

“Land of Promise”: Society and Politics in British Documentary films, 1930-1960

During this tumultuous period in British history, the Documentary Movement of filmmakers associated with producer-directors John Grierson, Basil Wright and a generation of their colleagues sent the celluloid film into battle for social understanding and change. They set out to help shape a new citizen for a new era of educated democracy and advancing technology.

During the same period, the General Post Office Film Unit occupied an important position in British film history and the documentary cinema in particular. The Unit attracted cinematic and artistic talent such as Humphrey Jennings, Charlotte Reiniger, Benjamin Britten and W.H. Auden. In an age of increasing social concern and sensitivities, the governments of the day themselves were sponsoring and guiding experiments in new cinematic genres:

The Central Office of Information (established in 1946) produced and distributed thousands of short films in Britain, the Commonwealth and the world. It is arguable that Britain's post-colonial identity was shaped in significant ways by these films.

Though never reaching truly wide audiences, the documentary film had matured into a media and art form on the British silver screen before a significant home grown feature film industry did. For this reason the British feature films of the 1940s and '50s show remarkable dependence on the techniques developed by the documentarists.

The protagonists, methods, techniques, aims and achievements of the early British documentary film movement will be explored in this article. There are few sources on this topic other than the films themselves that have recently been restored, digitised and published on DVD by the British Film Institute. The article will describe and analyse the visual and sound experience of some of the most prominent items in the sizable collection.