The History of the British Film 1929–1939

Film Making in 1930s Britain

Volume VII

Rachael Low

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 1997
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Reprinted 1999

First issued in paperback 2011

History of the British Film
7 Volumes: ISBN 0–415–15451–0
This is a reprint of the 1985 edition

Typeset in Garamond by Routledge

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data
Low, Rachael. [History of the British film]. History of the British Film / edited and with a new introduction by Jeffrey Richards.
Originally published: History of the British Film. London: Allen & Unwin, 1949–1985.
Includes bibliographical references.
1. Motion pictures–Great Britain–History. I. Richards, Jeffrey, 1945– . II. Title.
PN1993.5.G7L6 1997 96–51734
791.43'0941–dc21 CIP

ISBN10: 0-415-15451-0 (hbk)
ISBN10: 0-415-60493-1 (pbk)
ISBN13: 978-0-415-15451-2 (hbk)
ISBN13: 978-0-415-60493-2 (pbk)

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London
GEORGE ALLEN & UNWIN
Boston Sydney
Published in association with the
British Film Institute

George Allen & Unwin (Publishers) Ltd,
40 Museum Street, London WC1A 1LU, UK

George Allen & Unwin (Publishers) Ltd,
Park Lane, Hemel Hempstead, Herts HP2 4TE, UK

Allen & Unwin Inc.,
Fifty Cross Street, Winchester, Mass 01890, USA

George Allen & Unwin Australia Pty Ltd,
8 Napier Street, North Sydney, NSW 2060, Australia

First published in 1985

Published in association with the British Film Institute

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Low, Rachel
Film Making in 1930s Britain.
1. Moving-pictures—Great Britain—History and criticism
I. Title
791.43'0941 PN1993.5.G7
ISBN 0-04-791042-9

Set in 10½ on 11½ point Baskerville by Grove Graphics, Tring
and printed in Great Britain by Anchor Brendon, Tiptree, Essex

Contents

Illustrations

The most striking stills from the most important films have been reproduced many times. Rather than repeat them I have tried to convey some general impression of the British film industry as a whole, with the various companies, some of the film makers and stars, the comics, the work of the art directors, the unexpected realism of many of the films and the way the overall look of the films changed between the beginning of the period and the end.

I am in debt to the Stills Department of the British Film Institute for making most of the illustrations available. For the shot of Gracie Fields in *Sally in Our Alley* I am indebted to John East.

Foreword

by Sir Richard Attenborough

The British film industry has been through many cycles and phases since the first commercial screening of a moving picture almost ninety years ago.

It may well prove that the 1980s, with the benefit of hindsight, will be as major a turning point in our history as the decade Rachael Low chronicles so thoroughly and with such perception in this book.

The pre-war period is fascinating and instructive for all manner of reasons – not least because the characters, many of them giants of the cinema, who spring so vibrantly from these pages are, in the main, no longer here to tell their own story. By fleshing out these pioneers during their most active and creative years and depicting them against the social, economic and technological conditions of an epoch of fundamental change, Miss Low gives an overview that is tremendously helpful in understanding what is happening today.

The long term effect of talkies and, to a lesser extent, colour – introduced in the thirties – was just as radical and far-reaching as recent innovations such as video, cable and satellite communication will prove to be in the 1980s and beyond.

This book, for me, is particularly illuminating for two reasons. From a purely personal point of view, it charts the decade immediately preceding my own first encounter with feature film making as a young, nervous and inexperienced actor in 1942.

More importantly, however, by describing the pitfalls of hasty and ill-conceived legislation that resulted in the infamous quota quickies of the pre-war years, Miss Low illustrates vividly the potential for good or ill that government may exert over our industry, whilst failing to place feature films correctly in context with other performing arts.

For example, only two years after the implementation of the second Quota Act in 1938 which, while it cured one set of problems created a whole series of others, the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts – later the Arts Council – was formed. Whilst recognising the phenomenal ascendancy of British music, live theatre and ballet at the beginning of the forties, only in the mid-sixties did it acknowledge film, by initiating an allocation for documentaries on the work of painters.

It is true that the ultimately somewhat anachronistic Eady Fund did prove,

over a long period, to be of considerable value to the indigenous film industry. But now that the Fund has been abolished, one of its principal beneficiaries, the National Film Finance Corporation, is to be re-constituted on a basis that is, to say the least, somewhat questionable. This, coupled with the policy of treating feature films as though they were indivisible from any other manufacturing industry – with the minor exception of NFFC grants emanating from the Exchequer which, over the years, have been little more than derisory, highlights the imperative need for a long term solution.

It is greatly to be hoped, in the light of today's resurgence of the British feature film both at home and as an export, that present and future administrations have learned the folly of improvised stop-gap measures and will finally grant our industry the status and sustained support it has been so cruelly denied since its inception in 1896.

What emerges with great clarity from Miss Low's book is that those pioneers who cared desperately about quality productions had to struggle against tremendous odds. That so many did fight, did care and won through to lay the foundations of an indigenous industry of which we can be truly proud, should be a continuing source of inspiration to us all

9 October 1984

Introduction and Acknowledgements

Many years ago, when I began a series of books on the development of the British film industry, of which this is the seventh, the history of the film was not taken seriously as an academic subject. It was a question of starting from scratch, interviewing veterans of all branches of the industry from the beginning of the commercial showing of films in this country in 1896, and looking for documentary evidence concerning the whole field of production, distribution and exhibition, film technique, official and unofficial regulation and organisation.

Gradually more and more information became available and, of course, the later the period being studied the more activity there was to study. Some years ago, with the help of a research fellowship at Lucy Cavendish College, Cambridge, awarded by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, I began research into the British film industry in the 1930s. Work on this has continued with the generous support of the British Film Institute. Two books based on this research appeared in 1979, *Documentary and Educational Films of the 1930s* and *Films of Comment and Persuasion of the 1930s*. In the intervening years a number of other writers have brought out useful studies of particular aspects of the subject or of individual film makers. But until now there has been no full account of the decade to put the cinema and its problems into a historical perspective and trace the power struggles within the developing industry.

This book gives an overall picture of the feature industry between the coming of the talkie in 1929 and the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939. In doing so, incidentally, it clarifies the nature and causes of the speculative boom in production and the subsequent crisis in the mid-thirties. Without a historical perspective these have been much misunderstood and, surprisingly, the part played by the Aldgate Trustees has been neglected. An idea has gained acceptance that Korda's success with *The Private Life of Henry VIII* in 1933 was responsible for a boom in investment and that his extravagance at Denham subsequently caused financial interests in the City of London to lose confidence in production as a field for investment. Certainly Korda was extravagant and certainly his chief backer, the Prudential Assurance Company, took fright during 1937. But it was the unfortunate results of the Aldgate operation which alerted them and others, and caused something like a panic in the City. It was the Aldgate producers,

not Korda, who were at the centre of the scandal and it was their activities that gave rise to the legal action which followed.

Financial considerations are fundamental to the story. Despite a persistent drain to Hollywood there has never been a shortage of film-making talent in Britain. It is production finance that has been hard to find. The economic facts of life enabled American producers to make so much profit in their own home market that they could afford the best of everything, whereas their British counterparts, with a much smaller public near at hand, had to watch costs. Cost and quality are not synonymous, of course, and everyone can point to good low-budget films. But shoestring masterpieces are rare, and because British pictures had to be relatively cheap they suffered in comparison with their American rivals. A share of the American market, which would have made more lavish production economically viable, was denied to them. For, although isolated British films enjoyed occasional successes in America, regular nation-wide circuit distribution at a fair rental was in the hands of the big Hollywood companies, who naturally saw little reason to assist their competitors. By the late twenties the American advantage had been reinforced by exploitation methods which even had the British market so tied up that British producers had difficulty in finding playing dates for their films in their own country.

The 1927 quota legislation intended to solve all the industry's problems was a failure. Film production doubled during the thirties, but the increase consisted almost entirely of cheap and inferior films, the famous quota quickies and others not much better, which took advantage of the protected market and went far to ruin the reputation of British production as a whole. Much time was spent during the mid-thirties trying to devise a better system, and the second Quota Act, which was passed in 1938, did succeed in killing the quota quickies. It is interesting that despite their economic handicaps the serious producers made pictures throughout the decade which were popular with British audiences. They presented a varied and interesting body of film which was quite separate from the quota output, as examination of both forms of production will show. The story of these quality producers, of the quota merchants, and of the American importers who made, sponsored or acquired British film footage for their legally required quota, reminds us again and again that the problems of the British film industry stemmed from the disparity in size of the British and American markets. All the big British producers tried to break into the American market during the thirties in order to counter the Americans' overwhelming competitive advantage, and by 1939 both Korda and Wilcox seemed on the verge of success.

As for the films themselves, since this is the study of an industry rather than a critical assessment a detailed critical analysis would be out of place. All the same, an account of any branch of show business must try to convey some idea of what it was all about. A broad survey of the films and those who made them, an extensive study rather than an intensive one, is needed to establish a frame of reference so that individual contributions can be

seen in context. This was the age of stars like Jessie Matthews, Merle Oberon, Anna Neagle, Leslie Howard, Michael Redgrave and Jack Buchanan; of comics like Gracie Fields, George Formby, Will Hay and Jack Hulbert. Michael Balcon, Korda, Hitchcock, Wilcox and Victor Saville were leading film makers and the young Carol Reed, David Lean and Michael Powell were showing new talent. There was also a westward drift as British actors and technicians were drawn away to Hollywood, and eminent refugee film makers arrived in Britain from Nazi Europe. Films by these and many others, good and bad, are discussed against the economic background of production. The film index at the end of the book is included in order to make the material upon which this survey is based available to others, and makes no claim to be comprehensive, although I believe it to be reasonably accurate.

Between the conversion to talkies and the outbreak of war both the studios and the cinemas were transformed, most of the changes taking place in a few short, confusing and anxious years. The talkie revolutionised film making, causing dramatic changes in the continuity structure, and even to the physical appearance, of the films. Stories told in pictures, with a few inset titles which could easily be translated, had been acceptable in any country. But stories depending heavily on the spoken word brought new problems. Many producers strove to retain the international currency of the cinema by production of the so-called 'multilingual' films, but by 1939 the ordinary British filmgoer knew only the English-speaking stars of British and American pictures. The ease with which they had previously accepted stories and personalities from many European countries was a thing of the past. At the same time well educated people, who had previously looked down on the cinema, increasingly went to film societies and small specialised or repertory cinemas showing the best films from all over the world. The thirties were the age of the super-cinema, with the 'atmospherics', the Odeons, and lavishly decorated picture palaces of every description, and showmen had a monolithic philosophy, hoping to draw more and more people into the same cinemas to see the same films. In fact, fragmentation of the audience had already begun with the advent of a more selective public.

I would like to express my gratitude for the help and encouragement I received down the years from the late Sir Michael Balcon, Thorold Dickinson, Baynham Honri and Paul Rotha. My thanks are also due to Brenda Davies, formerly Information Officer of the British Film Institute, and to Jeremy Boulton, formerly of the National Film Archive, as well as to the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation and the Governors of the British Film Institute.

RACHAEL LOW

Chapter 1

Exploitation

The cinema, like spectator sports and tourism, is one of the great recreation industries of the twentieth century. By the time the talkies arrived in Britain in 1929 many millions of people throughout the world went to the pictures regularly. It was estimated in the mid-thirties that an average of 18½ million cinema tickets were sold in Britain every week.

The estimate, in an industry notoriously short of statistical information, was made by Simon Rowson. Rowson, who had started his career many years before as a statistician, had entered films in his thirties as a renter and, greatly admired in the trade for his academic attainments, for many years tried single-handed to pin down the elusive statistics of an industry not keen on disclosing its business to others. Some of his value judgements have to be treated with reserve, for as a statistician he was concerned with quantity rather than quality. For example, he considered the quota legislation of 1927 a success because it led to an enormous increase in British film production, ignoring the appalling quality of most of that increase.[1] Nevertheless his work is a mine of information, carefully gathered and meticulously defined. By now the cinema was widely accepted as a respectable part of society and Rowson was to address several august bodies on the subject during the thirties. He read papers at a Royal Empire Society dinner, to the British Kinematograph Society, the British Association, the Royal Statistical Society and the Royal Institute of International Affairs. By far the most comprehensive and important paper was that read to the Royal Statistical Society on 17 December 1935, describing the film exhibition business as it was in the year 1934.

To get a detailed picture of cinema admissions he based his calculations on two sets of figures, the yield of entertainment duty, which included tax from legitimate theatres and other forms of amusement as well as cinemas, and the number of admission tickets of various prices sold for use in a number of certified halls, that is to say cinemas licensed under the 1909 fire precautions legislation. In the paper he referred to the study as covering a large proportion of the cinemas in the United Kingdom, and the figure was said elsewhere to be 2,000, which turned out to be approximately 43 per cent of the total. The figures were obtained from the Excise Department,

which issued adhesive labels to be used with tickets, and from legally authorised ticket printers. His main conclusions about admissions were that they numbered 963 million in 1934, or an average of 18½ million a week; that a total of £41,120,000 was taken at the box office, of which about £6,800,000 went on entertainment duty; and that the vast majority of the tickets sold were for the cheaper seats. Nearly 80 per cent of them cost 1/- or less, including entertainment duty, and 43 per cent as little as 6d or less. What he could not tell from the figures was the frequency of people's visits or the actual size of the cinema-going public. It was clear that many people paid a weekly visit to the pictures and indeed that many went more often than that. An indication of this was contained in the results of a questionnaire filled in by 124,837 of the people visiting Sidney Bernstein's Granada cinemas in 1933–4, which suggested that 37.4 per cent of them went once a week but that 57.7 per cent went even more often.

Rowson's figures were the first authoritative statistical survey of the number, size and distribution of the cinemas in Britain and their takings. From time to time different bodies quoted conflicting figures of the number of cinemas. The Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association used a low figure, claiming that its membership included virtually all regular six- or seven-day cinemas, but it seems from Rowson's investigation that it actually included only 85 per cent. Western Electric, concerned with the installation of sound reproduction equipment for the talkies, used a much higher figure; as they were looking for custom it may well be that their figure was high because it included halls and legitimate theatres used only for occasional shows and cinemas which were temporarily closed. In the House of Commons Leslie Hore-Belisha, for the Board of Trade, said in reply to a parliamentary question that on 30 April 1933 there were 4,331 cinemas operating in Great Britain, but as this probably referred to licences issued a true picture would have to take account of cinemas closing and changing hands. It is necessary to remember that the number of cinemas in the country was fluctuating all the time. After the introduction of the talkie in 1929 many less prosperous cinemas were unable to make the transition and were closed down, most of the others were closed temporarily for alteration and a growing number of new ones were opened. Rowson took the two trade directories, *Kine Year Book* and *Cinema Buyers' Guide*, both of which claimed to have a complete list, giving the sound system used in each cinema and the number of seats in many of them. By combining the lists and checking up on discrepancies he formed a more accurate and complete list and was able to fill in the missing information about seats by applying to the sound equipment companies, who had made their own records of seating capacity when they conducted their acoustic surveys. In this way Rowson was able to give a definitive account of regular six- or seven-day cinemas at the date of collection by the two directories. He found that there were 4,305 such cinemas, with 3,872,000 seats. Most of the cinemas, or 70 per cent, with just over half the seats, were small and had only 1,000 seats or less. In the

London County Council area this was not so marked, 55 per cent of the cinemas with only 31 per cent of the seats falling into this category.

The acoustic requirements of the talkies were not met by many of the early auditoriums and the cost of adaptation and equipment hit many small exhibitors very hard. Times were bad anyway in 1929 and the early thirties. There was mass unemployment, the dole was cut in October 1931 and there were widespread wage cuts. The Chancellor of the Exchequer, Philip Snowdon, who had cut the rate of entertainment duty in 1924, now put it up again and at the same time both the rate and the spread of income tax were increased. As a result people had less to spend on going to the pictures and, despite the early attraction of the talkies, rentals and service charges for equipment were too much for many small showmen.

To make matters worse the big renters handling the desirable new sound films were able to insist on sharing terms, or percentage rentals, often at very high levels and often with guaranteed minimum payments. If the film did not come up to expectations at the box office the exhibitor lost, but if it did unexpectedly well there was no windfall to compare with the old days of flat rates and the exhibitor, compelled to disclose his takings, had to pay up.

The secrecy of the box office had always been jealously guarded, and there was great resentment of the new system. To prevent 'ticket irregularities', by which they meant fraudulent returns, the two big trade organisations formed a joint investigation committee, with inspectors to police the system. The Kinematograph Renters' Society, dominated by the American majors, was a small, united and aggressive body with a couple of dozen members, who held all the cards and kept the exhibitors in line with very real threats of boycott. The Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association, with from three to four thousand members, was an ineffective body which tried to represent at the same time the interests of the many small independent showmen and of the big circuits. The latter were themselves associated with renting companies and their interests were totally different to those of the small showmen. The CEA's disunity and lack of support for joint action was as marked as the unity of purpose and effectiveness of the KRS. The sole concession made by the joint investigating committee was to offer a flat rate instead of a percentage to cinemas with weekly takings of £125 or less. It is revealing that even as late as 1935 the CEA estimated that 1,250 cinemas or nearly 30 per cent of Rowson's total took less than £50.

The big circuits did not need the protection of the CEA, for their bargaining power was so great that they were able to get bookings paying only 20 or 25 per cent of their takings to the renters, but the small men had to pay up to 40 or 50 per cent for their super films, or 33⅓ per cent for an ordinary feature without any supporting programme. Charges for discs, during the early years when some companies still did sound-on-disc, were an additional burden. In the middle of 1930 the CEA tried to rally its

members to refuse to pay, in order to get guaranteed minimum payments and disc charges abolished. J. C. Graham of Paramount, the American President of the KRS, refused to countenance joint talks between the two bodies, saying that such talks would be useless as the KRS did not tell its members how to conduct their business. The CEA accordingly tackled the renters individually. Some were agreeable but some insisted that guarantees were essential 'in exceptional cases', by which they meant when they suspected exhibitors of lying about their returns. Several wished to retain disc charges. As for J. C. Graham, he simply said that he would run his business as he saw fit.[2] The CEA tried to persuade its members to continue their resistance and later claimed that this had been partially successful, and in March 1931 W. R. Fuller of the CEA asserted that charges had been reduced from between 50 and 60 per cent to between 38 and 45 per cent. But a boycott was not a weapon the CEA was ever able to use effectively and in reality there was little the independent cinemas could do if they wanted a film. Charlie Chaplin's *City Lights* in 1931 caused much bitterness. Neighbouring showmen were angry when the Dominion Theatre, not yet converted into a cinema, booked it for twenty weeks at 60 per cent to United Artists with a guarantee of £40,000, creaming off much of the business it would do in the London area.[3] United Artists wanted 50 per cent from other exhibitors and the Gaumont-British circuit refused to pay, trying to get it for 40 per cent. The CEA advised its members to stand out for 33⅓ per cent in the case of large halls and 25 per cent for the smaller ones. But John Maxwell of the large ABC circuit booked it at 50 per cent, saying that it was his duty to the public, and Oscar Deutsch expressly dissociated himself from an attempt by the Midlands branch of the CEA to boycott the film. With a box-office winner like *City Lights* no unity could be expected from exhibitors. But even in the case of less outstanding films they had to take the renters' terms or go without, and those who could paid up.

In early 1933 the CEA, lowering its sights a little, was trying to establish a ratio of 40 to 60 per cent in the exhibitor's favour. At a conference in Birmingham a resolution not to book at a higher rate was adopted by the members. But once again it was proved that the CEA was too big and heterogeneous a body for united action, and towards the end of 1935 it was admitted that the Birmingham resolution had been a failure.

Meanwhile many exhibitors blamed their financial difficulties not so much on the high cost of programmes as on competition from new cinemas. As early as August 1931 some exhibitors in Manchester sought to persuade the magistrates not to issue any new licences on the grounds of 'saturation'. This word, like 'overseating' and 'redundancy', was to become familiar during the next five years. Elaborate calculations based on the number of seats and performances a week and the head of population sought to establish a ratio beyond which no new licences would be issued in an area. What no one mentioned was that every time a new modern cinema opened it

was because the old ones had not kept up with the times, and that if new cinemas were not allowed it would be the public who lost. New openings increased as the decade went on. At the same time the CEA claimed that 420 cinemas closed in the years 1932, 1933 and 1934. The authorities' initial response to pleas about overseating was to point out that licensing under the 1909 Act was for safety, not for the protection of vested interests.* Late in 1933 the Liverpool JPs did turn down two applications although the reason given was that of site difficulties, not redundancy. Councils were, however, entitled to refuse applications without stating their grounds for doing so, and in August 1934 at last Wells, and later a number of other towns, gave in to pleas of redundancy. Two years later it was openly admitted that an application from Union Cinemas at Darlington had been turned down because there were six other cinemas within 300 yards of the site. But as it was to be a modern cinema with 2,000 seats and Union thought well enough of its prospects to make the investment, it must be assumed that the refusal was protecting inferior cinemas. As a rule, however, the authorities were unsympathetic to such requests. Towards the end of 1936 one exhibitor tried to arouse interest in getting government intervention, but nothing was done and the complaints gradually died away.

Two methods by which independent exhibitors repeatedly tried to defend themselves against high rentals were co-operative booking and co-operative production.

Thomas Ormiston's attempt in 1927 to give the independents something approaching the bargaining power of the big circuits by forming a co-operative booking agency had been effectively stopped by the flat refusal of KRS members to supply films to any exhibitor joining such a group. Unlike the CEA, the KRS was well able to operate a boycott and made it very plain that they would do so, yet there were many similar attempts by exhibitors during the thirties. Every now and then a plan would be announced, followed shortly afterwards by a repetition of the KRS position. One of the more important was the Film Industries Co-operative Society, which was proposed in July 1931. The structure planned was typical, with member cinemas contributing the capital and receiving interest, doing all their booking through it at a 1 per cent booking fee; one of the directors was to handle booking, which it was hoped would be at a 25 per cent rental, and assurances were given that all business would be kept private and confidential. The scheme was to go into operation when membership had reached 200. But even if enough independents had overcome their extreme reluctance to disclose their finances the scheme had no chance, for the KRS simply made their usual pronouncement in December 1931 and that was that. Then, when a certain Mr Urquhart was appointed to book for a firm

* The Cinematograph Act of 1909 explained that the licensing authorities were 'The Council of the County or County Borough, but as a rule these powers are, in the first instance at least, exercised by a committee . . . The County or County Borough Council may delegate these powers to the local justice'.

in Scotland, the KRS made it known early the following year that they were not prepared to deal with a booking agent without a substantial financial interest in the firm in question. Before long another leading exhibitor, C. P. Metcalfe, suggested that the CEA itself might either be turned into a limited liability company or form a subsidiary and operate a booking scheme. This proposal, however, threatened to split the CEA in two, as the big circuits were unlikely to welcome the creation of what would amount to a new large circuit and rob them of the competitive advantage for which they had been formed. Discussions led nowhere.

In the mid-thirties the Gaumont-British circuit had acquired a financial interest in H & G Cinemas, owned by Major Gale and Sid and Philip Hyams. Early in 1935 the KRS, which J. C. Graham had so pointedly said did not tell its members how to conduct their business, instructed them not to book to H & G through Gaumont-British until that firm had explained itself to the KRS. H & G had no option but to call off the booking arrangement, which they did in April, upon which the KRS gave its members permission to resume booking. Some months later Gaumont-British, in what was described as a £700,000 deal, acquired three H & G supers in London – the Troxy at Stepney, the Troc-ette in Tower Bridge Road and the Trocadero at Elephant and Castle. The properties were held by Gaumont Super Cinemas, which was registered as a private £400,000 company in August 1935 with Gale and the Hyams, and Mark and Maurice Ostrer and A. W. Jarrett of Gaumont, on the board. Booking was to be conducted by Major Gale. Next month the KRS took a full-page advertisement in the trade press, stating that renters would only book to agents owning a majority control of the share capital of a company, and that they were investigating 'scores of cases'. Later it specifically instructed its members not to book to the three supers. Gaumont Supers sought an injunction to prevent them from enforcing the ban and there was talk of it being a conspiracy in restraint of trade. Gaumont, of course, had its own renting business, which was a member of the KRS, and it was persuaded to drop the action early the following year, but the issue of legality which had been raised demanded further examination. Early in 1938 the question of exhibitors' combines and KRS boycotts was raised in Parliament, and later the Cinematograph Films Council created under the new quota legislation in 1938 took the matter up. Talks were held with the KRS but it surprised no one that agreement had not been reached by the time that war broke out in September 1939.

An alternative to co-operative booking as a way of reducing rentals was co-operative production backed by the exhibitors themselves, and various schemes for this were proposed during the thirties. Like booking combines, all proved unsuccessful. An abortive scheme in 1933 called the Empire Co-operative Friendly Society was typical. It was intended to produce twelve films a year at the old Whitehall studio at Elstree, costing from £10,000 to £20,000 each. Member exhibitors would choose from a list of possible

PLUNDER
Farce from the Aldwych Theatre, filmed by Tom Walls in 1930 for B & D, with little alteration. Ralph Lynn and Tom Walls in centre stage, Mary Brough seated, with Robertson Hare.

PLUNDER
Ralph Lynn and Tom Walls in their usual roles as 'young men-about-town'.

JOURNEY'S END

David Manners, Billy Bevan and Colin Clive in the successful film of a hit play: theatrical drama of life in the trenches. Directed in Hollywood by James Whale for Gainsborough-Welsh Pearson in 1930.

SUSPENSE

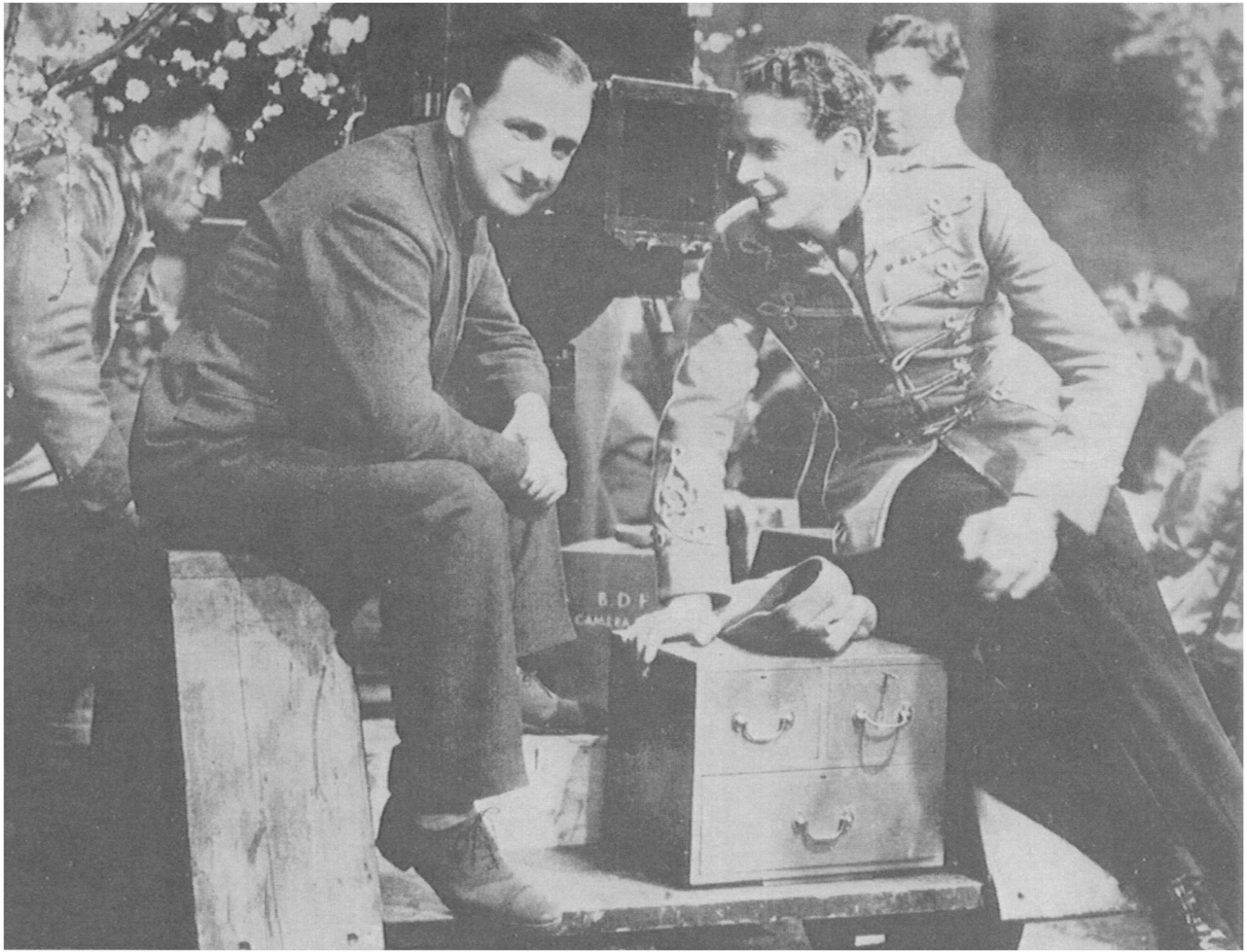
A less successful film, but a more adult and realistic treatment of the same subject, directed by Walter Summers in 1930 at Elstree.

WHY SAILORS LEAVE HOME

Leslie Fuller, a British music hall comic with large heavy face and a lugubious style. With Eve Gray. The film was directed by fellow comic Monty Banks at Elstree in 1930.

THE LYONS MAIL

The actor manager Sir John Martin-Harvey appeared for Julius Hagen in a mini-spectacular film of his favourite stage part, made at the tiny Twickenham studio in 1930.



GOODNIGHT, VIENNA
Herbert Wilcox and Jack Buchanan on the set late in 1931.

films which should be made. They would contribute to the cost of each film, and be entitled to book it before other exhibitors at a rental of 33⅓ per cent.

The scheme fell through. Like later schemes, it had two fundamental weaknesses. The exhibitors' problem was not an absence of cheap, mediocre films, which this kind of operation was likely to produce, for the market was already overstocked with these owing to quota production. What they really wanted was to be able to book high-quality features at lower rentals than those currently charged, and the scheme did nothing to make this possible. Secondly, the idea that if exhibitors selected which films were to be made from a list then these would be more likely to do well at the box office, a belief which has recurred many times down the years, was very unrealistic.

In the late summer of 1936 the solicitor and Conservative MP A. C. N. Dixey circularised exhibitors about a plan essentially the same as the earlier one and based on the same misconceptions; 350 member cinemas were estimated to be the minimum needed to start the operation, and fifteen films a year were planned. This time it was claimed, moreover, that a number of films which were already made or in production would be available to launch the scheme. An agreement was made in April 1937 for studio space and services at the small Rock studio at Elstree, and five of the six films eventually put out as British Independent Exhibitors Distribution films were, in fact, simply Joe Rock productions. The standard of production was very poor and only Michael Powell's fine independent production *The Edge of the World*, for which Rock had fortuitously provided backing and which seemed oddly out of place in such company, had any merit. Despite much big talk, BIED never got more than 300 members and was dogged by trouble. Dixey resigned at the end of the year and the company was taken over by another low-grade producer, Norman Loudon of Sound City, but was in the hands of the receivers by October 1938.

The production of top-quality films which could then be hired at reasonable rentals by independents would have cost far more than the small exhibitors who needed them could afford, but the idea of exhibitor-financed production continued to have an appeal and even John Maxwell of British International Pictures suggested something along similar lines in the summer of 1939. As a postscript, after the war had started a group of producers and exhibitors, including Michael Balcon and Sidney Bernstein, got up a scheme largely through the initiative of Richard Norton whereby guaranteed bookings would enable producers to raise production finance. Bernstein wrote a pamphlet published privately which outlined an exhibitor-financed system very like the Dixey scheme, producing twelve pictures a year, with 400 member cinemas in an exhibitors' co-operative having CEA representation.[4]

It was not only the cost of film hire which worried small showmen. The cost of both producing and showing sound films was far higher than that

of silent films and a rise in the price of admission would have been justified, but the industry continued to think of the cinema as entertainment for the masses at rock-bottom prices. Technical standards, and standards of comfort and elegance, improved greatly. The thirties were the heyday of the super cinema, and competition was fierce. Many cinemas were big, but on the whole the trend towards the really enormous halls seen at the end of the silent film era – such as the Davis Theatre at Croydon, opened in December 1928 and with 3,900 seats one of the biggest in Europe – was halted by the acoustic demands of the talkie. From 1,500 to 2,500 seats was said to be a more suitable size. Some, however, still aimed to astonish the public with their size and opulence, like the Trocadero at Elephant and Castle, which was so big that at its opening one foggy day in December 1930 the fog was said to be almost as thick inside as it was outside.

Much trouble was taken to make the new or converted picture palaces the last word in luxury and magnificence, and there were a number of architects and interior designers who specialised in them.* Some care was given to their facades although not to their lumpish sides and backs, which, with their bleak windowless walls and ugly roofs, did little for the environment. It was inside that imagination ran riot. Intricate coffering of walls and ceilings, decorative grills, illuminated panels and alcoves and luxurious seating, carpets and drapes were common. Many cinemas were built with stages, for variety shows were sometimes included with the films, although this, like the double feature, led to extremely long performances of three or even four hours and was the subject of much criticism from renters. Underlying the magnificence of these palatial buildings was the idea that the film, the occasion for the outing, was only part of the total experience and that a touch of grandeur was part of the fantasy for a largely underprivileged public. There were three main types of decorative flights of fancy. Traditional theatres in adaptations of classical and baroque styles were common, less so the modern theatres influenced by the more riotous aspects of art deco. But it was the atmospheric cinemas that caught the imagination. In these, the interior gave an illusion of a palace, garden or some other exotic setting with the appropriate domes, minarets, balconies or vistas; the proscenium arch, the exits, galleries and lighting effects were incorporated into some fantastic scene from Spain, Italy or the Middle East, the reality of which the audience, who in the thirties got no further than the British seaside for their holidays, would never see. Some were mainly *trompe-l'œil* murals or bas-reliefs but the more spectacular included solid architectural detail.

Atmospherics had been popular in America for some years before they reached Britain in 1929. Not everyone liked them. In January 1930, the same month that the new Tivoli opened at Portsmouth disguised as a Spanish courtyard, *Kine Weekly* expressed some disapproval of atmospherics as

* The architecture and design of British cinemas have been admirably described in great detail by David Atwell in *Cathedrals of the Movies*.

obtrusive, expensive and, a strangely practical note, dust traps. By contrast '*l'art moderne*' seemed preferable for it was uncluttered, cheaper and, presumably, dust-free. By 1933 a more modern and understated style influenced by cubism and cool art deco was making a growing impact. It was not yet associated with Oscar Deutsch's Odeon circuit, which was still very small. In fact in that year the 700-seat Odeon at Lancing opened with an auditorium designed, by Mrs Lily Deutsch, as an old-world garden, the dado a stone wall with flowers and trees painted above it, and the ceiling as the sky. Before long, however, the Odeons adopted a quintessential thirties look, streamlined and plain, the apotheosis of the antiseptic style for which *Kine Weekly* seemed to hanker. A rapidly growing circuit of medium-sized halls, Odeon created a house style aimed at comfort rather than luxury, and good taste rather than magnificence. With exteriors in either brick or the well-known cream faience tiles, with slim vertical towers or fins and characteristic lettering, there was an overall similarity also in the simple interiors with their pastel art deco detail.

To digress, the rise of the Odeon circuit, which finally rivalled ABC and Gaumont-British, with Deutsch's highly original approach to exhibition was one of the success stories of the thirties. The son of an immigrant from Hungary who set up a prosperous family scrap-metal business in Birmingham, he had entered the film business in the twenties in association with two other members of the large Jewish community in the Midlands, his former school friends Michael Balcon and Victor Saville. Whilst these two moved over to production, Deutsch acquired two Coventry cinemas in 1925 and before long was a prominent provincial exhibitor. He founded Cinema Service to run his expanding circuit and provide centralised services for his cinemas, and at the Birmingham suburb of Perry Bar he first used the name 'Odeon' for one of his cinemas in 1930. Each new cinema was a separate company, the bulk of the money for the site being raised by the sale of preference shares to local business interests likely to benefit from the existence of a cinema in the community. A small number of ordinary shares would be held by Deutsch and his associates W. G. Elcock and F. S. Bates. A rent charge on the site and later a mortgage on the building, raised chiefly from insurance and finance companies, would pay for the building itself, but the policy of local involvement was deliberate and every effort was made to establish the cinema as a focus for the neighbourhood, with ceremonial openings attended by local dignitaries. Deutsch sited his cinemas in new suburbs and dormitory towns previously without them. These were being spread across the country by ribbon builders in the twenties and thirties and the sites, which were relatively inexpensive, avoided competition with established circuits. When the conversion to talkies occurred Deutsch's technical expert, Sidney Swingler, conducted research at the laboratories of British Thomson-Houston, as a result of which in 1931 Deutsch founded Sound Equipment to market the successful BT-H system of sound reproduction, which he installed in his own cinemas.

By 1933 the circuit, with 26 cinemas, was the eighth biggest in Britain, and in October Odeon Theatres was registered as a private £100 company to replace Cinema Service. A London office was opened in November. Still based in Birmingham, the circuit also included a number of cinemas in the south-east and a number that, having been acquired rather than built, had names other than Odeon. Newly built ones, however, were all called Odeon and from now on evolved the characteristic contemporary architecture and decorative style which created a brand image for the company similar to that of the chain stores then extending across the country. Early in 1935 the capital was put up to £200,000, almost all the ordinary shares owned by Deutsch himself. The two other directors remained, but the operation was very much Deutsch's personal business and according to the articles of association he was to be the permanent managing director, with a perpetual casting vote. An attractive figure in the development of cinema exhibition, with an individual and intelligent approach, despite bad health he made the local Odeon a comfortable feature of suburban life, providing value for money rather than spectacular showmanship.*

The Odeon style was more in touch with contemporary life than the atmospherics. At the time many regarded the latter with amused tolerance as vulgar displays for common people. The more sophisticated cinemas in the West End of London did not go further than the semi-atmospheric. Theodore Komisarjevsky, a highbrow and aristocratic stage producer-designer who designed a number of bizarre settings for Bernstein's Granada circuit, had little opinion of the public for whom he created them. His oft-quoted remark 'The commercial cinema not only caters for imbeciles; it breeds them'[5] suggests that the bad taste of his conceptions was an expression of condescension to the audience. Deutsch, with his emphasis not on fantastic surroundings but on reasonable standards of comfort and ambience in which to concentrate on the film, showed greater respect both for the films and for the people.

The great palaces, the comfortable modest halls and the struggling fleapits were full for comparatively few of their weekly performances, of course. Deutsch and Rowson were two who were concerned to push up weekly admissions by persuading more of the population to go to the cinema. Estimating that some 5 million out of a population of 40 million went to the cinema once a week or more, Deutsch considered another £300,000 could easily be taken at the box office by attracting new customers. Rowson said in his Royal Statistical Society paper that cinemas were only a third full on average. In 1936 he calculated that 3,800,000 seats and 19,500,000 admissions gave a rate of 5·1 full houses a week, whereas the comparable figure for the United States was over 7 full houses. Like Deutsch he considered that an increase of 1 per cent or £370,000 was feasible and suggested publicity like the 'Eat More Fruit' campaign of the time. Both

* For later development of the company see under United Artists.

accepted without question, as did the entire industry, that progress lay in getting more and more people in to the same cinemas to see the same films.

This monolithic philosophy, however, with its limiting effect on film content, was already out of date. As cinemagoing spread upwards in society different tastes emerged, and specialised cinemas and film societies began to cater for them. There were several attempts to pinpoint the preferences of regular cinemagoers. Both *Film Weekly* and *Picturegoer*, the latter the biggest of the fan papers with a circulation of 100,000, held annual ballots amongst their readers. Bernstein conducted several rather more elaborate polls in an effort to draw systematic conclusions about his patrons' opinions, as distinct from his box-office results. But the problem with the monolithic cinema, with everyone seeing all the films, was that by its very nature it had to please the least discriminating. A writer in *Kine Weekly* complained that 'the cheapest and most obvious gags are the ones that get the laughs: the sloppier the sentimentality the more certain the tears'.[6] Cyril Ray talked of 'a semi-educated public . . . the film of today presents, with supreme technical efficiency, a theme of unparalleled triviality'.[7] Under the circumstances, as Charles Tennyson, the poet's grandson, remarked in the discussion following Rowson's address to the Royal Statistical Society, it was surprising how good a lot of the films were. But there were still many amongst the better educated sections of society who would have agreed with Liberal MP Isaac Foot and many Wesleyan Methodists in their frequent condemnation of the cinema, or the poet John Drinkwater when he asserted that 'Nothing has done so much to vulgarise the taste of the world as the cinema'.[8] On the other hand there were also plenty of signs of society's growing acceptance of the cinema. Big premières were attended by diplomats, politicians and aristocrats as well as by intellectuals. The Federation of British Industries put on a gala film show for delegates to the Imperial Conference in 1930. A big dinner to launch a new version of *Phantom of the Opera* was attended by many famous members of the establishment. When Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford visited Britain in 1929 it was with Lady Mountbatten that they stayed, and when Chaplin came in 1931 he gave a party at which he entertained such celebrities as Lord and Lady Astor, Lady Oxford and Winston Churchill.

If such straws in the wind showed that many educated people were now prepared to take films seriously, it did not necessarily mean that they would join the regular fans who went to the pictures whatever was on. The founding of film societies enabled them to select their films, and by 1938 it was estimated[9] that there were over a hundred of them. More important was the appearance of specialised repertory cinemas showing revivals of good films. The Shaftesbury Avenue Pavilion in London had been run by Stuart Davis as an art house showing repertory and unusual films in the late twenties. When his lease ran out in 1929 Paul Rotha and others obtained his mailing list and secured support from his regular patrons for a film group, founded in October 1930, to hire another hall and run it as a rep cinema.

They were unsuccessful, but the idea was taken up by the exhibitor Eric Hakim, whose Academy Cinema in Oxford Street opened early in 1931, under the management of Elsie Cohen, with a six-week season of French films. Later a season of unusual films there included *Earth*, early work by Chaplin and *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*. There were other rep cinemas in London, but the Academy was outstanding in finding worthwhile films from all over the world. Foreign films, widely shown in silent days with translated titles, had disappeared from the ordinary cinema since the advent of the talkie except in the unsatisfactory form of multilinguals (q.v.). The best of them now began to reappear in these specialised cinemas, and the well educated tended to prefer them to run-of-the-mill American or British films. Similar cinemas gradually appeared in other large towns. In 1933 the little Everyman Theatre in Hampstead was converted to a rep cinema of 285 seats by J. S. Fairfax-Jones, who had earlier founded the Southampton film society, and proved very successful in this rather special residential area of London, which was a centre of *avant-garde* artistic activity. The Curzon Cinema, opened in early 1934 near Park Lane by the Marquis of Casa Maury, set new standards of comfort and elegance, with a purist approach to the film which disdained distractions like interval music or supporting programmes. In 1936 Studios One and Two opened very near the Academy in Oxford Street with two small cinemas in one building, the second with only 300 seats.

The days of the monlithic system were numbered. Its fragmentation was delayed by the coming of war in 1939 and the mass audience, presented with a mass product, actually increased enormously during the next few years, admissions soaring in a way that neither Deutsch nor Rowson would have dared to hope for. Yet the process had already begun. Rep cinemas, film societies, television (not yet in the home to any great extent but already greatly feared by the exhibitors) small, intimate plural cinemas – in fact all the means except video and cable television by which people would be able to exercise a more personal choice of film in future – were already threatening the cinema as it then was.

Chapter 2

The Organisation of Labour

With some four thousand cinemas in the country, staffed by cleaners, ushers, projectionists, box-office staff, electricians and managers, a large number of people were earning their living in the cinemas by 1929. Long hours, low pay and little or no provision for such things as overtime, paid holidays or conciliation machinery made it a depressing industry in which to work.

Two large trade unions, both affiliated to the TUC, competed for members throughout the thirties. The National Association of Theatrical Employees, which also included workers in legitimate theatres and music halls, aimed at industry-wide representation of all cinema workers and was prepared to let members retain their craft union cards as long as they were represented in their dealings with the film industry employers by the NATE.[1] The Electrical Trades Union wished to recruit electricians and projectionists only, and had an early studio agreement with BIP for those working at Elstree and Welwyn. Both unions wanted to include workers in the studios as well as those in the cinemas.

The coming of the talkie focused attention on the projectionists, who now required greater skill and deserved better pay. An organisation for projectionists was already in being. When talkies came in and the big sound companies were talking toughly about boycotting cinemas with poor sound performance the Guild of British Projectionists and Technicians was organised in May 1929 to set up inspection and training schemes. Its stated aims were 'to uphold the status of Projectionists through efficiency and good service'.[2] It sought recognition from the Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association as the voice of the projectionists, but as a craft organisation rather than as a trade union. In May 1931 it was registered as a limited company, which meant that it was legally unable to negotiate as a union.

NATE did little in 1930 apart from concluding its first studio agreement at Elstree over carpenters' rates of pay.[3] The ETU, on the other hand, was very active on behalf of projectionists. In the early summer of 1930 a new branch in Manchester, claiming that projectionists there had to work between 60 and 75 hours a week for between 24/- and £2, threatened to

strike unless the CEA granted them a 48-hour week. The CEA was unwilling to recognise any union at all, asking instead that cases of exploitation should be referred to it individually. In the autumn ETU operators in Liverpool held a lightning strike, but the North-West CEA still refused to recognise the union. Despite official CEA policy, though, the Manchester branches of the ETU and CEA nearly reached an agreement. This was for a 48-hour week, agreed overtime, one week's holiday for every six months and a minimum pay of £4 in grade-A cinemas and less for B and C halls, as well as some provision for conciliation. The CEA headquarters, however, censured the branch for this and it withdrew. The ETU then considered calling out 150 operators and 100 electricians, claiming that this was 95 per cent of the Manchester operatives.* Next the Liverpool ETU members came out. As so often happens, both sides claimed success. The Secretary of the Birmingham branch of the union claimed that conditions were bad there also, with chief operators getting only £2 5s 0d, but again the CEA refused to discuss the matter. Later in the year, however, agreement was reached in Liverpool and conflict seems to have died away for a while.

From now on, although the ETU continued to press for a 48-hour week and was less willing to compromise than NATE, leadership in the struggle passed to the latter. Next year the Labour Minister of Labour, Margaret Bondfield, promised to look into the wages and working conditions of cinema employees, but nothing was done. At the TUC Conference Hugh Roberts, the General Secretary of NATE, moved a resolution which was adopted, urging the government to institute an inquiry into pay and conditions. He called exhibitors 'the most relentless and unscrupulous individuals the world has ever seen'. The attempt to involve the government in regulation of the industry continued to be part of NATE policy but was resisted by successive governments. Roberts was replaced as Secretary of NATE in 1932 by Tom O'Brien, a former stage electrician and a union official who had belonged to NATE since 1919, and who was to lead it vigorously and successfully for many years.

In November 1931 a joint conciliation board was formed by the London and Home Counties Branch of the CEA and the London Trades Council, which included the ETU, NATE, the Musicians' Union and the Guild of Projectionists. This was to play an important part in laying the basis for later national negotiations. Preliminary proposals were announced in the spring of 1933. These included a 60-hour week for male uniformed staff, 54 for women, 55 for projectionists, time and a half for overtime work, not more than 5 hours to be worked on Sunday, double rates for Sunday work and a week's holiday a year. These mild proposals caused consternation at some branches of the CEA although many in the unions felt they did not go nearly far enough. After further discussion the final recommendations were published in April 1934. The classes of hall were defined, an AA hall being one with average weekly takings of £1,000 or more, and A hall takings

* This seems unlikely as *Kine Year Book* lists 119 cinemas in Manchester at the time.

of £500 to £1,000, a B hall £300 to £500 and a C hall under £300. Pay rates ranged from £5 5s 0d a week for a first projectionist in an AA hall down to £1 2s 6d for a third projectionist in a C hall, and from £5 for a stage manager in an AA hall to 15/- for a cleaner in a C hall. Hours were to be 60 a week for a man and 55 for a woman if not working on a Sunday, or 55 for a man and 50 for a woman if Sundays were being worked.

These proposals were an advance on the worst of existing conditions but many cinemas already had better terms and both unions rejected them. The ETU was strongly critical of the proposed hours. At a mass meeting called by both unions O'Brien of NATE called again for a national inquiry and legislation for a trades board, with wages and conditions backed by law, and urged more cinema workers to join the unions. According to him, 6,500 cinema workers then belonged to NATE out of a possible 20,000.[4] Cinema workers joining the ETU were very much fewer, and even in 1936 in its memorandum to the Moyne Committee it only claimed 1,000.

The Joint Conciliation Board's proposals were finally adopted by the CEA's London and Home Counties branch, NATE and the Musicians' Union for a twelve-month trial period beginning in September 1935, covering some 10,000 people. O'Brien was prepared to settle for what he could get, and considered the attitude of the ETU, which continued to demand a 48-hour week, as unrealistic. At the TUC Conference in September, this time at Margate, an ETU resolution condemned the agreement and demanded that the industry should be brought under the provisions of the Trade Boards Act as a sweated industry. The resolution, condemned by O'Brien, was shelved.

Meanwhile in February 1935 the General Council of the TUC had at last sent a deputation to the Home Secretary which included representatives of NATE, the ETU and the TUC, seeking an inquiry and legislation. The predictable reply was that wages were a matter for the unions and the employers to settle. It was added that if the Cinematograph Act of 1909 were to be revised at any time some regulation of working conditions might be included.

By 1935 the new Association of Cine-Technicians was starting to organise the studio technicians, and both the other unions turned their attention to manual workers in production. The NATE Annual Report of July 1935 spoke of an agreement with ABPC and of 'influence' rather than agreements with Gaumont-British, Stoll, Fox-British and London Film Productions, and asserted that the terms of many studios were already up to union rates of pay and conditions. In September it called for the reaffirmation of O'Brien's policy, which he claimed had pushed up wages in the studios by £100,000 in the last twelve months. In October an agreement already reached with Gaumont-British informally in June was made public. It covered plasterers, carpenters, electricians, props, painters, stage-hands and others over wages, overtime and other matters.[5] The 1936 report mentioned agreements also with London Films and British Lion. In his

evidence to the Moyne Committee in 1936–7 O'Brien claimed the union had about 5,000 members in the studios, although out of a total membership of 8,421 in 1936[6] this seems surprisingly high. Meanwhile in August 1935 the ETU had brought about a strike of electricians at BIP. Work was brought to a standstill for four days, but the union decided to concentrate on building up branches for projectionists in the big cities in future and leave the studios to others.

NATE was growing much faster and now changed its name to the National Association of Theatrical and Kine Employees. At the Plymouth TUC Conference in 1936 an ETU resolution urging a 48-hour week yet again was amended to bring it into line with TUC policy in favour of a 40-hour week, so even here the ETU lost the initiative. In the south-east the arrangements recommended by the Joint Conciliation Board were working well, but many exhibitors and CEA branches still refused to recognise either union and one unionist attacked them for using 'the language of slave-owners of 150 years ago'.[7] Again it was discussed whether the government should be asked to schedule exhibition as a sweated industry.

1937 was a year of great progress for NATKE. Agreement was reached with the AC-T defining their respective spheres in the studios and providing for mutual support and joint action. Leaving the higher technicians to the AC-T, it had wage agreements for other workers with all the main studios and with the Gaumont-British, ABC, Odeon and County circuits, as well as a number of CEA branches. In 1937 the TUC Conference was held at Norwich, and NATKE pressed for official support of the film industry both on ideological grounds and as a source of employment, urging that regulation of hours and conditions should be included in the quota legislation then being discussed. In October 1937 the Film Industry Employees' Council was formed by all the unions, including one which represented artistes, to take part in the discussions leading to the Films Act.

NATKE continued to reach agreements with CEA branches in 1937 and early 1938. These agreements, of course, covered the projectionists, whom the ETU regarded as their concern. NATKE usually accepted weekly hours of up to 54, but at the same time talks were held with the London Joint Conciliation Board on the possibility of securing a 48-hour week and a 12½ per cent rise in pay. By early 1938 there were 95 NATKE branches, 70 of them for projectionists, and a membership of 16,000. The union was on the way to securing recognition as an industry-wide negotiating force. In February 1938 it succeeded in signing an agreement, with the Leicester CEA, which included a normal working week of 48 hours. Significantly, it also included a two-year probationary period for projectionists pending a national agreement, as a first step towards controlling entry into the industry.

In early 1938 the ETU found that NATKE talks with local CEAs had prejudiced their position, for several CEAs refused to negotiate with them whilst talks with the other union were going on. The first was Hull in

February 1938, and when the same thing happened next month in London the ETU threatened to strike. In reply O'Brien publicly complained that the ETU action was meant to sabotage his own talks on the 48-hour week for all workers. Over Easter ETU members in Hull, London and Manchester went on strike, and the Gaumont-British studios at Islington were briefly shut down when fifteen projectionists and electricians struck, but they were soon replaced by NATKE and Guild members. The AC-T was sympathetic to the strikes and left-wing sources claimed that large numbers were involved, but O'Brien, who belittled them and said that the strikers were damaging the unions' cause, put the figure at only 300. The strikes lasted some weeks in London and Manchester and longer in Hull, and in both Manchester and London the employers were finally prepared to consider a 48-hour week.

By that time, however, the NATKE negotiations in favour of it seemed to be nearing success. For, although the larger union continued to make agreements allowing longer hours, the Joint Conciliation Board at last agreed to consider its proposals for a 48-hour week and a 12½ per cent rise in pay in June 1938. A general national draft agreement was presented for discussion at the next NATKE annual conference in July, covering the hours, conditions and pay of all cinema workers. For the first time a 48-hour week with no exceptions, and 45 for women, was claimed. An important clause, leading to a closed shop, was also introduced:

> It also provides that in case of any vacancy arising, the manager shall ask for a list of the unemployed members of the National Association of Theatrical and Kine Employees from the local secretary, and, if practicable, fill the vacancies from the said list, the management having the right to select or reject if unsuitable.
>
> In the event of a non-member of the N.A.T.K.E. being engaged, such employee shall be required to apply for membership of the Association at the end of the first week of employment.[8]

O'Brien called the draft agreement a national charter for the cinema worker and hoped that it would eventually be adopted by the CEA. But this did not happen, and its existence gave the government an excuse, if it needed one, for taking no action. Its half-promise of February 1935 to look into pay and conditions had led to nothing until, after much prompting, an official questionnaire was sent to 4,800 cinemas in October 1937. Two years later persistent questioning in Parliament by a Labour MP, Harry Day,* elicited the reply from Ernest Brown, the Minister of Labour, that inquiries were complete, but he insisted that matters were best left to the negotiations between joint bodies representing employers and employees which he heard were in progress. In exasperation Day demanded: 'How can that apply to cases where the people concerned do not belong to any

* Harry Day, a loyal and vociferous parliamentary watchdog for the film industry, died several months later in September 1939, aged 59.

association?' There was no reply.'[9] Later in the month Brown repeated, 'We are anxious to promote harmonious discussions between the two sides of industry', at which Day asked if he was aware that some smaller cinemas would not let their employees join a union. Again, 'There was no answer'.[10] A similar exchange took place the next month also.

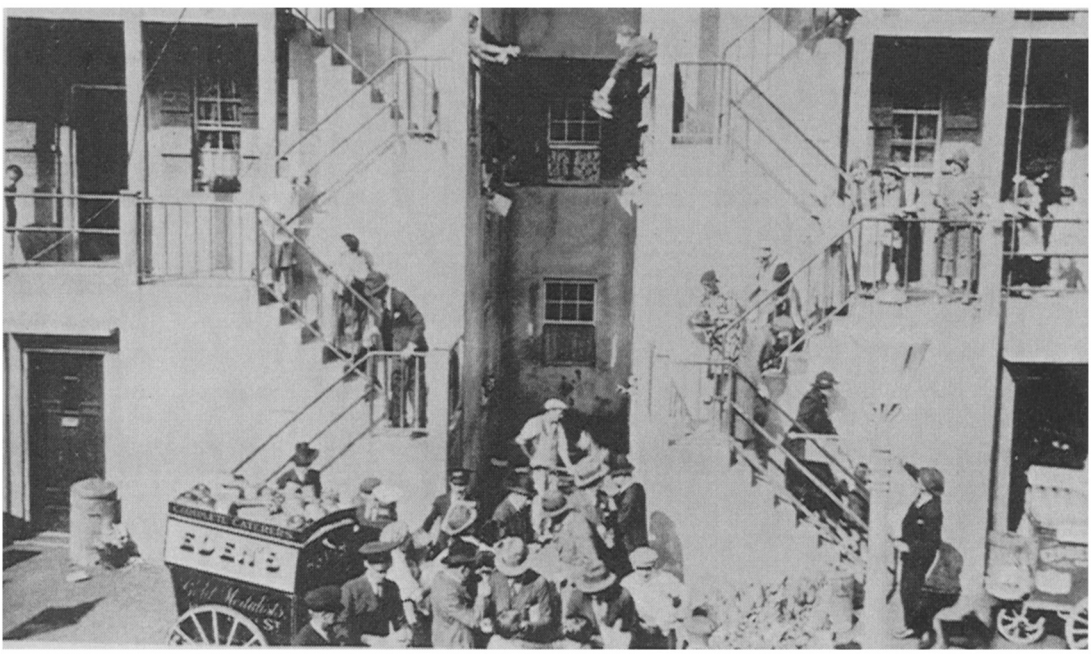
The union had made remarkable progress under O'Brien's leadership. By the summer before the war it had 33 agreements covering 45,000 workers in 2,500 cinemas. There were also new hopes of continuing the organisation of studio workers, which had slowed down during the production slump, and of negotiating industry-wide agreements with the new employers' organisation. This was the Film Production Employers' Federation, which changed its name to British Film Producers' Association in 1939. The old Film Producers' Group of the British Federation of Industries had been prevented by its constitution from negotiating labour matters with the unions, and in any case by its very nature could not represent American production interests in Britain. The rise of the AC-T had made it essential that there should be a body that could negotiate on behalf of all producers and the new organisation was in being by early 1938. Later that year NATKE, ETU and the AC-T were considering the possibility of setting up an organisation to represent all workers in the production side of the industry, including higher, semi-skilled and unskilled workers. The first studio agreements reached by NATKE were with Nettlefold and Sound City early in 1939, covering skilled and artisan labour and including a 47-hour week.

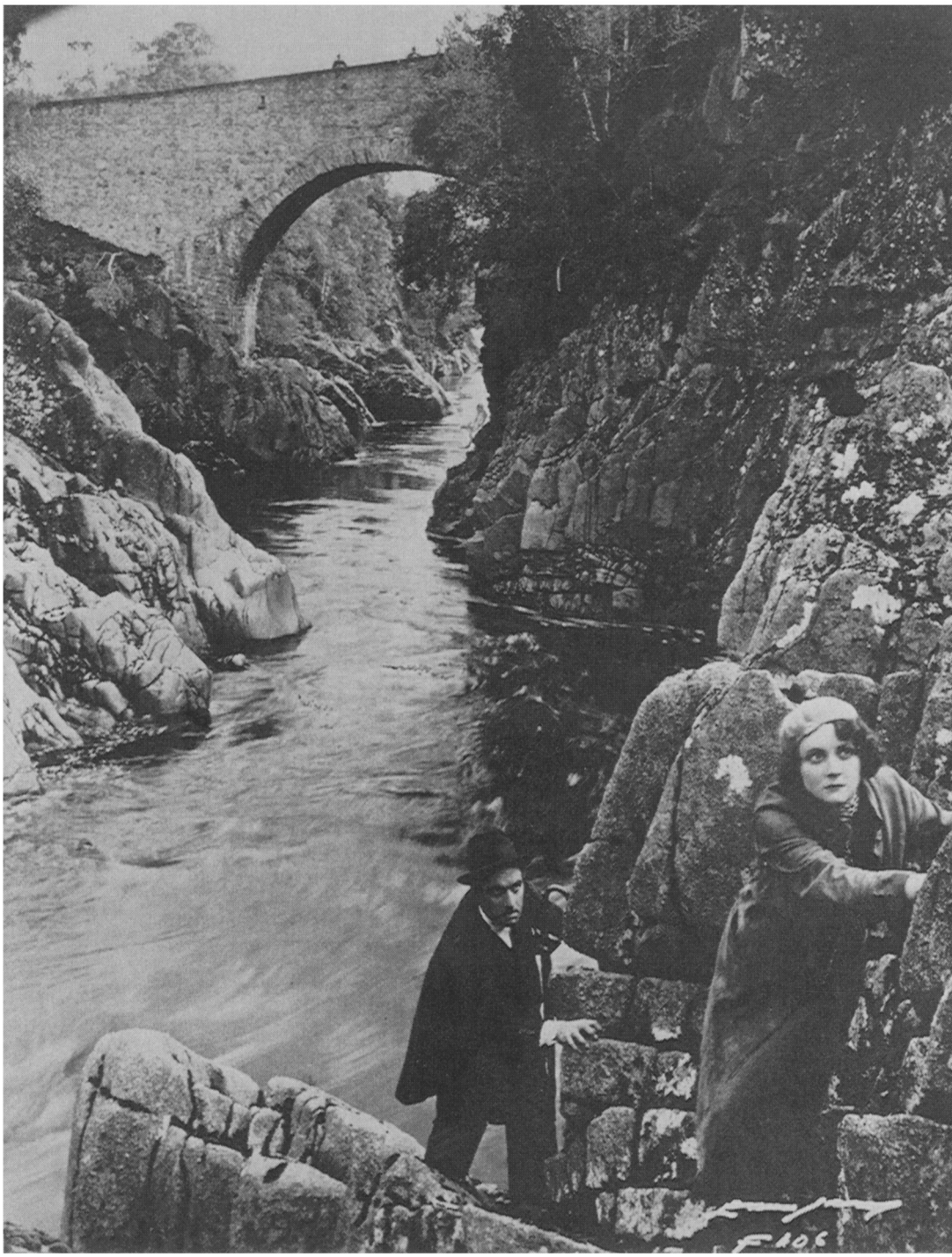
Thus the unionisation of workers in the cinemas and of craft and manual workers in the studios made great progress during the thirties. The organisation of film technicians, however, was even more remarkable. By the early thirties there was already a small learned technical society. A branch of the American Society of Motion Picture Engineers, formed in London in 1928, broke away in January 1931 and established the British Kinematograph Society under the chairmanship of Simon Rowson. By the end of 1931 it had 188 members. Its aim was 'the dissemination of knowledge and the elucidation of technical problems within the Industry',[11] and it continued to flourish, although on a small scale, throughout the thirties and after. Like the Projectionists' Guild, it was concerned not with union matters but with status and excellence.

For the technicians were better educated and had careers rather than jobs, and although they worked long hours and were poorly paid in comparison with their Hollywood counterparts there is little sign in the early thirties that they shared the cinema workers' discontent. The nature of their work led to an absence of routine and a spirit of 'the show must go on', and excitement and ambition, especially among the youngers ones, kept them going when they were expected to work all night, to sleep at the studio if public transport had closed down, and to improvise endlessly to meet unexpected problems, especially on location. Printing and lab technicians

SALLY IN OUR ALLEY
Gracie Fields in her first film, which she was later to describe as a real story, not just one 'stitched around her'. With Florence Desmond. Produced by Basil Dean at Beaconsfield in 1931.

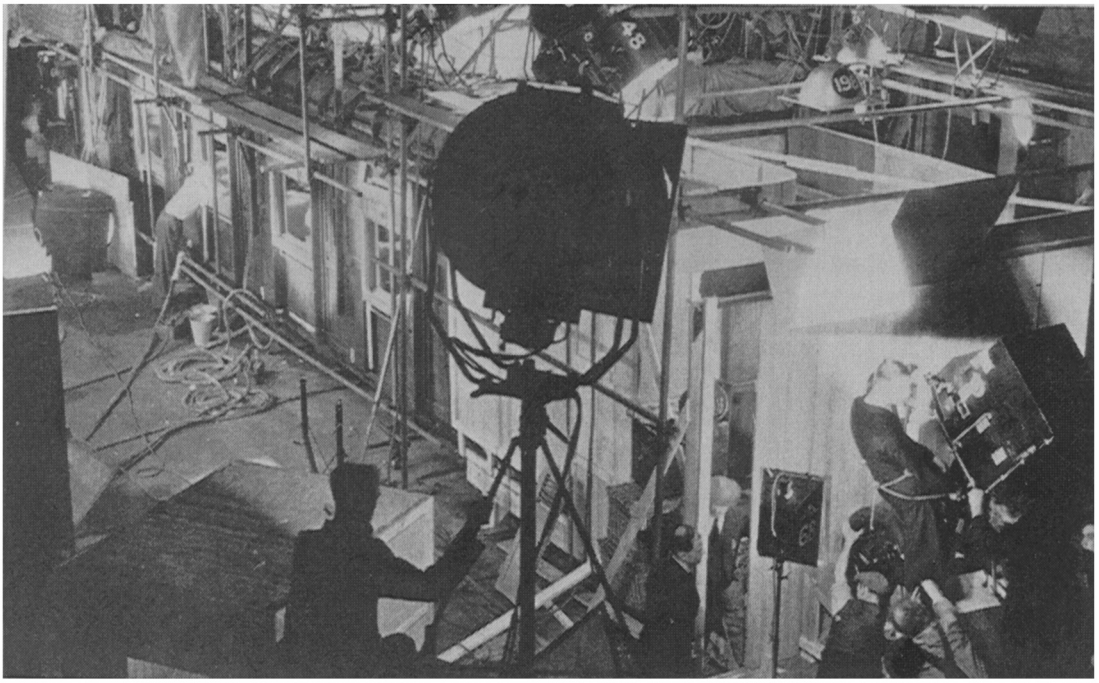
LOOKING ON THE BRIGHT SIDE
Archie Pitt persuaded Basil Dean to include this expensive set in Gracie Fields' third film. The two buildings moved unsteadily together across the Ealing stage until the lovers could embrace across the gap. Dean directed with Graham Cutts in 1932, and the art director was Clifford Pember.



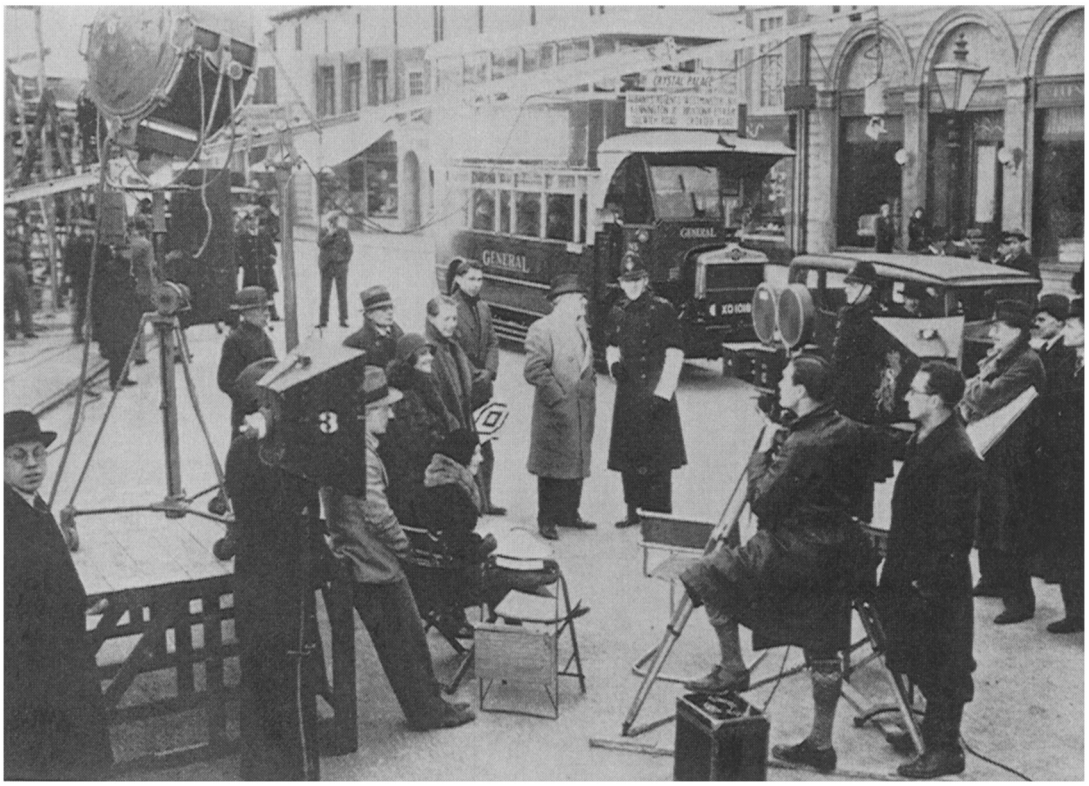


A HONEYMOON ADVENTURE

More to Dean's liking were films shot on location. Benita Hume and Harold Huth are in the grounds of Dalcross Castle, Inverness, in this 1931 film.



ROME EXPRESS
The railway carriage, wall and platform built at Shepherd's Bush in 1932 for a film whose action almost all took place on a train. Directed by Walter Forde, art director Andrew Mazzei.



JACK'S THE BOY
Jack Hulbert as a policeman on the lot at Welwyn in 1932. Director Walter Forde, art director Vetchinsky, cameraman Leslie Rowson; a Gainsborough film.

THE GOOD COMPANIONS

In a cosy English boarding house the touring concert artistes toast the troupe – Denis Hoey, Marjorie Binner, John Gielgud, Percy Parsons, A. W. Baskcomb, Mary Glynne, Edmund Gwenn, Jessie Matthews, Viola Compton and Jack Hawkins. Victor Saville directed this important Gaumont-British film at Shepherd's Bush in 1932. Art director Alfred Junge.

THE GOOD COMPANIONS

The concert party in action, in the film of J. B. Priestley's bestseller.

found life less rewarding, but later memoirs and recollections of those directly involved in production convey no sense of injustice but instead a perverse pride in how hard they had to work, and the flexibility with which they helped each other and met the demands of their jobs. Despite this, by the end of the decade they were almost entirely unionised. Being comparatively few in number they were easy to organise, and under the leadership of a keen left-wing group rapidly became an articulate and effective radical union. They were soon in a position to demand an elaborate scale of hours, pay and conditions, and manning levels and job demarcation which were later to prove costly to a British film industry always threatened with economic disaster. Two things boosted support for the new union: first the large number of refugee film makers from Nazi Europe working in British studios, and later the production slump of 1937–8.

In the early part of 1933 a group of Gaumont-British technicians, including the editor Sidney Cole, fell into the habit of meeting at a cafe in Shepherd's Bush to discuss film matters. According to R. J. Minney[12] it was at first simply a select band of top technicians without union aspirations. Adopting the name of the Association of Studio Workers, soon changed to the Association of Cine-Technicians, it turned into a more formal organisation, at first under the colourful and slightly disreputable Captain Cope, and then with help from Tom O'Brien became a fully-fledged trade union and met for the first time as such in February 1934.

At this meeting the employment of aliens in British studios was one of the chief topics, and it is ironic, if understandable, that throughout the thirties a constant refrain running through the deliberations of this very left-wing body was a desire to prevent European film makers, many of them refugees from Nazism, being freely employed in British studios. It was suggested that if the union had a register of members it would be less easy for employers to obtain a work permit for a foreigner by telling the Ministry of Labour that no British technician was available.[13] The exodus from Hitler's Europe from 1933 onwards included many well-known film makers and Michael Balcon and the Ostrers, among others, with their experience of Anglo-European co-production, were glad to take advantage of the presence of experienced directors, cameramen and designers. In 1933 and early 1934 there were between twenty and thirty working in British studios, most of them for Gaumont-Gainsborough, Korda and BIP. As many as ten were at Shepherd's Bush. The union's aims as published in *Kine Year Book* in 1934, while largely those of a craft guild concerned to safeguard standards and employment, included the phrase 'To check foreign employment if a Britisher is available capable of undertaking the work required by the Company'.

Starting with 98 members in 1933, the AC-T grew rapidly and numbered 605 by the end of 1935. Membership fluctuated, however, owing to the irregularity of employment in films. Not all technicians were on contract as some were employed on a picture-to-picture basis, a practice the union

was not able to eradicate during the thirties. Membership included cameramen, editors, sound technicians, and members of the art and scenario departments and labs. A newsreel section was being formed in late 1935. George Elvin became General Secretary in January 1935, introduced by his brother Harold Elvin, a film enthusiast. George Elvin, son of the trade unionist and later President of the TUC. H. H. Elvin, had been Honorary Secretary of the British Workers' Sports Association and was a professional trade union organiser. Thorold Dickinson and Ivor Montagu became vice-presidents, and with backing from Labour Party supporters like Sidney Bernstein and the Ostrers the union was on its way. Its politics were further to the left than those of either the ETU or NATKE. Elvin himself was a Labour supporter but Sidney Cole and two of the most influential members, Ralph Bond and Ivor Montagu, were communists. Montagu, member of a wealthy and titled banking family, was a talented film maker who worked on Gaumont's *Wings Over Everest* in the summer of 1933 and soon became a key member of Balcon's production team. He and Bond, a documentary film maker, had together organised the import and distribution of the great Soviet silent films. Under a professional trade union organiser the union became more suave, changing its rather frank remark about foreigners' work permits to a discreet clause about 'Consultation with Authorities on employment of foreign technicians', and they succeeded in setting up an official employment bureau licenced annually by the LCC.

The resentment felt against aliens continued to be a unifying factor. In November 1935 the General Council issued a protest at the number of foreign technicians engaged in Britain and set up a committee to investigate it. The next spring a deputation, which included Elvin, Desmond Dickinson and Sidney Cole, complained to the Ministry of Labour that at any one time about a hundred foreign technicians exclusive of resident aliens were at work in Britain, standing in the way of promising British talent and causing unemployment. The following year it was claimed that 122 foreign technicians had applied for work permits in 1935 and all but 12 had been granted.

The figure of 110 permits must presumably refer to all forms of production, including, for example, short films and the colour advertising films of Dr Gaspar. As far as mainstream feature films made during the course of 1935 are concerned, examination of screen credits reveals that some 55 senior European film makers and 25 non-Europeans, mostly American, worked on them. Americans had always been employed in Britain, most of them not of top rank and not attracting any resentment from British film makers. It was the Ostrer policy of appointing Europeans to top jobs which had given the AC-T its rallying call, and this grew in strength as time went by and Korda's Hungarians and others, as well as Max Schach's less impressive but equally showy associates, seemed to dominate production. It became a bitter joke that to get a job in British films you only needed a foreign accent. Xenophobia was not the current

sentiment in British left-wing circles, which were sympathetic to refugees from Nazism. But when the union complained, as it did in 1935, that not all foreign imports were able to pass their knowledge on to their British juniors because of language difficulties, and said in its 1939 report that 'refugees' blocked British promotion, it was clear that it was the Europeans, not the Americans, who were under attack.

The union continued to expand in 1936, taking part in the Moyne discussions, and had 1,200 members by the end of the year, claiming that this was almost 100 per cent of studio technicians. At the end of 1936 the union prepared a set of demands for selected studios which included a normal 48-hour week, overtime, two weeks paid holiday a year, sickness pay, 50 per cent of the money received by the studio for their services when hired to other studios and a £1 15s 0d minimum for juniors. At the end of December the first studio agreement was signed for a trial period of six months, predictably enough with Gaumont-British at Shepherd's Bush. This did not follow the terms of the standard demands but covered minimum rates for camera staff, sound editing, stills and continuity personnel and some of those in the sound department, and dealt with such matters as late work, location work, travelling expenses, termination of employment, holidays and sickness pay. The terms were in no way remarkable but it was a beginning, although in fact Shepherd's Bush closed down before the six months was up and was to remain shut for two and a half years.

At the same time AC-T turned its attention to the laboratory workers and in November 1936 asked the printing and lab companies for a meeting. The request was turned down. The next spring the union claimed that district meetings of lab members had promised support and the General Council now threatened action. Their demands included a 44-hour week spread over 5½ days, with overtime and night rates, limits on how many hours could be worked continuously, provision for travelling expenses when public transport was not running, and adequate wage fixing, with an average basic wage of £3 10s 0d. In May 1937 the AC-T met the employers' representatives under Neville Kearney's chairmanship and the proposals were circulated.

A month later, as we have seen, the AC-T signed an agreement with NATKE for mutual support and joint action. A joint consultative committee was formed as a result of which the Film Industry Employees' Council was set up in the autumn, with O'Brien as president and Elvin as secretary. It soon represented not only the AC-T and NATKE but also the ETU, the British Association of Film Directors, which was still in existence although not active, the Film Artistes' Association, representing mainly small-part players, and the newly formed Screenwriters' Association. Ivor Montagu was on the Council. Trade union forces had been strengthened in June by the appointment to the post of President of the AC-T of another member of an aristocratic family with many useful contacts, Anthony Asquith.

The FIEC claimed to represent 10,000 people engaged in film production,

and it was felt that national collective bargaining was in sight. The official figure of those working in film production at the time was given in the Board of Trade Production Census late in 1938,[14] which put the number in the week ending 16 October 1937 at 9,529.* But 4,125 of these were artistes, who in fact were not yet very highly organised, and it was the other 5,404 who constituted the FIEC's real strength.

At the time there was considerable unemployment in the industry. The protracted discussions about the forthcoming quota legislation had led to great uncertainty and many companies were waiting to see what sort of production would be possible. At the same time a crisis of confidence among investors in the City contributed to the fall in production. In November 1937 Thorold Dickinson, with Anthony Asquith, Tom O'Brien and the cameraman Henry Harris representing labour and with Maurice Elvey representing the directors, formed an AC-T deputation to R. A. Butler, Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Labour, to protest about the current unemployment in the film industry. Once more opposition to alien technicians played its part. Claiming that the number of unemployed members of the AC-T had risen from 40 to 200 in twelve months (which would have been 16 per cent of the membership of 1,200 previously mentioned), they sought a ruling that only one foreign technician might be employed on a film unless equivalent British technicians were also employed.

Nothing was done and unemployment continued to get worse, and early in 1938 the FIEC held a protest meeting at Gatti's restaurant in London which unanimously urged the government to amend the Films Bill in order to ensure production workers continuity of work and better pay and conditions. They referred to unemployment of 80 per cent among production workers, although it was not explained how this figure was reached. At the time many studios were closed, although this situation did not last. Shepherd's Bush remained closed, but most reopened after two or three months, when the new legislation came into being. However, production did not return to its former level, because changes in the quota laws had killed the quota quickie. The new system resulted in better, but fewer, films. But the labour unions were naturally more concerned with the volume of employment than with the quality of production.

The only response to Labour's request that regulation of conditions and pay be included in the Quota Act had been Section 34, which laid down that pay and conditions of employment in the film industry were not to be inferior to those in government employment. Shortly after it came into force this led to trouble. Because of the slump Pinebrook had been formed in January 1938 with plans for six £20,000 films to be made on a co-operative basis, with some of the participants working for low salaries and waiting

* In the Board of Trade evidence to the Moyne Committee it was stated that the only available evidence of the numbers actually engaged in production up to that time, 1936, was the 1931 Census of Population, which put the number at just over 6,000 excluding artistes and those out of work.