

Address to the British Kinematograph Society

By W. Sellers, December 1947

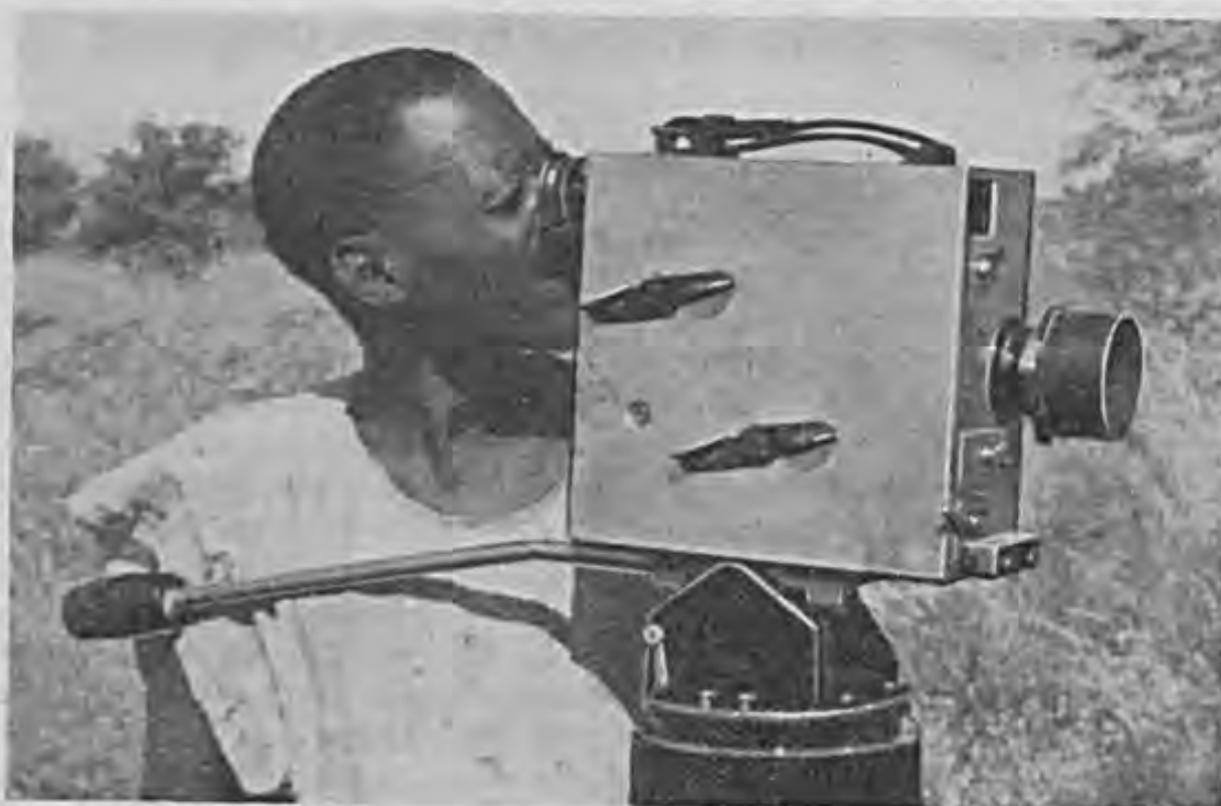
MR. SELLERS began his talk by referring to the paper which he gave to the Society in 1941, in which he described how, over a period of twelve years before the outbreak of war, he had made a study of the reactions and visual limitations of Nigerian peasants who were seeing films for the first time; how, in the light of the psychological and technical problems which emerged, he experimented in the making of suitable films; and how gradually he hammered out a technique specially designed for the inexperienced eyes and unsophisticated minds of his audiences.

When it came into being in 1939, the immediate task of the Colonial Film Unit was to provide a means of interpreting the war to Colonial peoples, a large number of whom were illiterate. In manpower and material goods these people were capable of contributing substantially to the war effort. Throughout the war the Unit was unable to send production units overseas, a fact which materially influenced the type of film produced during that period. Most of the films made at that time dealt with various phases of the war from the Colonial angle, though a few films of a general educational nature were included in the production programme.

But the value of the familiar scene in the film education of illiterate peoples was not overlooked, and in 1941 a bold experiment was begun. Mr. Sellers then outlined the history of the Raw Stock Scheme and described the facilities provided for the training of amateur substandard director-cameramen in many Colonies.

The results of this Scheme have been most encouraging. Fortunately, it has been carried forward into the post-war period and is being used as an effective instrument of education in matters closely concerning the daily lives of the people. Some of the films produced in this way have proved to be of more than local interest, and have received wide distribution.

By the end of the war, film production had reached substantial proportions and the Raw Stock Scheme had supplemented the number of films available for cinema programmes. This was the end of the first chapter. A new phase in the Unit's history began in 1946, when the first overseas production unit went out to the Gold Coast. At last the long-term work had begun, the immensely important task of using film as an instrument in mass education, helping to develop self-reliance and to break tradition-bound ground so that the seeds of progress in health, industry and agriculture could be planted. *Fight Tuberculosis in the Home* and *Weaving in Togoland* were the two major productions of this tour. There were of course many disappointments on account of the varied problems inseparable with filming in tropical countries.



In the autumn of 1946 two units left for Africa, one for Nigeria and one for Kenya and Uganda. The production schedule included films on education, agriculture and other subjects of interest; *Towards True Democracy*, for instance, was a record of the opening of the first Nigerian Legislative Council under the new constitution. Perhaps the most outstanding film made was *Good Business*, a film on the marketing of cocoa by African co-operative societies. This is the type of film which might well be suitable for wide theatrical distribution. With appropriate editing and a specially written commentary, it should retain a distinctive character, showing not the Dark Continent of the picture-postcard travelogue, but a good honest slice of Africa as it really is, throwing light on a little-known aspect of Colonial development in which African initiative, self-reliance and self-government play a significant part.

After describing the work of the cinema vans in the bush, Mr. Sellers went on to give some details of an experiment which is now being made in the Gold Coast for the establishment of static cinemas run by the Native Administration in the larger villages, where the people pay a small sum for admission. One visualises a chain of such static cinemas in all villages of importance, with the cinema vans being used to do the job for which they are best suited, that of getting information quickly to large numbers of people, for campaign work and for breaking new ground. The actual running of the cinemas would be in the hands of Native Administrations, but the development of such schemes is one of the many responsibilities of the Colonial Films Officers.

Mr. Sellers dealt with other plans for the future, mentioning first the four production units which went to African locations in late 1947. These units consist of a director and a cameraman, and depend for general assistance on local people, who in this way will have the advantage of working with experienced technicians. The unit working in Gambia and Sierra Leone has a twofold character—shooting films and training Africans in the use of 16mm. cameras, so that they can in future undertake production under the Raw Stock Scheme. It may be possible to extend this idea to other territories.

Production schedules for these units are heavy and varied in their scope. Briefly, the general pattern of production has the twofold theme of self-reliance and co-operation, to arouse interest in such subjects as local government, the development of industry, co-operative societies and so forth.

Actually, upwards of twenty units are required to cater for the needs of the Colonies. In order to build up this number, it will be necessary to train Colonial people as film technicians over a period of several years. In this way it will be possible in time for each territory to have its own film production unit to make the films they require, with the C.F.U. providing the necessary supervision and guidance. This is undoubtedly a formidable task, but experience to date is encouraging. Colonial personnel have already been attached to the Unit in London for training and they have responded well and show great promise. One African from the Gold Coast was trained as a script writer and proved himself capable of thinking in pictures, showing imagination far above the average. Members of the C.F.U. working on location in the Colonies have reported favourably on the African assistants they have employed and there is every indication that, given the opportunity, Colonial people will in time prove themselves to be capable technicians. It is hoped that serious training may begin in 1948, as there is a proposal to open a regional film school at Accra in the Gold Coast. The trainees will be selected young well-educated Africans who have shown they have a flair for film-making. The syllabus, which includes theoretical and practical work in both 16mm. and 35 mm., has been drawn up to cover a period of twelve months. At the end of this initial course the trainees will be regraded and the more promising ones may be brought to this country for more advanced training. Others will return to their territories and begin by producing a much-needed monthly local news magazine.

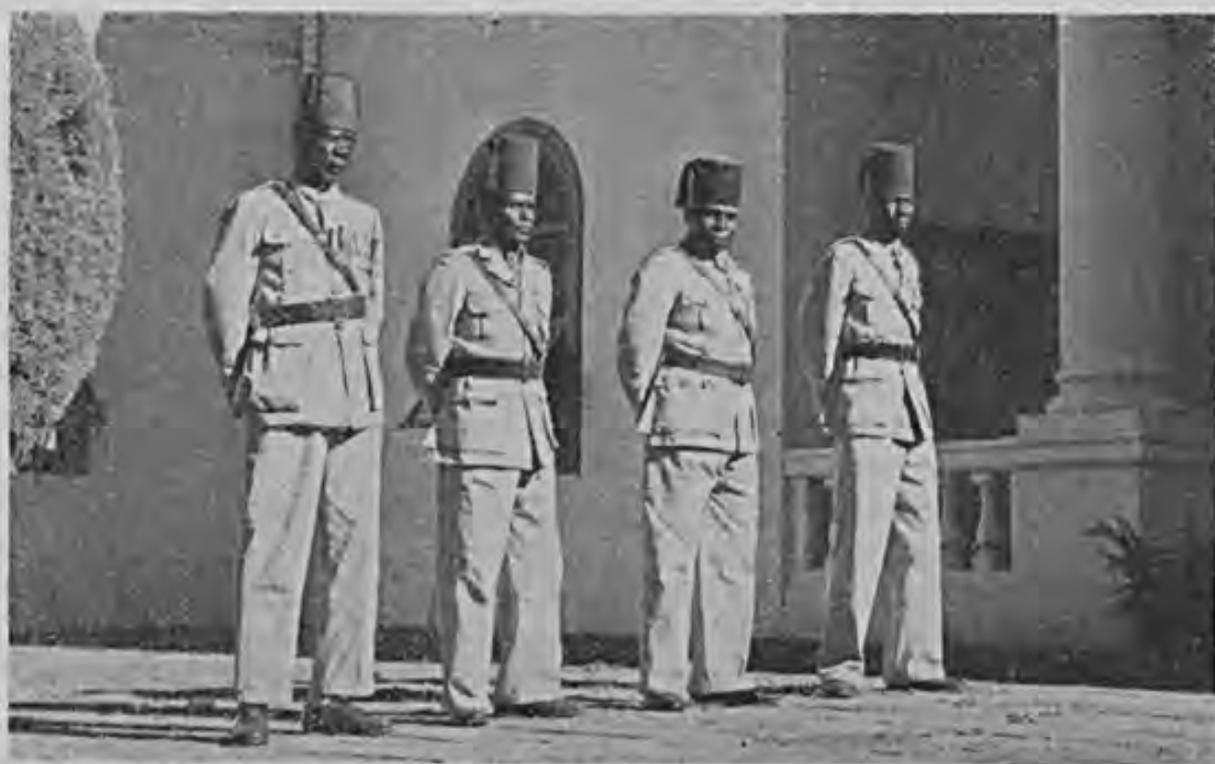
What progress in technique has been made during the past few years? How quickly is the unsophisticated Colonial acquiring the art of viewing films? Have we under-estimated his capacity to assimilate a more advanced technique? It would be difficult to make any accurate assessment in reply to such questions, as so little is known of audience reactions. In the country districts, with which film work is still mainly concerned, the element of novelty is still apparent for even in places best served by mobile units, where the van may put in an appearance perhaps five or six

times a year, the audiences can scarcely be regarded as seasoned filmgoers. Questionnaires have been used, but the information gained from them is inconclusive. Essays written by schoolchildren after seeing films show traces of the teachers' influence. The small amount accomplished has been sporadic and unco-ordinated, and very little that is constructive has come out of these scraps of audience research. Until a research unit is sent to Africa to deal with the various problems of film production on which the Unit requires reliable information, there must be a great deal of wasted effort. Such a unit should consist of three members : a trained social science researcher, the Unit's Musical Director, who happens to be a Nigerian and a distinguished musician, and an engineer to look after projection and recording equipment. Systematic research will then be possible and the work of the Unit directed along proved scientific channels.

In conclusion Mr. Sellers emphasised that all planning for mass education, whether through films or classroom teaching, broadcasting or books, is unlikely to prove effective unless it has the full co-operation of the Colonial people themselves.

Montgomery Visits East Africa

MEMBERS of the Colonial Film Unit in East Africa were invited to Government House, Nairobi, on 11th December 1947, to meet the C.I.G.S., Viscount Montgomery, who was paying a four-day visit to the



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