

A HISTORY OF THE BRITISH NEWSREELS

In June 1910 the first British newsreel was issued, the weekly Pathe's Animated Gazette. Films had been exhibited in Britain since the 1890s, and news events were covered by the early film-makers, but the newsreel was a novel concept that appeared as a result of the more settled, regular pattern of film-going that was becoming established with the rise of cinemas. A newsreel was a reel of film, lasting originally around five minutes, that usually showed four or five stories illustrating the week's news. The films were silent, with brief titles introducing each item, and by 1912 the newsreels had settled into a pattern of two issues per week, matching the usual change of cinema programmes.

The idea had natural appeal, and very soon rival newsreels were challenging Pathe. Warwick Bioscope Chronicle and Gaumont Graphic appeared later in 1910; Topical Budget began in 1911, and others followed in the years leading up to the First World War. The war hit the British film industry hard, but the strongest of the newsreels survived: Pathe Gazette, Gaumont Graphic, and Topical Budget, which in 1917 was taken over by the War Office and run on propagandist lines as an outlet for official war film, changing its name to the War Office Official Topical Budget, and later the Pictorial News (Official).

The newsreels became widely popular in the 1920s. No cinema programme was complete without its newsreel, and audiences saw on the screen the heroes and heroines, fads and fashions, disasters and triumphs of the era. The newsreel cameramen became synonymous with daredevil stunts and bold scoops, as the newsreels vied with newspapers and radio to feed the public's appetite for news. Pathe, Gaumont and Topical remained dominant, with a fourth reel, Empire News Bulletin, joining them in 1926. The newsreel companies also issued cinemagazines that covered more light-hearted or ephemeral topics. Gaumont produced first *Around the Town*, and then later in the decade *Gaumont Mirror*. Pathe introduced the *Pathe Pictorial* in 1918, then in 1921 a cinemagazine for women entitled *Eve's Film Review*.

The first British sound newsreel was *British Movietone News*, which began life in June 1929. The parent company, Fox, was American, the signal of a significant change in ownership-bias from the French companies that had originally supported British newsfilming in the silent era. The changeover to sound was a gradual process for British cinemas, and Pathe, Gaumont and Empire all issued silent as well as sound reels for a few years. Pathe issued silent and sound versions of its *Gazette*; Gaumont issued the silent *Gaumont Graphic* and *Gaumont Sound News*, and *Empire News Bulletin* ran alongside its sound counterpart, *Universal Talking News*. The *Topical Budget* reel faded out in 1931, but a new major sound newsreel, *British Paramount News*, appeared at the same time. Both *Universal* and *Paramount* were ultimately controlled by the giant American corporations.

Sound was used only falteringly at first, and it was not until the mid-1930s that the most familiar newsreel style became established, with authoritative commentator and upbeat musical accompaniment. *Movietone*, *Paramount*, *Pathe*, *Universal* and the reconstituted

Gaumont-British News controlled the market, while a rival colour newsreel, the National News, lasted only a few issues in 1937. The newsreels were longer than in silent days, running to ten minutes or more, and became increasingly influential in their presentation of the news, though they took great care not to cause controversy, and became devoted to maintaining the status quo, celebrating the traditional aspects of British life such as royalty, sport and personalities, while handling politics with caution. A very small challenge to their dominance was the Workers' Topical News (1930-31), issued by the Federation of Workers' Film Societies, but a far greater challenge to their style was offered by the dynamic and innovative American news cinemagazine, *The March of Time*, which was shown in British cinemas from 1935 onwards. British newsreel editors were wary of such novelty, and the safer approach of the British newsreels remained as the Second World War approached.

The newsreels undertook to report the war with courage on the part of the cameramen, and a sense of national responsibility on the part of the editors. The Government was unable to take control of any one of the independent, largely American-owned newsreels, as it had in the First World War, and the official message was mostly presented through services newsreels such as the RAF's *The Gen* and the home front reel *Worker and Warfront*, as well as public information trailers which were often shown at the end of the main newsreels. However, the newsreels were subject to the censorship of the Ministry of Information, and the use of pooled film (that is, the same cameraman's film used by several of the newsreels to save on resources) led to a certain homogeneity of style. The newsreels also began to suffer in the public's eyes from unavoidably being the regular bearers of bad news, and there was considerable shock and questions asked about what was appropriate to show in public cinemas when the first evidence of the concentration camps was shown in April 1945.

The initial post-war years saw the newsreels continuing in the style that they knew best. Their very familiarity made them popular, each being associated with the warm tones of the commentators Lionel Gamlin (British Movietone News), E.V.H. Emmett (Gaumont-British News) or Bob Danvers-Walker (for the renamed Pathe News), but the experience of the war, and of 1930s government, had made the British public more sceptical of the news that it was offered, and the newsreels could no longer command the general trust that they had once enjoyed. A more thoughtful, documentary style account of news stories was news cinemagazine *This Modern Age* (1946-50), produced by the Rank Organisation as a British answer to *The March of Time*. But the major threat to the newsreels' hegemony was television.

The BBC had originally transmitted cinema newsreels to its small audience, but from 1948 to 1954 it issued its own newsreel, *Television Newsreel*. This broke no new ground, but television's live coverage of the Coronation in 1953 showed up the newsreels' necessarily delayed delivery of news, and greatly increased the popularity of television. Live, daily news with newsreaders was introduced in 1955 by the BBC and the new commercial ITV service, and within two years British Paramount News had ceased production. Universal News had been largely absorbed by Gaumont-British News since

the war, and ended in 1956, while Gaumont-British News itself evolved naturally into a colour cinemagazine entitled *Look at Life*, in 1959.

Pathe continued with both its Pathe News newsreel and the Pathe Pictorial cinemagazine, both showing some challenge to television by being in colour, but the news values were minimal, and when colour television was introduced, Pathe saw that its time was over, and the newsreel folded in 1970. British Movietone News had similarly sought salvation in colour, and in 1969 changed its name to just Movietone News. It was partly supported by a contract to provide an overseas Commonwealth newsreel entitled *British News*, and lasted just long enough to celebrate its fiftieth anniversary, before calling it a day in 1979.

As the newsreels bowed out from cinemas, so both commercial and academic interest began to increase in their libraries. The newsreels became, and have remained, a major source of historical film for television documentaries. British Movietone News and British Pathe News market their respective newsreels, while the ITN Archive has inherited from Reuters Television (and before them Visnews) the libraries of the Gaumont, Paramount and Universal newsreels. Scholarly interest in newsfilm as both a unique historical source and a rewarding subject for study in itself has continued to grow since the 1960s. The Slade Film History Register, maintained by the British Universities Film & Video Council (BUFVC) since 1974, saw a progressive attempt to document the newsreels, as a historical resource and for their own sake. This work led to the publication by BUFVC of three volumes of the *Researcher's Guide to British Newsreels* and a microfiche edition of newsreel issue sheets in the *Slade Film History Register*. In 1995 the British Universities Newsreel Project was established and has resulted in the publication of this database, with its contents taken from the original newsreel issue sheets.

The work to document the newsreels continues, with the addition of supplementary documentation such as commentary scripts and cameramen's dope sheets. Such data will further build up the picture of how this particular news medium was constructed. The newsreels have bequeathed an enduringly important record of the twentieth century, preserving in motion pictures not only the major news stories and personalities of the era, but the inconsequential, passing subjects that mattered, or amused at the time. The newsreels, in their heyday, connected with the popular passions and prejudices of the age, and this is what will give them their lasting value.

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