

# THE M.O.I. FILM CATALOGUE

Thoughts arising from the catalogue of films produced and acquired by the Films Division from the outbreak of war to June 30th, 1942, and published in this issue by courtesy of the M.O.I.

TWO HUNDRED AND FORTY films; two hundred and nine thousand, one hundred and eighty-two feet of cut negative—equivalent to twenty-two full length features; one hundred and thirty-eight films acquired from other sources.

The quantity is impressive. What of propaganda quality? What does it amount to? Will it improve? In what direction will it develop? In what direction ought it to develop? These are big questions, but we can at any rate assess the present position, and indicate what we believe to be the line which must be followed in the future.

In the first six months of 1942 the Films Division has been responsible for 82 films. In the whole of 1941 only 89 were produced. Since there is no reason to suppose a diminution of production since June 30th, it looks as if the film output of 1942—and certainly the cut-negative footage—will at least be double that of 1941. No mean quantitative achievement, considering that there has been no increase in manpower over 1941, though a number of war trainees, including several women directors, are only now getting into their stride.

So much for quantity—what of propaganda quality? Take first the 5-minute films. Out of the first thirty-two (the series started in August, 1940) most were poor and some were contemptible. Only twelve—*Ashley Green Goes to School*, *Britain at Bay*, *Miss Grant Goes to the Door*, *The Front Line*, *Britain Can Take It*, *Neighbours under Fire*, *We've Got to Get Rid of the Rats*, *The Dawn Guard*, *War and Order*, *Northern Outpost*, *The Heart of Britain*, and *Dai Jones*—deserve any mention at all. The rest had better be forgotten. Of the most recent thirty-two, up to September 28th, nineteen\* reach a fair propaganda level, and none, not even the dingy *Workparty*, falls to the level of idiocy, evasion and lack of reality represented by *A Call for Arms*, *Food for Thought*, and *Mr. Borland Thinks Again*—to take three of the first thirty-two titles at random. (We must add, however, that the most recent thirty-two 5-minute films include two National Savings Committee films, *The Owner Goes Aloft* and *Down Our Street*, not produced by the Films Division, but which the Division is apparently compelled to circulate. These reach as low a level of propaganda as any films yet issued).

The non-theatrical output shows a quantitative improvement too, and several films have recently been delivered which will bring the 1942 total well over the 1941 total of 23 films (inexplicably the 1941 total amounted only to 7 films). The 1940 films were efficient but unambitious and cheap. The 1942 programme contains more ambitious productions, such as *Speed-up on Stirlings*, *The Battle of Supplies*, the

telling A.F.U. production *Street Fighting*, *Spring on the Farm*, and *Night Shift*. In addition a non-theatrical film magazine, *Worker and Warfront*, designed specially for factory showing, is now in its third issue.

Instructional and training films are—rightly—on the increase, and in these the Films Division has excelled. Almost all are clear, telling and precise, and by their clarity, carry a propaganda message of more than local importance. *Fire-guard*, a study of fire watching methods, has had a wide success in Canada and the U.S.A. The Ministry of Agriculture *Dig for Victory* films are a model of this type of production.

Apart from two feature length films by the Crown Film Unit which, at the time of going to press, have not been publicly shown; the vivid interview film, *Plastic Surgery*, made to accompany Sir Harold Gillies' lectures in the U.S.A.; and the solid work of the Colonial Film Unit, which is outside the scope of this article, the only other M.O.I. 1942 productions which demand attention are the "trailers". These have recently been reduced from about two minutes to about a minute and a quarter in length, and are attached to the newsreels. They are virtually pictorial slogans linked to propaganda campaigns in other media. At one time trailers were no one's baby, trivial, technically poor and lacking in punch or point. Latterly they have shown improvement.

## Films acquired

Finally there are the films acquired by the Films Division, almost all circulated through the Central Film Library, and forming one of the most catholic film collections ever assembled. Here may be found *Men of Africa*, a good U.S.A. selection, including *The City*, *Power and the Land*, and *A Child Went Forth*, and seven *March of Time* issues, a disappointingly short Army Film Unit list, a number of B.C.G.A. films, including *The Londoners*; the better British Council films; a good though not very up-to-date Canadian list; a good selection of films from India; some sensational blitz records taken by the Fire Brigades; a fair selection of films from the U.S.S.R., including *Soviet Schoolchild*; four representative Shell Film Unit films including *Airscrew*; and six productions of the National Savings Committee—a major blot on the whole collection. (As we go to press, we learn that the I.C.I. film, *The Harvest Shall Come*, has also been added.)

What do these films represent in propaganda achievement? On the credit side the Films Division can claim a high level of technique; an intimate and warm handling of people as people unmatched, in the best instances, by any country in the world; a high level of informational content (though there are some remarkable gaps, particularly a woeful absence of informative films about the armed forces and the tactical aspects of the war); and an increasing (though still lagging) sense of urgency.

To the debit side must be placed, besides the lack of tactical films about the Forces, first,

parochialism; second, a lack of planned films for overseas use; and third and most important and most serious of all, the absence of films which portray for the benefit and inspiration of the peoples of the United Nations, the positive forward-looking fighting spirit of the peoples themselves.

First, parochialism. Too many films assume that Britain is the centre of the world and London the centre of Britain. Too many imply that civilisation itself resides in our own little blitzed cabbage patch, that British bravery is, by itself, an answer to Hitler's *geopolitik*, and that British suffering is, by itself, a moral panzer division capable of overwhelming the enemy's steel and fire. This tendency to replace direct action by self pity is dangerous to the war effort, and is maddening to our allies.

The lack of planned films for overseas is reflected in the catalogue. Since the beginning of the war till June 30th, 1942, out of 240 films, only 27 had been produced "wholly or mainly for overseas use" as against 77 5-minute films, 48 non-theatricals, and 34 instructional and training films. This does not mean, of course, that only 27 films have been sent overseas—most of the others have certainly been sent as well; but it does suggest that overseas planning has, hitherto, been subordinated to home planning, though there is now reason to suppose that the planning of overseas films is being much more seriously considered.

Parochialism and lack of overseas planning can be corrected within the Films Division itself; the lack of films on the social and moral war purpose of the peoples of the free world, the lack of films which represent, not the government speaking to the people, but the people speaking through the government, reflecting their own thoughts, picturing their own social organisations, supporting their own anxieties, organising their own will to win, goes far deeper than any inhibitions from which the Film Division may suffer. It is almost incredible that, out of the whole list, there appear to be no films on the Trade Unions (the largest collective body of civilians in the country), no films on the Works Committees or Shop Stewards (a fundamentally important and new factor in industry), and no films on the Co-operative movement (the largest manufacturing and retailing movement in the world).

Yet it is clear that such films could contribute enormously to the war-effort, inspiring and welding together the people of Britain, and contributing significantly to our reputation overseas.

## Citizen Organisations

There is an almost complete absence, in fact, of films about the great and independent citizen organisations which are playing such a huge part in the war, for the films on such "safe" organisations as the W.V.S. are no answer. (Incidentally, *Youth Takes a Hand*, on the Youth Service Corps, priggish and patronising, bears unhealthy symptoms of the political outlook for which the recent Conservative report on post-war education was rightly castigated.)

Why is a film propaganda drive of growing intensity castrated by the absence of such films?

(Continued on page 139)

\* *Land Girl*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Mobile Engineers*, *Diary of a Polish Airman*, *Builders*, *Filling the Gap*, *The Middle East*, *Balloon Site 568*, *Free French Navy*, the crude but dynamic *Five Men of Velish*, *Partners in Crime*, *New Towns for Old*, *Troopship*, *Dockers*, *Free House*, *21 Miles*, *Chiang Kai Chek in India*, *A New Fire Bomb*, *The Nose Has It*.

## 2. NEWSREEL TRAILERS

Till December, 1941, Trailers were about 200 ft. in length; since that date they have been 125 ft. in length.

TITLE OR THEME	PROD. UNIT	DEPT. CONCERNED	RELEASE DATE	NOTES
What To Do in an Air Raid	—	Home Security	5/40	A separate version made by each newsreel company
Incendiary Bomb	Universal	Home Security	6/40	
Local Defence Volunteers	Movietone	War Office	8/40	
Anderson Shelter (1)	Pathé	Home Security	9/40	
Gas Masks	G.B. News	Home Security	9/40	
Your Home as an Air Raid Shelter	Universal	Home Security	10/40	
Post Early	Pathé	G.P.O.	12/40	
Anderson Shelter (2)	Universal	Home Security	12/40	
Morning Blackout	G.B. News	Home Security	1/41	
Economical Use of Coal	Movietone	Mines	2/41	Regional distribution only
Recruits for Munitions	A. Buchanan	Labour	3/41	Re-issued 6/41
Stop that Fire	Crown	Home Security	3/41	Also issued non-theatrically
Carry Your Gasmask	Universal	Home Security	5/41	
Diphtheria	G.B. News	Health	5/41	
Paper Saving	Universal	Supply	7/41	
Help for the Homeless	G.B. News	Health and Home Security	8/41	
Shelter at Home	Movietone	Home Security	8/41	
Empty Houses	Pathé	Home Security	9/41	
Address Clearly	Universal	G.P.O.	9/41	
Fuel Economy (Heating)	Films of G.B.	Mines	12/41	
Post Early	Pub. Pics.	G.P.O.	12/41	
Food Advice Centre	Verity	Food	12/41	
Swinerton	Pub. Pics.	Supply	12/41	Regional distribution only
Sneezing	Strand	Health	1/42	With Cyril Fletcher
Fuel Economy (Cooking)	Films of G.B.	Mines	1/42	
A.T.S.	N.S.S.	Labour	1/42	Regional distribution only
Milk	Pub. Pics.	Food	1/42	
Fuel Economy (Hot Water)	Films of G.B.	Mines	2/42	
Paper Salvage	Films of G.B.	Supply	3/42	
Rats	Strand	Food	3/42	
Metal Salvage	Films of G.B.	Supply	5/42	
Rubber Salvage	Films of G.B.	Supply	6/42	With Basil Radford

## 3. COLONIAL FILM UNIT PRODUCTIONS

This list does not include nine films acquired, after the outbreak of war, from the British Council, the Imperial Institute and Messrs. Kodak Ltd. These films—some of which were re-edited—included not only Empire subjects, but "Killing the Killer" (a fight between a mongoose and a cobra to symbolise Churchill and Hitler) and a Chaplin film.

TITLE	LENGTH	DATE OF DESPATCH OVERSEAS	NOTES
Children of the Empire	860	3/40	Re-edited from a film in the Imperial Institute Compiled chiefly from library material by British Films Ltd. Re-edited from a film in the Kodak Library
Empire at Work, The	2,200	3/40	
Heritage of Defence	920	3/40	
British Army, The	2,062	11/40	
Mr. English at Home	2,630	11/40	
Story of Cotton, The	1,150	11/40	
Royal Air Force, The	1,040	12/40	
R.A.F. Commentary	1,057	12/40	
Guns in the Desert	476	1/41	Re-edited version of "Italy Beware"
Progress in the Colonies	1,030	4/41	
English and African Life	636	5/41	
African in London, An	1,125	7/41	
This is a Searchlight	495	11/41	
This is a Special Constable	815	11/41	
This is a Barrage Balloon	672	11/41	
This is an Anti-Aircraft Gun	600	11/41	
These are Paratroops	1,000	12/41	War Office material
This is an A.R.P. Warden	987	12/41	
Our Indian Soldiers	525	2/42	Material from "A Day with the Indian Army"
Self Help in Food	1,175	2/42	
With our African Troops—Early Training	266 (16 mm.)	2/42	African material
With our African Troops—on Active Service	708	2/42	
Soldiers' Comforts from Uganda	755	2/42	
This is a Fireman	1,030	4/42	
These are British Soldiers	635	4/42	
Bren Gun Carriers	707	6/42	Partly War Office material
These are A.T.S. and W.R.N.S.	205 (16 mm.)	6/42	M.O.I. material
Barbados Day at Portsmouth	230 (16 mm.)	6/42	
Uganda Police	243 (16 mm.)	7/42	African material

(Continued from page 135)

We believe there are two reasons:—

First, the Ministry of Information plays safe. Better no response at all to its propaganda than a lifted eyebrow from the 1922 Committee, or a frown from the T.U.C. Better be bland, equivocal, dignified and insipid. Yet propaganda which is safe will never inspire; propaganda which raises no questions will raise no feelings either. Bland equivocal dignified propaganda follows public opinion and neither leads nor even expresses it. Bland equivocal dignified propaganda is, in the last resource, defeatist propaganda. Propaganda which does not lead, in the end impedes.

The second reason is to be found in the whole set-up of the M.O.I. itself in relation to the government. For the M.O.I. does not initiate propaganda policy; it is subordinate to the other government departments. It is a channel for the

dissemination of other people's propaganda lines. It cannot command; it can only obey or obstruct or argue. This battle was fought and lost many months back, partly in the House of Commons under the maladroit Duff Cooper, partly outside the House over the question whether the M.O.I. should be responsible for the Service news bulletins, or whether each Service should compile its own news handouts. The Services won, with disastrous results for our propaganda.

Thus it is that the Films Division, instead of laying down policy on facts supplied to it, is at the mercy of half the petty officials in Whitehall. Any film scheme the M.O.I. puts up can be shot to pieces by any official who prefers the *status quo* to action, any official who is trying to get on the right side of big business after the war, or any official who looks for personal preferment to the party bosses of the Conservative or Labour

political machines. Small wonder then that every propaganda theme which hits is suspect, every theme which has not the support of every small, unrepresentative and conflicting minority is impeded, every reference to the new social organisations derived from the war is smothered, because their development represents a diminution of the power of various interests to wage the war in a way best suited to their own particular ideas.

In this lies what must be the next struggle of the Ministry of Information. It must become a creator of propaganda detached from, and not subservient to, the local, private and often conflicting notions of government departments. The M.O.I. must initiate and plan policy as a whole. This means that it must express the will of the people in war. This issue must be fought and won. Till it is, the Films Division policy will remain truncated and one-sided.