

## **Charles Urban: Pioneering the Non-Fiction Film**

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Good evening everyone, and thank you for coming to this talk on Charles Urban - Pioneering the Non-Fiction Film. I say talk, but it would be more accurate to say film show with some talk in between. Urban was a filmmaker, and filmmakers are always best explained by showing their films. Because Urban was a film pioneer, producing work in the early years of the twentieth century before motion picture sound had been invented, his films were shot silent. When showing these films, it is necessary to add live music, just as would have been done in the so-called silent days of cinema, and I am delighted that we have playing for you today probably the leading silent film accompanist anywhere, Neil Brand.

So, who was Charles Urban, and why talk about him - or indeed write a book about him, as I have done? Most film histories today do not mention him, but that is because our film histories are generally very partial, and dedicate themselves to the glamorous fiction film. Urban's interests lay elsewhere, as will be made clear. In his day he was considered important, indeed visionary. Here you can see him among a gathering of the leading figures in the American and European film industries in Paris in 1909. The major figures have placed themselves at the front: Charles Pathe, George Eastman, George Melies, Leon Gaumont, and Charles Urban. In 1922, Terry Ramsaye, cinema's first historian, produced a list of the thirteen people who he felt had made the greatest contribution to motion picture history. They included Thomas Edison, D.W. Griffith, Charlie Chaplin, Adolph Zukor, and Charles Urban. But by 1925 he was a forgotten man.

Why had he been significant, and why was he then neglected? Terry Ramsaye's citation stated what had been Urban's great contribution to cinema:

*Charles Urban - Who persistently for twenty-five years has carried on the cause of the 'non-fiction' pictures, commonly called 'educational', who sponsored and brought forth the first and basic natural color effects in motion pictures, and whose earliest film work was a large factor in wide distribution of the new art and its acceptance in high places.*

And that was Charles Urban - a man who put heart and soul during a roller-coaster career into promoting the non-fiction film, in the firm belief that the true purpose of the medium was to educate and inform, but that in doing so it should entertain. This is his story.

### **Childhood**

Charles Urban was born Carl Urban on 15 April 1867 in Cincinnati, Ohio. His parents were immigrants from the Austro-Hungarian empire, and Urban was raised among the substantial German community of Cincinnati's 'Over-the-Rhine' district. His was an unhappy, impoverished childhood, owing to his father's business failure, ill temper and vindictive manner. Urban when aged twelve also suffered the loss of the sight in one eye, following a baseball accident (so his left eye in this picture is a glass eye). He left school aged fifteen, changed his name to Charles, and determined to make his way in the world as soon as possible, and to find the success in business that had eluded his wretched father.

### **Book Agent**

After work in various newspaper and stationery stores, Urban found an occupation conducive to his particular talents. Book agents were familiar figures on the American scene in the late 19th century, at a time when many book sales were secured door-to-door rather than in book stores. Urban specialised in selling expensive works with a strong cultural cachet. Selling de luxe publications to a select clientele on the promise of the educational and improving nature of such works helped shape the film producer that he would later become.

### **Phonographs**

Urban, by now married and seeking a more settled occupation, moved to Detroit and opened up a stationery goods store. Here Urban became familiar with selling such products as Densmore typewriters and the Edison mimeograph (a copying machine). However, the product which most attracted Urban's interest was the Edison Phonograph.

### **Electricity in the Ears**

The Phonograph is known as an entertainment device, but in common with its inventor, Thomas Edison, Urban was most interested in the Phonograph as a business dictation machine, and he enjoyed success in selling it to local businesses. This was unusual, as generally the Phonograph was a failure as a business tool. There was considerable resistance to its introduction from stenographers (Urban recalled that they complained of "*electricity in the ears*"). 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. Those few Phonograph franchises that prospered were those

which offered a good repair or support service, which Urban certainly did. But he also covered the entertainment side, making recordings of local musicians, and putting on Phonograph concerts.

### **The Kinetoscope**

On 14 April 1894 the Kinetoscope, the Edison peepshow mechanism that first showed motion picture films to the public, opened in New York. It was instantly popular, and many Phonograph concessionaries added Kinetoscopes to their businesses. The Kinetoscope first appeared in Detroit in November on the same year, and Urban was naturally attracted to this new phenomenon.

He opened a combined Kinetoscope and Phonograph parlour on Woodward Avenue early in 1895. The parlour is shown here. It featured six Kinetoscopes, twenty Phonographs, and five special Kinetoscopes synchronised with a phonograph to give a crude approximation of sound pictures, called Kinetophones.

### **The Big Screen**

Urban had therefore discovered moving pictures, though at this stage he was like any other Phonograph businessman who added the latest toy to his attractions while there was an audience for it. The Edison film subjects, mostly variety acts, had little appeal for Urban. What caused the fundamental change in his career, and determined the pattern of his life thereafter, was motion pictures on a screen. These he first saw in April or May of 1896, when he was on a business trip to New York, and saw how thrilled and astonished audiences were by the overwhelming sense real life generated on the screen. Urban succeeded in securing rights to the Edison Vitascope for the Michigan area, and proceeded to tour the region putting on film shows in all manner of towns and communities, but he was now hankering after greater independence, and felt that a very good way to achieve this was to have his own projector.

### **Problems with the Vitascope**

He went to a New York engineer, Walter Isaacs, and instructed him to manufacture a projector that incorporated a take-up spool, a handle to free it from an electricity supply, and something to make it flickerless, flicker (caused by low projection speed and the use of single-blade shutters) being the chief complaint of all early film audiences. The resultant projector was called the Bioscope, and though its design ideas had been stolen from a French source, it went on to be the cornerstone of Urban's fortune.

Bioscope projectors were destined to become so widespread across the world in just a few years that the word itself became a generic term for film shows. You didn't go to see a film; you went to see the Bioscope. The name has lived on - it is still a common term for cinema in India, South Africa and the Netherlands.

### **Maguire & Baucus**

At the end of 1896 Urban was recruited by Maguire & Baucus, agents for Edison films and film projectors in Europe. Urban spent a six month trial period in New York before sailing out to Britain in August 1897. From being a very small fish in an emergent industry, he now had a rich opportunity to make a grand impression in Britain.

### **A Yank in Britain**

The film business was at a very rudimentary stage in 1897. There were no cinemas in which to show films: instead they featured as part of variety theatre programmes, or in shows putting on by travelling showmen in town halls and fairgrounds. The films themselves were short - usually no more than 50 feet or a minute in length - and the number of people they reached numbered in the thousands rather than the millions that would later be the case. Many involved in film saw it as a short-term craze to be exploited for a few years before moving on to the next business. But audience enthusiasm for motion pictures was apparent at every show, and some like Urban saw further.

### **Warwick Trading Company**

Urban began at the London office of Maguire & Baucus, which traded in films as the Continental Commerce Company. Urban's first action was to relocate the company. He found premises at Warwick Court, close by Chancery Lane, moving the firm there by September 1897. He next changed the name. Noting a certain anti-Americanism in the film business, he named them after their new location - the Warwick Trading Company ("*a good solid British name*", thought Urban).

### **Success**

The effect of Urban's management of the company can be seen quite simply by the huge rise in sales figures: sales were £10,500 in 1897, and had risen to £45,000 by 1901. Sales were initially generated by selling Bioscope projectors and marketing other people's films, but Urban soon had the company making its own films, and determined that the company would be dedicated to a particular kind of product, namely films of real life.

### **Filming Reality**

A commitment to the actuality film, and especially in his earliest years as a film producer the travel film, meant a team of travelling cameramen. Among these were the mountaineering cameraman Frank Ormiston-Smith, Jack Avery (Urban's brother-in-law) and Joseph Rosenthal, who was Warwick's leading cameraman during the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902. The filming of the Anglo-Boer War became a

testing ground for the infant film industry in Britain, and the public enthusiasm for the accomplished and regular diet of films supplied by Rosenthal and his fellow war film correspondents help to establish the industry firmly in the public eye.

**FILM: *A Skirmish with the Boers Near Kimberley by a Troop of Cavalry Scouts Attached to General French's Column* (1900) [1min 30]**

### **Breaking Free**

Urban broke away from the Warwick Trading Company in 1903 to form his own Charles Urban Trading Company. From this point onwards he sought to market his own name and that of his products as hallmarks of quality. The bedrock of his product continued to be the travel and topical film, with Joe Rosenthal and George Rogers reporting from the Russo-Japanese of 1904/5 from the Japanese and Russian sides respectively. But he now began to take an increased interest in promoting scientific film, starting his campaign for the cinema to be recognised as an educative force.

### **The Unseen World**

Typical of Urban's approach was the series of films he initiated at the Alhambra music hall in 1903, entitled *The Unseen World*. These films were produced by the first scientific filmmaker to come under Urban's wing, Francis Martin-Duncan. A photographer and lecturer who had adopted the cinema to his special interest in microphotography, Martin-Duncan's work came to the attention of Urban, who naturally responded to this promise of science as entertainment. Audiences were certainly fascinated, and in some cases quite alarmed, by the microscopic scenes presented on the screen, for example in the revelatory *Cheese Mites* of 1903.

**FILM: *Cheese Mites* (1903) [2mins 15]**

### **Putting the World Before You**

Having formed the Charles Urban Trading Company in 1903, Urban progressively diversified his film business interests. He formed the Eclipse company in France to produce fiction films in 1906, and established the Kineto Company in 1907 to produce his scientific and travel films. He was a keen advocate of sponsored filmmaking, doing deals with railway companies that would grant him all facilities and generous access in return for the free advertising to holiday destinations that Urban's travel films offered.

Urban produced few fiction films throughout his career - those he did produce were too often stilted, gauche and poorly made even by the low standards of much British film production of the time. He loved reality, loved packaging it and making it palatable to a general public that on the back of the Education Acts of 1870 and 1902 was newly literate, absorbed popular magazines, and was keen to see if not to learn as such. Urban understood this audience, and instructed his cameramen to go always for those scenes that immediately captured the eye, to record first impressions. He set out his manifesto for the motion picture as an educative and propagandist force in a 1907 pamphlet entitled *The Cinematograph in Science, Education, and Matters of State*. In it he wrote:

*[T]he Cinematograph has become, not – as some people imagine it to be – a showman’s plaything, but a vital necessity for every barracks, ship, college, school, institute, hospital, laboratory, academy and museum; for every traveler, explorer and missionary. In every department of State, science and education, in fact, animated photography is of the greatest importance, and one of the chief and coming means of imparting knowledge.*

This is the key to Urban's vision. He saw film as having primarily an instructional purpose, and in order that it might best instruct, it had to go out to where it was needed. This meant going beyond entertainment venues such as variety theatres or the cinemas that started to mushroom across British towns from 1908 onwards. Finding the right place for the film that educated as much as it entertained was the great challenge Urban presented to himself.

### **Charles Urban Trading Company**

The Charles Urban Trading Company produced many different kinds of non-fiction film. Camera operators were sent to every corner of the globe, their travels and their product then celebrated in the lavish catalogues than Urban published annually. If one looks at the 1906 catalogue, for instance, there are films showing the UK, France, Spain, Holland, Italy, Switzerland, Morocco, Russia, Japan, China, New Zealand, the USA, Canada, Uruguay, Burma, Borneo, even an expedition to the North Pole, as well as sports, natural history and fiction films. This represented a huge investment in films showing the world, at the very time when other producers were investing instead in building film studios and producing ever more elaborate and glamorous dramatic films. 'We Put the World Before You' was the slogan adopted by Urban - a man who understood very well the value of trademarks, slogans and strong brand identity.

We have a few examples for you. First, there is one of a series of films shot by Herbert Lomas in North Borneo. This expedition was typical of Urban in that it was sponsored by the British North Borneo

Company with the explicit intention of promoting British capital investment. The result is guilelessly colonialist and yet with its keen observational eye sees beyond colonialism.

**FILM: *A Trip Through British North Borneo* (1907) [8mins]**

The single most ambitious undertaking by the Charles Urban Trading Company was the Urban-Africa expedition of 1906-08. The principal camera operator was Joseph de Frenes, one of Urban's most trusted lieutenants. The films were released in stages throughout 1907-08, but at its fullest extent the series ran to fifty-seven films amounting to nearly 20,000 feet or nearly five hours of film. Sailing out from Southampton, the series takes the viewer from Madeira to Cape Colony, Natal, Rhodesia, Mashona, Barotseland, Zanzibar, Aden, Egypt, Tunis, Algeria and Morocco. One has to say 'viewer' in a theoretical, since no actual viewer ever sat through the entire series shown on a screen. The full experience is available only by reading the catalogue, presenting an idealised experience in which the viewer might share but never encounter at its fullest extent. Not only was the full series never seen by any single person, but today only a single film from the entire endeavour is known to survive, though it was the most acclaimed of the series, *The Great Victoria Falls, Zambesi River* (1907).

**FILM: *Great Victoria Falls, Zambezi River* (1907) [3mins 20]**

**Percy Smith**

The most celebrated of all the scientists who came under Urban's wing was Percy Smith, a shy and retiring functionary at the Board of Education, who happened to have a passion for animal life and photography. Urban got to know of his photographic work in 1907 and persuaded him to make films along the same lines. Smith was a patient and dedicated scientist, who pioneered many of the classic techniques of nature photography using stop motion techniques, but he was not above a bit of showmanship, and saw in Urban someone with enthusiasm but also the necessary patience to let him work under the best conditions. Percy Smith's *The Balancing Bluebottle* of 1908, with its combination of instruction and amusement, expressed with memorable imagery, is the quintessential Charles Urban film:

**FILM: *The Balancing Bluebottle* (1908) [3mins]**

This next film is one of Urban's most remarkable achievements. *A Day in the Life of a Coal Miner*, made in 1910, is a study in the exotic and the strange to be found on your own doorstep. The film company that toured the world to bring back images of different places, peoples and practices, applied the same intelligence and keen camera eye to filming the coal fields of Wigan.

**FILM: *A Day in the Life of a Coal Miner* (1910) [9mins 45]**

**First in Wardour Street**

On 1 May 1908 Urban moved to a new premises in Wardour Street, becoming the first film business to be established in what soon became the heart of the British film industry. He named the building 'Urbanora House' - here it is as it looked in 1908, and as it looks today. At its opening unveiled to an invited audience the marvel that was to become his greatest achievement, Kinemacolor.

**Kinemacolor**

Kinemacolor was the invention of Urban's associate George Albert Smith. It worked on the principle that though you should need the three primary colours - red, green and blue - to act in combination to create a full spectrum, you can get reasonably satisfactory results with just two.

The camera was fitted with a rotating wheel with red and green filters, so that alternate frames were exposed through either the red or the green, but resulting in a black and white positive. This was then projected through the Kinemacolor projector at double speed (30 frames per second), which itself had a rotating red-green filter wheel. The results were remarkably good, the chief defect of the system being the colour 'fringing' (fringes of red or green) apparent when objects were filmed in movement. Colour was not unknown to cinema audiences of the time, as painstaking hand-coloured or stencil-coloured films had been a feature of programmes for years, but although the effects were often beautiful, they were patently artificial. Kinemacolor seemed to offer to its awestruck audiences a realism and a truth to nature that was the longed-for realisation of cinema's potential.

**The Natural Color Kinematograph Company**

Urban had decided to devote all his energies to Kinemacolor. He resigned from the directorship of his various film companies, and formed a new company in 1909, the Natural Color Kinematograph Company, to exploit Kinemacolor. This was based at Urban's new offices, Kinemacolor House, in Wardour Street, to which he moved in June 1910. He was able to set up the company thanks to a £5,000 investment from his second wife Ada, whose participation as a director at this and other Urban film companies incidentally makes her the most powerful woman in British film at this time.

Urban chose to keep the Kinemacolor process exclusively for himself, and because the films could only be shown on a special motor-driven Kinemacolor projector, capable of the double speed necessary, his whole market strategy was based on exclusivity, high prices and a quality product. Kinemacolor became



associated with news and actuality film, particularly scenes of pageantry, and Urban was fortunate that the next few years yielded an ideal series of events. The funeral of Edward VII (1910), the unveiling of the Queen Victoria Memorial (1911), the Coronation of George V (1911), and the Investiture of the Prince of Wales (1911) were all subjects made for Kinemacolor. They were showcased at the Scala Theatre, off Tottenham Court Road, and in a short time he made it the talking point of London, the film show that anyone who was anyone simply had to go and see.

The films were then exhibited across the country, and globally. Because of the specialist equipment required, they were seldom shown in cinemas. Instead Kinemacolor thrived as a special turn in theatres. In some respects it was a backwards step to the roots of film exhibition; in other respects it was a radical decision that showed film could and should find its audiences beyond the narrow confines of the cinema.

Kinemacolor films today are few and far between. The disaster that overcame Urban's film business in 1925, together with the wear-and-tear the films received through being projected at double speed, mean that pitifully few have survived today - probably less than one per cent of what was produced. I do have three Kinemacolor films to show to you today, however, two of which have not been since in public in 100 years.

### **The Delhi Durbar**

Urban's greatest triumph was the Kinemacolor film of the Delhi Durbar. This spectacular ceremony, held in Delhi in December 1911 to celebrate the coronation of George V, was filmed by several film companies, and their black-and-white records had already been seen in Britain by the time Urban returned from India with his team of eight and many thousands of feet of colour film of the ceremonies.

The film, given the title *With Our King and Queen Through India*, opened at the Scala on 2 February 1912. Offering the public an unprecedented two and a half hours of film (16,000 feet), Urban presented the film with a stage setting that represented the Taj Mahal, and accompanied it with a 48 piece orchestra, a chorus of 24, a fife and drum corps of 20, and three bagpipes. Its success was phenomenal. Patriotic London flocked to see it, and the proceeds from the Scala run, five road shows across the UK, and prestige screenings across the globe, made Urban a wealthy man. In particular, the Durbar films attracted an upper-middle and high society audience to see films for the first time, the theatre setting and royal subject matter making the Kinemacolor shows more socially acceptable to those who would not deign to visit the working class cinema. And of course a richer audience could pay more for their tickets. Kinemacolor raised the social status of the lowly cinema, and made many realise for the first time the power and influence that the new medium could wield.

Tragically Urban's most spectacular achievement is effectively lost film. Many, many films from the earliest years of cinema have been lost. It is estimated that 80% of all silent films no longer exist, and I estimate that only 10% of all of Charles Urban's film productions at most survive today. However, *With Our King and Queen in India* is not entirely lost, since one reel, showing a military review that took place the day after the main ceremonies, was discovered in Russia in 2000. We'll see some of the surviving film now.

**FILM: *With our King and Queen through India: The Royal Review of 50,000 Troops* (1912) [5mins]**

### **Balkan War**

The first of the Kinemacolor rediscoveries is film taken by the war artist and journalist Fredric Villiers and camera operator James Scott Brown in 1912, and shows scenes from the Balkan War, fought between the Balkan League of Bulgaria, Greece, Montenegro and Serbia and the Ottoman Empire. The original film ran for over an hour - we have just two-and-a-half minutes.

**FILM: *Actual Scenes of the Balkan War* (1913) [2mins 30]**

### **Failure in France**

Kinemacolor companies were formed worldwide, though few prospered (that in Japan was a notable exception), and the French venture played a significant part in the downturn in Urban's fortunes. Hoping to emulate the success of the Scala shows, Urban took out a lease on the Théâtre Edouard VII, Boulevard des Capucines, Paris, which opened in December 1913. The theatre proved to be too small, poorly located, and the tickets priced too high. Urban lost a considerable amount of money, and the theatre closed in May 1914.

### **Kinemacolor vs Biocolour**

In December 1913 a court case began which eventually spelt the end of Kinemacolor. William Friese-Greene, one of the pioneers of motion pictures, was now hoping to developing a colour film system, Biocolour. Friese-Greene had been frustrated in his attempts to exhibit his Biocolour films because every attempt at colour film seemed to infringe the Urban-Smith patents. This was precisely what Urban wanted - a total monopoly over colour film. Friese-Greene's case was based on the grounds that Smith's patent was insufficiently detailed, but the judge dismissed the petition. However, this was reversed on appeal in March 1914, a decision upheld when taken to the House of Lords the following year. The appeal judge

pointed out very simply that the patent claimed to produce natural colours, but with only red and green filters, it did not produce a true blue. Hence it was not a record of natural colours. Hence it was invalid.

From henceforth, therefore, the Kinemacolor process was available to for anyone to use. This was a dreadful blow to Urban, and in April 1914 he put the Natural Color Kinematograph Company into voluntary liquidation to protect the shareholders. Kinemacolor, the marvel of its brief age, was effectively over.

### **Urban as War Propagandist**

The First World War was a potentially awkward time personally for Urban, who was after all the son of German immigrants. His loyalties were totally with Britain, but he was a man who made enemies and it is surprising that little if anything seems to have been made of his German antecedents, even when some of those enemies were trying to discredit him. But the fact is that he was not impeded in any way in his attempts to interest British propaganda outfits in using film as he moved from the Kinemacolor debacle.

### **Britain Prepared**

British officialdom was initially deeply suspicious, if not hostile, towards film, but while the film industry lobbied the War Office to be allowed to film at the front, Urban made contact with the covert War Propaganda Bureau, led by Charles Masterman. This secret body employed authors such as Thomas Hardy, Arnold Bennett and J.M. Barrie to write letters and articles promoting the British cause, particularly aimed at American audiences. Masterman was also interested in film, and this led to a documentary feature produced by Urban in December 1915 entitled *Britain Prepared*. With some Kinemacolor sequences, and filmed by four cameramen including Urban himself, the film showed scenes of Britain's military preparedness - the army, munitions factories, and the Grand Fleet.

British officialdom was greatly impressed with the film, and Urban, as an American with an assumed understanding of that country's people, was sent with the film to get it onto American screens. However, he was instructed not show the film with its Kinemacolor sequences, because of the specialist projection equipment required, and so much to his disgust *Britain Prepared* was shown around the world in monochrome only. So it is that the surviving copy in the Imperial War Museum is black-and-white, and the colour sequences are believed to be lost. But they are not, because we have some of them here for you tonight. Brief as the sequence is, it is the only surviving colour film of the First World War.

**FILM: *Britain Prepared* (1915) [2mins 30]**

### **Patriotic Film Corporation**

Urban sailed to the USA in 1916 to try and get *Britain Prepared*, and subsequently other British war films, on American screens. He encountered considerable resistance from American exhibitors to the British propaganda films, for reasons as much commercial as political (America was of course neutral at this time and was being lobbied by both British and German propaganda interests). The Patriotic Film Corporation was formed to ensure distribution of the British war films, and in particular the film which was now retitled *How Britain Prepared*. A publicity leaflet for the film, with endorsements from various United States government officials, billed it as "*the Motion Picture Object Lesson for America*". However America, and especially American cinema exhibitors, largely resisted the lesson, and the Patriotic Film Corporation suffered heavy losses. Cinema owners wanted to see far more dramatic scenes, the more violent the better, and isolationist and German-American interests lobbied fiercely against the film's exhibition.

### **Hearst controversy**

Urban struggled on with his attempts to screen the British war films, but he blundered badly in September 1916, when he made an approach to the Hearst organisation regarding a possible distribution deal. William Randolph Hearst was widely seen as being pro-German, and the clear threat was that he could suppress the films once they were under his control. The press got hold of the story, and the British propagandists were extremely embarrassed by the whole affair, especially when Urban loudly protested his innocence and threatened to sue. In short, he was making a considerable mess of handling the British war films in the United States. He was rescued at the end of 1916 by secure financing from William K. Vanderbilt for a new venture called Official Government Pictures, which found it easy to distribute the British war films following America's entry into the war in April 1917.

### **The Battle of the Somme**

A far more distinguished episode in his war film years was to be when Urban returned to Britain in the summer of 1916, during the middle of the *How Britain Prepared* saga, and edited the documentary feature film that was to become *The Battle of the Somme*, whose images of that battle are (in Britain at least) the most familiar motion picture scenes there are of the war. Every time you see on TV this image of a man carrying another down a trench, or this of troops going over the top, they are scenes from *The Battle of the Somme*, edited by Charles Urban. The film astonished audiences who had had little conception of how the fighting in the Western Front actually looked. It moved them as no other Urban film could ever have done. It is maybe his greatest achievement, certainly the greatest film with which he was involved.

### **Official Government Pictures**

He returned to the USA and, following the formation of Official Government Pictures in January 1917, worked with them on the now successful distribution of British war films in America throughout 1917-18. Urban time working for British propaganda outfits was now over, and he turned to reviving his own business in America. He formed the Kineto Company of America, and did editing and printing work for the American propaganda organisation, the Committee on Public Information, in particular producing for them the propaganda newsreel *Official War Review*. When the war ended, Urban, whose businesses in London were virtually dormant, decided to maintain operations in the United States.

### **The final chapter**

Along with many of the pioneers of the cinema, Urban was a lost man in the post-war cinema world. He was furthermore separated from the British film industry where he had been, for a while, predominant, and was now only a very small cog in the giant machine that was the American cinema industry. Urban still placed his faith in the film that was good for you, the educational film, but it seemed too few people wanted to learn than wanted to see stories.

### **Kinekrom and cinemagazines**

Urban's business interests were now these. He was co-founder of a small, independent newsreel called *Kinograms*. Although it bore the distinctive 'K' title of several of Urban's creations, he had little to do with its subsequent operations. He was developing a colour film system that would improve on Kinemacolor and enable to make further commercial use of his huge Kinemacolor library. The system was to be called Kinekrom, but it never got beyond the trial stage. He started producing new films, working with yet another natural history filmmaker, Raymond Ditmars. Their 1921 feature-length documentary, *The Four Seasons*, was a survey of the natural world through the seasons, with an anthropomorphic use of animals as characters which was then innovative but is now the stuff of every natural history television programme.

Urban also looked at ways of re-purposing his huge film library. Rather than investing in producing too many new films, he sought rather to make the most of those he had already made. He issued two magazine series: *Charles Urban Movie Chats* and *Kineto Review*, which presented collections of short items on travel, industry and sport. Our last film this evening is a *Movie Chat* from 1920, though the film it shows dates from before 1910, and features Charles Urban himself.

**FILM: *Oyster Fishing in Whitstable, England* (1920 – original film pre-1910) [4mins 30]**

### **Spirograph**

Urban's major innovation in these years was the Spirograph, a table-top viewer which showed films arranged in micro-form in a spiral on a celluloid disc. The Spirograph was portable, easy to use, could be set up anywhere, and could stop on any particular image. It was DVD, decades ahead of its time, and promised finally to make good Urban's belief in having films taken to where people had need of them rather than restrict screenings to the entertainment venue that was the cinema. Moreover it was an excellent means of reusing his film library.

### **Irvington**

In 1922 Urban moved all of his business interests and his reported library of two million feet of film to a huge building, originally designed by Stanford White, at Irvington-on-Hudson just north of New York City. It was to be the complete plant for his parent company Urban Motion Picture Industries Inc. and all ancillary activities, and he boldly named it the 'Urban Institute'. This, he hoped, would be the culmination of all of his years as a producer of films. His plans were ambitious. He aimed to create a kind of motion picture encyclopedia, which he called *The Living Book of Knowledge*, offering a library of films, as films or as Spirograph disks, to schools and other bodies with educational intent, bypassing the cinemas (which were by implication ignoring his films). It was a bold concept and impressively idealistic, impressive enough to attract a number of local investors, who should have thought a little more wisely about what income Urban's activities at that time enjoyed.

### **Downfall**

Urban's films were in truth gaining few bookings, and when the chief offering was the *Movie Chats* and *Kineto Review* series, most of which was pre-war film in a rehashed format, then he simply did not have the revenue to support so grand an undertaking as the 'Urban Institute'. The inevitable occurred, and the Irvington-on-Hudson business in its grand building with all of its grand notions of supplying a motion picture encyclopedia, collapsed into a prolonged and awkward bankruptcy over 1924-25. It was the end of the name Urban as an active concern in the world of film.

### **The End of the Dream**

Urban was not in penury, because his second wife - who had wisely kept much of her personal resources separate from his - remained comparatively wealthy. Tragically, although some of Urban's films remained in distribution through other companies for a while the two million feet of film that he boasted of seems largely to have disappeared. Presumably it was destroyed or melted down for its silver content, its only

true worth as a tangible asset to the industry, when Urban had had such high hopes of its enduring, educational value.

### **Urban's Last Years**

Urban and his wife Ada returned to London around 1930. He had not tired of seeking out new business schemes, and though he had retired from the movie business, he lost much of his wife's money over a misbegotten scheme to manufacture metal bottle tops. 1937 was a decisive year from him. His wife Ada died, after 27 years of happy marriage. Later that same year Urban donated all of his papers to the Science Museum - a natural choice for a man who liked to think of himself as being as much as scientist, in its broadest sense, as he was a filmmaker. He seems to have hoarded every clipping, telegram or letter with which he was associated, especially for the Kinemacolor phase of his life. The papers have remained a huge boon for researchers ever since, myself included. He then moved to Brighton, and died there in a nursing home, aged 75, with just a few hundred pounds to his name, in 1942.

### **Reputation**

At the time of his death Urban was largely a forgotten man, but in more recent years a growth of interest in the history of colour motion photography, and particularly the rise in early cinema studies since the 1970s, has seen the name of Urban regain, in these small worlds at least, the ubiquity and magic that it had before. Although the lasting motion picture library of which he dreamed in the 1920s never came to pass, and thousands of the films that he produced are now lost, a sufficient number survive to ensure that his work endures. Urban almost never produced a bad film. His productions all have a hallmark of quality, in their subject matter, camera work, editing and presentation.

Film production can be grouped into four kinds: fiction (which tells the imaginary through character and narrative); non-fiction (which documents the real); amateur (which documents the personal); and the avant-garde (which explores film's formal qualities). Each strand grew out of the formative years of film production, and Urban it was the outstanding innovator of the non-fiction film. The term 'non-fiction' is a problematic one, suggesting it does something that can only be defined in relation to the primary art of the fiction film, but in Urban's case its oppositional quality is appropriate. Urban's sentiments were wholly non-fictional.

Urban had a different vision of cinema to that of his peers. He aimed to elevate audiences by presenting their world to them on the screen, making us all global citizens by the very act of entering the cinema. He believed fervently that the non-fiction film was as entertaining as the fiction film, and superior in value. We may not always want to have instruction and entertainment bundled up as one, but from *The Undersea*

*World of Jacques Cousteau*, to *The Living Desert*, to *Cosmos*, to *Life on Earth*, to *Around the World in Eighty Days*, to *Springwatch*, the cinema Urban believed in and helped launch has continued to thrive on our cinema and television screens, amusing and educating at the same time, completing our screen culture.

His lasting legacy is the non-fiction film's ubiquity. Urban argued for film to be set free from the narrow confines of the cinema and to be discoverable where people had need of it. He believed that this would be done with his technology and with his films (which he saw as essentially timeless), but it is the idea that has lasted. The film that informs is at our fingertips, wherever we may be, and is playing a greater role in informing as well as entertaining than ever before. The iPad can deliver what the Spirograph was too early to be able to achieve. More needs to be done to open up archives and to make film as discoverable and reusable as any other knowledge medium, but we have made giant steps towards the world that Charles Urban wanted to put before us.