 1890-1900: An Annotated Filmography* (Genoa: Le Giornate del Cinema Muto/Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997), pp. 189-190.

³² Frank Andrews, *The Edison Phonograph: The British Connection* (Rugby: The City of London Phonograph and Gramophone Society, 1986), p. 2.

Thomas Edison, inventor of the phonograph and the kinoscope, was now to become the prime mover in the life of Charles Urban, as he was for millions of other American lives. When a child Urban had seen the first electric street lighting introduced to Cincinnati (in 1880), when two blocks on Vine Street, between Fourth and Sixth Avenue, were fitted with twelve arc lamps.³³ Edison was the inventor (or rather the improver) of the electric light bulb and the distribution system necessary for electric lighting. He had made contributions to wireless telegraphy and telephony, and his many hundreds of patents, brilliant business sense and flair for self-publicity brought him fame and wealth. To millions of Americans he was simply 'The Inventor', 'The Wizard of Menlo Park', the genius of the nation.

Edison's inventions were absolutely the products of their age. They illuminated, communicated, democratised, brought people together. They gave people a new and liberating sense of themselves and how they might interact with others. While serving people and their communications, he was equally the businessman's inventor, producing essential devices that needed the organisation of major enterprises, while he brought to the process of inventing itself the principles and practices of industry.³⁴ Two of Edison's inventions that require analysis here were both communications devices that lent themselves to entertainment purposes, and it was this borderline between instruction and amusement - with which Edison himself was never comfortable - that was to prove so conducive to Charles Urban. The two inventions were the phonograph and the kinoscope, closely allied in their production and their marketing, yet very different in their inventor's affections.

Edison made the discovery of the principles behind the phonograph in 1877, while examining the properties of diaphragms vibrating to sound. He was working on the idea of enabling people who might not otherwise be able to afford a telephone to record messages which might be delivered to a central bureau of some kind. Instead of a telephone repeater, he discovered the talking machine. The public were astonished, and acclaim for Edison was instantaneous and loud. Its commercial potential, however, was limited at this stage. As a recording device it was extremely basic, and although it was readily assumed that it would be employed by business, and the Edison Speaking Phonograph Company was formed in 1878 to exploit the invention, it nevertheless was promoted largely as a novelty item, recording the voices of members of the audience at public demonstrations and causing simple amusement when the sounds were played back. The tin foil impressions gave a harsh sound and could

³³ Urban, *A Yank in Britain*, p. 15.

³⁴ Matthew Josephson, *Edison* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959); Reese V. Jenkins, *Images and Enterprise: Technology and the American Photographic Industry, 1839-1925* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975).

only be played a few times before they became unusable. Edison foresaw widespread use for the phonograph, including the teaching of elocution, dictation for letter writing, music, books for the blind, speaking clocks, talking dolls and the preservation of the words of the great, but within a year, the novelty was over, and Edison had turned his mind to other things. He remained certain that the commercial future of the machine lay in letter writing, and not the mass production of music recordings.³⁵

It was in 1885 that Alexander Graham Bell and associates greatly improved on Edison's original invention by patenting a recording system that used wax-coated cylinders with cardboard cores and loosely-mounted stylus, which they name the graphophone (a simple reversal of the name of Edison's machine). A furious Edison responded in 1888 with a 'Perfected' phonograph, which likewise used wax cylinders and appropriated the ideas of the Bell group in introducing a subtle floating weight mechanism to hold down the stylus. A large factory for the construction of phonographs was established close by the Edison laboratories at West Orange. Exploitation rights of the patent rights for North America went for \$500,000 to successful Pittsburgh industrialist Jesse Lippincott, who formed the North American Phonograph Company in July 1888 and had already acquired the American patent rights to the Bell graphophone for \$200,000, thereby controlling the marketing of all recording devices in the United States.³⁶ It had been Edison's intention to sell phonographs outright, at \$85 to \$100 each. Lippincott, however, equated the phonograph with the telephone, and chose to follow the example of the Bell Telephone Company by issuing licenses to local dealers for individual territories, who would then rent the machines out for an annual rental of \$40, split between the parent company and the subsidiary licensee.³⁷ Although this system yielded disappointing results, it was to serve as the model for the exploitation of the later kinetoscope.

The phonograph was initially marketed as a business machine and only later as an entertainment device. The latter purpose was destined to flourish; the former to end in failure, with the majority of those taking up licenses for the phonograph as a business machine going out of business. Nevertheless it was the machine's potential as a business and educative tool that first interested Charles Urban, something which allied him to Thomas Edison. Although Edison was now to have such a considerable

³⁵ Boorstin, *The Americans*, pp. 379-380; Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907* (*History of the American Cinema* vol. 1) (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1990). pp. 55-57.

³⁶ Roland Gelatt, *The Fabulous Phonograph, 1877-1977* (London: Cassell, 1975, 2nd rev. ed.); Andrews, *Edison Phonograph*, pp. xii-xiv, 4; Josephson, *Edison*, pp. 328-331.

³⁷ Gelatt, *The Fabulous Phonograph*, p. 42; Josephson, *Edison*, p. 331.

influence on his life, Urban probably never met him, but pictures of him were to feature prominently on the walls of Urban's offices at the Warwick Trading Company in London.³⁸ Beyond their interest in the higher purposes on the phonograph (and later in the educational potential of motion pictures), however, there was a more personal connection of which Urban seems to have been unaware. In 1865, when he was a young itinerant telegraph operator, Edison lived for a time in Cincinnati, working at the Western Union office there and spending his free time at the theatres and beer gardens of the 'Over the Rhine' district. He returned to the city the following year, then in 1867 (the year of Urban's birth) he was working in Louisville, scene of Joseph Urban's downfall, where his passion for invention started to grow.³⁹

Beyond geographical roots, both were examples of the self-made man so dear to American hearts. The mystique that arose around Edison centred on his lack of any formal education which nevertheless did not prevent a natural genius from creating machines that were useful and revolutionary. People's fears of the hugeness and impersonality of modern industry and the city life that was now defining America, were softened by the image of Edison bridging the old and new worlds.⁴⁰ Urban, similarly lacking in finished school education, made himself a salesman for the world that Edison helped introduce. Such inventions needed men of faith to impress on the public that only by such possessions or such entertainments could they attain full happiness. The economic imperative that drove the search for mechanical solutions created the market, that self-sufficient world which Americans were discovering had supplanted the old, familiar world of small business and personal relations. Urban taught people to welcome the machine age, to find comfort in the everywhere community. A man like Urban was the logical outcome of a man like Edison.

Robert Thomae, the representative of the North American Phonograph Company who called in on Doan & Urban, was no doubt very glad to find in Urban someone so enterprising and so keen to take on the phonograph as a business machine. Urban

³⁸ Photographs showing the Warwick Court offices of Maguire & Baucus (and later the Warwick Trading Company) are in the photograph album held in URB 11/2 pp. B and F, and reproduced in John Barnes, *The Rise of the Cinema in Gt. Britain* (London: Bishopsgate Press, 1983), pp. 157-158. Further photographs are held in the Charles Urban 'portraits' file of the British Film Institute's Stills, Posters and Designs department. Large framed photographs of Edison are prominent in each room. In February 1915 Charles Urban was one of the many guests at a luncheon held by the motion picture industry held to celebrate the seventy-seventh birthday of Thomas Edison, and it is possible that he met him then. Urban was listed among the representative 'pioneers', among whom were Thomas Armat, C. Francis Jenkins, J. Stuart Blackton, Edwin S. Porter, Harry Marvin, William Selig and Albert E. Smith. URB 12/9-15.

³⁹ Josephson, *Edison*, pp. 45-56.

⁴⁰ Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), pp. 66-67.

was enthusiastic about the phonograph's potential as an office and educational tool, and broke away from Doan, taking over the specialised typewriter and phonograph businesses, opening a shop of his own, and joining the North American Phonograph Company as agent for the Michigan area on 1 September 1893.⁴¹ Urban devoted all his energies to developing both agencies, but soon found that the Densmore typewriter could not compete with Remington, and he concentrated solely on the phonograph.

In contrast to the general experience of those who tried to market the phonograph as office equipment, Urban made a success of it. Among his clients were the seed firm of D.M. Ferry & Co. and the whiskey distillers Hiram Walker & Sons of Walkerville, Ontario, which Urban would visit twice weekly to instruct the manager how to dictate into the machine and his typist how to transcribe from the wax cylinders.⁴² There was considerable resistance to the phonograph, however, from the women typists, who (in Terry Ramsaye's phrase) complained about "*electricity in the ears*", and feared that its introduction would cut both wages and staff.⁴³ Urban found himself assaulted by a posse of typists' boyfriends, but he persevered, persuading the manager to guarantee jobs and wages (with salary rises, according to Ramsaye), and in the end fitted out the Hiram Walker building with seven phonographs. Another eight were placed with D.M. Ferry, and in his first year Urban had sold seventy-two phonographs for business use, which according to his own record was ten more than had been sold in New York State or Pennsylvania put together.⁴⁴

Overall the phonograph failed as a business tool. There was, as Urban recalled, considerable resistance to its introduction from stenographers, who were in fact mostly male and fearful for the loss of their livelihoods. Many did their best to impede its progress. The equipment frequently broke down; the stylus points soon blunted; and the cylinders had only a capacity for two minutes, or four hundred words. The battery acid had a disconcerting habit of leaking, and the suppliers found the repair service they had to provide onerous. Phonographs were returned, and licenses not renewed. Those few phonograph franchises that prospered were those which offered a good

⁴¹ Urban, *A Yank in Britain*, p. 28; Contract between the North American Phonograph Company (general manager Thomas R. Lombard) and Charles Urban, 1 September 1893, URB 3/2 p. 68. The contract, with general instructions to the salesman, is reproduced with a short introduction in Frank Andrews, 'The North American Phonograph Company: Appointment of Dealer Contract', *The Talking Machine Review*, no. 38, February 1976, pp. 571-577.

⁴² Urban, *A Yank in Britain*, p. 29.

⁴³ Ramsaye, *A Million and One Nights*, p. 361.

⁴⁴ Urban, *A Yank in Britain*, p. 29.

repair or support service, which was probably as much behind Urban's success as his selling technique.⁴⁵

There is one known account from a customer of Urban's at this time, which illustrates the attraction that the invention had for those looking for a dictation machine. In 1932 Hugo Erichsen recalled:

*It must have been in the late '80's or early '90's that I read that Gen. Charles Augustus King, then Superintendent of the Orchard Lake Military Academy, was dictating his novels to a phonograph. As I was doing considerable work for the press just then, this struck me as a very convenient method of composition. Consequently I purchased a phonograph from Charles Urban, then in business at the northwest corner of Griswold and West Fort Streets. Later Urban became a movie magnate in London and will be remembered in this country by his magnificent photoplay in colors picturing the Indian Durbar. But, alas and alack, I could never accustom myself to that form of dictation and had to abandon the use of the phonograph for that purpose. As a musical instrument, however, it proved very much more satisfactory.*⁴⁶

Nevertheless, if Urban's phonograph business was to prosper, he was obliged to cultivate its growing popularity as a medium of entertainment. Ordinary people did not purchase phonographs, which were bulky, complicated to maintain, and cost \$150 to purchase in 1891. The licensing system favoured by Jesse Lippincott meant that the phonograph could entertain either through concerts or by being accessible as a coin-in-the-slot device within dedicated parlours, drugstores and saloons, where a single machine might earn on average an impressive \$50 a week.⁴⁷ Urban worked both these fields. He put on phonograph concerts for schools and private parties, and made recordings of singers, choirs, and on one occasion a recording of Handel's *Largo* by Christopher Hendrick, organist of the First Congregational Church, Detroit, which recordings were sent to the Edison laboratories at West Orange for general distribution. '*I thus became known to Mr. Edison and his Organization as a fairly successful worker*'.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Walter L. Welch and Leah Brodbeck Stenzel Burt, *From Tin Foil to Stereo: The Acoustic Years of the Recording Industry 1877-1929* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994), pp. 30-32; Josephson, *Edison*, p. 331.

⁴⁶ Hugo Erichsen, 'How the Edison Phonograph Came to Michigan', *Michigan History Magazine* no. 16 (Winter 1932), pp. 59-67, reproduced on the *Phonozoic* web site, <http://envy.nu/phonozoic/a0089.htm>.

⁴⁷ Gelatt, *The Fabulous Phonograph*, p. 44-45.

⁴⁸ Urban, *A Yank in Britain*, p. 30.

However, Urban's involvement with the phonograph was but a short step to his discovery of the kinoscope, and his true vocation. The phonograph had been an invention especially close to Thomas Edison's heart, for its significant position in his rising career, its utter novelty, its public acclaim, and its personal link with his own deafness. It was a machine that somehow reproduced life itself. It created sound, and crucially human sound, that was alive. It could even make the dead speak again. The kinoscope promised the same for what could be seen, and ought to have loomed still larger in the Edison legend. But it never did.

Edison's inspiration for a motion picture machine that could logically emulate the success of the phonograph was recorded in a caveat written on 8 October 1888 and filed at the U.S. Patent Office, to establish precedent, on 17 October, with the famous opening phrase: *I am experimenting upon an instrument which does for the Eye what the phonograph does for the Ear ...* But whereas the phonograph had been an undisputed novelty, things were considerably less clear for the kinoscope, and although motion picture films as we now understand them had their foundation in Edison's kinoscope, arguments over invention, precedence and validity have persisted. Motion pictures could never be an unsullied Thomas Edison invention, and although Edison's apologists have always acclaimed his primacy, motion pictures are never given the importance in resumés of his career as are his contributions to wireless telegraphy, telephony, the generation of electricity, the electric light and the phonograph.

Nevertheless, the kinoscope was the essential device in the first development of true motion picture film, and the first public demonstration of the perfected kinoscope took place during a lecture at the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences on 9 May 1893.⁴⁹ In its bulk and presence, the kinoscope was very similar to the phonograph. It was encased in a four foot high wooden cabinet, with a single eyepiece with magnifying lens on top for the individual viewer. Inside a forty-six foot loop of film threaded through a series rollers was propelled by an electric motor drive. Between the film and an eight volt electric lamp was a revolving shutter bearing a narrow slit that allowed through the intermittent flashes of light that created the illusion of movement. The machine was activated by a lever (later models were coin-operated), and stopped after a single viewing of the loop of film.⁵⁰ The visible image of this peep-show was tiny - one eyewitness spoke of seeing "*a Lil[l]iput world - but with real life,*

⁴⁹ Deac Rossell, *Living Pictures: The Origins of the Movies* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), pp. 79-86.

⁵⁰ Ray Phillips, *Edison's Kinoscope and Its Films: A History to 1896* (Trowbridge: Flicks Books, 1997), pp. 30-34; Rossell, *Living Pictures*, pp. 85-86; Robinson, *From Peep Show to Palace*, pp. 33-34.

because there seems to be a soul in the body of the little figures"⁵¹ - and the show's duration was only twenty seconds.

The kinetoscope made its commercial debut on 14 April 1894 at a parlour operated by the Holland brothers at 1155 Broadway, New York. One ticket, price twenty-five cents, entitled the purchaser to view one row of five kinetoscopes, two tickets all ten, a single view each time.⁵² The kinetoscope was generally marketed by those already in the phonograph business, and was to be frequently exhibited alongside the earlier Edison invention. It was immediately popular, and similar parlours sprung up all over the country. The kinetoscope arrived in Detroit on 19 November 1894,⁵³ at a music publisher's showrooms at 184 Woodward Avenue, where Urban recalled seeing the machines on display.⁵⁴

The kinetoscopes at 184 Woodward Avenue were licensed by the Kinetoscope Company, run by Raff and Gammon. After they had run their commercial course at this venue and other locations in Michigan, the machines were sold to the Michigan Electric Company. Urban, immediately attracted to the moving picture machine, offered to merge his business with theirs:

After showing these Kinetoscopes in the larger towns of Michigan, Raff and Gamon [sic], the Concessionaires [sic], sold the six machines to the Michigan Electric Company. I had sold them the idea of opening a slot machine Parlour on the Ground Floor of their extensive building on Woodward Ave (the Piccadilly of Detroit). I also sold to them my Phonograph Agency with 20 slot machine Phonographs, and five additional Picture Machines, to which were added a phonograph, the record of which would synchronise with the movement of the

⁵¹ Translated from a report in the Mexico City newspaper *El Monitor Republicano* of 20 January 1895, given in Gordon Hendricks, *The Kinetoscope: America's First Commercially Successful Motion Picture Exhibitor* (New York, 1966), p. 66.

⁵² Hendricks, *The Kinetoscope*, pp. 56-58.

⁵³ Hendricks, *The Kinetoscope*, p. 64.

⁵⁴ Urban, *A Yank in Britain*, p. 31. Some sources confuse the 184 Woodward Avenue address with Urban's later Kinetoscope parlour at 101 Woodward Avenue, and hence put Urban's motion picture debut incorrectly as 11 November 1894. See for example, Deac Rossell, "'...The New Thing With The Long Name And The Old Thing With The Name That Isn't Much Shorter...': A Chronology of Cinema 1889-1896", *Film History* vol. 7 no. 2 Summer 1995, p. 129; Barnes, *Filming the Boer War*, pp. 159, 165; Laurent Mannoni, *Le grand art de la lumière et de l'ombre: archéologie du cinéma* (Paris: Nathan, 1994), p. 371. Urban's motion picture debut was in early 1895, though curiously he celebrated his twenty-five years of cinema in 1921. Possibly he may have been thinking of projected film in 1896, but his memory for dates was generally unreliable. 'Charles Urban Has Instructed Millions in His Twenty-five Years as a Film Man', *Moving Picture World*, 16 July 1921, p. 293.

picture. This was called the Kinetophone and was the first Talking Picture Machine. I undertook to manage this "Parlour" with its 30 Machines. It was beautifully decorated and lighted and became very popular. Looking after the automatic coin devices, changing the film and sound records daily and keeping them all in adjustment, was a whole day's job.⁵⁵

The precise nature of the business deal between Urban and the Michigan Electric Company is difficult to determine, but the end result was that early in 1895 Urban became manager of a combined phonograph and kinoscope parlour at 101 Woodward Avenue, Detroit, which was the property of the Michigan Electric Company. A photograph exists which shows the interior of the parlour, with neatly-dressed staff standing by the rows of phonographs, kinoscopes and kinetophones.⁵⁶ The kinetophone was simply a kinoscope with ear tubes with which the user heard a phonograph recording which was not synchronised with the film, though a false synchronisation might be achieved because kinetophone subjects were mostly of dances or bands. The photograph reveals a general attempt at a classy appearance, with the neat attendants, potted palms, ornate wallpaper, decorated ceiling and three fans, though one feels that the Urban of a few years later would have achieved rather more in the way of style.

Urban remained in charge of the parlour at 101 Woodward Avenue for the remainder of 1895 and into the first few months of 1896. As he indicates, maintaining the machines in good running order took up much of his time, and the business was apparently a success, although the limited appeal of the kinoscope meant that after the initial public enthusiasm of 1894, the succeeding year saw a marked downturn in interest and sales generally. But he says virtually nothing of the contents of the films themselves, merely recalling a few famous or typical titles of the early period. It seems fair to speculate that at this stage Urban saw nothing in motion pictures to attract his attention, and remained more interested in the machinery and its earning potential. The typical subjects of the kinoscope were variety acts, often those who had appeared at Koster and Bial's Music Hall in New York. They were dancers, acrobats, boxers, vaudevillians and novelty animal acts. The kinoscope films were diverting, but fundamentally trivial, and combined with their miniaturised state, offered nothing to the imagination of one such as Urban. At some time there came the point where Urban saw beyond the short-term gimmick of the kinoscope, and

⁵⁵ Urban, *A Yank in Britain*, pp. 31-32.

⁵⁶ URB 11/2, p. ? A copy is also in the Charles Urban 'portraits' file of the British Film Institute's Stills, Posters and Designs department. The photograph has been reproduced in D.B. Thomas, *The First Colour Motion Pictures* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1969), p. 7, Phillips, *Edison's Kinoscope and Its Films*, p. 64, and Barnes, *Filming the Boer War*, p. 165. The photograph is from a business card, which gives the address and names Urban as 'Manager'.

began to construct his own special vision of what motion pictures should achieve. It does not seem that he dreamt of the educational and documentary purpose of film while all he knew of motion pictures was a peepshow displaying brief variety turns. Like so many others, what converted him wholly and determined the rest of his working life, was film projected on a screen.

At some time between April and July 1896 Charles Urban made a trip to New York to see a projected film show at Koster and Bial's Music Hall given by the Edison vitascope. It had opened there on 23 April, for a four month run. Urban recalled also seeing the Lumière cinématographe, possibly during the same trip. which opened at Keith's Union Square Theatre, New York, on 29 June, for a twenty-three week run. He was instantly enthusiastic: "*I lost all interest ever after in slot machines and tried to acquire one of these projecting machines but neither Lumiere's nor the Edison Vitascope could be bought, only leased*".⁵⁷

Edison had not invented a film projector. Whether he could not or would not is still a matter of debate, but certainly the initial profits of the kinetoscope discouraged him from pursuing the alternative form of film exhibition to any extent. However, it was obvious to many who saw the peepshow kinetoscope that such pictures could be thrown upon a screen in the manner of the magic lantern, and inventors in the United States, Britain, France and Germany all began to work on a solution. In America Charles Francis Jenkins and Thomas Armat began working in partnership on the problem in March 1895, achieving a workable projector in September 1895, which they named a phantoscope. Edison concessionaire Frank Gammon learnt of the projector, and arranged an exclusive contract whereby the Edison Manufacturing Company would construct the projectors and supply the films. Edison himself saw that other motion picture enterprises were catching up on him, and he reluctantly agreed to the enterprise, which included the projector being promoted, for the soundest of commercial reasons, as the latest Edison invention. Improvements were made, and the machine was renamed the Edison vitascope.⁵⁸

If Edison was humbled by having to adopt another's invention, he nevertheless had the benefit of hearing the cheers of the crowd at the triumph of the vitascope's debut on 23 April 1896. A thrilled public saw on the screen a short programme that included a hand-painted serpentine dance by Annabelle, a political satire *The Monroe Doctrine*, a barber shop scene, and unexpectedly a British film made by Robert Paul and Birt Acres, of the sea breaking on Dover pier. The realism of *Rough Sea at Dover*

⁵⁷ Rossell, 'The New Thing With The Long Name', pp. 148, 155-156; Urban, *A Yank in Britain*, pp. 18-19.

⁵⁸ Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema*, pp. 100-111.

made it the sensation of the programme, and it had to be repeated several times.⁵⁹ Just as the phonograph had astonished people simply by reproducing the familiar, so the vitascope threw real life on the screen, larger than life, and audiences were overwhelmed. Charles Urban was in one of those first audiences, and he resolved that he would have to be a part of this phenomenon that so excited people.

However, exploitation of the vitascope was to be as tightly controlled as had been that of the kinetoscope. It was, as had been demonstrated by the earlier machine, something which was expected to capture the public's fancy for a short while only, and needed to be marketed tightly to generate the maximum profits in the short time available. Such short-termism was to plague the early film industry, and Urban was certainly to prove who took the long view and came to believe in the value of cinema. Raff and Gammon marketed the vitascope in the same way that the phonograph and the kinetoscope had been marketed, by allotting exclusive state territories to subsidiary companies. This system gradually filtered down to the Michigan Electric Company, and Urban spent the remainder of 1896 both selling the vitascope on behalf of the Michigan Electric Company, while also touring the Michigan area with the projector to wherever a suitable electricity supply could be found, as the vitascope was powered by an electric motor. Whether Urban was acting independently in these touring ventures or with backing from the Michigan Electric Company is not known for certain, but the balance of evidence suggests the former.

Urban was an instinctive showman, and one who was determined not to con his audience but to put on a quality show. He was greatly bothered by the dependency on an electrical supply, when many areas of Michigan still lacked any electrical facilities, or else the local power supply was on alternating current when the vitascope required direct current. Urban was further frustrated by the breaks in the programme caused by the need to lace up a new film each time, the Edison films being only fifty foot long. He needed a projector that was safe, easy to use, hand-operated, could show an extended amount of film without a break, and did not infringe Edison's patents.⁶⁰ There were an increasing number of projectors coming on to the market, but Urban was starting to look for independence and the power that his own machine would give him.

Urban was not a technician, but his experience with phonographs and kinetoscopes had given him an understanding of mechanical matters and he knew how to ask for what would serve him best. From his time as a phonograph salesman, Urban had

⁵⁹ Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema*, pp. 115-117; Ramsaye, *A Million and One Nights*, pp. 231-234.

⁶⁰ Natalie S. McIntosh, 'Stardust and the Rainbow's End', *Brooklyn Life*, vol. LXIII, 2 April 1921, pp. 18-19, URB 3/3 p. 88; Urban, *A Yank in Britain*, p. 33.

made the acquaintance of a New York engineer and phonograph exhibitor, Walter Isaacs. Isaacs was to become the first of a notable series of men with technical ability with whom Urban would form partnerships, sharing in the glory, and reaping the financial rewards, of their 'joint' efforts: Cecil Hepworth, Alfred Darling, Edward R. Turner, G.A. Smith, Theodore Brown, F. Martin-Duncan, William Vinten, Percy Smith, Henry Joy. Urban's words on how he formed this first alliance make his view of the collaboration clear:

During my phonograph days I bought a lot of accessories from a Mr Walter Isaacs (New York) who also made machine parts. I called on him and we jointly designed a Motion Picture Projecting Machine, which I named the "Bioscope". After testing the first model he had completed, I placed an order with him for 50 Machines, which I had decided to sell outright.⁶¹

There is an interesting parallel here with Thomas Edison and his technician William Kennedy-Laurie Dickson. Urban, like Edison, conceived of (or approved of) the vital idea; Isaacs, like Dickson, made his general directions a practical reality. Isaacs was an unabashed imitator of others' designs, who would go on to supply projectors to order for others after Urban, and to incur the litigious wrath of Thomas Edison. The precise nature of the first Bioscope projector, which was to prove the cornerstone of Urban's fortune, has been something of a mystery. Charles Musser states that it was a modified Lumière Cinématographe, but the researches of John Barnes have shown that the Bioscope in all its various manifestations employed a distinctive intermittent mechanism that was borrowed from the patent of French inventor Georges Demeny. Moreover, when he was with the Warwick Trading Company in Britain, Urban and Warwick were paying royalties to Demeny and the French company that marketed his machines, Gaumont.⁶² Urban in his memoirs makes no mention of Demeny, but his description of the Bioscope's eccentric mechanism is clearly the distinctive 'dog' or 'beater' movement of Demeny's patent:

Edison used the 'Geneva' or Maltese Cross movement to actuate the film, while in the Bioscope I used the eccentric roller movement which allowed a quicker pull-down or change of picture with a longer phase of light exposure on the

⁶¹ Urban, *A Yank in Britain*, pp. 32-33.

⁶² Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema*, p. 168; Richard Brown, "'England is not big enough...' American rivalry in the early English film business: The Case of Warwick v Urban, 1903", *Film History* vol. 10, 1998, p. 23; Joseph D. Baucus (letter), 'The Inventor of the Bioscope', *The Era*, 2 January 1904, p. 27.

*screen when projected. This was always a source for argument during the following years, but the Bioscope movement did gain great popularity in the British Market, as I will refer to later.*⁶³

The original bioscope as devised by Isaacs and Urban was an excellently engineered machine, which employed the eccentric 'beater' movement for its intermittent, and which was most distinctive for having no shutter, thus avoiding completely the flicker which so distressed early film audiences. The downside of this was that the pull-down of each succeeding image could be detected, giving a blurred effect known as 'ghost' or 'rain'. Increased illumination and rapid pull-down helped counteract those problems caused by the absence of a shutter.⁶⁴ It was operated by a handle, and on account of the 'beater' mechanism it was very noisy in operation. An attachable spool-bank allowed for continuous projection if so desired. The simple gate comprised two velvet pads. There was no take-up reel, and the finished film simply fell into a basket. It was a fine projector, whose significant defects were corrected by Cecil Hepworth in Britain in 1898; further improvements were to be made by Alfred Darling. Practical and inventive features were always to distinguish the bioscope, establishing it as one of the most reliable and popular projectors on the market for over ten years.

The bioscope was an undoubted practical success, and although its greatest impact would be in Britain, it was employed with success in America throughout 1897. Terry Ramsaye, as usual, gets to the heart of the matter:

*This machine was in all probability the first of its type, which soon became widely distributed. The Bioscopes went as fast as they could be delivered. This machine offered the possibility of taking the new motion pictures out into the small towns and lumber camps. Dozens of lecturers went out equipped with Bioscopes and a stock of Edison films, which Urban continued to handle.*⁶⁵

Urban knew his audience, from the city sophisticates that graced the music halls and kinoscope parlours, to the plain folk of Grand Rapids and similar pioneer towns,

⁶³ Urban, *A Yank in Britain*, p. 32.

⁶⁴ Further details of the Bioscope given in the *British Journal of Photography*, 22 April 1898, p. 252, quoted and commented on by John Barnes in *Pioneers of the British Film* (Bishopsgate Press, 1988), p. 145. This account seems to have been taken word-for-word from Urban's own publicity for the Bioscope, for example the Warwick Trading Company catalogue for 1901, pp. 7-9. The Bioscope is further described in Barnes, *The Rise of the Cinema in Gt. Britain*, pp. 155-156, 158, with illustrations. The Bioscope in these descriptions is the same as was first constructed by Isaacs in New York.

⁶⁵ Ramsaye, *A Million and One Nights*, p. 363.

many of whom owed their first sight of the magic of moving pictures to an itinerant showman arriving with his Urban bioscope and small stock of Edison films (Urban says that he supplied twenty to thirty films for each bioscope outfit that he sold). Urban gave his small town audiences the best that he could, and always sought to improve on what he had to offer.

His was not the only projector on the open market, however. Urban had approached Isaacs some time late in 1896, and as he recounts, "*Edison however had anticipated me by putting on the market a portable projecting machine before I secured delivery of a quantity of Bioscopes from Walter Isaacs*".⁶⁶ This was the Edison projecting kinoscope or projectoscope, a moderately priced projector designed for the general market, which had its debut in November 1896 and became widely available in February 1897. It was the same month, on the 5th, that Urban paid Isaacs for the bioscope prototype.⁶⁷

On a visit to New York to see Isaacs, Urban went to the offices of Maguire & Baucus, Edison agents, to ensure a further supply of films. There he was pleased to meet his old acquaintance from phonograph days, Robert Thomae, now manager of the film department at Maguire & Baucus. Soon after, Thomae wrote to him, suggesting that he apply for the position of manager of Maguire & Baucus' London office. There were two others in competition for the post, and Thomae urged him to come to New York immediately, promising that he would strongly recommend him. This seems to have been at the very end of 1896, the start of a time of giddy change of Urban.⁶⁸

Franck Maguire and Joseph Baucus ran Maguire & Baucus Ltd., one of the three groups licensed by Edison to market the kinoscope. The company had formed a subsidiary, the Continental Commerce Company, incorporated in September 1894, with which to exploit had the exclusive rights to market the kinoscope overseas,⁶⁹ but with the waning of interest in the kinoscope they were now marketing Edison projectors and serving as a film agency, handling Edison and then later Lumière standard gauge films. Maguire and Baucus themselves were in London at this time, with Mr Stapleton, the manager they intended to replace. Urban was interviewed by

⁶⁶ Urban, *A Yank in Britain*, p. 33. In the manuscript, the word 'by' is crossed through and replaced with 'from', which may or may not indicate a sensitivity on Urban's part as to whose invention the Bioscope was.

⁶⁷ Charles Urban affidavit, 12 September 1903, TNA J4/6734/2137, cited in Brown, 'England is not big enough', p. 23.

⁶⁸ Urban, *A Yank in Britain*, p. 36.

⁶⁹ Charles Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon: Edwin S. Porter and the Edison Manufacturing Company* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/Oxford: University of California Press, 1991), p. 46.

the company's treasurer, Walter Howe, and offered the job the following day, at a salary of £500 per year plus a percentage on business.⁷⁰

There was a considerable amount of risk involved, and Urban records that he was at that time earning three times as much as they had offered him in salary. He must have sensed a great opportunity, however, one that he would certainly have regretted turning down, and bioscopes could be sold in Britain just as easily as America. Maguire & Baucus for their part would have been very pleased to secure the services of such an enterprising and ambitious young man, all the more when he could bring with him a projector which might help loosen the bonds that tied them to the Edison organisation. They promptly agreed to take over the balance of fifty bioscopes (in itself a considerable investment for Urban to have made and an indication of how successful he had been marketing the vitascope throughout 1896) to be delivered by Isaacs on Urban's original order.⁷¹

Urban accepted the post and had resigned his position at the Michigan Electric Company by February. He was not sent to London immediately, however, but spent six months in New York, learning about Edison equipment and films, and studying (in his words) "*the trading methods with American distribution and how the requirements from London were being dealt with*".⁷² He got on well with Walter Howe and Robert Thomae, and started to specialise in selling the bioscope through Maguire & Baucus, though the company's chief product remained the Edison projecting kinoscope. Maguire & Baucus sent a number of bioscopes to Britain in June, two months ahead of their avowed inventor, though staff at their London office could not work out how to operate one, and had to await Urban's arrival, something which can only have added to his aura as the brilliant young man who was coming to revitalise the British and European operations of the Continental Commerce Company.⁷³

Charles Urban spent his first thirty years in the America of Mark Twain's 'Gilded Age'. Born two years after the Civil War came to a close, he experienced a country that changed from a small town world of the familiar, personal and circumscribed, to a land of cities, industrialisation, incorporation and commodities. Many commentators bemoaned the changed and alienating post-war world with its new language of money. Urban knew no other and revelled in its opportunities. As he prepared to

⁷⁰ Urban, *A Yank in Britain*, p. 36-37.

⁷¹ Urban, *A Yank in Britain*, p. 38; Urban affidavit, 12 September 1903, TNA J4/6734/2137, cited in Brown, 'England is not big enough', p. 23.

⁷² Urban, *A Yank in Britain*, p. 38.

⁷³ Brown, 'England is not big enough...', pp. 23-24.

leave for Britain, Urban was still a largely unremarkable figure on the fringes of an exciting new phenomenon, moving pictures. But he was now on the journey from selling machines to selling what they had to communicate.

The early film industry seemed to be nothing but a parade of odd names whose science and curiosity value showmen billed as the main attraction - animatograph, biograph, kinoscope, kineopticon, cinématographe, bioscope. But it was the films themselves that the people were coming to see, the software not the hardware. The high degree of emotional involvement people had with the first projected film shows was one essential factor in this change. Future Urban employee Cecil Hepworth recalled, "*I have never in my life before or since witnessed such intense enthusiasm as these short, crude films evoked in audiences who saw films for the first time*".⁷⁴

The other factor was that people encountered these images as part of an audience. Public exhibitions of the phonograph as an entertainment medium had seen people drawn by the appeal of the machine itself rather than by any particular artist or recording. To encounter the phonograph in a parlour, such as Urban managed, began to make the transition from technical curiosity to individual pleasure, but there remained a distance maintained by the casual act of visiting such a parlour; passing by, then passing on. The phonograph and its successors only flourished when the machines and their recordings became available to the public as private purchases. The kinoscope was similar to the phonograph, in that the manner of its parlour presentation (and the miniscule images it offered) kept that distance between the viewer and the emotional charge that only became apparent in films when they were thrown upon a screen, to an audience. Although there were efforts by several early film producers (including Urban) to make film production and exhibition easily available for the home market, films were finding their natural home among the music halls, theatres and fairground booths where they were initially exhibited. People were coming together to see films. It was not necessarily individual films or individual subjects that attracted them, and for many simply the comforting experience of visiting the cinema and enjoying the social space that it offered would be that for which they paid their money.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, whatever the reason, the audience was drawn to the screen, not to the machine providing the images. The word 'bioscope' became not a projector but a place to see films; the cinématographe gave us the word 'cinema'. Urban would now follow this same path by going from marketing the machine to becoming a producer of images, and a provider of a cinematic experience that was the world on show.

⁷⁴ Cecil Hepworth, *Came the Dawn: Memories of a Film Pioneer* (London: Phoenix House, 1951), p. 32.

⁷⁵ Nicholas Hiley, 'The British Cinema Auditorium', in Karel Dibbets and Bert Hogenkamp (eds.), *Film and the First World War* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1995), pp. 160-170.

The new degree of involvement with the product that this entailed was, however, already part of Urban's makeup. The good book agent knew his product and believed intensely in what it could offer people. He was nothing if he did not believe in the "*value of the book*". The control that this implies, together with possible vulnerability, especially if the emotions were to be too strongly engaged, characterised Urban the salesman, and Urban the man. There were all the ingredients of the future film showman and purveyor of popular knowledge to a mass audience in his life so far: the thirst for education from one whose own schooling had been restricted; a rapport with peoples of all kinds, and the ability to appreciate an audience's point of view; the familiarity with the machinery of entertainment and how it might best be employed; the successful salesman's high confidence. He would now be making the product that he most wanted to sell.

Eventually his trial period in New York was over, and the time arrived for him to take up the post for which he had applied. He and his wife Julia returned to Grand Rapids to say good-bye to members of her family, in anticipation of a long stay in Britain, and Urban made a promise to Jack Avery to invite him over to a good position in the company, as soon as the opportunity presented itself. He likewise visited some of the scattered members of the Urban family in Chicago and Cincinnati. On 14 August 1897, Charles and Julia Urban sailed from New York on the Cunard liner *Etruria*, arriving in Liverpool on the 22nd. The following day, having found lodgings in London, he rose early, donned his frock coat and silk hat, and set out to wake up the British film industry.