



**STEVE  
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**THE  
British 'B' Film**



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Steve Chibnall & Brian McFarlane



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(back) Phyllis Calvert discovers she is in a 'B' film (*A Lady Mislaid*, David MacDonald, 1958, Welwyn Studios)  
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This has turned out to be a rather big book about a lot of small movies. It has been completed during difficult circumstances in both our lives and has acted as solace and distraction. Those nearest and dearest to us are no doubt as relieved as we are, however, that it has been finally put to bed. We thank them for their patience and support, and Rebecca Barden at BFI/Palgrave for her enthusiastic backing of the project. Finally, we thank Rona Anderson, Queen of the British Bs, for so readily agreeing to write the Foreword to the book.

We dedicate this work to Geraldine McFarlane and Paola Merli.

## Foreword

Growing up in Edinburgh in the 1930s, I was an avid film fan. We had a veritable feast on a Saturday afternoon, with a newsreel, a cartoon and then a double feature, with a 'B' movie before the interval. When I was actually involved in 'B' features in the 1950s, no one took them seriously because they were churned out in three weeks. But the very fact that they *were* made quickly was the result of everyone concerned being so experienced. They knew what they were doing and there was no waste of time or money.

It's great to have a book about them now, and fifty years later they often look sharp and entertaining. They made their points and moved on. If, like me, you were married and had children, the idea of three weeks' work was very attractive as you weren't away from home for too long – you lived at home and certainly never went on location as that would have been far too expensive!

Once you were on the sound stages, they were all pretty much the same, cold and draughty. Merton Park, squeezed into a suburban street, was probably the smallest, but the method of working was the same in them all: arrive at 6am for hair and make-up, then a welcome break for tea and bread-and-dripping, a great favourite with the crew – and me. It set you up for the day, which finished at 6pm.

The second feature was often a training-ground for new directors, and I had the pleasure of working on some of the earliest films of Ken Hughes, John Guillermin and Wolf Rilla who all went on to bigger things. I also had some smashing leading men, like John Bentley, Guy Rolfe (a demon at cards), Dennis Price (suave and sophisticated) and those charmers, Robert Beatty and Dermot Walsh. There were as well two nice Americans, Richard Carlson and Richard Conte; a Hollywood actor gave the film added kudos.

I wish we could see more of these films today as those we do see on television so often look better than we thought at the time. I was mostly playing 'Joan' or 'Mary', forever being polite and helpful, but sometimes, as in *The Black Rider* with Jimmy Hanley, I was allowed to pull on trousers and jump on the back of a motor-bike. I loved that. Looking back, I think what a great lark it all was – and what a great life.

Rona Anderson  
February 2009

## Preface

American Producer (Richard Basehart): 'You know as well as I do that the little picture is finished.'

British Studio Boss (Roger Livesey): 'Perhaps I shouldn't have out-lived it.'

*The Intimate Stranger* (1956), scr. Howard Koch (as Peter Howard),  
d. Joseph Losey (as Joseph Walton)

There is no reason at all why small pictures should not be good pictures.

*The Cinema Studio*<sup>1</sup>

Pinewood, late September 1960: a watershed moment. Something is happening here that tells us so much about the relationship between British cinema and Hollywood. Everywhere there are swords and sandals, tunics and togas, pyramids and palm trees, megaphones and mega-structures. 20th Century-Fox has taken over England's premier studios to make the lavish epic, *Cleopatra* (1963), the most expensive movie ever shot there, or anywhere else in the country. The studios' back-lot has been transformed into ancient Alexandria, but it is really the future we are witnessing: the increasing use of British facilities to make Hollywood's 'runaway' productions for international markets. But in a tiny corner of the great studios, on Stage G, the past *can* actually be seen. Space has somehow been found for a small unit under old-Etonian, Alfred Shaughnessy, to make a creepy picture about a pantomime dame who is not quite what he seems. This is a species of British film-making whose days are truly numbered. This is a 'B' film. Here there is no Technicolor, no CinemaScope and no Stereophonic Sound; just monochrome, academy ratio and monaural music. Appropriately enough, this Bryanston production is called *The Impersonator* (1961), because if *Cleopatra* is the real McCoy, then this is merely an impersonation. *Cleo* boasts the giant talents of Elizabeth Taylor, Richard Burton and Rex Harrison among its cast of thousands, while Shaughnessy's supporting feature can muster only John Crawford, Jane Griffiths, John Salew and Patricia Burke – hardly household names. A million pounds has been spent on Liz Taylor's mighty epic before the cameras even roll. *The Impersonator* has a miniscule budget of £23,000, and its sixty-four minutes will be shot in three weeks. In twice that time, *Cleopatra* will record only eleven useable minutes of film before aborting the whole Pinewood venture and de-camping to Rome.<sup>2</sup>

As the sun sets over Alexandria, Shaughnessy's unit moves outside and dresses the back gate of the Studios to represent the entrance to an American Air Force base in the North of England. There are barely enough lamps to illuminate the setting, but Shaughnessy and his cinematographer, John Coquillon, take advantage of the flood of ambient light created by the night shoot on the adjoining

Alexandria Harbour set. It is a situation emblematic of the relationship of dependence and subordination that exists between the humble British second feature and the sort of production – over-paid, over-sexed and over here – that it is designed to support. ‘We were very much the poor relations during those three weeks at Pinewood,’ recalled Shaughnessy, ‘struggling on a low budget and shooting at great speed with much enforced economy.’<sup>3</sup> They were struggling, he might have added, to recreate a little piece of the USA on that cosmopolitan back-lot, to generate enough signifiers of American culture to make their film acceptable to the transatlantic audiences needed to ensure profitability.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, problematic Anglo-American relations is one of the main themes of *The Impersonator*. The northern society it depicts is one with an American garrison whose personnel are accused of being ‘noisy’, ‘chasing skirt’ and ‘throwing their money around’. The judgment of one local woman is that ‘All Americans are gangsters’, while the film’s cute kid (eight-year-old John Dare) would prefer them all to be cowboys. In the end, however, it is the American sergeant, falsely accused of murder, who is the hero, and the British masquerader, the perverse pantomime dame, who is the villain of the piece. In *The Impersonator*, as at Pinewood during its filming, the brash, confident and affluent Americans are encamped on British soil, determined to be the protagonists in the drama of its national cinema. Theirs is the economic power, and theirs will be most of the glory in the years to come. Low-budget local dramas like *The Impersonator* will soon be as outmoded as the pantomime dame. Within a year, the actor who played the eponymous role, John Salew, will be dead, and Alfred Shaughnessy will never direct another picture. When the curtain comes down – as it literally does – in the last frames of *The Impersonator*, it signals a wider finality. The black-and-white British ‘B’ film, which has supplied thirty years of indigenous supporting-feature entertainment and



Nothing like a dame: John Salew in *The Impersonator* (1961)

just about out-lived its American counterpart, is coming to a close. By the time the *Cleopatra* road-show ends its journey round the Odeons of Great Britain, few will ask the question 'What's on with it?' If they do, the answer is likely to be 'a few advertisements and a couple of trailers.'

Four decades later, some might say that it is not worth raising the curtain again on a minor film like *The Impersonator*, but in its day it was praised by those grand dames of film criticism Dilys Powell (*Sunday Times*) and Penelope Gilliat (*Observer*). In the cineaste journal the *Monthly Film Bulletin*, the reviewer hailed it as 'a second feature which has been thought about and worked on, and which shows it.'<sup>5</sup> Among the trade papers, *The Daily Cinema* found it an 'Exciting and neatly contrived mystery ... another feather in Bryanston's cap.'<sup>6</sup> As Shaughnessy himself commented: 'I have always believed that lavish sets, huge crowds and great stars in expensive costumes are no substitute for originality, visual imagination and a good script.'<sup>7</sup> *The Impersonator* was certainly one of the better examples of its class, but it was by no means unique among its peers. So now, perhaps, it is time to ask the question 'What *was* on with all those big-budget movies that dominate our notions of cinema history?', and to chart the rise and fall of the British second feature. The first ten years of this story – covering the consequences of the 'Quota' Acts in the 1920s and 1930s – has already been told in Steve Chibnall's *Quota Quickies*.<sup>8</sup> Now, in this book, we will examine what type of 'B' pictures the combination of cultural policy, production economics and audience demand brought forth in the years of war, austerity and 'affluence' between 1940 and 1965. We will address the issues of who made these films, under what conditions, with what results. What were they like, who wrote them, who starred in them and what sort of image did they present of the society in which they were filmed? What, in short, is the big picture as far as these small pictures are concerned?

# 1 Big Ships and Little Ships

## The Bs at War

To my mind it is nothing short of sacrilege to see a great picture massacred in the public interest by having to associate it with tripe contained in a totally unnecessary second feature.

Teddy Carr, United Artists' executive<sup>1</sup>

The early months of World War II, the period of the 'phony war', created confusion and uncertainty among Britain's film producers and distributors who wondered if cinemas would be closed down, studios requisitioned and personnel conscripted. It was a difficult time for planning investments, but at least there were films on the floor, or in the pipeline awaiting release. None of these were yet commonly termed 'B films'. Lower-budget productions were generally referred to as 'programmers' or 'second features'. The latter, usually forty-five minutes to an hour in length, were unpretentious films designed to occupy a supporting position on the double bills that most cinemas favoured, changing them either weekly or, more usually, twice weekly. Cinemas would hire these supporting films at a modest flat rate, usually as part of a package offered by the distributor. Only a lucky few would be exported to overseas markets. The 'programmer' was a film lasting over an hour that offered flexibility to cinema programme-builders. It might play as a supporting feature at the picture palaces owned by the three major circuits – Odeon, Gaumont British and ABC – but it might also be strong enough to be billed as a main attraction or a 'co-feature' in the independent houses that constituted the majority of cinemas throughout the 1940s and 1950s. If so, its makers and distributors would be entitled to a percentage of box-office takings. It might also be offered for overseas distribution. This meant that a programmer could afford a budget that was higher than that of a humble second feature.

After 1927, film distribution and exhibition in Britain was regulated by protectionist legislation that imposed a 'quota' of screen time for home-produced films, often termed 'quota pictures.'<sup>2</sup> Exhibitors were required to devote a set minimum percentage of their programmes to British-registered product, and distributors (renters), including those owned by Hollywood studios, were expected to offer their customers a slightly higher percentage of British footage. Following widespread complaints that American renters had been discharging their quota obligations by making or commissioning inferior, deliberately loss-making pictures contemptuously called 'quota quickies', the most recent Films Act had raised the minimum cost criterion for films to qualify as 'renters' quota'. Consequently, Hollywood's British subsidiaries were more or less obliged to distribute indigenous programmers, rather than more cheaply made second features, as only these were likely to be expensive enough to count as renters' quota and thus allow the distribution of their American movies. British

producers, on the other hand, were usually free to make cheap second features that would qualify for 'exhibitors' quota' only.

There might have been 'a war on, you know', but the quota regulations were still in force and, come hell or high explosive, British films would continue to be exhibited. To begin with, both British and American distributors emptied the shelves of their stockrooms. Among the releases from English renters like Associated British and British Lion were a proportion of programme pictures and second features. Associated British had Herbert Brenon's *The Flying Squad* (1940), a second adaptation of the Edgar Wallace story, in the pipeline. It featured Sebastian Shaw as a dashing copper, with strong support from Jack Hawkins and Phyllis Brooks, the sort of Hollywood import who would become a commonplace in British second features after the war. As its production base was at Elstree, one of the first studios to be requisitioned for war production, Associated British was obliged to turn to alternative sources for product. Ealing supplied a sentimental Robert Stevenson film in which Clive Brook was appropriately cast as a British actor returning incognito from Hollywood to a seaside town. Its nostalgic title, *Return to Yesterday*, must have summed up the wishful thoughts of its audience in the early months of 1940. Much grittier and more memorable was Ealing's *The Proud Valley* (1940), a superior programmer in which a rich-voiced Paul Robeson sacrificed his life for others down a Welsh mine. The film had gone into production just before the outbreak of war, and its ending had been re-tailored to the needs of wartime propaganda.<sup>3</sup> The director was Pen Tennyson, a promising talent who sadly would not outlast the war, and the film was judged 'Good, but somewhat depressing, entertainment' by *Film Report*, the booking guide of the Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association (CEA).<sup>4</sup>

British Lion distributed two old-fashioned melodramas from one of the leading quota-quickie producers, George King, who was gradually beginning to raise his aspirations. *The Chinese Bungalow* (1940) was a workmanlike adaptation of the stage play, previously filmed in 1931. A steamy tale of death and adultery on an oriental plantation, it starred Paul Lucas in oriental make-up and Kay Walsh. *Crimes at the Dark House* (1940), based on Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White*, was another in the long line of Tod Slaughter blood-and-thunder melodramas. Slaughter gave his customary fruity portrayal of Victorian villainy as the dastardly rascal who is masquerading as the knight he has murdered. *The Cinema* trade magazine described it as 'truly an uncompromising tale of unbridled wickedness'.<sup>5</sup>

As for the American distributors, MGM, Columbia and United Artists confined their activities to making or handling first features. Those still in the business of distributing programmers and second features searched their vaults to find any quota pictures that had been buried there. RKO unearthed two 'quickies' made four years earlier. Alfred Goulding's *Honeymoon Merry-Go-Round* (1940), a Claude Hulbert and Monty Banks farce, was set in Switzerland. Although it did have an early minor performance by the now-popular Sally Gray, critical opinion was scathing.<sup>6</sup> The second film, *The Mysterious Mr Davis* (1940), starred the once-popular Henry Kendall, and had been written, produced and directed by the French film-maker Claude Autant-Lara. It also had an early performance by a rising star, in this case Alastair Sim, but its comedy was no less feeble than *Honeymoon Merry-Go-Round*'s. 20th Century-Fox also looked at what was gathering dust in its basement and discovered something rather more interesting, William Cameron Menzies' gangster film *Four Dark Hours*, a second feature which had been made in 1937. While wartime reviewers were unimpressed, this film, re-titled *The Green Cockatoo* (1940), had quite a lot going for it: a cast that included John Mills, Robert Newton and Rene Ray, photography by Mutz Greenbaum, and a script by Graham

Greene. It deserved better treatment, but when it was finally released critics were hungry for material that was more contemporary. They were a little kinder on Fox's more recent production, Harry Lachman's *They Came By Night* (1940), an off-the-shelf jewel-thieves drama, starring Will Fyffe. However, it was scripted by Frank Launder and Sidney Gilliat, and was significant for introducing Phyllis Calvert in her first starring role.

Warner Bros.'s production factory at Teddington also had a string of programmers awaiting release or in production. Roy William Neill's thrillers, *His Brother's Keeper* (with screen debutant Clifford Evans as a stage sharp-shooter and the glamorous Tamara Desni as a gold-digging blues singer) and *Murder Will Out* (which teamed the popular John Loder and Jane Baxter) had been completed before the outbreak of the war. So too had Herbert Mason's *Dr O'Dowd*, an Irish medical melodrama with a cast that boasted a bevy of future stars like Patricia Roc and Peggy Cummins. Even Warner's films entering general distribution in the traumatic summer of 1940 continued to be set in a world with no sign of the war. There was little topicality in David Macdonald's *The Midas Touch*, adapted from Margaret Kennedy's novel, and a stagey and far-fetched melodrama that largely squandered the talents of Barry K. Barnes and Judy Kelly. One indignant Welsh viewer, who praised *The Proud Valley* as a true representation of the 'British scene and temperament', complained that *The Midas Touch* was 'a flagrant copy of American stuff' and was simply 'the latest British film to drive me out of the cinema, seemingly oblivious to the fact that it had been produced by an American company.'<sup>7</sup> Barnes was partnered by the vampish Greta Gynt in the more action-packed comedy drama *Two for Danger* (1940), directed by the tireless George King and scripted by Teddington's house writer, Brock Williams, again with scant awareness of prevailing conditions.<sup>8</sup>

The first Teddington production to acknowledge contemporary circumstances was Redd Davis's spy comedy, *That's the Ticket* (1940). It showcased Sid Field's first starring role, but was strictly for the easily amused, and rather too crude for the critics: 'The chief ingredients of the picture are a perpetual "drunk", comedians dressed up as women and a mud-pie battle,' commented one, while another conceded that it might help audiences 'forget the blitzkrieg for an hour.'<sup>9</sup> There was rather more originality and social relevance in Warner's *The Briggs Family* (1940), the story of the problems of a lower-middle-class family in wartime. However, the realistic atmosphere created by director Herbert Mason in the domestic scenes was undercut by the more fantastical final courtroom sequence in which Pa Briggs (Edward Chapman), a lawyer's clerk, successfully defends his wayward son (Peter Croft), who is charged with burglary. A planned series based on the family was shelved.

RKO also updated its output with David Macdonald's *Law and Disorder* (1940), an espionage comedy drama featuring the thoroughly over-exposed Barry K. Barnes, who had three films released in the first three months of 1940. Here, he could do little to combat weak direction, stock characterisation and pulp-fiction plotting. At Paramount British, *Spy for a Day* (1940) was a topical comedy vehicle for Duggie Wakefield, who played a shy farm hand who becomes a war hero after being abducted by German agents and foiling their plot. The film was lifted slightly above the run of second features by the feel for comedy of its director, Mario Zampi.

If anything, British distributors were even slower to adapt their supporting features to the requirements of propaganda. Grand National offered a more-lavish-than-usual programmer *Room for Two* (1940), directed by Maurice Elvey continuing his career on the margins of top-flight cinema. As a vehicle for Winston Churchill's son-in-law the 'violin-playing comic' Vic Oliver (supported by the glamour of Frances Day and Greta Gynt), it might have been expected to do well. Unfortunately, it

was overtaken by events when the romance of its Venetian setting was undercut by Italy's entry into the war.<sup>10</sup> British Lion took a year before it did its bit with the rousing featurette *John Smith Wakes Up* (1940), depicting the nightmare of a London bookshop owner (Elliott Makeham) who imagines that the spirit of Nazism has infected English life. He dreams that his son has denounced him to the regime, which orders his books to be burned, and realises that he needs to be more determined in the defence of freedom. The CEA's *Film Report*, however, was uneasy with this sort of unadulterated propaganda in an entertainment film: 'The play is naive in conception and there seems little point in the whole business, except to ram home what we are all agreed upon, i.e. that freedom is worth fighting for. Such an ideal does not need the vapourings of a disordered brain to point the moral.'<sup>11</sup> The down-market distributor Equity British almost prided itself on providing entertainment divorced from the serious concerns of the moment. Its sepia-tinted Leslie Fuller and Wally Patch comedy, *Two Smart Men* (1940), made by quota-quickie veteran Widgey Newman at M. P. Studios, Boreham Wood, was announced as 'an unsophisticated comedy tuned to the demands of present-day audiences', with 'no direct or indirect reference to the war in the entire picture.'<sup>12</sup> Newman reluctantly acknowledged the war in his next film, *Henry Steps Out* (1940), the story of a waster (George Turner) who is ordered to join the army by his tyrannical wife (Margaret Yarde) but fortuitously lands a job as a bathroom orderly at an ATS camp. Wally Patch was in it again, just as he seemed to be in every comedy at the time.

The Government, however, could see no particular use in the war effort for this sort of independent production, which simply clogged up the supporting programme and reduced space for Ministry of Information (MoI) films and other worthy material. World War II offered the burgeoning British documentary film movement a unique opportunity not simply to cement its place in the national cinema but to achieve a position of aesthetic dominance by associating itself with the urgent hopes and desires of the country. As Dickinson and Street have commented:

Documentary film-makers became more influential than they were ever to be again. The magazine *Documentary News Letter* provided a platform for their views on information, propaganda and film policy. They took an increasing interest in the controversies surrounding government policy towards the entertainment industry, and were for many reasons practically less isolated from their colleagues in features than they were before or after the war. Because of the increased demand for documentary films and the shortage of facilities for making features, most of the feature companies turned partly to making factual shorts for the Ministry of Information. The shortage of technicians further encouraged an exchange of labour between the studios and documentary companies.<sup>13</sup>

As far as supporting features, were concerned, the interests of Government and of American film producers in Britain were in accord. Hollywood companies were phasing out 'B' pictures in order to concentrate on films with maximum international appeal, while the Government were not only keen to use more of cinema supporting programmes for propaganda, but happy for Hollywood companies operating in England to make exportable films with that proportion of their earnings that they were now obliged to reinvest in British production. The Films Act was duly amended to encourage the production of bigger films that might be saleable in overseas markets.<sup>14</sup> Warners and 20th Century-Fox responded immediately by announcing a change in production policy in favour of larger pictures.<sup>15</sup> The last of the Warner's low-budget programmers was Herbert Mason's *Fingers* (1940), a very slight

tale of an East End jewellery fence (Clifford Evans) who tries to follow a West End girl (Leonora Corbett) into high society before realising he has made a mistake and returning to the working-class girl (Elizabeth Scott) who loves him. Warner's billed it as the tale of 'an affair that makes Mayfair gasp and the East End rock', but the CEA's *Film Report* called it 'an artificial story, crudely told'.<sup>16</sup>

The primary responsibility for supplying quota supporting features passed for the first time to British distributors. By and large, it was not a responsibility that they were either prepared for or able to honour. While a handful of second features were made in the first year of the war, the supply became increasingly scarce as the hostilities continued. No British second features were trade-shown in the first half of 1941, until Pathé released the first of its wartime *Pathétone Parade* compilations at the end of June. The Gaumont circuit, desperately short of programmers, even screened the Australian comedy *Dad Rudd MP* (1941) and pressed the latest in the popular *Old Mother Riley* series into service as a support. In the absence of conventional supporting material, British distributors increasingly embraced their patriotic duty by handling the work of Ministry of Information, Crown and armed forces film units.<sup>17</sup> They were encouraged by enthusiastic reviews in all sections of the press. Harry Watt's 'super support', *Target for Tonight* (1941), described by *Picture Show* simply as 'the real thing', was screened on both the Odeon and Gaumont circuits.<sup>18</sup> *Picture Show* added that the film,

is so thrilling that one's interest is held from start to finish so completely that one resents the slightest sound that interrupts one's thoughts. ... This is a film to make every man and woman of the British Empire proud to belong to it and proud of the men Churchill described in his never-to-be-forgotten speech as the few to whom so many owed so much.<sup>19</sup>

Documentarist Donald Taylor of Strand Films was in no doubt about the meaning of the success of Watt's picture:

In 1941 the documentary came into its own. This once-despised theory of film-making has produced more films than ever before, with a wider exhibition than ever before, and the humble, one-reel instructional film has grown up until an epic like *Target for To-Night* has made certain a general acceptance of the documentary method by the public. It is proving the contention that, once documentary went before the public on a large scale, it would have an immediate and universal appeal.<sup>20</sup>

The following year, the documentary cemented its position on the cinema programme. British Lion handled Humphrey Jennings' legendary Crown Film Unit (CFU) short, *Listen to Britain* (1942).<sup>21</sup> Associated British distributed Compton Bennett's Fleet Air Arm tribute *Find, Fix and Strike*, made by Ealing, and Pat Jackson's highly acclaimed CFU featurette, *Ferry Pilot* (both 1942), billed as 'The story of the "Back Room Boys" who make *Target for Tonight* possible'. As the *Documentary News Letter* (*DNL*) commented, the film suggests 'that friendly people, with a sense of humour and a deep love of their craft, may be no less efficient than the grim automata beloved of Nazi ideologists'.<sup>22</sup> The reference was to the men shown in the film, but the comment might apply equally to the documentarists who made it. The *DNL* was even more enthusiastic about Renown's *The Harvest Shall Come* (1942), Max Anderson's dramatisation of four decades in the tough and poorly rewarded lives of farm labourers, filmed in Suffolk with John Slater in the leading role:

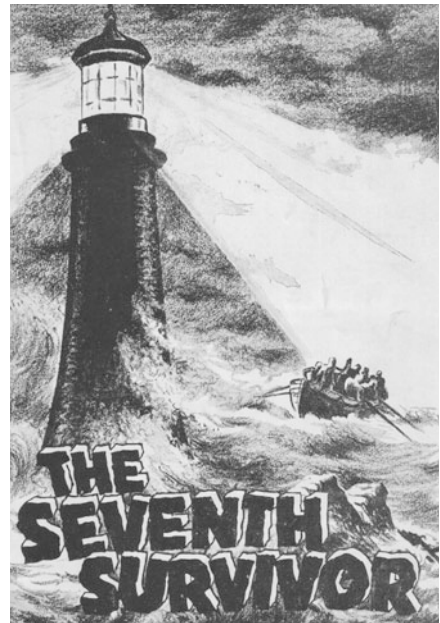
[It] marks one of documentary's most significant steps forward. It is the first genuine story film made with the documentary purpose and by documentary method ... There are no false situations and there are none of the story twists so dear to the hearts of our professional scriptwriters ... The story is fiction, but it reflects the life of every British farm labourer and is heart-tearing in its sincerity and in the power of its deliberate under-statement ... There is a lack of technical polish about the film which only adds to its quality as a rugged documentary.<sup>23</sup>

This now largely forgotten 'rugged documentary', which eschewed pictorial lyricism and rural romanticism in favour of stark verisimilitude, thus pointed a potential new direction for the supporting feature, a road ultimately not taken.

GFD distributed the Army Film Unit's hour-long *Desert Victory* (1943), the morale-boosting record of Rommel's defeat in Libya, as well as Humphrey Jennings' CFU Civil Defence documentary *Fires Were Started* (1943).<sup>24</sup> Ealing took responsibility for distributing Jack Lee's CFU documentary *Close Quarters* (1943), an unvarnished seventy-five-minute account of the submarine war in the North Sea, as well as Jennings' *The Silent Village* (1943), an imaginative recreation of the Nazi atrocity at Lidice, Czechoslovakia, transposed to a Welsh mining community. The power of the latter film was such that the London paper the *Evening Standard* used its leader column to endorse the production: 'See this film, terrible in its terror, and be filled with holy hatred against the men perpetrating similar crimes every day their foul system festers in Europe.'<sup>25</sup>

While most distributors were increasingly happy to settle for these sophisticated documentaries as supports for their first features, a few companies continued to turn out conventional fiction programmers. The leading story in film production in the first years of World War II was the rise of British National (BN), the obscure company that had made *Turn of the Tide* (1935). It was the company with which J. Arthur Rank had begun his venture into cinema, but Rank had departed before the outbreak of the war, leaving British National to be taken forward by his friend, the wealthy widow, Lady Yule. With other producers wondering how to react to the changed conditions of wartime, BN seized the time and raised its standard at Elstree's Rock Studios, bringing others – like Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger – rallying round. Soon films were also being made for BN at Hammersmith's Riverside Studios, backed by distribution by Anglo-American. As well as bona fide 'A' features like *Gaslight* (1941) and *One of Our Aircraft is Missing* (1942), BN also made programmers. One of the first wartime offerings was *The Second Mr Bush* (1940), a simple-minded theatrical farce from which even a lively director like John Paddy Carstairs could squeeze little humour. An average of nine BN films were produced each year, many by independent film-makers working under the flag of BN. Rank would adopt a similar modus operandi – although on a somewhat grander scale – when he extended his exhibition and distribution empire into the production sector in the later war years. In fact, it was Rank's General Film Distributors (GFD) which released the Lady Yule-financed second feature, *The Man at the Gate* (1940, USA: *Man of the Sea*), a sort of follow-up to *Turn of the Tide*. Both films were directed by Norman Walker, were adaptations of stories by Leo Walmsley, and both featured Wilfred Lawson as the weather-beaten patriarch of a fishing family.<sup>26</sup> *The Man at the Gate* even recycled some of the footage from *Turn of the Tide*, but was more studio-bound and sentimental. It was clearly geared to the needs of the war effort, and dealt reassuringly with a mother's fears that her remaining son might be lost at sea. Its message, 'Put your hand in the hand of God', was one very much approved by J. Arthur Rank.

British National's head of production was John Baxter, a film-maker with a pedigree as a champion of working-class themes and everyday stories. During his time at BN, his productions increased in size and prestige, but he continued to value modest productions that were true to life. One trade advertisement during the launch of his film *The Shipbuilders* (1943) depicted his previous pictures as vessels in an Atlantic convoy with the positive and optimistic message: 'Big ships and little ships – each with a purpose – each with its cargo of entertainment – each manned by a British crew – each contributing to the experience that will enable bigger and better ships to be built in the years to come.'<sup>27</sup> Working in parallel with Baxter was the husband and wife partnership of Leslie and Elizabeth Hiscott, which made pictures for British National initially at Jack Buchanan's Riverside Studios. Their first venture was *Tilly of Bloomsbury*, a romantic comedy of class masquerade which went into production in January 1940. The second was the more topical *The Seventh Survivor* (1941), a spy drama (with plenty of comedy relief from Ronald Shiner and Wally Patch) set, like a number of wartime films, in a lighthouse – emblematic, one might argue, of Britain's isolated and beleaguered position as the light in the European darkness. The same formula was applied to the Hiscotts' third production, another nautical thriller, *Sabotage at Sea* (1942), made at Teddington, again with Shiner and Patch supplying comedy cameos. In spite of its preponderance of talk over action, *To-Day's Cinema* was happy to recommend the picture as a 'Very acceptable popular support.'<sup>28</sup> It was quickly followed by the complicated comedy thriller, *The Lady from Lisbon* (1942) with Jane Carr in the title role and similar endorsements from the trade reviewers: 'Elizabeth and Leslie Hiscott have turned out another commendable little offering here – a subject which earns praise for its ingenuity and the all-round quality of its production.'<sup>29</sup> By the time the Hiscotts produced the well-received comedy *The Butler's Dilemma* (1943), they had effectively moved beyond the supporting feature into co- and first-feature



Suspense beneath the revolving beam: trade advertisements for two lighthouse thrillers

territory. Critics judged this vehicle for the madcap antics of Richard Hearne funny enough to constitute an attraction in its own right.<sup>30</sup>

Associated British also distributed a couple of programmers in 1941–2. There was more espionage beneath a revolving beam in Lawrence Huntington's grim *Tower of Terror* (1941), filmed at Welwyn and on the island of Flatholm off the Welsh coast for the production company of John Argyle, another quota-quickie merchant with raised aspirations. As the title suggests, this film strove for an eerier atmosphere and packed more suspense than *The Seventh Survivor*, but, as *Film Report* complained, the story was 'naive and full of incredibilities', while most of the characters were 'artificial' and much of the action 'unconvincing'.<sup>31</sup> Its saving grace was Wilfred Lawson, perfectly cast as the half-demented lighthouse keeper. The trade reviewers were more enthusiastic about Huntington's *Suspected Person* (1942), a competently made, but ultimately dull, gangster yarn involving American mobsters on the trail of bank-robbery loot brought into Britain by an errant member of the gang. The cast was strong, with Clifford Evans as the marked man, future Gainsborough star Patricia Roc as his sister, Robert Beatty as a pursuing gangster and David Farrar as the Police Inspector, but it remains difficult to care about the fate of any of them.

The most regular producer of British programmers during the war years was Butcher's Film Service. The firm's head of production, F. W. Baker, was no stranger to wartime conditions. He had been working in the industry since the Boer War, and had produced the first British picture after the outbreak of hostilities in 1914. He repeated the feat in 1939 with Oswald Mitchell's *Jail Birds* (1940), a riotous comedy starring Albert Burdon and Charles Hawtrey escaping from prison in drag.<sup>32</sup> Patriotic as ever, Butcher's adapted the established comedy formats of its programmers to the wartime context. Oswald Mitchell directed *Sailors Don't Care* (1940), which chronicled the efforts of three keen but slow-witted tars on an Estuary Defence unit, who eventually succeed in catching a spy. The film was short of star appeal, but did include a young Michael Wilding. Mitchell's follow-up, *Pack Up Your Troubles* (1940), was another service comedy with character actors Reginald Purdell and Wylie Watson as a couple of accidental heroes, but the cast also included, Patricia Roc as an ATS girl. Roc also starred with Sebastian Shaw in the equally patriotic, but rather less typical for Butcher's, *Three Silent Men* (1940), a mystery concerning the death of a fifth columnist, which was directed by Daniel Birt.<sup>33</sup> Oswald Mitchell returned for the Albert Modley Home Guard comedy with songs, *Bob's Your Uncle* (1941), a sort of grandfather of television's *Dad's Army* (although considerably less rib-tickling) made at Welwyn Studios. There were more laughs in Maclean Rogers' *Front Line Kids* (1942), an occasion for Leslie Fuller's comic antics, which also drew attention to the problem of packs of unsupervised children running amok in towns and cities while their parents were engaged in war work. Here, however, the catapult-toting kids were mainly on the right side of the law, helping the police to round up a gang of blitz looters. The film is notable for Fuller's drag performance as 'Aida Down' during which he flirts with a vicar.<sup>34</sup> Rogers also directed two topical vehicles for the celebrity radio comics, Elsie and Doris Waters, but the popularity of the double-act was such that *Gert and Daisy's Weekend* (1941) and *Gert and Daisy Clean Up* (1942) played in most venues as main features.

It was back to large doses of Butcher's brand of rural sentimentality with Germain Burger's *Sheepdog of the Hills* (1941), set in Devon. Noting that this was a film for 'unsophisticated audiences', the *Film Report* commented: 'This is an old-fashioned story with a novelettish love interest and little effort has been made to brush it up to suit modern taste.'<sup>35</sup> Butcher's tried and tested entertainment formula was

explicitly stated in their hit melodrama *Danny Boy* (1941) when impresario Jack Newton (Wilfred Lawson) advises songstress Jane Kay (Ann Todd):

Always introduce something sentimental in the programme – that'll please any audience. It's funny how people enjoy themselves when they're crying. Look at my old Ma: unless she weeps a bucketful when she goes to the pictures, she isn't happy. As a matter of fact, I like a good cry myself sometimes. Some of the old numbers, they'll never die. For instance, 'The Tears of an old Irish Mother' ... and 'Danny Boy'.

By 1942, however, Butcher's had lost their production base at Nettlefold Studios, Walton-on-Thames, to the war effort, and the production of conventional low-budget pictures was becoming almost impossible. *Kinematograph Weekly's* Studio Survey noted:

Productions of superior quality are now the aim of all our companies and independents, who wish to make the most of facilities and materials, to say nothing of the stars available. This is all to the good, and perhaps we have seen the end of the 'quota quickie', which reduced the whole industry and made it the laughing stock of the British public – and Hollywood.<sup>36</sup>

A year later, British Studios had lost 50 per cent of their floor space and 80 per cent of their technicians. Only nine studios out of twenty-two were operational, and most of those had suffered bomb damage. George King pointed to an enormous increase in production costs that meant 'it is no longer a commercial proposition to make "programme" pictures', and therefore 'practically no second-features are now being made in this country'.<sup>37</sup>

### Production of Feature Films by Studio, 1940–2<sup>38</sup>

Studios	1940	1941	1942
Denham	8	15	14
Ealing	6	8	8
Gainsborough	2	–	4
Gaumont British	8	5	4
Highbury	2	1	1
Nettlefold's	8	1	–
Riverside	3	–	9
Rock	4	9	7
Warner's	3	5	6
Welwyn	3	7	7
Others	8	5	–
Total	55	56	60

Shortage of British films was clearly creating problems for independent exhibitors. In 1940–1, 25 per cent of cinemas failed to show the quota minimum of 17.5 per cent British material, although the overall figure achieved by all exhibitors was 23.4 per cent.<sup>39</sup> This indicated that, while the major circuits still enjoyed a surplus of British (mainly first-feature) product, the independents were struggling to find the cheaper films on which the fulfilment of their quota obligations depended. Prosecutions, however, were few and far between, and fines light.<sup>40</sup> In the 1941–2 period approximately 42 per cent of cinemas defaulted to some degree, but there was a recommendation for prosecution in less than 1 per cent of cases. The number of defaulters was significantly reduced the following year by a cut in the quota to 15 per cent and an increase in British film production, but very few of these films were the sort of bread-and-butter low-budget pictures that had previously been a staple of independent cinema programmes.

### Exhibitors' Quota Defaults, 1939–45

Year	Defaults	Prosecutions
1939–40	316	3
1940–1	1402	3
1941–2	1721	4
1942–3	846	2
1943–4	977	6
1944–5	1014	6

In fact, only nine films of this type (exhibitors' quota only) were registered in the quota year 1941–2, and, by September 1942, *The Cinema* was predicting that production of second features would decline further, and might cease altogether.<sup>41</sup> However, the trickle of supporting and co-features from the dwindling number of British studios still open for business began to be extensively supplemented in the spring of 1942 by a programme of quota re-issues from companies like International Film Renters. Their catalogue ranged from genuinely popular pre-war thrillers like *The Terror* (1938) and *Black Limelight* (1938) to more dubious quickies like *Queer Cargo* (1938). Some longer films made during the war were also cut down to a more convenient supporting-feature length and re-issued.<sup>42</sup> At the same time, though, the Board of Trade was having discussions with renters with a view to eliminating second features from cinema programmes entirely in the interest of conserving film stock.<sup>43</sup> In the end, however, the Board stopped short of issuing an order to this effect, but rationing of stock imposed pressure on the length of programmes, and the trade voluntarily offered to reduce the number of prints for second features.<sup>44</sup> Exhibitors reported considerable opposition from their patrons to any attempt to curtail the double-bill programme. At a meeting of the Devon and Cornwall CEA, for example, several members protested that 'if two feature films were not shown at their cinemas the people would go away disgusted'.<sup>45</sup> The question was: how could supporting features continue to be produced in the face of rising costs and unhelpful government policy?

The 1938 Films Act had divided films, for quota purposes, into five categories:

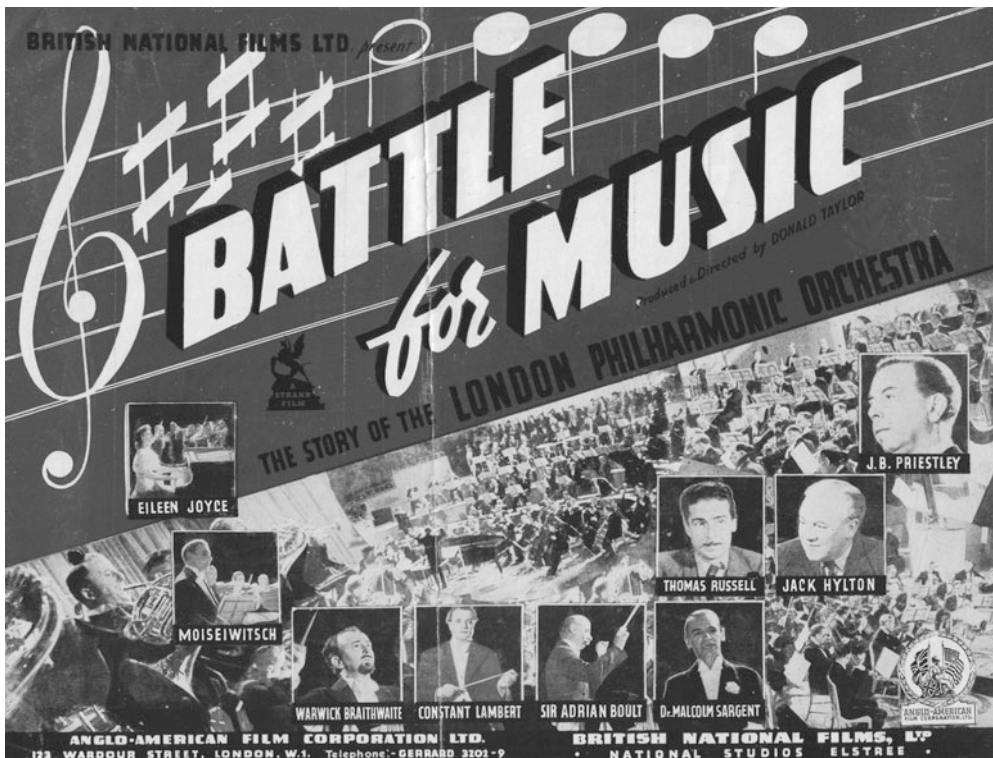
1. Shorts (under 3,000 feet)
2. Exhibitors' quota only long films (production costs of less than £15,000)
3. Single quota long films (usually costing £15,000–36,000)
4. Double quota long films (usually costing £36,000–75,000)
5. Treble quota long films (usually costing over £75,000)

An analysis conducted by the Cinematograph Films Council of receipts from films produced in 1937–8 indicated that it was considerably easier to make a profit on pictures costing less than £15,000, even though they were booked at a flat rate only, than on those that cost more than this, especially those that cost £15,000–36,000.<sup>46</sup> However, the negative costs of studio film-making virtually doubled between 1939 and 1943, making it particularly difficult to recoup outlays on a flat-rate basis. For those making films that qualified for exhibitors' quota only, the most viable option was to economise by making shorter pictures with running times slightly over the thirty-three minutes that enabled a film to be classified as 'long'. These would be the 'featurettes', the new 'quota quickies'.

Actually, the production of featurettes had already been recommended by the same Devon and Cornwall CEA branch that had opposed the abolition of the double feature. *Kinematograph Weekly* had immediately lent its support to the request for more four-reel films running for around forty-five minutes. This type of film, it was argued, would not only increase flexibility in programme-building, allowing time for informational material supplied by the newsreels and the MoI, but might have a positive effect on the quality of supporting features, eliminating padding and speeding up narratives.<sup>47</sup> Although producers were initially slow to respond to the call for featurettes, it would echo into the early post-war years to the eventual regret of many in the trade and beyond.

Before the war, three- and four-reel films in a variety of genres had been produced at the rate of approximately one per month. By 1939, however, the format was being used primarily for religious dramas and variety films like the *Pathétone Parade* series and Andrew Buchanan's *Hello Fame*. The latter, distributed by Exclusive in 1940, was a showcase for new talent, most of whom never saw their names in lights – the exceptions being Jean Carr (Kent) and Peter Ustinov. Hardly any featurettes were produced in the period 1940–1, but they began to make a return with Renown's first foray into film production, C. Pattinson-Knight's *Escape to Justice* (1942), made at Marylebone Studios. It was hardly an auspicious return as the CEA's *Film Report* condemned the picture as 'mediocre' with 'amateurish' acting and direction that was 'behind the times'.<sup>48</sup> Distributor E. J. Fancy searched the shelves of Wardour Street and found two pictures produced at Worton Hall Studios by Alfred D'Eyncourt and directed by Walter Tennyson that had been mouldering since 1939. *The Body Vanishes* was a rural whodunit starring Anthony Hulme, while *Mistaken Identity* was an unsophisticated comedy about a shy conjurer (Richard Goolden).<sup>49</sup> Neither release in 1942 did much to improve the reputation of the featurette as low budget and low quality, but change for the better was effected by the actuality work of Humphrey Jennings and by *The Volunteer* (1943), a dramatisation of the career of an ordinary recruit to the Fleet Air Arm (Pat McGrath), with a whimsical commentary by Ralph Richardson, made for the MoI by Powell and Pressburger. Documentary featurettes could be produced very quickly without professional actors, and released while events were still topical. They became a regular part of the armoury of the Crown Film Unit, but were also made by other production units such as the RAF's, which released its study of balloon ships, *Operational Height* (1943), via Butcher's.

As the war moved into its fourth and fifth years, British second features almost disappeared from the major circuits. The Gaumont circuit offered only one between 1943 and 1945. The occasional supporting feature or featurette, however, continued to be made. At British National, these were the work of Donald Taylor's Strand Films which effectively became a 'B' film unit within the larger organisation, producing sponsored and non-sponsored actuality films. The unit's screen versions of the popular radio quiz show *The Brains Trust* (1943), with a collection of pipe-puffing intellectuals seated round a table, was hardly imaginative cinema, but 10 million radio listeners guaranteed that the first film of the series would be a 'red-hot title attraction which cannot miss anywhere'.<sup>50</sup> Strand's drama-doc, *Battle for Music* (1943), was rather more adventurous, telling the story of the London Philharmonic Orchestra's struggles to stay together under wartime conditions. Members of the orchestra played themselves in the reconstruction, and were joined by conductors Malcolm Sargent, Constant Lambert and Sir Adrian Boult, as well as J. B. Priestley, who had launched a famous appeal on behalf of the LPO. For the MoI, Strand produced the featurette *There's a Future in It* (1943). This romance about a girl (Ann Dvorak) in love with an RAF bomber pilot (Barry Morse) was a tribute to the courage of Britain's airmen and the women who wait anxiously for them to complete their missions safely. It was, in the opinion of *To-Day's Cinema*, 'powerful propaganda' of 'handy supporting length'.<sup>51</sup> The downbeat *Browned Off* (1944), billed as the 'Saga of a Searchlight' and promising 'Blitz Bravery – that does not come into the limelight', was made with the blessing of the War Office.<sup>52</sup>



Documentary drama: the press book for British National's *Battle for Music* (1943)

Rather riskily for a film distributed as entertainment, it attempted to capture the boredom of those whose duty is to stand and wait for something to happen.

As the end of the war came in sight after D-Day, almost every branch of the fighting and supporting services had a documentary tribute paid. Castleton Knight and Edward Jarratt offered an earnest salute to the work of the Air Training Corps in *Sons of the Air* (1944) for Rank, while Francis Searle responded very effectively to the challenge of depicting the experiences of a *Student Nurse* (1945). The Realist Film Unit's Alexander Shaw produced an hour-long tribute to DEMS (defensively equipped Merchant ships) and *Soldier, Sailor* (1945) for the MoI. Ealing's Charles Frend was given the task of stimulating sympathy for a Norwegian whaling crew in *The Return of the Vikings* (1944), an assignment that was rather easier in the 1940s than it would be today. Even so, as *The Cinema* noted, Frend seemed ill at ease with the treatment of his material and the result was one of the more forgettable examples of wartime actuality film-making.<sup>53</sup> On the other hand, the most distinguished and memorable of these documentary featurettes was MGM's tense Technicolor account of the twenty-fifth mission of a Flying Fortress, *The Memphis Belle* (1944).

There were also plenty of featurettes with much less evident propaganda intent: for example, Paul Barralet and Granville Squires' B. S. Productions combined its work on Government training films with the production of commercial actuality films. Early in 1943 Barralet produced and directed *The Pinnacle of Fame*, a film about Madame Tussaud's waxworks, that made full use of the notorious Chamber of Horrors. It was distributed by Paramount and well received by the trade. It was followed a few months later by a survey of the history and current activities of the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, *I Want to be an Actress* (1943), and in 1945 by *Horse Sense*, a survey of equine activity from thoroughbreds to Army mules. Ronald Haines' British Foundation Pictures took time off from producing informational shorts to make entertainment featurettes, and eventually tried something a little longer, *The Man with the Magnetic Eyes* (1945). Unfortunately, it was a dismally out-dated depiction of the tracking down of a crudely disguised criminal mastermind, who, in violation of genre convention, turns out to be a character previously unknown to the audience.

As opportunities for making studio second features closed down, Widgery Newman reverted to animal-antics featurettes like *Pandamonium* (1942), *The Parrot Remembers* (1943), covering the evacuation of London Zoo to Whipsnade, *Mingling With Ming* (1943) with Wally Patch and Mabel Poulton, the canine comedy *The Peke Speaks* (1944) and *Parrot Goes to Sea* (1944), a compendium of pre-war zoo and Mediterranean travelogue footage, with commentary from Marquis the Macaw. Late in 1943, Newman changed direction and embarked on a lengthy photographic tour of Britain, running into all manner of restrictions imposed by a Government preparing for the invasion of Europe. The resulting series of travelogues, distributed by E. J. Fancey, began with *Charted Waters* (1944), a leisurely tour round the byways of Fenland. *To-Day's Cinema* described it as 'a restful little picture' which 'in spirit does not belong to the war', and, with its horse brasses, Cromwellian relics, weeping willows and light-hearted commentary, it was already anticipating the end of hostilities.<sup>54</sup> The Scilly Isles travelogue *West of the Sunset* (1944), credited to Newman's wife, Joan, was equally escapist. Film-makers, exhibitors and the MoI were all aware that audiences were tiring of war-related themes and looking for diversion. This was reflected in the approval given by *To-Day's Cinema* to the third of the Newmans' series *Road to Yesterday* (1944): 'This interesting tour deep into the heart of Wales takes us away for a time from the worries of wartime.'<sup>55</sup> By this time, however, Widgery Newman was beyond earthly cares, having died at only forty-three years of age, leaving a legacy of



'A crudely disguised criminal mastermind': *The Man with the Magnetic Eyes* (1945)

more than fifty films. Undaunted, his widow kept the family business going, releasing their Wye Valley travelogue, *Going Wye Way*, in March 1945 and a Hertfordshire tour, *Queen of Hearts*, a few months later.

As well as travelogues and zoological novelties, the stock-in-trade of the commercial short and featurette maker was variety turns. Harold Baim's Federated Film Corporation catered for the army of factory hands with the variety revue *Playtime for Workers* (1943), which had plenty of swing numbers and a suitably propagandist finale.<sup>56</sup> Federated followed it up with Denis Kavanagh's *Starlight Serenade* (1944), compèred by a wise-cracking Bonar Colleano. The turns included Ike Hatch as a Kentucky minstrel and the inscrutable Wilson, Keppel and Betty in a classic performance of their sand dance. Berkeley's *Rainbow Round the Corner* (1944), directed by Victor Gover, trod much the same boards with a liberal sprinkling of ukulele melodies and a concluding homily on the need for democracy if the future of the world was to be assured.<sup>57</sup> A bizarre combination it might seem, but it was emblematic of the easeful coming together of banality and profundity that was so much a feature of wartime entertainment. Berkeley's next second feature was the genuinely bizarre *A Night of Magic* (1944), directed by Herbert Wynne and again featuring Billy 'Uke' Scott. This time the cabaret turns decorated the story of a man-about-town (Robert Griffith) who acquires an Egyptian princess's mummy (Marion Olive). The long-dead princess comes to life and is taken on a tour of London night spots before returning to her palace for an alcoholic orgy. The whole sorry affair turns

out to be a dream. Up-and-coming actuality film-maker, Sam Lee, offered something a little more substantial with *We the People*, a featurette hosted by Bonar Colleano and Olive Wright that adopted the sort of magazine format that would become commonplace on television, but sounded a novel note in 1944.

It was no accident that travelogues and other location-shot productions, as well as variety acts filmed in theatres, dominated the supporting programme in the later months of the war, because, by the summer of 1944 there was virtually no studio space available for low-budget independent production. Butcher's were already working largely on location. Their nostalgic romance, *My Ain Folk* (1944), was shot in Scotland, where settings for its sing-songs included a factory canteen and even an open boat after a shipwreck. The Butcher's featurette *Boys of the Old Brigade* (1945), directed by A. Stanley Williamson, provided a typically nostalgic look at the lives and history of the Chelsea Pensioners, demonstrating that the residents of the Royal Hospital at Chelsea could still down a pint or two and appreciate the charms of a pretty girl. British National still had its own studios, but also joined the exodus to locations. The sheep dog epic *Loyal Heart* (1946) was filmed in Cumberland in the summer and autumn of 1944, and Oswald Mitchell had to wait until the end of May the following year to shoot interiors in the studio. The wait was blamed, however, not on a shortage of studio space but on the need for the film's star, 'Fleet the wonder dog', to fulfil his sheep-minding duties over winter and spring.<sup>58</sup> The picture was not worth waiting for. *As Film Report* put it: 'the film creaks uneasily all the way through', with the scenery and the dog its only redeeming features.<sup>59</sup> British National's high point proved to be 1942–3, after which it began to feel the competition of Rank, Korda (now returned from the USA) and the British production arms of the American studios. In 1944, BN adjusted its sights and aimed its programmers towards a lower section of the market. Star vehicles for the likes of Arthur 'Old Mother Riley' Lucan and Flanagan and Allen could still expect to garner a majority of bookings as first features, and might be co-features at worst, but for an increasing number of other pictures from the studio this was no longer the case. Films like *Meet Sexton Blake* (1944), which lost some of its juvenile audience when it was given an 'A' certificate by the BBFC, and the bucolic *Strawberry Roan* (1945) and *The Voice Within* (1946) were really co-features at best. British National worked hard to promote Maclean Rogers' gangster burlesque *Don Chicago* (1945) – billing the radio comic Jackie Hunter as 'Definitely England's New Film Star', and the film itself as 'The Funniest Story Ever Told: a laugh with every bullet, comedy with machine-gun rapidity' – but it all seemed a little desperate for a film lacking genuine star appeal.<sup>60</sup> *Don Chicago*, *Loyal Heart* and *Meet Sexton Blake*, with a Chinese villain named 'Slant-eyes' and David Farrar as the square-jawed hero, all played the Odeon or Gaumont circuits as supporting features.

Although the double bill had survived the war and would continue to be the preferred mode of post-war cinema programming, the position of the second feature had been challenged by a versatile film format which had proved highly adaptable to difficult conditions: the featurette. The ability of this variety of film-making to articulate national sentiments and embody educational aspirations as well as common-or-garden entertainment values was clearly evidenced in Harold Baim's *Our Mr Shakespeare* (1944). This travelogue of Stratford-on-Avon and its surrounding countryside blended patriotic and literary concerns with pictorial pleasures and, in its depiction of tourism in wartime, a strong sense of normality and continuity. 'Look here, upon this picture', wrote the Bard in *Hamlet* (Act iii Scene 4), and that is exactly what filmgoers did, allowing *Our Mr Shakespeare* to play for six

months in London's West End. By the end of the war, production of featurettes was easily exceeding pre-war levels, and they accounted for most of the 'exhibitors' quota only' films that were being produced at the rate of approximately two per month in the last years of the war. Their exhibition had come to dominate the British element within the supporting programme, particularly for independent exhibitors. The question now was: would the mass production of featurettes continue as the infrastructure of film production was gradually returned to commercial usage?

## 2 'What's on with it?'

### The Rise and Fall of the Bs

Lavishness need be no criterion of quality. I have met many cinemagoers who expressed their enjoyment of a supporting film for its originality, novelty or sincerity ... Intelligently written and handled, and having satisfactory technical qualities, there is no reason why such films should not play an important part in meeting a need.

*The Cinema's Studio Correspondent*<sup>1</sup>

With the end of the war, the battle for the British supporting programme began in earnest. Documentary-maker Jill Craigie fired the first salvo when, at a speech in Plymouth, she called for the abolition of second-feature dramas and their replacement by 'entertaining documentary films'. These, she asserted, would prove more popular with the public than the sentimental and unreal pictures it was being offered. Good documentaries would also attract new audiences and counter political apathy by cultivating a critical approach to social arrangements.<sup>2</sup> In truth, the traditional British second feature must have appeared to be a dead man walking. In 1945–6 only a handful of companies were producing this type of film – principally British National and, to a lesser extent, Butcher's. BN had been in its pomp only three years before, but was reduced to producing a lame comedy starring the now-forgotten Moon and Brown. The title, *What Do We Do Now?* (1946), summed up the company's dilemma. The studio would eventually shut down in April 1948, but, in the meantime, BN's former documentary wing, Strand Films, was making conventional fiction films like the follow-up to *Meet Sexton Blake*, John Harlow's *The Echo Murders* (1945), an intended co-feature in which David Farrar reprised his role as Blake. The plot, with its Nazi fifth columnists, looked back to the conflict just ended rather than forward to the gathering Cold War. For many critics, this type of film was also looking back. The future, it seemed, was in the big picture, supported possibly by an actuality short or featurette.

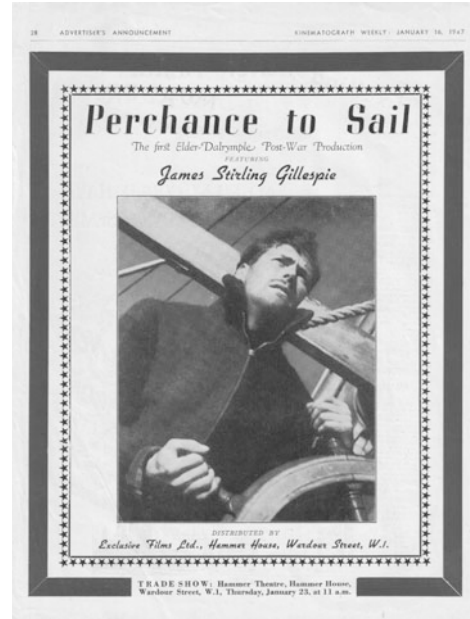
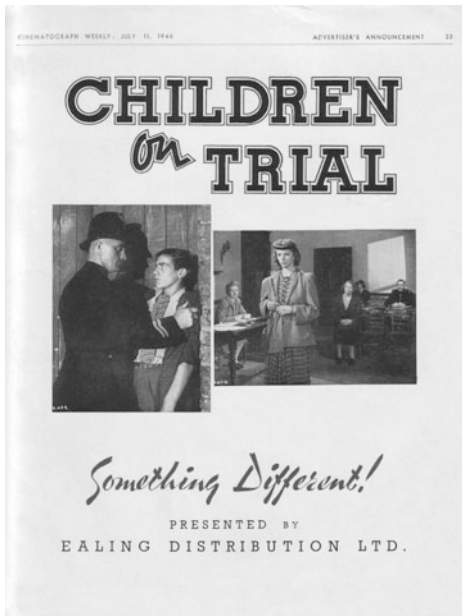
#### 'Is it useful?' Documenting the Peace

While second-feature fiction films continued to sink, documentaries appeared to be riding the crest of the wave. There were increasing signs, however, that the documentary movement's ship was not an entirely happy one. In 1945, the Crown Film Unit produced Humphrey Jennings' *Diary for Timothy*, with commentary by E. M. Forster and music by Richard Addinsall. The narrative is addressed to a baby born on the fifth anniversary of the outbreak of the war and recounts the stories of a wounded fighter pilot, a farmer, a miner and an engine driver in its final days. With such talent assembled, *Documentary News Letter* might have been expected to give the film a rapturous reception, but, while marvelling at Jennings' ability to match sound with stunning images, the *DNL* remained unhappy

about the film's lack of social and ideological clarity.<sup>3</sup> Jennings' film met every aesthetic criterion, but had trouble answering the perennial questions asked of any film in the documentary movement: 'Is it useful? Does it help people?' Documentary film-making had a choice to make. It could continue to serve the propaganda needs of the state, or it could strive for a critical voice that would encourage the government to address the causes and solutions of problems facing the people in the peace. The *DNL* was keen on the latter approach and, on this ground, questioned the utility of Jack Lee's *Children on Trial* (1946), a study of the rehabilitation of two young offenders. This was another CFU production, and its distributor, Ealing, was quick to celebrate its pedigree and authenticity.<sup>4</sup> This was not enough to impress the *DNL*, which attacked the complacency of Lee's message:

*Children on Trial* gives the impression that approved schools are a complete answer to juvenile delinquency. Just send the children to them and get them back as little angels in a year or two's time ... Are we going to keep up a policy of shining a becoming pink light on our society, blanketing off everything which we dislike?<sup>5</sup>

The *DNL* had fewer reservations about another second-feature length drama-documentary from Ealing released around the same time: Charles Crichton's sympathetic examination of the lives and loves of bargees, *Painted Boats* (1945). The film's neo-realist approach contrasted strongly with Maurice Elvey's earlier treatment of a similar theme in *The Water Gipsies* (1932). Crichton's film was not only more 'realistic', but, from the perspective of the *DNL*, had its heart and politics in the right place. It was a creditable example 'of the now accepted incursion of the documentary idea into the second-feature world' and had experienced no trouble in holding the attention of West End audiences.<sup>6</sup>



Factual featurettes: trade advertisements for two early post-war examples



The lives and loves of barges: Charles Crichton's neo-realist *Painted Boats* (1945)

There was no lack of critical edge to Paul Rotha's passionate feature documentary *Land of Promise* (1946). Even the *DNL* expressed some concern at the film's excessive demagoguery.<sup>7</sup> The film addressed Britain's housing problems in historical perspective, using the technique of disembodied voices to represent differing viewpoints. Rotha's *The World is Rich* (1948) was also not afraid to adopt an openly political stance in a harrowing thirty-five-minute account of the world's food problems.<sup>8</sup> The *Daily Herald* used its leader column to recommend the film as one everyone ought to see, and ask that readers lobby their local cinema managers to screen it in their cinemas. Even at the other end of Fleet Street's political spectrum, the *Daily Mail* described it as a work of 'merciless cinematic brilliance' and 'a picture to scald the conscience'.<sup>9</sup> However, the *DNL* doubted that the picture would receive the level of theatrical distribution that it so richly deserved.<sup>10</sup> Here was the problem for films like these: to persuade exhibitors that they would appeal to patrons. In reviewing *Land of Promise*, *To-Day's Cinema* recognised the film's qualities and acknowledged that it 'should provoke thought wherever it is shown', but felt compelled to warn its readers: 'Exhibitors, however, should realise that it has a Left Wing bias and in view of the agreement that politics are out of place in the cinema, they should view the film themselves.'<sup>11</sup> Such reservations caused Leslie Halliwell to complain that, in a city of almost 300,000 inhabitants, it was impossible to see a representative selection of 'reality films'.<sup>12</sup> A *DNL* editorial echoed his complaint, bemoaning the fact that half the cinema programme was 'taken up by bad American second features or equally noxious British "featurettes"'. The elimination of these 'low-quality' productions was seen as a necessary step in clearing the way for the more worthy and educational documentary:

During the war ... a number of films like *Target for Tonight*, *Western Approaches*, *Desert Victory* and *World of Plenty* did enjoy wide distribution in the cinemas and proved box-office successes. But with the end of the war the barriers have been raised again. Yet the success of the Rank-sponsored series, *This Modern Age*, over the post-war years proves that there is a market if the trade is willing. There is a talent and capacity in this country to produce not only shorts but longer story documentaries, to take the place of the present low-grade supporting films.<sup>13</sup>

*This Modern Age*, a series of twenty-minute films 'of vital interest to the Britisher' was Rank's response to its 'public service broadcasting' duty.<sup>14</sup> Produced by Moscow-born Sergei Nolbandov, who had recently been a production head at the MoI, the series was launched in September 1946, and became one of the most familiar fixtures in the supporting programme until 1950. After giving an enthusiastic reception to the series' opener, an examination of the contemporary housing crisis (*Homes for All*, 1946), the *DNL* began to criticise the series for its tendency to provide 'a soothing cup of warm cocoa', admittedly made with the very best ingredients, and it advised to start tilting at 'a windmill or two'.<sup>15</sup> Generally, the organ of the documentary movement was happier with the treatment given by *This Modern Age* to political issues – like the *Coal Crisis* (issue 7) – than with the way the series handled matters cultural. The provocative subject of issue 16 was *The British – Are They Artistic?*, and the *DNL* (under its new title *Documentary Film News*) quickly spotted an 'uptilted-nose atmosphere about the film' that again smacked of snobbery.<sup>16</sup> Undeterred, Rank produced over forty editions of what was voted by filmgoers the most popular series of shorts.<sup>17</sup>

Tri-partite battle lines were being clearly drawn. On one side stood the major producers, British and American, who were interested in making longer and more lavish pictures that would draw audiences as a single attraction (with only a perfunctory supporting programme). Ranged against them, and poorly equipped, was the army of small film-makers, whose interests lay in the double bill and flexible cinema programming. What power they had came not from any economic muscle, but from the stubborn resistance of cinema audiences to any attacks on a two-feature programme that they regarded as value for money. The third force, whose time had come to seize the day (or so it seemed), was composed of the documentary film movement. The movement had enjoyed enormous state patronage and retained the sympathy of the new Labour Government.<sup>18</sup> The penultimate year of the war had witnessed a bitter dispute between the British Short Film Makers Society, which represented non-sponsored film production, and the loftier Association of Short Film Producers containing the luminaries of the 'legitimate' documentary movement. In the autumn of 1944, the Association had sought to take advantage of the richer resources brought by official sponsorship by lobbying the Board of Trade to introduce not only a cost qualification for quota registration of shorts but also for short films to count as double and triple for quota if sufficient money had been spent on them.<sup>19</sup> In 1945 the movement gave birth to a further pressure group, the Federation of Documentary Film Units, which, in line with the *Documentary News Letter*, advocated that the coming Films Act should prohibit the double feature. The British Short Film Makers Society, on the other hand, called for a quota for an 'intermediate class' of pictures between 3,000 and 6,500 feet, with the aim of encouraging the production of decent second features, 'a department of film production which has been neglected and which is in fact the bread and butter of the American film industry'.<sup>20</sup> The documentary movement's strategy had to be to forge an alliance with the major producers – Korda was already in agreement – and try to convert small commercial film-makers to its cause. In this, the movement had considerable

initial success. The British Film Producers' Association (BFPA), in its consultations on the next Films Act, recommended a separate supporting programme quota that would encourage shorts and documentaries 'in which British producers have for years been outstanding.'<sup>21</sup> To build on this, however, required internal unity, and that was something the brothers and sisters of the movement found hard to achieve.

In the early months of the peace, the documentary movement was able to count on the active support of Labour politicians. When Herbert Morrison addressed the annual dinner of the CEA's London and Home Counties branch, he linked a more social-realist approach to film-making with a continuing close relationship between cinema and government:

British documentary film making took another and long step forward during the war under the Godparenry of the Ministry of Information. Their fame has spread throughout the world, and we should look to it that their quality is upheld, that they are used to help us make good neighbours abroad, and perhaps friendly and willing customers ... British film studios must remember their responsibility to show the world British life, British democracy, and British ideals.<sup>22</sup>

As the post-war Films Bill moved through its committee stage, Labour MP Cyril Dumbleton introduced an amendment to boost the revenues of specialised and documentary film producers. He was sure that 'the ordinary person' would enjoy the output of these producers 'more than many of the second features which now disgrace our screens.' There was a high level of consensus in the parliamentary committee on the idea that once audiences were educated to appreciate the documentary short, there would be little demand for a second feature. The Conservative MP Walter Fletcher, a former independent exhibitor, declared: 'The genius of the film production of this country has been shown very largely in the production of short and documentary films.' He was backed up by the Board of Trade's Harold Wilson: 'The average cinemagoer would rather see a good English documentary film than much of the big feature stuff which he is now asked to look at.'<sup>23</sup>

Ultimately, however, it was exhibitors rather than politicians who would determine the fate of the documentary movement. By and large, exhibitors, whether small independents or giant combines, were not among the Labour Government's most fervent supporters and were resistant to further state involvement in the enterprise economy and attempts to influence public tastes and attitudes. As businessmen burdened with a high entertainment tax, most distrusted the state-sponsored documentary as covert left-wing propaganda, likely to pave the way for further bouts of nationalisation. Within six months of VE-Day, there was vigorous debate in CEA meetings around the country concerning the wisdom of continuing to give house-room to films sponsored by the MoI. Audiences, it was frequently said, no longer wanted 'propaganda films.'<sup>24</sup> The CEA rejected the idea of a 'split' quota, arguing not only that there should be no separate quota for second features but also that the 'general tendency should be either to decrease the quota for shorts or abolish it altogether.'<sup>25</sup> Without the support of exhibitors, the documentary movement lacked a platform from which to address the public.<sup>26</sup> The Government understood this well and cautioned the movement that documentary films would have to foreground entertainment values if they were to receive any kind of distribution. Even the austere and puritanical Minister for Trade and Industry, Sir Stafford Cripps, had signalled this when he addressed the Association of Specialised Film Producers in 1947.<sup>27</sup> He had assured the Association that: 'we must somehow or other give the public the opportunity of seeing the output

of these [documentary] units, an output which I am convinced the ordinary person would enjoy more than many of the second features which now disgrace our screens.<sup>28</sup> However, Cripps was careful to state the conditions necessary for such a cultural policy to be effective. First, the documentary or realist film must be 'entertainment and not education': 'You cannot and should not try to force down the throats of people who have paid to be entertained what you consider is good for them by way of education.' Second, the position of the second feature had to be challenged: 'So long as the second feature is insisted upon ... it is almost impossible to put a short into the programme.' Third, renters and exhibitors must agree to allocate a larger proportion of rental fees to the supporting programme to make the production of unsponsored quality shorts a viable economic proposition.<sup>29</sup> This final condition became an issue of increasing urgency as production costs soared – especially for films over 3,000 feet – following new pay rates and crewing minimums agreed with the technicians' unions.

Cripps's comments about the importance of entertainment value may have been prompted by Humphrey Jennings' most recent CFU film, *The Cumberland Story* (1947), which took a look at the modernisation of the pits and dramatised the historic dangers of mining. It was hardly Jennings at his best. Even his biographer described it as 'the most boring long film Jennings ever made, and by far the most flawed of his mature career.'<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, John Grierson seemed to have Cripps's remarks very much in mind when, shortly afterwards, he made *A Yank Comes Back* (1949). It starred Burgess Meredith as the returning American, as well as Paulette Goddard, and injected elements of fun and irreverence into the promotion of its message that conditions might be difficult, but the spirit of the British people is indomitable. Suddenly here was a film that was not afraid to poke fun at Stafford Cripps, employ the manic Spike Jones as its 'director of music', or show women in states of undress or complaining about coupons and shortages. It created a ripple of surprise among trade critics, but *Kinematograph Weekly* still sniffed out 'Government propaganda' in a picture that contrived to be simultaneously 'naive and pretentious'.<sup>31</sup>

### 'What use are these?' The Age of the Featurette

The attack by Cripps on second features was probably directed at American 'B' films rather than their British cousins, which, at the time, were hardly troubling the bookers because they were in such short supply. As we have seen, with studio facilities out of reach to most low-budget film-makers, the format of choice (or rather necessity) had become the featurette. These second-class entertainments, running just over the legal minimum for 'long films' (3,000 feet), varied from straight documentaries to low-budget dramas and comedies in a spectrum that took in variety shows, novelty pictures and what we would now term 'drama-docs'. In 1945–7, to the concern of CEA members trying to fulfil their quota obligations, every other British long film was one of these over-length shorts.<sup>32</sup> Thirty-eight were registered in 1945–6, and fifty-five the following quota year, when there were just six films running between forty-five and sixty-five minutes, the standard length of the second feature, and forty-five longer pictures.<sup>33</sup> 'What is the use of these 3,000 ft films?' asked the Chairman of the Edinburgh CEA rhetorically. 'The majority are of no use at all to us.'<sup>34</sup> His view was echoed by the Chairman of Granada cinemas, Sydney Bernstein, who hoped the next Films Act would 'prohibit the production of this type of film which is doing much to harm the good name which British films now enjoy'.<sup>35</sup> Although Bernstein's outburst was a little hysterical, especially in the light of the generally favourable reviews received by most featurettes in the trade press, there were a few examples of film-making at its feeblest. The *Film Report* ratings given to W. F. Elliott's comedy *The Adventures of Parker* and

Ronald Haines' story of a pools win, *The Happy Family*, both reviewed in the same week in August 1946, were among the lowest in the publication's history: six and five marks respectively.<sup>36</sup>

One of the leading producers of featurettes, and the man responsible for *Our Mr Shakespeare* (1944), Harold Baim, felt it necessary to defend his company's product from growing hostility, asserting that 'travel subjects' in particular had met with an enthusiastic response from audiences, and that it was 'a short-sighted policy to agitate against the smaller producer whose efforts will eventually help to make for a greater and more virile British industry.'<sup>37</sup> Veteran low-budgeteer, Horace Shepherd – who made *A Musical Masquerade* (1946), an ironic tale about a composer who can only get his music performed when it is believed to be by Tchaikovsky – also wrote to the trade press to warn that, in dismissing all featurettes on the basis of a few poor ones, there was a danger of throwing out the baby with the bath water. There were producers 'who are willing and eager to turn out intelligent, sincere featurettes – and are only too anxious to give the exhibitor something more ambitious as soon as he shows that he is prepared to play fair – and pay for it.'<sup>38</sup> Fellow featuretteer, Paul Barralet, confirmed that one Midlands' exhibitor had offered him a paltry 25 shillings to book one of his pictures for three days, but admitted that there were too many films of this type being produced.<sup>39</sup>

The root cause of the mushrooming of featurettes was the shortage of studio space as producers waited for facilities to be reopened after wartime requisitioning. Independent film-makers, often with documentary experience in the plethora of state information units, were obliged to stay on location, and try to broaden the commercial appeal of their actuality films with attempts at light comedy. This was most easily achieved via a witty commentary delivered by a popular radio personality like Ronnie Waldman, who combined effectively with Jack (Colonel Chinstrap) Train on the brewing and distilling documentary *What's Yours?* (1947). Waldman also supplied the narration to an accompanying film on tobacco, *Fag End* (1947), directed by future *Carry On* luminary, the camp Charles Hawtrey, and to *Birth of a Film* (1947), a documentary on feature-film production directed by Richard Gray. 'Coating the pill of instruction with entertainment is fast becoming an art in the provision of screen fare for adults,' noted *The Cinema*.<sup>40</sup> The combination of alcohol or tobacco and personality was always going to be a winner, but less obviously populist topics met more critical opposition. Eric Leslie's tour of Hampshire with Waldman, *Down in the Forest* (1947), for example, was criticised by the trade press for 'its tendency, like so many of its kind, to pad out the material with irrelevant sidelines' in order to push the length over 3,000 ft.<sup>41</sup>

Familiar aspects of British history and literature offered the chance for populist appeal without totally sacrificing documentary credibility. John George Taylor Productions delivered *After You Mr Dickens* (1945), a biographical travelogue that toured London locations associated with Charles Dickens. The distributor was E. J. Fancy (New Realm), whose Do-U-Know (DUK) Films also gave a hard sell to Cecil Williamson's Tower of London featurette, *Prisoners of the Tower* (1946). The film was marketed as if it were a horror picture:

The horrors of the torture chamber, and the agonised shrieks of its victims as the screw twists and the rack turns. No escape! Despair of the heart that nearly drives the mind to madness – and time – an eternity of light and dark. And then – the last mile! The way to Tower Hill; a sea of eager derisive faces waiting for the performance of death. A cheer trembling on their lips that will never be heard, for it will burst forth only when the head rolls from the shoulders and the axe is dripping with blood.<sup>42</sup>

There were more bloody deeds in Walter West's *We Do Believe in Ghosts* (1947), a film inspired, no doubt, by post-bellum interest in the afterlife and the revival of spiritualism. It consisted of an unconvincing recitation of three chilling tales involving post-death perambulations by Charles I, Anne Boleyn, Katherine Howard and – most bizarrely of all – the jockey, Fred Archer. Richard Fisher was responsible for an even eerier featurette, *The Haunted Palace* (1949), which offered a tour of the stately ghosts of England. The ghost stories were separated by a ballerina performing excerpts from 'The Haunted Ballroom' and 'Dance Macabre'. Other featurettes also tapped into a lighter vein of British whimsy. Francis Miller's *Loco Number One* (1948) observed a retired engine driver playing with his train set while reminiscing about his favourite runs; while James Hill's *A Journey for Jeremy* (New Realm, 1949) depicted a young boy's dream of driving a steam train from Glasgow to London. Most of these offerings were, after so many traumas, understandably 'feel-good', but there was still a little room for a campaigning documentary like John Miller's *An Englishman's Home* (1946), which drew attention to delays in dealing with the housing crisis resulting from wartime bombing; or Donald Alexander's *Probation Officer* (1949), which displayed the consequences of dysfunctional family life.

The producers and directors of these films were a mixture of long-term industry professionals like Harold Baim and Horace Shepherd, those who had developed their film-making techniques on MoI documentaries, and demobbed servicemen, some of whom had enjoyed their first taste of movie-making with the film units of the services. For example, three former servicemen, L. A. Goldwater, L. E. Manuel and J. D. Toff, scraped together enough capital to make a featurette on Covent Garden market called *Early One Morning* (1947). Unfortunately, it failed to launch glittering careers in the cinema, unlike the featurette on the same subject made a few years later by Lindsay Anderson (*Every Day Except Christmas*, 1955). Among the more established film-makers was Denis Kavanagh (1906–1984), an Irishman who began his career in Hollywood in 1926 before working in the British industry as an assistant director, production manager and editor. He started making shorts in 1938 and continued after war service in the RAF and work on propaganda films. Increasingly, he turned his attention to non-sponsored subjects, making *Sportlight on Dogs* (1945) and *Hyde Park* (1946). They were followed by *Women in Sport* (1946), which was narrated by Raymond Glendenning, and paid tribute to the growing physical fitness of women. Clearly Kavanagh had not had his fill of lithe and lissom femininity, because his next picture was *Glamour Girl* (1946), a flippantly narrated look at a day in the life of a couple of showgirls (Joan Verney and Mavis Cooper).<sup>43</sup> It would become a staple subject for short film-makers looking for circuit bookings.<sup>44</sup> Working for Bain's Federated Films, he followed it up with *Plenty Questions* (1947), an innovative adaptation of the radio general knowledge quiz. Kavanagh then formed Pegasus Film Productions with Sidney Lesser and Doreen North (former continuity girl with the RAF Film Unit), making *Signed Sealed and Delivered* (1947), an account of a diplomatic bag's journey from the Foreign Office in London to the British Embassy in Paris.

The themes of the early post-war featurettes reflected the structures of feeling and preoccupations of their time: most notably pride in nation and achievement and the long-suppressed desire for leisure and recreation in the hard-won peace. *The Bulldog Breed* (1947) was actually the title of a featurette on the breeding of pedigree bloodstock, but it was also the motto of the patriotic featurettes that had been emblematic of British film-making during the war and continued in the years that followed. Public sentiment continued to support unabashed expression of what might now be thought gross

sentimentality towards England's history and traditions. Emblematically, the MoI celebrated peace in Europe with the proudly titled *Our Country* (1945), an overview of wartime Britain from the point of view of a sailor on leave. *To-Day's Cinema* had no hesitation in recommending that John Eldridge's film 'should be given the widest possible showing both here and abroad'.<sup>45</sup>

The genre that lent itself most easily to the articulation of these sentiments was one almost as old as cinema itself: the travelogue. Before the war, it had been used primarily as a window on a more exotic world for an audience unused to foreign travel, but, with the arrival of peace, it came to be a vehicle for the patriotic promotion of the delights of the British Isles. Foremost among these were the sea and the coast. Horace Shepherd's *Cornish Holiday* and Renown's *Land of the Saints* (both 1946) featured Cornwall's rugged coastline and fishing villages. *The Skipper Puts to Sea* (1946), directed by Paul Barralet and T. A. Glover, referred back to the origins of the British documentary movement and Grierson's *Drifters* (1929). The title of Ronald Haines' *Coastline* (1947) evokes an iconic line of resistance to invasion, once so vulnerable and now so secure from threat. Donald MacDonald's *Whitstable Natives* (1948) observed the peace of the Kent fishing village, with plenty of oysters and hardy fisherfolk.

Countryside and waterways played a prominent part in the evocation of nationalist feelings, and the title of the featurette *Old Father Thames* (1946) encapsulated the way in which a sense of history flowed easily into pride in recent achievements.<sup>46</sup> The war had also reinforced the British self-image as an island race protected by invincible seapower. When MGM distributed the patriotic *All the King's Men* (1948), Edward Eye's survey of the training regimes and ceremonials of the Army and Air Force, *To-Day's Cinema* immediately complained that it would like to have seen coverage extended to include the Navy.<sup>47</sup> In fact, the Naval section had been saved for a second documentary, *The King's Navy* (1948), this time distributed by GFD.<sup>48</sup> The same distributors also released two equally patriotic documentaries on Britain's flagship passenger liners. MGM's *Top Liner* (1948) was Lewis G. Jonas's tour of the new *Queen Elizabeth* in her berth at Southampton docks, while GFD's *Queens of the Sea* recalled the role played by both *Elizabeth* and *Mary* as troop ships during the war. A. Digby Smith's *The Red Duster* (1951) looked at the less glamorous work of the Merchant Navy during a round-trip to Spain, while Cecil Williamson's *No Sail* celebrated the windjammers of the past and their evolution into modern racing craft.<sup>49</sup> There was a hearty critical reception for Basil Wright's contribution to the Festival of Britain, *Waters of Time* (1951), a portrait of the London Docks released immediately after Ealing's drama *Port of London* (1950).<sup>50</sup>

Post-bellum travelogue-makers also mined sources of patriotic sentiment in the heart of Britain. After the success of *Our Mr Shakespeare*, documentary film-makers were thick on the hallowed ground of Stratford-on-Avon. C. H. Williamson's curiously titled *The Upstart Crow* (1948) took viewers on another tour of Shakespeareland in the company of narrator John Snagge,<sup>51</sup> while John Douglas began his theatrical survey, *The Play's the Thing* (1948), with the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre before departing for the more politically conscious Mercury and Unity companies and the more showbiz Italia Conti drama school. After years of blood, toil, sweat and tears, a vacation was top of the agenda in 1946, and appetites were whetted by *Englishman's Holiday* (1946), a reminder of the scenic beauties of Bath, Wells and Glastonbury. Moss Goodman and Victor Cochrane Hervey's featurette was not particularly memorable cinema, but it carried considerable symbolic weight as a statement of what had been fought for. This was a holiday that had been earned as never before. Equally timely was John G. Taylor's *Take it Easy* (1946), a wide-ranging survey of all kinds of entertainment

and leisure activities available to the middle-class family, with a suitably light-hearted commentary. British holiday featurettes generally foregrounded history and heritage. Harold Baim's visit to the Isle of Wight, *Chip Off the Old Rock* (1946), was an early case in point, although its pride in heritage was rather distractingly overlaid by the bickering banter of its male and female narrators.

The British travelogue units were quickly joined by others. In 1946, the American producer James A. Fitzpatrick made a series of fourteen half-hour 'Traveltalks' on various British locations for international distribution in cinemas and on US television. They were very much welcomed by the British Travel Association, which attributed a significant part of the growth in tourism to the British Isles (particularly from the USA) in 1947–8 to the influence of films like these.<sup>52</sup> Some indigenous filmmakers had already had a similar bright idea of selling characteristic images of their country to overseas audiences. The rickety outfit British Australian Film Corporation, for example, was responsible for *A Yank in the West Country* (1945), directed in his usual simplistic style by Geoffrey Benstead. Actually there were a brace of Yanks, a pair of middle-aged hoofers, a couple of comedians and some vigorous maypole dancing in the course of this artless tour of Dorset and Wiltshire. It might conceivably have been seen in a town like Alice, but it is unlikely to have made it to Palm Springs. The same was probably true of British Lion's *Hands Across the Ocean* (1946) in which a GI and his future bride (Bill Swyre and Pearl Cameron) go on a romantic tour of Britain and Ireland. A transatlantic relationship also provided the motivation in Sam Lee's *Drake's England* (1951), Anglo-Amalgamated's breezy tour round Devon in the company of a gentleman farmer and an American girl searching for her ancestral roots.

Most of these endless travelogues were at least competently filmed, but there were inevitably some real stinkers like F. W. Attwood's *Elizabeth Takes a Holiday* (1948), described by *The Cinema* as a 'scrappy tour of various places in England with Elizabethan associations ... weak direction; indifferent photography; badly-synchronised dialogue; harsh recording'.<sup>53</sup> Richard Fisher's *The English Way* (1950) sounds equally embarrassing, with its 'pointless and often amateurish Norwegian-visitor commentary, made the more unacceptable by stilted acted sequences showing female friends and pantomime-style Dick Whittington, who points out places of interest'.<sup>54</sup> International Film Renters' *It's No Tale* (1948) lived down to its title in presenting a turgid portrait of the Isle of Man with 'indifferent editing' and 'trite commentary'.<sup>55</sup>

Some travelogues gave a wider geographical perspective by using footage shot before the commencement of hostilities. J. Blake Dalrymple, for example, set his yachting cruise of the Baltic, *Perchance to Sail* (1947), in 1938 and included pre-war footage of Warsaw before flashing forward to the destruction it was to suffer. However, as the post-war chaos in Europe began to subside, documentary units began to venture across the water. An irritatingly comic London waterman made it as far as Belgium in Harry May's *Skiffy Goes to Sea* (1947), while Paul Barralet was back on the briny with *Passage to Bordeaux* (1947), a record of the voyage of a cargo ship to the French wine country. It even sounded as if New Realm's romantically titled *Roman Holiday* (1947) might have travelled as far as Italy, but actually its subject was Roman remains in Britain. International's *Happy Holiday* (1947) followed a cheerfully bantering young married couple to France and Switzerland, a formula reproduced in New Realm's *Swiss Honeymoon* (1947) a few weeks later. Ronald Haines' Luxembourg travelogue, *Then There Were Two* (1948), was shot from the point of view of a couple on honeymoon, who also provided the 'determinedly informative' commentary.<sup>56</sup> Almost inevitably the presentation of the native culture included the making of schnapps and a wine festival, so in one way, at least, these

travelogues were not as dry as they have been portrayed. Haines' *Lorelei* (1948) ditched the honeymooners for a more direct account of a voyage through the Rhineland. It sounds thoroughly picturesque, but, at the time, the banks of the Rhine were still littered with bombsites. A. Digby Smith's portrait of post-war recovery, *Paris in the Spring* (Renown, 1948) was more unequivocally upbeat, but brute reality had a habit of protruding through even the most anodyne and promotional of travelogues, as it did in the same director's *Spanish Holiday* (1950), when its carefree atmosphere was disrupted by the bathetic spectacle of the bull-fight, involving what *The Cinema's* reviewer called 'scenes of revolting cruelty'.<sup>57</sup> Stirling's *The Way to a Man's Heart* (1948) sounded romantic, but it turned out to be a study of Danish food production. Nevertheless, it was recommended as 'very acceptable' for most cinemas.<sup>58</sup> British Foundation's equally misleadingly titled *A Lady Desires* (1948) moved a few miles down the road for a feast of windmills and tulip fields (and a spot of gin-making) in Holland. Conversely, there was a sad appropriateness about the title of *Last Wish* (1949), a love story grafted on to a Parisian travelogue, directed by the unfortunate Sam Lee who died while filming shortly afterwards. Adrian Reid's *Norwegian Holiday* (1951) was another romantic travelogue, documenting the love affair between a British student and a Scandinavian girl, resulting in what one reviewer described as 'carefree entertainment which is definitely a delight to watch'.<sup>59</sup> Audiences apparently agreed, and it was the most popular featurette of the quota year.

Cinema patrons in search of footage from further afield were offered C. H. Williamson's *Bali Adventure* (1948), a journey to the picturesque island east of Java which was largely untouched by the conflicts raging elsewhere. Williamson went even further with *The Gods Can Laugh* (1948), taking a trip round the solar system to set man's struggle to harness the forces of nature in a wider context. When post-war travelogues ventured beyond Europe, however, Imperial Africa was the most favoured destination. Ambassador's *Land of the Springbok* (1945) toured South Africa with plenty of wildlife, and Frank A. Goodliffe's *Warden of the Wild* (1948) visited a Rhodesian game reserve, with human interest supplied by the warden and his family. These films regularly lent themselves to the promotion of ideological messages, as in Premier Distributors' *North and South of the Niger* (1949), a survey of 'what British administration is achieving and of native co-operation which is bringing higher standards of living to the populace' in Nigeria.<sup>60</sup> Donald Swanson's *Chisoko the African* (1949) performed much the same ideological work in the context of the exploitation of copper in Rhodesia; while, in Joseph Best's *My African People* (1948), clumsily photographed and edited scenes of exotic native customs were saved from accusations of racial condescension only by the commentary of the black singer, Edric Connor. In contrast, the CFU's Oscar- and BAFTA-winning *Daybreak in Udi* (Terry Bishop, 1949) placed its emphasis on Nigerians' own philosophy of 'happiness through work' and their active role in the construction of a maternity hospital.

Africa was also the spiritual home of the wild-animal featurette. Few of the 1940s offerings, however, emulated the global zoological expeditions of the legendary naturalist photographer Cherry Kearton.<sup>61</sup> A walk on the wild side for most featurette-makers was a potter round the local zoo.<sup>62</sup> The idea of a new spring after the war, a time for home-building, was suggested by the whimsical New Realm featurette, *Whose Baby?* (1946), produced by Joan Widgery Newman. Lion and bear cubs took pride of place among a Noah's Ark of baby animals that warmed the hearts of the hard-headed trade reviewers. Little dignity was granted to animals in the nature featurette. Widgery Newman had begun supplying speaking voices to puppies and parrots in the 1930s, and the technique was continued in an early post-war film by Frank Chisnell, *Tom Tom Topia* (1946), in which the humorous exchanges