

THEY FORGOT TO READ THE DIRECTIONS

Museum of the Moving Image

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Good evening. In putting this presentation together, I had to decide whether to show the films this evening in extract form, and give you lots of background detail in my talk; or to give you the opportunity to see the films complete, and to give you my comments in concentrated form. I have decided on the latter, though there is still much to say, and I hope that you will find the background information entertaining along with the films.

What you are going to see are four unusual films from the National Film and Television Archive for which it is hard to give a label. They are all dramatised home movies, all but one made by or starring members of the British literary intelligentsia of the 1910s and 1920s. If there is a neat label that embraces such films, I have yet to think of it, but there is no doubt it existed as a phenomenon. For in the 1910s and 1920s, numerous members of the British literary world discovered moving pictures.

Such a discovery came in different ways. Some discovered the simple delights of going to the cinema, especially in the 1920s when the Film Society attracted London's intelligentsia to the Soviet classics and other forms of art cinema. James Joyce, uniquely, became the manager of a cinema in 1909, though happily for posterity a very bad and short-lived one. Several wrote about this new medium - Virginia Woolf wrote about its status as an art form; Bernard Shaw on its possibilities as a medium of education; John Buchan included his experiences as head of the Department of Information during World War One, where he was in charge of film propaganda, by writing a comic film production scene in the Richard Hannay novel *Mr Standfast*; H.G. Wells, who as early as 1895 had been approached by R.W. Paul about a plan for film exhibition inspired by his novella *The Time Machine*, wrote an entire novel, *The King Who Was a King*, that attempted to present a film script in novel form. Many, of course, found themselves the richer for having film adaptations made of their work, or were

approached by the film companies to provide new scripts. Bernard Shaw felt that they were trading more on his name than on any scriptwriting abilities, but Hall Caine happily wrote the screenplay for the British wartime propaganda epic, *The Invasion of Britain*. A number, such as J.M. Barrie, found themselves assiduously wooed by Hollywood, and P.G. Wodehouse was famously able to spend some considerable time in Hollywood as a scriptwriter doing nothing and getting paid handsomely for it.

But our subject today is those literary figures who took up the motion picture camera themselves and made their own films. Little is known about such films, which were amateur, light-hearted productions, seldom mentioned in biographies or autobiographies, and few of which have survived. What is clear is that, for those who could afford to purchase a camera, or more likely to hire a cameraman, and pay for the processing, titling and so forth, then making your own film drama was the new fun thing to do. Home movies of themselves were becoming common enough, since substandard film gauges had been available from the earliest years of cinema, and 16mm in particular became available in 1923. Furthermore, the 1920s saw a thriving cinema club movement where enthusiasts made their own film dramas in the manner of local theatre productions. Coming somewhere in between the two come these films this evening, made by Evelyn Waugh, J.M. Barrie, and Rebecca West and Lord Beaverbrook respectively.

The first film is the best-known, after its rediscovery in the 1960s and its mention in the biographies of its scriptwriter. That writer was Evelyn Waugh, and the film, made in 1924, was *The Scarlet Woman*. Unlike our later films this evening, this film was made before Waugh had been published, though he was at work on his first attempt at a novel, the unpublished *The Temple at Thatch*, having just come down from Oxford. The film was chiefly the production of one of Waugh's Oxford friends, Terence Greenidge, who had been an enthusiastic member of the university's cinema club and who had acquired a 16mm camera. Greenidge made several amateur films in these years, including *666*, *The Mummies*, and *The Cities of the Plain*, the latter of which featured Waugh as a "lecherous black clergyman". Greenidge was never destined to become a professional filmmaker, ending up a stage actor instead, but *The Scarlet Woman* boasts sufficient attention to detail and inventiveness to make it well worth showing in its entirety this evening.

With £5 put up by each of the leading performers to finance the production, filming started in July 1924 and lasted largely until September. The story for the film was supplied Waugh himself, and as you will see it is a ribald satire on the Roman Catholic church, concerning as it does the attempt of the Dean of Balliol to convert the English monarchy to Catholicism. Waugh was of course to convert to Catholicism just a few years later, which gives *The Scarlet Woman* a particular piquancy, the final rebellious assault of one more drawn to the religion than he knew. Waugh mentions the film's production in his diaries, where he wearily records that he was quite disgusted with how bad it was, and in his autobiography *A Little Learning* he refers to it without comment. Nevertheless, any reading of Waugh's diaries will show he was greatly attracted to films as he was a frequent visitor to the cinema throughout his life, and in the film he acts his two parts with gusto. He plays the Catholic Dean of Balliol, a real figure of Waugh's acquaintance that he had come to despise, and plays him as a blonde-wigged homosexual with designs on the Prince of Wales; he also plays the impecunious peer Lord Borrowington. Other performers include his writer brother Alec Waugh, as the drunken mother of a cardinal, John Sutro as the cardinal, John Greenidge as the Prince of Wales, and Terence Greenidge as a Jesuit priest. What makes the film exceptional, however, apart from Waugh's contribution, is the appearance of the young Elsa Lanchester. The same age as Waugh (21), the precocious Lanchester ran a London club called The Cave of Harmony, which Waugh often frequented. Playing the drug-addicted actress Beatrice de Carolle, who attracts the Prince of Wales away from the lascivious Dean, she shows every bit of the talent that would see her in Hollywood ten years later, married to Frankenstein's monster. The film was shot in Oxford, on Hampstead Heath, and in the Waugh family's Hampstead back garden. The film was first shown at the Oxford University Dramatic Society, where the future composer Lennox Berkeley provided the music accompaniment with gramophone recordings. This evening we have Stephen Horne:

THE SCARLET WOMAN

Our second film is one made by probably the most enthusiastic British literary filmmaker of this period. J.M. Barrie is now chiefly known for *Peter Pan*, and for his custody of the sons of the Llewellyn-Davies family, the 'Lost Boys'. It is largely forgotten that he was among the most highly regarded and revered writers of his time, as a novelist and especially as a dramatist. It is hardly known that he was fascinated by the cinema. Many writers of his generation were

intrigued by the new medium, especially those like Barrie who wrote plays and who saw films as an artistic and economic threat, but also something deeply tempting. This new medium took their stories, their plays, their actors, it enjoyed a growing audience who largely consisted of people their art never reached - it is no surprise that such writers were equally repelled and fascinated by the cinema. Barrie found the medium more compelling than most, and this compulsion led him to make his own films.

Barrie was involved in the production of several films in the 1910s and 20s. Three were amateur. The remainder were Hollywood productions, namely Cecil B. De Mille's *Male and Female* (based on Barrie's play *The Admirable Crichton*), *Peter Pan* and *A Kiss for Cinderella*. For *Peter Pan* Barrie wrote an original script, though it was not used. Of the amateur films and one professional oddity, only one survives, but I shall take a brief time to describe the others first.

The first two were each connected with a combined theatre-and-film revue that Barrie had dreamt up in July 1914, only to abandon. The first was called of an event called *The Cinema Supper*, to which Barrie was able to invite such luminaries as the Prime Minister, Edward Elgar, George Bernard Shaw and G.K. Chesterton, to enjoy supper at the Savoy and see a series of short sketches written by Barrie and acted by such theatrical luminaries as Marie Lohr, Dion Boucicault, Marie Tempest, Gerald Du Maurier and Edmund Gwenn. The evening was made the more remarkable by Barrie having hired a team of cameramen to film everyone arriving and then seated at their tables. Many apparently had no idea that they were being filmed; none except Barrie knew what he had in mind. At one point in the evening Bernard Shaw got up and started delivering a haranguing speech against three other guests present, namely G.K. Chesterton, the drama critic William Archer and Lord Howard de Walden, getting so heated as to start waving a sword around. The three he had insulted then all got up, bearing swords of their own, and chased him off stage. This was all a further part of Barrie's plan, and according to G.K. Chesterton in his *Autobiography*, Barrie had "*some symbolical notion of our vanishing from real life and being captured or caught up into the film world of romance; being engaged through all the rest of the play in struggling to fight our way back to reality*".

Thus comes the second Barrie film, because either just before *The Cinema Supper* or just after (accounts differ), Barrie had hired a movie cameraman, and with the renowned playwright and theatre producer Harley Granville-Barker as director, he

made a comedy Western, starring Bernard Shaw, William Archer, Howard de Walden and G.K. Chesterton. Chesterton has left us with the best description of this extraordinary little episode:

We went down to the waste land in Essex and found our Wild West equipment. But considerable indignation was felt against William Archer; who, with true Scottish foresight, arrived their first and put on the best pair of trousers ... We ... were rolled in barrels, roped over fake precipices and eventually turned loose in a field to lasso wild ponies, which were so tame that they ran after us instead of our running after them, and nosed in our pockets for pieces of sugar. Whatever may be the strain on credulity, it is also a fact that we all got on the same motor-bicycle; the wheels of which were spun round under us to produce the illusion of hurtling like a thunderbolt down the mountain-pass. When the rest finally vanished over the cliffs, clinging to the rope, they left me behind as a necessary weight to secure it; and Granville-Barker kept on calling out to me to Register Self-Sacrifice and Register Resignation, which I did with such wild and sweeping gestures as occurred to me; not, I am proud to say, without general applause. And all this time Barrie, with his little figure behind his large pipe, was standing about in an impenetrable manner; and nothing could extract from him the faintest indication of why we were being put through these ordeals.

Chesterton says that the film was never shown, and Barrie's biographer Denis Mackail suggests that Barrie's ideas were still half-formed and objections from some of the unwitting participants caused both films to be withdrawn. However, it is a little recorded fact that the cowboy film was shown publicly, two years later at a war hospital charity screening at the London Coliseum, where it was given the splendid title of *How Men Love*. A review of the event indicates that Chesterton's description of the action is what was seen on the screen, with the added detail that the others hanging from the rope over a cliff were too much even of a man of his great bulk to support, and he was forced to drop them. According to Denis Mackail, a print was still in existence in 1941. Where, oh where is it now?

Where, still more, is the film in which Barrie was involved in 1916, entitled *The Real Thing at Last*? This was a professional film production by the British Actors Film Company, for which Barrie supplied the script. 1916 was the tercentenary of Shakespeare's death, and among numerous celebratory productions, there was going to be a Hollywood production of *Macbeth*, produced by D.W. Griffith and

starring the English actor-manager Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree. The idea of Hollywood tackling Shakespeare filled many with hilarity, and Barrie wrote a thirty minute spoof which contrasted *Macbeth* as it might be produced in Britain, with how it would be treated in America. The film starred Edmund Gwenn as Macbeth, and among a notable cast Leslie Henson and A.E. Matthews, who both have left droll accounts of its production.

The film had a director, L.C. MacBean, but according to Matthews, "*Barrie did all the work - MacBean just looked on admiringly*". The film gained all its humour from the contrasts in the British and American interpretations of *Macbeth*. In the British version, Lady Macbeth wiped a small amount of blood from her hands; in the American she had to wash away gallons of the stuff. In the British, the witches danced around a small cauldron; in the American the witches became dancing beauties cavorting around a huge cauldron. In the British, Macbeth and Macduff fought in a ditch; in the American Macbeth falls to his death from a skyscraper. The intertitles were similarly affected; a telegram was delivered to Macbeth that read, "*If Birnam Wood moves, it's a cinch*". Sadly, no copy of this happy jest of Barrie's is known to exist.

What does exist, however, is *The Yellow Week at Stanway*. This film was made in 1923, and is a record of a house party held by Barrie at Stanway, the Cotswolds home of Lord and Lady Wemyss, which Barrie rented every summer. Barrie invited his many guests, which on one occasion included the entire Australian cricket team, to take part in theatricals, cricket matches and other such entertainments, and in 1923 he hired a professional cameraman, name unknown, to film a story that he initially called *Nicholas's Dream*. Nicholas, or Nico, was the youngest of the five Llewellyn-Davies boys, and a little of their history is required to put the film in proper context.

The five boys were the sons of Arthur and Sylvia Llewellyn-Davies, friends of J.M. Barrie and the models for Mr and Mrs Darling in *Peter Pan*, both of whom died tragically early, with Barrie assuming the guardianship of the five. They were, of course, the inspiration for the 'Lost Boys' of Barrie's imagination, and Michael Llewellyn-Davies in particular became the inspiration for the character of Peter Pan. But the family was to be visited by further tragedy. George, the eldest, was killed in action in 1915, then Michael, Barrie's favourite, was drowned in 1921. Two of the others ones, Jack and Peter, moved away from Barrie, and the youngest, Nico, still at school at Eton, stayed with Barrie during holidays but felt

Michael's death deeply and knew that he was no substitute for him. It is with this background, knowing both Nico and Barrie's great personal sadness, that we should look at *The Yellow Week at Stanway*, which records a Stanway house party in 1923 to which Nico invited several of his Eton friends, with a complementary female component made up of friends of the Wemyss family, whose daughter Cynthia Asquith was Barrie's secretary.

The film is largely in the standard home movie style, with some simple trick effects and a distinctive tone of whimsy which is typical of Barrie, who wrote all of the rhyming intertitles as well as directing the film. I will point out who the people are as the film progresses, but there are two notable scenes in particular. The first is the 'Nicholas's Dream' sequence, a sort of dramatised fantasy, in which Nico - perhaps with some unfathomable and unconscious cruelty on Barrie's part - is rejected by each of the women of the party in turn. The second is a short pirate sequence, featuring Barrie himself and the children of Cynthia Asquith, which is remarkably close to his photo-story *The Boy Castaways* which was in turn the inspiration for *Peter Pan*. And I have no idea what a 'Yellow Week' might be.

THE YELLOW WEEK AT STANWAY

The last two films come courtesy of Lord Beaverbrook. The newspaper publisher was an avid enthusiast for the cinema, something which began when he was head of the Ministry of Information during the First World War and became responsible for controlling the British film propaganda campaign. Unlike many of the British political establishment, Beaverbrook had no problems with the favoured medium of the masses, and believed strongly in its positive and democratic qualities. After the war he controlled Britain's leading cinema exhibition circuit and had a half share in the *Pathé Gazette* newsreel, and he also had private cinemas at two of his homes, where he preferred to watch films as he was free to talk while they were screening. As with J.M. Barrie, he loved house parties, and on at least two occasions hired professional cameramen to make dramatic films starring his house guests in the gardens of his Surrey home, Cherkley Court.

The first of these films has no literary connection as such, but it is short, and it survives, so we will show it first. It was made in July 1924, precisely when *The Scarlet Woman* began production, was filmed by a Pathé newsreel cameraman named Arthur Fisher, and stars the Duchess of Westminster and Beaverbrook himself. The film is called *A Lone Miracle*, and though the nature of the action is a

little obscure, in the way of such amateur films with their in-jokes and personal references, it will help to know that it is parodying a famous theatrical production of the day, entitled *The Miracle*. *The Miracle*, originally a Max Reinhardt stage production before the First World War, had been revived in Britain with Lady Diana Manners taking on the role of the Madonna, a statue which comes to life to take on the duties of a nun who has fled her convent for the temptations of the outside world. The nun is tempted by a mischievous, Mephistolean figure named Spielmann, which is the name of the character the Beaverbrook plays here:

A LONE MIRACLE

Our final film this evening was made in the same year, 1924, at the same location, Cherkley Court. We are fortunate to be seeing it at all, because when the films in the collection of Lord Beaverbrook were offered to the National Film and Television Archive after his death, it was recommended that this next film should be destroyed. Its contents were deemed to be too embarrassing, especially as some of the participants were then still alive, and until recently there was a complete embargo on any sort of public exhibition. The film is called *They Forgot to Read the Directions*, and it was written by and stars Rebecca West. It also stars her two sometime lovers, H.G. Wells and Lord Beaverbrook. Although nothing about the film is mentioned in any of the biographies or memoirs of the leading participants, it came at a crucial point in West's emotional life, when she had ended her long affair with Wells, by whom she had had an illegitimate son, and was now just ending a short but traumatic affair with Beaverbrook. The fact that both men appear in the film, and that its theme involves multiple marriage and infanticide, makes it a uniquely fascinating and lurid document, and any future biographers of the participants should be calling at the Archive very soon. West had just returned from a visit to America, allusions to which may be detected in the film, and offered Beaverbrook a scenario for a dramatic film. He hired another cameraman, this time John Y. Brown, who seems to have been a general cameraman for hire of the period, and the film was produced at some time during the summer of 1924. West wrote the exceedingly verbose intertitles, and acts with the enthusiasm of someone who when a teenager got into RADA but did not last a full year there. Wells appears as a clergyman, who seems to be in blackface, Beaverbrook plays a spoof version of himself, and among the other guests is Beaverbrook's fellow newspaper publisher and film distributor Sir Edward Hulton and his wife. Of the other participants, I know little except that they were of the usual sort of Beaverbrook house guest.

THEY FORGOT TO READ THE DIRECTIONS

A copy of the original synopsis for the film by Rebecca West exists in the Beaverbrook papers, and there are some slight differences, because originally it was to have been revealed that the three wives had each insured themselves with Beaverbrook's newspapers, and being ruined he committed suicide by jumping into the pool.

I hope you have enjoyed these four films on a similar theme. *The Scarlet Woman* shows Evelyn Waugh, on the threshold of his literary career, apparently satirising the Catholic church with enthusiasm, but in fact confronting and experimenting with its growing attraction to him. He would soon join the Church and it would become the dominant influence on his art. *The Yellow Week at Stanway* shows J.M. Barrie clinging to a fey vision of adolescent love, and still in thrall to the dreams of childhood which were his greatest inspiration. And *They Forgot to Read the Directions* shows Rebecca West vigorously satirising her relations with Lord Beaverbrook and H.G. Wells, a theme she was also exploring in the autobiographical novel *Sunflower*, which she was writing at that time but which would not be published until after her death. Each approaches film as something suitable only for a summer's frolic, yet each cannot help but use it as a medium for their art.

Each of these films, I believe, has received its first ever full public screening this evening. All of the films come from the collection of the National Film and Television Archive, and over the past two or three years I have had the great pleasure of organising and sometimes presenting a number of programmes of films from the Archive, usually films that would not otherwise get a screening and are generally little known. I am extremely grateful to the Museum and to Stephen Herbert for this opportunity, and it is the greatest shame, as some of you may know, that these Wednesday special screenings are coming to an end in September. This has therefore been the last of my Museum Special presentations, and my grateful thanks must go to the infinitely patient team of projectionists who have handled my usually clip-based programmes with professionalism and aplomb; to Stephen Horne who more often than not has been the incomparably versatile pianist; to Stephen Herbert who has been the organising genius; and lastly to you the audience. Thank you all for coming.