

BASIL WRIGHT: DEFINITIONS OF
DOCUMENTARY

G. E. PALMER

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

University of Stirling
1990

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.

I would like to acknowledge the assistance of the following -

Dr John Izod and Professor Ian Lockerbie of Stirling University acted as my supervisors over five years and who gave me much help and encouragement

Basil Wright and Kassim Al-bin Said both demonstrated great generosity and patience during my frequent visits to Little Adam Farm

My wife Sheena Palmer has been patient and supportive over these difficult times and has helped enormously

Janet McBain and The Scottish Film Archive

The Stirling University Archive Team

The staff of the Dorset Institute and Stirling University libraries

Mr Bruce-Jones and Mr and Mrs Readman

Stirling University for granting me a three-year studentship

My parents Mr and Mrs Carl Palmer

And especially my Grandparents Mr and Mrs Rattenbury God Bless



Abstract.

A close textual analysis of the films of Basil Wright between 1931 and 1938. This work will give a fresh perspective on the working methods of one of the senior members of the British Documentary Movement. It will also discuss the influence exerted by the leader of this group John Grierson.

Seven films will be looked at in detail beginning with *The Country Comes to the Town* and concluding with *Face of Scotland*. In these detailed analyses we will discuss how the ideological thinking of the group found expression through Wright. The purpose of studying an individual is to judge what measure of freedom individual members of the unit were permitted.

In seven chapters we will chart the growth of the movement from Grierson's *Drifters* in 1929 to Wright's *Face of Scotland* in 1938. During the period the Movement went through changes in direction which had a direct bearing on the style of Wright's work. In order to understand these changes we shall chart Wright's development from cutter in late 1929 to senior member in the late thirties. Each chapter will begin with socio-historical data on the subject Wright was filming. Also included in this section is material on key personnel and details of shooting. This is followed with a close analysis of the form and meaning of Wright's style. In the conclusions we will discuss Grierson's reaction to the films in question as well as giving further political and historical data.

The purpose of this thesis is to re-evaluate Wright's early work and to judge how much it is a reflection of the middle-opinion group whose ideas on social policy find expression in some of the films.

BASIL WRIGHT: DEFINITIONS OF DOCUMENTARY

<u>CONTENTS</u>		<u>PAGE</u>
INTRODUCTION		1
CHAPTER ONE	Gnerson and <i>Drifters</i>	5
CHAPTER TWO	The Early Years	36
CHAPTER THREE	The First Two Films	67
CHAPTER FOUR	The West Indian Films	108
CHAPTER FIVE	<i>Song of Ceylon</i>	149
CHAPTER SIX	A Change of Direction	194
CHAPTER SEVEN	<i>Face of Scotland</i>	246
CONCLUSION		289
THE FILMS		293
BIBLIOGRAPHY		297

Introduction

Basil Wright has a central role in the history of documentary as the first man chosen by John Grierson to join him in the film-making enterprise which came to be known as the British Documentary Movement. Wright was a typical member of the Movement in that he shared the same class and education as that of his colleagues, but what distinguished Wright was that he developed a lyrical style which was very much his own. Between 1929 and 1939 Wright was to play a key role as a film-maker, propagandist and as a teacher for the Movement. In this thesis we shall be evaluating Wright's work as one particular and distinctive contribution to the history of documentary.

In order to extract Wright from Grierson's shadow we have to deal with the myth that has grown up around the Movement. The main reason for this has been an over-concentration on Grierson and his writings. To a degree this is understandable as Grierson was undeniably the father of the Movement, and its guiding force. But such a concentration inevitably fails to read the films as anything more than expressions of Grierson's philosophy and not as texts of value in themselves. By focusing on Wright we will be discussing to what extent individuality was permitted within the Movement. This in turn necessitates questioning the very idea of a 'Movement' as a group of film-makers with shared aims. We will investigate how Wright negotiated his own artistic 'space' between the institutional demands of the EMB and his own desire to express himself as an artist.

Wright has always maintained that his primary purpose was to 'please himself' by creating what he called 'little works of art'. This has significant implications. In the traditional histories, Wright and his colleagues record their allegiance to Grierson's socially purposive approach. But while those in the Movement may have believed in their leader's rhetoric, as artists they all sought to make individual contributions. Wright's particular concern was in what can broadly be termed 'the aesthetic'. His concern with the detail, pattern and the form of his films are all symptomatic of his interest in style. It is Wright's distinctive method and the manner in which he constructed his films and treated the subjects handed to him by Grierson that will be analysed in order to discover the ideological significance of Wright's style.

In the course of this investigation we will also be dealing with the history of the period. The films of the Movement have a special place in the story of British film because of their claim to be 'realistic'. This is a claim we shall be examining by looking at the historical and economic background in which the films were made. We will ask whether the films tell us something about the thirties or whether they are significant only as the insights and discoveries of one man. Wright's work will be placed in its historical context and seen as a response to a complex of forces. His films will be contrasted with other artifacts from the period.

Our analysis will also touch upon the question of audiences. The Movement has received a great deal of critical attention which is out of all proportion to the number of people who actually saw the films at the time. It is important to investigate just who saw the films to understand their meaning in the thirties. This is not just a statistical question but a crucial issue, for Wright's knowledge of this audience would have influenced his approach to the subject. For example the non-theatrical circuit that developed in the thirties included not only the burgeoning cineastes but comprised a high percentage of children and these featured predominantly in Wright's work throughout the decade. This knowledge will contribute to our analysis.

One of the recurring themes of the thirties was the importance of defining British democracy in a rapidly changing world. Wright and his colleagues were concerned with this problem and the films they made were often conceived with this theme in mind. Indeed 'democracy' was one of Grierson's key-words and a concept from which the Movement drew inspiration. In looking at Wright's work we shall be examining his own filmic definition of democracy and how this was influenced by the various institutional demands acting upon him. Our investigation then is also a discussion of the role of intellectuals in the state as mediators of mass democracy. What makes this pertinent is that the forms Wright adopted to portray this idea, is a form still utilised by film-makers today in what has been called mainstream documentary. As a result, it is important that we take into account the economic and political circumstances surrounding the original formulation.

It is fortunate that in our attempt to evaluate Wright's contribution to the

documentary form we have some private letters and interviews conducted with the director in the last years of his life. These have offered insights on the planning and construction of Wright's work as well as revealing his feelings about particular subjects and locations.

Wright and his colleagues have contributed to the myth of the Movement by constructing their own inevitably subjective history of the period. It is hoped that by discussing Wright's recollections in the context of other accounts of the period we will be helping to re-locate his work and providing a fresh perspective which may have implications for future studies of the Movement and the history of British film.

The method adopted in the following will be to trace Wright's career from the time he first joined Grierson in late 1929 to 1938 and the release of *Face of Scotland* - his last major film before the war and the last project he worked on before the gradual break-up of the Movement during the war.

We shall be focussing on seven films that Wright is credited with directing, and analysing them in chronological order. We shall look at his preparations for shooting, the editing process and then concentrate on a close textual analysis of the film in question. This will be followed with a conclusion in which we assess to what extent Wright's work is an expression of the Griersonian philosophy.

Wright's concern with the history of his subject is of particular interest because it is here that he reveals what he considers important about the culture under investigation. Wright's priorities will be analysed and his approach discussed before we move on to a closer examination of the technical aspects of the film. We will be concerned with questions of address and the central organising role of the narrator as well as the meaning of Wright's particular sense of form.

It will be borne in mind that Wright was filming in a period of British history which abounds in contradictions and is known alternately as 'The Devils Decade' and 'The Baldwin Age'. Wright's films are interesting historical documents not only because of the insights they offer of the changing social scene but because they reveal this world filtered through the stylistic apparatus of a man responsible for the formulation of what we now know as documentary. The fact that Wright was primarily

concerned with the artistry of his work makes this enquiry particularly interesting It is the ideological significance of Wright's distinctive style that we shall be chiefly concerned with in the following

CHAPTER ONE

GRIERSON AND DRIFTERS

One of the prevailing myths surrounding the documentary Movement is that it was Grierson's sole creation. But as Constantine and others have pointed out there were already 'many indications of active interest in film publicity at a senior level in both Westminster and Whitehall before the arrival of the documentary idea' [1]. In this thesis we shall be discussing Basil Wright's filmic contribution to the idea. But before introducing Wright we should establish the background to the formation of the Movement. This will involve a discussion of official interest in the use of film and an analysis of *Drifters* - the film which inspired Wright to join the Movement in the first place and the model emulated by the new recruits.

By the time Grierson arrived at the Empire Marketing Board (EMB) at twenty-nine years of age he had already had a wide and varied career. He had served on a mine-sweeper during the war and had then gone on to play an active part in Labour student politics at Glasgow University. This was followed with academic work at Durham where he also continued to preach and write. In the mid-twenties Grierson won a Rockefeller Scholarship and travelled widely across America. Beneath the gay facade of the twenties he discovered a 'wilderness in which the human particles of our city exist' [2]. He felt that people no longer knew their place in the world, that they lacked a sense of direction and purpose. Grierson believed that society in the early twentieth century was going through the most radical and far-reaching changes, and that a new outlook was needed to deal with the modern world. By the time he arrived at the EMB he felt himself to be fully equipped to give these masses leadership in the articulation of a faith, to inspire them towards an understanding of the 'complex and impersonal forces' that commanded the modern economy [3]. Cinema was the instrument chosen to spread this new teaching.

Grierson's was a complex character but one theme that runs through all of

his work is the Christian virtue of duty and responsibility to the community

At Glasgow University Grierson at first took an intellectual approach to his faith by choosing to study moral philosophy, the problem of 'how men should live' But although he excelled at his studies, Grierson was more interested in the practical application of ideas He took an interest in the Russian Revolution not merely from a political perspective but from the standpoint of one who wanted to see whether the new system could improve conditions for working people Like many young radicals of the time he praised the 'social mastery of the Bolsheviks' and hoped that such a system would 'settle down on our more conservative Englanders' [4] When lecturing on Kant at Durham University he felt that his students would be better employed helping the underprivileged in the area [5] For all of his academic ability Grierson was a practical person who saw little value in vague theorising and urged those around him to work hard for each other - for the good of the community The essential spark at the heart of Grierson's philosophy was the need for action Early in 1924 we find Grierson using the pulpit to put across his message -

the secret of activity It is what those who take no part in the light never realise and the whole secret of it is that each one of us must take part in the establishing of good things, before good things can come to pass Leaving the matter to a few people, as we leave our politics to the politicians is no use in the wider world It is for each of us to take our active part in the organisation of our world It is for each of us to live and live strongly for the community of men, and to God according to the light that is in us [6]

Grierson's religion was a brand of radical Christianity that declared itself in favour of an improvement in social conditions in an effort to counter what he considered the decline of faith in the old communities He believed in restoring faith through constructive action In a sense Grierson can be placed in the tradition of Scotsmen like Watt and Hume who used their inventions and discoveries to improve the lot of their fellow men If we look to Grierson's sermons we can find

him praising Knox

And if you take another man like John Knox what do you find his love to be? It is the love of straight actions, of energy and honest endeavour - and the right of every individual to stand equal before God That is what he loves, what he fights for - his ideal [7]

Grierson claimed to have turned down two constituencies offered to him as a graduate [8] This refusal is not only indicative of Grierson's complicated political position It demonstrates that Grierson was neither a laissez-faire Tory nor a determinedly socialist Labour man and that he dwelt somewhere in the centre The role of the centre and the rise of a new liberal ideology are one of the themes of this work Even in the twenties Grierson's need for action can be related to the reforming zeal of those occupying in the centre

But if we look elsewhere for Grierson's inspiration we can see some links to Calvinism Most relevant to our inquiry is the Calvinist belief in an ordered society

It would discipline the common man that the order may be, in part, of his own making, and that at all times he should feel himself responsible for it [9]

In short each man had a part to play in maintaining the same system, for it was a shared belief in the rightness of the system that held society together Whether rich or poor the Calvinist ministers sought to organise the whole of man's life under one comprehensive idea -

which sought, not merely to purify the individual, but to reconstruct Church and State, and to renew society by penetrating every department of life, public as well as private, with the influence of religion [10]

Such a philosophy gave the believer a distinctly ethical outlook as well as strength of character and rigidity of will

Already we can see some connections with Grierson. In the first place he had no quarrel with the social order. Grierson was interested in some social reform and was a powerful critic of the elitist elements in British culture but he was never an advocate of revolution or violent change. He sought not to change the system but to improve the understanding of those working within it. He spoke of the 'hard gruelling responsibility, of thinking for ourselves' and this too echoes Calvin. [11] But perhaps the most important link between Grierson and Calvin is their shared belief in the importance of the collective above the individual. Grierson had little time for the 'belly-aches' of the individual in a world in which 'impersonal forces command' [12]. Calvin associated individualism with pride - a sin before God. Both men sought leadership in their faith but they also sought to plan the work of the community. It is this evangelical drive for order and unity that we will note in our analysis of *Drifters* which represents a form of Calvinism in action.

Grierson was often to speak of the need to define democracy in the modern world. The democracy of Calvinism under Knox was the people's right to elect their own ministers. The education system was set up in order to teach people scripture so that they could select the most worthy men to become ministers. In such times the religion was a means of unifying the people, a common ground in which they could all come together. But we should note that such a religion sanctions the status quo and the notion that 'everyone has a place' was to be one of the central ideas in the Movement.

Another flaw in the democracy of Calvinism was the doctrine of the elect. It was these lucky individuals whom God had chosen to save and whose responsibility it was to lead the community - if not in teaching then by example. Those who were not part of the elect and therefore saved were damned to a life without hope. As a result of this the people *en masse* decided they were saved - this was the only way they could live with themselves. The people were bound by fear and embraced the religion as a means of unification.

Grierson wanted power in the moral and spiritual sphere in order to reunite the communities with a faith. As one of the elect his role was to provide the masses with leadership. The traditional outlet for such an ambition was the church. But the church was no longer a power in the land and its influence was minimal. This was a cause for some regret on Grierson's part because he felt its moral influence was essential to the community. Grierson was often to use religious metaphors and similes in his writings. These were more than simply rhetorical flourishes - they express Grierson's hope of regaining the position of influence once held by the church. In 1931 he wrote New Worlds for Old in an effort to persuade the church to go into the business of making films. As he put it - 'Who more than the church should be interested in recording the daily dignity and daily achievements of man and his work?' [13]. By 1931 Grierson had already made *Drifters* and had become so convinced of the power of the medium that he believed, along with an unnamed Catholic Bishop quoted in his book, that if St Paul were to come back to earth he would become a movie director. [14]

Grierson was not the only one to draw comparisons between the cinema and the church. The Catholic apologist Christopher Dawson wrote 'Do people go to the cinema or to church? Does not the cinema take the place that was once occupied by church and chapel?' [15]

It was this curiously moral attitude that determined Grierson's feelings about Hollywood. He admired the Westerns for their epic scale and appreciated the work of men like Vidor, Chaplin and Von Sternburg. But he also believed, like many of the morally responsible, that the mass cinema of the day was, for the most part, a vulgar and simple entertainment. It was a 'Woolworth's of the emotions' and essentially a passive form of activity. [16] As Stead writes-

Cinemas were seen to confirm the new apathy which was thought to be typical of those years of mass unemployment. It was a substitute which enticed precisely those groups which had no real grasp of the concept of citizenship. [17]

However the Church did not respond to Grierson's vote of confidence and so the Movement took it upon themselves to instruct the people in the concept of citizenship. Grierson conceived of himself as a cinema-preacher with a mission, or rather a duty, to educate the masses towards an understanding of the modern world. This sense of duty was combined with his reformers need for change. The EMB provided him with this opportunity to express his faith.

The EMB was set up in May of 1926 under the auspices of the Dominions Office 'to promote the marketing of the products of the British Empire and to encourage 'research and development' [18]. The creation of the Board was a result of the electorate's rejection of Conservative Party proposals for preferential tariffs at the 1923 General Election [19]. Its aim was the development of an economically self-sufficient Empire. Its method was propaganda.

The first and only Secretary of the Board was Stephen Tallents, a career civil servant who had already worked on government propaganda during the first world war. Tallents believed that propaganda was essential to the survival of the Empire. Britain was to be aggressively promoted to combat the idea that she was 'down and out' [20]. To this end the EMB adopted a very modern approach to publicity. According to Swann -

In creating its machinery of interpretation it enlisted the services of the best artists to paint its posters, it brought in the best architects to design its public exhibitions and it sought the help of writers, speakers, journalists and film producers [21].

It is worth noting that the response to the artworks produced by this new organisation met with a reaction not unlike that which greeted the work of the Movement. The posters received high praise for their artistic merit but were thought too subtle to reach the man on the street [22].

The aim of the Board was to make the populace realise the economic importance of the Empire. In buying sugar from Barbados and bananas from

Jamaica they were doing their part to help the Empire in its financial difficulties It was during the thirties that the first 'Buy British' campaigns were mooted [23]

The best medium for reaching the people was the cinema By the late twenties those in the Establishment had begun to realise the potential of the new mass medium for propagandist purposes There was a realisation slowly dawning that American films promoted an American way of life featuring American products It was feared that a populace duped by this powerful medium, would crave these products and this would have an adverse affect on British Trade When Cunliffe-Lister at the Board of Trade moved the Cinematograph Films Act of 1927 he revealed this concern when he said that cinema was 'the greatest advertising power in the world' [24] But there was also a fundamental fear that the British were losing their national identity and that something had to be done to re-establish confidence in the British image

In these early days Grierson was fortunate enough to have the support of powerful figures like Leo Amery, Philip Cunliffe-Lister and William Crawford On the Imperial Conference sub-committee of 1926 which reported on the power of cinema was Major Walter Elliot - a rising star of the Tory Party and a contemporary of Grierson's Elliot was to be of some use to Grierson in the future in his role as chairman of the EMB film sub committee Grierson also found friends in the Department of Overseas Trade and those in the Travel Association [25] Over the next decade some of these allies were to leave Grierson but their support in the early days was essential

It is hardly surprising that a fellow Scot like Crawford was sympathetic to Grierson's ideas Not only was he a believer in the pragmatic use of ideas in the Scottish tradition but he was also head of one the biggest advertising agencies in Britain [26] Crawford sat on the Imperial Economic Committee and was Vice-Chairman of the Publicity Committee of the EMB It should be clear that he was predisposed to promote the Imperial ideology - 'Everything that is richest and best can be garnered from the soil of the Empire All that is needed to sell it is skilled marketing and advertising' [27]

But there was also a belief at the EMB that children could and should be won over to the cause of Empire Again Cunliffe-Lister spoke of how cinema and other means of publicity would be useful for influencing the consumers of the future and the generation that Grierson later hoped he could 'command' [28]

It is a great thing when not only your manufacturers and all who work in our factories realise how dependent they are on Empire trade, but when every house-holder realises what it means and what he or she can do, and when a young generation are growing up and are being educated in all that the development of Empire must mean to them [29]

Tallents set up a scheme to distribute 150 EMB posters to schools and was later to reveal that children played an important part in the EMB's strategy [30] These themes will be investigated in the following but it is important for us to note that the Empire can only be understood in the 'matrix of perceptions' shared by people in the late twenties and thirties [31] In the words of one civil servant-

Ultimately the purpose of the Empire must be found, and is to be found, in the moral or spiritual sphere And this too seems confirmed by our actual experience, and consistent with the quality of our feelings What distinguishes this group from the closest of military alliances or the most expedient of economic relationships? The distinction is to be found not in the content of the actual relations between the partner communities, but in the quality of them They are, in short, in the ultimate sense, moral relationships [32]

The Empire was a fundamental part of the British identity and found expression through a variety of agencies In creating propaganda for the EMB, Grierson was not expressing a right-wing bias but making a contribution to an institution which was seen to be somehow above politics and fundamental to the British identity

The most important of Grierson's allies was Stephen Tallents who fell under the dynamic Scotsman's spell when they met in the Spring of 1928

I took to Grierson at first sight. He put his ideas, as he has always done, with persuasive conviction. I did not fully grasp their purport at that moment, but looking back, I can give a clearer account of them than I could have done at the end of that first meeting. The meagerness which he found in modern community life seemed to him due to a lack of essential understanding of the stuff on which that life was made up. If life itself were to yield its riches, then the raw material of life must be worked by processes which would elicit not merely its bare facts but its essentially dramatic qualities [33]

But despite his enthusiasm for Grierson's ideas Tallents had to be careful. Due to his very limited budget and the fact that Select Committee on Estimates were investigating the Board, Tallents was severely restricted in what he was able to offer Grierson. [34] Walter Creighton had already been employed as Film Officer and Tallents was in no position to give Grierson any work. [35] Instead he asked Grierson to do some research on the use of film. The result of these enquiries was Grierson's *Notes to English Film Producers*. [36] This is an interesting document for it reveals Grierson's grasp of the psychological impact of film. In this report he claims that films have-

a practical monopoly over the dramatic strata of the common mind in which preferences, sympathies, affections and loyalties, if not actually created are at least crystallised and coloured. Cinema is recognised as having a peculiar influence on the ideological centres to which advertisement endeavours to make its appeal, this is not only because of the widespread and continuous march of the Cinema, but because it is an ideal medium for all manner of suggestion. It seems that what

people want more than anything of cinema is practical example
and renewed variety [37]

The report was well received by Cunliffe-Lister and Crawford who all gave support to Grierson when he suggested that the EMB set up a 'producing and editing unit' in his very first report [38] And so while the idea for a small unit was Grierson's the impetus was long established and was waiting for the lead he provided His predominantly educational and social motives were married to the more specific goals of those concerned with trade figures and the economic and cultural significance of the Empire It was the combination of these not unrelated concepts that provide the ideological impetus to *Drifters*

While Grierson's ideas were being discussed it soon transpired that although Creighton had the friendship and support of Kipling he had very little idea how to make a film When the ill-fated *One Family* was completed it had eaten up £15,740 - a considerable part of the EMB budget [39]

Grierson had been wise enough to see that a government department could not compete with the experience and capital resources of Hollywood and suggested instead that they compete in the second features market In this connection he proposed two films to the Board One of these was on the Cattle trade, the other on the subject of the Herring Industry According to Swann 'Grierson claimed that the herring film was intended as a response to recent criticisms that the Board was not doing enough to advertise the herring industry' [40]

But the herring also represented a shrewd choice In 1928 a meeting was held with A M Samuel, Financial Secretary to the Treasury whose permission was needed if the EMB were to receive a budget for one of the proposed films Samuel was an expert on the herring and had written a book on the subject [41] He responded to the compliments given to him by those present The chairman of the EMB Film Committee was Walter Elliot who gave Grierson his full support But there was not to be a great deal of money forthcoming - only £35,320 was

earmarked for film over eight years [42]

The EMB did not have the finances to set up a production company of its own and so New Era - 'a leading company specialising in the production of short films' were given the contract [43] The company was owned by Sir Gordon Craig who has since been described as 'conservative in politics' [44] It was Craig who advised the Conservative Party on the formation of the Conservative and Unionist Film Association (CUFA) in 1930 [45] It should be clear that the company were not without links to the Tory Party and these connections would have constituted one of the constraints Grierson and the others would later have to deal with

Drifters cost £2,948 and was finished in the summer of 1929 before Creighton had even started shooting *One Family* [46] Although Grierson wrote relatively little on the actual filming of *Drifters* the making of the film is well documented It was shot in three weeks in the summer of 1928 primarily in Stornaway by the cameraman Basil Emmott who worked for New Era But it was the editing of the film which took up most of Grierson's time He had studied Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* while in America and wanted to make a film in the modern style The 'realism' of the film was captured by the use of a hand-held camera and by strapping the other camera onto the hull of the boat The fishermen were chosen primarily because of their photogenic qualities which, Tallents suggested, would add to the realism of the film [47] It is also worth recording that the scenes in the cabin and those of the fish were shot in a studio and added to the film during the cutting

Drifters is best seen as Grierson's attempt to convince his new colleagues at the EMB that he could make propaganda in a style which would be both effective, modern and cheap But *Drifters* is also a filmic expression of Grierson's philosophy and a model those in the unit would look to in the future The film can be seen as a prototype for the sort of advertising films that Grierson and the unit would make in the thirties As Arnes has written - '*Drifters* set the structural pattern of much subsequent documentary' [48] In the following we shall investigate this structure and discuss its ideological significance But we should also bear in mind that the film represents the coming together of a variety of men all

interested in propaganda - propaganda of the faith in Grierson's case and propaganda for the Empire on behalf of the EMB. These two impulses are married together in the film. But *Drifters* can also be understood as the first broadside from an intellectual elite who saw it as their historical role to interpret the world for the masses. It is the combination of these factors that we shall look at in our analysis of the film.

Drifters

O it's ane o' the bonniest sights in the world
To watch the herrin' come walkin' on board
In the wee sma' 'oors o' a simmer's mornin'
As if o' their ain accord

For this is the way that God sees life,
The hail jing-bang o's appenn'
Up owre frae the edge o' naethingness
-It's his happy cries I'm heann' [49]

Empire workers in action. A New Tradition.

Drifters is a reworking of a traditional tale of man and the sea told through the new medium of cinema. The film is fifty minutes long and in four parts of approximately equal length. The action begins at a deserted harbour at dawn with the fishermen walking across the beach, and finishes with a train leaving the harbour with its cargo of fish. The film concerns the efforts of the fishermen to secure a catch and get back to the market in time to make a sale. This is the 'Day in the Life' format adopted by today's documentary film-makers. The world of the fishermen is bordered by the harbour. It represents a meeting-place and a departure point. Perhaps most significantly for Grierson it is here that the community meet and work together. By beginning and ending with the harbour Grierson imposes order on the disparate activities of the community. The harbour is a meeting-place of two worlds. It is from here that the fishermen depart in their boats to pursue the age-old craft of fishing, but the harbour is also the place where the train departs. The train was to become a symbol for the Movement of the interconnected peoples of the modern world. In mixing old and new in this way Grierson was indicating how the traditions of the past were being transformed by the modern world. This was one of the major themes that Wright was to adopt in the early phase of his career.

Our first sight of the fishermen sets the scene for the struggles to come. They are seen in long shot walking across the unravelled nets. But Grierson cuts from this to a shot of the waves crashing against the rocks and the birds swooping overhead. In this fashion a leisurely stroll is given a dangerous edge. When the men arrive at the boat they go straight into action - each man going about his job with brisk efficiency. Grierson seems as interested in the tasks as the men themselves and cuts from the hands of one to a shot of the smoke rising from the funnels. In this way the men are seen to have an immediate effect on the preparation of the ship. The shot of the funnel acts as a link between the men - a sign of their unified purpose and this also points to the trust and co-operation in the journey to come.

Grierson's interest in the various processes that go into the preparation of the ship and the way the men seem to have a natural understanding was to find an echo in Wright's fascination with the same. From this beginning we can see that team-work is to be an important theme. The calm of the men is contrasted with the violence of the waves crashing about them.

Once the men are at sea they go about their various tasks in a calm and orderly fashion. What makes this remarkable is that the ship is in constant motion. Grierson faithfully records the waves crashing on the hull and the ship lurching from side to side but the men appear at ease in these surroundings and are undisturbed by the violence of the sea. When the nets are cast Grierson takes time to note the pattern made by the fine netting catching the light but his main concern is to demonstrate the teamwork of the men as they stand together maintaining a steady rhythm while the sea tries to dissuade them from their work.

After the nets have been cast the men retire to the cabin where some food has been prepared for them. This sequence features only two shots - that of the men descending the stairs and a middle-distance shot of them eating. The men are crammed around the table and the inevitable result is one of intimacy. But Grierson cuts from this cosy scene to the waves crashing on the hull outside. Despite the threat of the sea the team remain united below deck.

After some of the men have leave the cabin Grierson makes a point about the sense of tradition maintained at sea. An old 'sea dog' complete with beard, Arran sweater and pipe, ruffles the hair of the cabin boy. In a later scene the old man struggles to get out of bed while the boy lies dreaming of home- indicated by a flashback to the harbour. Finally the old man comes across and shakes the boy out of bed. The coupling of these two suggests both a family tradition and an emotional unity behind the 'machismo' facade. But lest we think this is a sentimental moment Grierson is eager to show that the boy has a part to play and we follow him around the deck as he joins in with the hauling of the nets. The importance of tradition and the role of children were to become one of the main themes in Wright's work and we can see its genesis here.

After this intimate scene the action returns to the deck where the men have to haul in the nets. Each man knows his station and goes about his work with only minimal communication with his ship mates. Grierson cuts from the fine netting to the grimy winch slowly pulling the nets in. A credit informs us that despite the winch 'every line has to be fought for'. Grierson focuses on the men in small groups and underscores the physical effort involved in the work. For example one pair of men are seen from the rear bringing in the nets with a light sky behind them. Later, when Grierson returns to this shot the men have become silhouetted and their work is still not over.

But even after the nets have been hauled in and the catch deposited in the hold, the men still have to race for the harbour in order to catch the markets. The captions inform us that 'One sea in the hold and the catch is ruined'. The return journey is fraught with danger. Not only do the men have to contend with the unpredictable sea but they also have to cope with competition. We see the skipper shouting at another captain as the boats almost collide in this homeward rush. Yet despite this hint about the world of commerce Grierson remains primarily concerned with the quiet and noble dignity of the men. A fine example of this is a sequence in which Grierson cuts from the waves crashing on the hull of the ship to the engine-room where the stoker has been shovelling coal to feed the engine. Despite this urgent activity he dips in his shovel to extract a burning coal and lights his cigarette. This is a fine example of 'grace under pressure', one of the themes

of the film It is also an example of 'machismo' and we are reminded that the only presentation of women in the film has them serving a decorative purpose as they stroll across the harbour This is primarily a man's world

Finally, after some twelve difficult hours the fisherman return to the harbour Grierson now switches his attention to the other boats all jostling for position 'Our' crew are about to merge into the mass of fishermen unloading the boats We will only catch sight of them for a few seconds as they rush to disembark It now becomes clear that Grierson's subject is the industry itself as he documents the myriad activities taking place on the harbour The fishermen are forgotten - they are no longer part of the process

The world of the market-place on the harbour is a different one from that of the fishermen Having no elemental struggles to depict Grierson turns the harbour into one vast machine in which a variety of groups have many roles to play We see the fishergirls with their arms linked as they walk towards the crates of fish and then the auctioneer ringing his bell and the crowd drifting behind him All of these people have a part to play in the new world of industry but they are dressed in the costumes of the past However not all labour is worthy of praise At one point Grierson betrays his feelings about the auctioneer The man is featured in close-up, his eyes darting about the crowd, then Grierson cuts to a shot of a bird trying to steal one of the fish from a packing-crate The meaning is obvious, as Grierson was later to write - 'It is a far cry from the simple and solid labour of the sea to the nepman haggling of the market-place' [50]

Inasmuch as he only devoted a quarter of the film to the market-place Grierson details a great deal of activity as we follow the baskets of fish moving from the ship to the men packing the cases The camera pans the baskets in the air and then makes a sharp cut as slivers of ice are thrown on to the tightly-packed herring In cutting his film in this fashion Grierson communicates the speed and urgency of the place The closing sequence of the film is of a train travelling over the bridge with its cargo of fish Grierson fades from the smoke to a shot of the fishermen hauling in the nets In this way we are reminded of the upstanding labour and noble struggle that formed the first link in the chain that led to the fish being

delivered to the far-flung corners of the Empire In this way Grierson hints at a continuity with the past as well as demonstrating a contrast between the old working methods and the new All have a part to play in the modern world of industry

Thus explained *Drifters* is a dramatic exercise bringing excitement to a modern industry and the interconnections within it But Grierson said he added 'a list of poetics' in order to give his drama 'higher meaning' [51] Although we have to treat such post-hoc explanations with caution an examination of these poetics hint at the director's religious impulse One such example takes place in the cabin while the men are sleeping

The head of each man is picked out and lit in such a way that there appear to be halos around them Grierson fades gently from one sleeping fisherman to another until he finds one of the men lying awake We cut from this shot to one of the herring swimming into the nets while being pursued by the dogfish Then we return to the man The effect of such cutting is to introduce a note of quiet danger to the film - not the obvious threat of the waves crashing on the hull but the danger of the unknown This is a rare moment in the film and suggests that this fisherman at least is not entirely in charge of his fate Here Grierson uses 'poetics' in opposition to the purposeful cutting of earlier to hint at a moment of introspection - perhaps a silent prayer When writing about the film in 1930 the director wrote 'if the result does not bear out the 107th Psalm, it is my fault' [52] It seems reasonable to suggest that the lines he had in mind were -

Others there are who go to sea in ships
and make their living on the wide waters
These men have seen the acts of the Lord
and his marvellous doings in the deep
At his command the storm-wind rose
and lifted the waves high
Carried up to heaven, plunged down to the depths,
tossed to and fro in peril,
they reeled and staggered like drunken men,

and their seamanship was all in vain
So they cried to the Lord in their trouble,
and he brought them out of their distress
The storm sank to a murmur
and the waves of the sea were stilled
They were glad then that all was calm,
as he guided them to the harbour they desired
Let them thank the Lord for his enduring love
and for the marvellous things he has done for men [53]

This is an unusually quiet sequence in a very dramatic film in which the men are nearly always active. Grierson has since hinted strongly of the religious meaning of such poetics but its inclusion here demonstrates that the director was conscious of the need to provide a little contrast in the men's lives. It also suggests that he was not adverse to imposing a slightly religious aspect to the life of the fishermen.

The film is concerned to educate its audience and in doing it expresses Grierson's educational rationale. The four (untitled) parts indicated by the captions represent a breathing-space for the viewer who has had to assimilate a variety of information about the ship's equipment, the location etc. But what makes *Drifters* more exciting than a lecture is that it claims - through its style - to accurately record the action 'as it happened'. We are given an insight into an unknown world which is both thrilling and contemporary. What makes the film powerful is the way Grierson cuts from the waves to the men to the cabin and back to the waves as they smash against the hull of the ship. The images are ordered in such a way that their force is irresistible. We have no time to contemplate the significance of a shot before Grierson sweeps us along with dramatic flourishes as the film powers on. But if the editing style was new to Britain it was no more revolutionary than that treatment of the fishermen. Grierson often pointed out that there was not a 'Piccadilly actor in the piece' [54] and that he had gone to film the 'raw material' [55]. For the most part the men in the film - particularly the fishermen - are framed in the 'heroic' style adopted by Eisenstein and others in Russia. We see them

framed against the sky or looking out over the horizon The very fact that the working man was being taken seriously by British cinema was said to be something of a shock to those in the audience The fact that he came across as a rather dour figure whose whole *raison d'être* appeared to be work was not as important as the bald fact he was there Grierson, Wright and others concerned with the history of the movement have spoken of how this was a revolutionary gesture at the time and perhaps it was this, combined with the modern styling of the film that impressed the audience sitting in the Tivoli in November, 1929

Implications of style and 'place'.

Life was a sermon, to be lived for the edification of society a life that could never relax, that was acutely duty conscious, with no heart, little emotion and no eye for beauty except in the stark [56]

The narrative of *Drifters* is propelled by the actions of the men who work together to get the ship out of the harbour, catch the fish and then return home Work is what binds them together Grierson transfers his own belief in the importance and centrality of work to the fishermen who are rarely seen idle for a moment The result is that the inter-relationships between the men are based on work and co-operation and nothing else Thus if their world is circumscribed by the harbour their characters are limited by being simply workers The fishermen are made into models of selflessness But their power as people is strictly circumscribed by the director and as a result for all their nobility they are just workers - cogs in the industrial machine This concentration on work and the community makes the film very one-dimensional and it raises several questions For example, if the community are united by work if this 'goes', then what is left to hold them together? This leads us to a central theme in the Movement - the concentration on the public face of the people Grierson may have made the various activities at the dock exciting but we get very little idea of the people themselves They are never more than functionaries - however brave and noble They are measured by what they do As a result the fishermen come in for praise because what they do is inspirational to Grierson The auctioneer is less well-favoured because he lives off the honest toil of the fishermen But we get no impression of character in these fleeting portraits, no indication that the people are more than their jobs We are not

suggesting that Grierson was unable to see the complexity in people but that he chose to present them in such a one-dimensional fashion because his chief interest was in work. Grierson suggests that work - whatever it is - is worthy of our attention. We can find another parallel for this in Calvinism. As Dakin put it - 'Indeed, for the first time ordinary daily work was taken up into the religious sphere and made the right, normal activity of all good men' [57]

The community in *Drifters* all have a duty to one another, they all seem to have the same purpose and depend on each other. But who is this work for? For a man interested in economics Grierson seems very reluctant to tackle this question. He clearly thinks it more important to show us a community united by their work. This may make for efficiency but ignores the fact that in the modern world, and especially in the fishing industry, such communal links were no longer functioning. Grierson overlooks this economic factor and concentrates on showing how well everyone operates in their particular sphere of activity. It may be a world of complex and impersonal forces but no one in the film is unsure of what their role is. And yet it is unlikely that the work at the harbour was being done without foremen of some kind. Equally there are no signs of union activity or any other such organisations. Even the skipper of the ship has to be pointed out in a caption. Grierson has chosen to ignore any power structures or chains of command because his main interest is in demonstrating the community working together 'naturally'. The inter-connection of activities makes for some interesting visual patterns but ignores the complexities of modern living where powerful organisations determine who will work in this market-place. The avoidance of this issue marks the limits of Grierson's portrayal of the modern world and, as the film became the model that others followed, it was to mark their limits too. Grierson has brought order into chaos by simplifying the workers and creating limits for their world. But although this appears to us to be perfectly 'natural', Grierson is making another ideological decision here. What is clear is that their relationships centre around work rather than anything else and to depict the men in this manner has certain implications. He could for instance have shown them co-operating outside the world of work. But in choosing to show them living in such a way is to prioritise the fact of work at the expense of other relationships operating outside this sphere.

Grierson later said that the fishermen were excellent real-life actors. But what

he seems to have appreciated most is their naturalism, the fact that they look authentic. It might have been interesting to discover what the fishermen felt about a life of endless conflicts with the sea. But Grierson's is the only interpretation that is permitted to stand. No-one is given the chance to dispute this presentation. No one emerges from the film to speak to us or meet the audience half-way. We never learn how the fishermen feel about their work because they never address us. We are given an insight into their world but we are not directly addressed. Our role is simply to watch and admire for no link is created between their world and ours. In fashioning his film in this manner Grierson was establishing a convention which his colleagues would later adopt. They are bound into the film and seem to perform their work away from us. Considering the situation at Lerwick in 1928 it seems probable that Grierson's noble workers would not supply the sort of comments that would fit in with his picture. And yet it is because of the strengths of Grierson's convictions that the film is so powerful and was such an inspiration to others. The style he pioneered and which became a model for others to follow does little more than bring the working-class to the screen as one-dimensional characters. The result is that the fishermen become as flat as some of the stereotypes in the commercial cinema. In *Drifters* Grierson started the process of replacing one stereotype with another.

We should be wary of taking Grierson's choice of establishing shot at face value. The harbour was one choice amongst the many he could have made. Even the circular form of the film carries with it some ideological implications. It is interesting to note that the harbour is both romantic and idyllic as well as being a business-place. In this way both of Grierson's aims are served. Having begun his narrative with the harbour Grierson has implied that the men will return there. The drama is in the struggles that the men encounter before returning. This is a further indication of the film's traditionalism for it is in the middle of the film that the suspense occurs.

Important as the harbour is, Grierson's main concern is to record the struggles of the fishermen. But this portrayal of the men in the 'heroic' style means an interest in their physical appearance. Campbell has made an interesting attack on this male narcissism when criticising Orwell's Road to Wigan Pier.

Miners are victims and heroes at the same time they command

both protection and admiration. They are represented as beautiful statuesque shaded men. The miner's body is loved in the literature of men because of its work and because it works [58]

As Colls and Dodd point out this 'accurately describes the dominant documentary tradition's treatment of the bodies of manual workers' [59]. This approach to workers prefigures much of Wright's work and can also be linked to the Photo-journalism of Mass Observation and similar poetic trends of the 1930's. *Drifters* is the first filmic examples of one class looking at another. Grierson was undeniably Scott's middle-class and, for all the egalitarian ethic he preached, he was to choose men of a similar class and background to work with him. While *Drifters* may seem like a gesture of respect for the working class its idealistic treatment of the subject reveals the class bias of its director.

The fact that all of the workers in the film are working class is not without significance nor is it entirely innocent to claim that they all know their place in the scheme of things. The efficient functioning of the *Drifters* themselves could be read as an analogy for the model society that Grierson has envisaged. And naturally such a picture would be acceptable to those in power for it reflects a world without conflicts, a world in which the status quo is happily being maintained.

Even the titles of the film carry a certain ideological significance for they give us a clue to the sort of stylistic 'voice' operating in and through the film. We might begin by asking why titles were used at all. Crawford thought that they would be incomprehensible to most people. They have an educational function in that they explain the various operations undertaken by the workers and link this to the Empire. They represent the voice of a schoolmaster underlining the message of the film. Notwithstanding the fact that they break the 'flow' of the film the titles create limits for our understanding, or provide categories under which we can bracket this new knowledge. They are not used to personalise the men but remind us that we are in the position of those to be educated and instructed. The fishermen toil under the banner of 'Empire Workers'. Given the sort of didactic style that was to follow in the later films of the Movement it seems reasonable to suggest that the titles stand in for a narrator instructing us about the sacrifices being made on our behalf. This use of titles is very

much in the Hollywood classic mould where their function was to explain character motivation or a change of scene. Here they are used to lend weighty significance to the scene. The motivations for the fishermen are not personal or private but the great drama of the Empire. In this way they are further deprived of power and individuality. This, coupled with the limited range of expressions chosen by Grierson, further defines these workers as unemotional creatures.

The question of the film's mode of address is complicated by the use of sound. It is certainly significant that Grierson chose to use classical music - a music that would have been familiar to only a certain amount of the population and whose meaning would have been understood by even fewer. The choice of Fingal's Cave by Mendelssohn may have been a way of indicating to his audience that the film had a more profound mystical aspect. But this is a subtle message that very few will have picked up on. We will note in the following pages that stylistic touches like this, while artful, often acted only to obscure the meaning of Wright's work.

Drifters pivots around 'the act of knowing and the question of how knowledge is produced and what kind of knowledge is produced by a succession of sounds and images' [60]. What we should ask is whether we really need to know what we are told or whether we are being instructed for some reason. Essentially, What is our place in relation to the text? Once again this is complicated by the fact that our point of view changes from that of intimates, to that of dock-workers caught in the hustle and bustle of the market-place. Grierson's project is to place us in the middle of the action - to involve us in this world. Our senses are assaulted by the sheer intensity of the activity. But we are not permitted to construct a meaning for ourselves. Everything is worked out for us by the director and in this forceful scheme no other voice can intrude. There are no crude exhortations for us to buy the products of the Empire but we are asked to admire what is being done on our behalf.

What makes *Drifters* especially interesting is that Grierson used the psychological power of film to address the social subject. To put it another way - he capitalised on the public's fascination with the medium to direct a message about responsibility and community. The selflessness of these workers coming together in their corner of the Empire for the good of all constituted an uplifting example and a

model for others By capitalising on the insights he had gained Grierson sought to make the issue of responsibility exciting

However, considering the interests of the film's producers we should ask what sort of image the film presents of Empire workers? Grierson makes scant mention of the Empire apart from a few references in the titles and no link is made to the other members in the Empire Instead we are left with the impression of a group of anonymous workers who simply toil This sort of image may well have appealed to those considering investing in Scotland - the community in *Drifters* look like the ideal work-force, and in this sense the film is a good advertisement But where are the inter-connections with the rest of the Empire? For a man interested in such a network of communications it seems odd that Grierson should have made so little effort to 'link-up' with other workers

What we are suggesting is that *Drifters* represents Grierson imposing his own religious feeling about the work ethic onto the Scottish community As early as 1924 he was writing 'In every action of our lives indeed we are declaring who is our God and it can not be hid' [61] This certainly seems to imply his own religious ethic *Drifters* is important because it is the first film which priontises the public against the private face Now while this is certainly a Calvinist belief and Grierson's inspiration we should note that such a concentration on the question of public duty would find favour with an organisation like the EMB whose whole advertising campaign was aimed at raising public awareness of the Empire

Special mention should be made of the train that leaves at the end of the film laden with fish for the Empire The train was to become an important symbol for the Movement It represents dynamism and energy as well as the network of communications that Grierson thought ought to be explained as part of the new world of the twentieth century In fading from the smoke of the engine to the men on board the ships Grierson creates a link between old and new, between honest labour and the industrial machine This was the first example of the equation 'old+new=modern' which Wright was to emulate It is a way of showing that history is alive in the present, that we should respect traditions But it also presents history as a smooth, unbroken line with no conflict It is interesting that Grierson should present history in this way

When we consider the state of the fishing industry and the fact that the Russian Revolution had a significant economic impact on the community it seems like a strange oversight

Grierson saw it as his mission to redefine democracy for the new world of the twentieth century This was to become one of the key concepts in the Movement and *Drifters* is meant to demonstrate a democracy in action And yet this concept is notoriously difficult to define It will be Wright's attempts to define democracy that we shall look at in this work As we have seen Grierson's democracy has links to Calvinism But whatever the influence *Drifters* provides a comforting picture of a busy industry with happy workers As such it was always likely to find approval with a government eager to preserve the status quo

State of the Industry.

Advertising is education It makes people think And thinking leads to action [62]

Given that *Drifters* was both propaganda for the Empire and an advertisement for the fishing industry it seems reasonable to ask what the result of the film was

The film inspired the formation of the British Documentary Movement - something which Grierson had urged on the completion of his Report to English Film Producers. But there are others which we should note here for they affected the development of the Movement

As far as those behind the EMB were concerned *Drifters* should have been an advertisement but two of the central maxims of advertising are that a product should be given a strong personality and the audience it is aimed at must be clearly targeted These conditions are not fulfilled in *Drifters* In this way the film is typical of much that was produced by the Movement For all its dynamism it is unspecific For all of its energy it fails to deliver a clear message As one member of the Public Accounts Committee put it, *Drifters* may have been 'a very good show, but does it make a man

eat an extra fish?' [63]

The dynamic style of *Drifters* gives the impression that the fishing industry was both healthy and in a good economic condition. Everyone has a part to play in the catching, packaging and boxing of the fish. This is interesting because all of this activity represents Grierson's idea of how the community should operate rather than reflecting the state of the industry.

By any standards the fishing industry in Scotland was in crisis. Since the Russian Revolution had put an end to the lucrative East European trade, the industry had been in sharp decline [64]. Smout writes of the 'rusting trawlers and rotting nets that littered the ports from Stornoway to Lerwick' [65]. The fishermen faced a future which 'promised no more than bare sustenance, derived largely from dumping herring at fish-meal factories' [66]. The film had been conceived of as a way of assisting the industry. But when we consider that the Government were doing nothing to actually assist the industry, £2,948 represented a very modest contribution. The truth is that the dynamism presented was more a product of Grierson's style rather than a reflection of the state of the industry. While Grierson was cutting *Drifters* 'the Board had already begun to erect an extensive non-theatrical distribution system and film shows were arranged for the Ministry of Agriculture and the Scottish Board of Agriculture' [67]. It would appear that the EMB thought propaganda one way of relieving the crisis in the industry.

A more immediate consequence of the film was that it did nothing to help the herring industry in Scotland. In 1934 according to Harvie even the cabinet declared it 'a tragedy' and in the following year the Herring Industry Board was set up to try and reorganise the industry by maintaining minimum prices and assisting re-equipment [68]. *Drifters* may have been an aesthetic success but it did nothing for the community it portrayed so dynamically.

In *Drifters* Grierson established a new image for the working man and in so doing established a style of 'realism' that was to shape and influence the development of British cinema. *Drifters* had attracted the attention of those cultural arbiters who took it upon themselves to educate the nation in matters of taste. Not only was

Grierson's film modern, it was British and considerably more exciting than most films made in Britain in 1929. The context has to be understood. In plain terms Grierson's film had very little home-grown competition and therefore its impact is less of a surprise. The film also fulfilled that most vital of criteria in a British art-form - it was educational. Because of the critical acclaim *Drifters* received, the work of the Movement was to receive respectful attention in the Press. Critics like Lejeune and Hardy were to prove invaluable in propagandising for the Movement. Even the trade papers such as Kine Weekly thought the film 'outstandingly good' and that 'Basil Emmott's camera work helped the clever direction of John Grierson' [69]. ('Clever' was perhaps not the sort of praise that Grierson would have wanted. After all to be 'clever' is to be meretricious - something he disliked in the Russian film-makers.) But while Grierson's decision to use a proven professional like Emmott was a wise one it was not a luxury often available to those who were to join the Movement.

Drifters secured extensive theatrical bookings. 'By September receipts from distribution had almost recouped the costs of production' [70]. This would have proved to Grierson's paymasters at the EMB that his model could be successful and it was this gesture of public support that Grierson used as an anchor when pressing for more money from the Treasury. But as we shall see the success of *Drifters* was far from typical.

It was therefore a combination of factors that helped Grierson to promote his ideas about the use of film for propagandist purposes. His documentary model was eventually given tacit support by the EMB who were impressed with the financial success of the film and disappointed at the dismal failure of Creighton's *One Family* [71]. To all intents and purposes Grierson would appear to have been right in his belief that the EMB should concentrate on the second-features market.

But we should also take into account the reception the film got from the public. *Drifters* may have secured theatrical bookings but it is certainly open to question whether Grierson's message of citizenship was understood or appreciated. Constantine has suggested that 'the EMB was identified in public and political eyes as a propaganda organisation' [72]. If this was the case then Grierson's message would have been significantly blunted. Film may have been a relatively new medium but we

have no evidence that audiences were less skeptical in the thirties than they are now
The important question of the effects of the films will be looked at later, when we note
the number of children who made up a significant proportion of the audience for these
films

In the following chapters we will see how Grierson inspired Wright and others
to share his faith both in cinema and in democracy - a concept he felt could best be
defined through a new use of film. If we might borrow Grierson's own religious
language we can say that cinema was to be the new scripture, a means of celebrating
man as a creative being. He would be taught respect for his neighbours all over the
world. He would become educated into a new citizenship through a new medium. By
seeing examples of hard-working communities he would become inspired to make an
effort himself and contribute to the new democracy. Perhaps Grierson was hoping to
recreate the success of Calvinism in enforcing an ideal-

It succeeded in impressing upon thousands its peculiar ethical
ideals and aims, even bringing whole peoples into subjection to
them. So that the typical Calvinist in both the new and the old
world stands out as a man of quite distinct ethical outlook. [73]

But it is essential to bear in mind that while Grierson's socio-cultural ideas
were one inspiration for the film, the institutions behind him were interested in
propaganda - increasing the sales of Empire products and spreading a message about
the centrality of the Empire to the lives of the people. As we have seen, the film was a
success because it pleased those at the EMB by presenting a world free of social
division, and an artistic triumph because of the professionalism of Emmott and
Grierson's skilful appropriation of the most fashionable cutting techniques. In the
following chapters we shall investigate how Wright came to work within the limits
created by Grierson and the EMB.

Notes

- 1 Constantine S 'Bringing the Empire Alive' The Empire Marketing Board and Imperial Propaganda, 1926-33 Imperialism and Popular Culture, ed John Mackenzie, (Manchester, 1986), p 208
- 2 J Grierson, 'New Worlds for Old' (Unpublished - in Archive G 2 21 3) Ch XII Unnumbered page
- 3 J Grierson, Grierson on Documentary (London, 1979), p 39
- 4 J Grierson, 'New Worlds for Old' (Unpublished - in Archive G 2 21 3), p 25
- 5 F Hardy, John Grierson. A Documentary Biography (London, 1979), p 29
- 6 J Grierson, Sermon - Unpublished - in Archive, G 1 5 4 7
- 7 J Grierson, Sermon - Unpublished - in Archive, G 1 5 6
- 8 F Hardy, p 29
- 9 A Dakin, Calvinism (London, 1949), p 238
- 10 R H Tawney, Religion and the Rise of Capitalism (Harmondsworth, 1948), p III
- 11 J Grierson, Sermon - Unpublished - in Archive, G 1 5 4
- 12 J Grierson, Grierson on Documentary (London, 1979), p 39
- 13 J Grierson, 'New Worlds for Old' (Unpublished) - in Archive G 2 21 4) Ch XI, Unnumbered page
- 14 J Grierson, Grierson on Documentary (London, 1979), p 25
- 15 C Dawson, Religion and the modern state, quoted in Cinema. Literature and Society by Peter Miles and Malcolm Smith (Worcester, 1987), p 98
- 16 J Grierson, 'New Worlds for Old' (Unpublished - in Grierson Archive G 2 21 3), p 2
- 17 P Stead, The People and the pictures The British working class and film in the 1930's Propaganda, Politics and Film, 1918-45 Ed D Pronay and D W Spring (London, 1982), p 78
- 18 F Hardy, p 44
- 19 P Swann, The British Documentary Movement 1929-1946 (unpublished PhD thesis-University of Leeds, 1979), p 28
- 20 J M Mackenzie, Propaganda and Empire (Manchester, 1985), p 84

- 21 Film Centre, memorandum for the Rockefeller Foundation, 1938,
Grierson Papers, Clevedon Court Quoted in P Swann *ibid* , p 30
- 22 Craig to Tallents, 28 February 1929, PRO CO 760/37 EMB/C/27 in
Swann, p 34
- 23 P Constantine *op cit* , p 210
- 24 *Ibid.*, p 208
- 25 Swann, p 192
- 26 Swann, p 4
- 27 Constantine *op cit* , p 203
- 28 J Grierson, *Grierson on Documentary* (London,1979), p 48
- 29 D Meredith *Imperial Images The Empire Marketing Board,1926-32 In*
History Today Vol 37, Jan 1987, p 32
- 30 Constantine , *op cit* , p 213
- 31 Mackenzie ,*op cit* , p 91
- 32 Paper written by unnamed civil servant in British Commonwealth
Relations, *Proceedings of the first unofficial conference at Toronto* II-21
September 1933 (Oxford, 1934), p 53
- 33 F Hardy, p 44 / 45
- 34 P Swann p 37 / 38
- 35 *Ibid*
- 36 P Swann p 39 / 40
- 37 Constantine *op cit* , p 209
- 38 Swann, p 40
- 39 Swann, p 50
- 40 Swann, p 44
- 41 Hardy, p 49
- 42 Constantine, p 209
- 43 Swann, p 45
- 44 *Ibid.*, p 10 / 11
- 45 T J Hollins, 'The Conservative Party and Film Propaganda between
the Wars', *English Historical Review*, Vol XCVI, April, 1981, p 367
- 46 Swann, p 48
- 47 A Aldgate, *Cinema and History* *British Newsreels and The Spanish*
Civil War (London,1979), p 67

- 48 R Armes, A Critical History of British Cinema (London,1978), p 129
- 49 H MacDiarmind, 'With the Herring Fishers', from Selected Poems,
edited by D Craig and J Manson (Harmondsworth, 1970), p 82
- 50 J Grierson, Grierson on Documentary (London, 1979), p 22
- 51 F Hardy, p 51
- 52 Psalm 107
- 53 Ibid.
- 54 J Grierson, Grierson on Documentary (London, 1979), p 19
- 55 Ibid., p 30
- 56 J F H New, The Renaissance and Reformation. A Short History (New
York, 1977), p 146
- 57 Dakin, p 224
- 58 B Campbell, Wigan Pier Revisited. Poverty and Politics in the Eighties
(London, 1984), p 97-98
- 59 R Colls and P Dodd 'Representing the Nation' British Documentary
Film 1930-1945, Screen Education, Vol 26, No 1 (Jan-Feb,1985), p 77
- 60 Bill Nicholls, Ideology and the Image (Indiana,1981), p 205
- 61 J Grierson, Sermon - Unpublished in Archive G I 5 6 40
- 62 G H Saxon-Mills, There is a tide...(London,1954), p 68 - quoted in Swann
p 4
- 63 Ibid , p 221
- 64 T C Smout, A Century of the Scottish People 1830-1950
(London,1986), p 77
- 65 Ibid
- 66 C Harvie, No Gods and Precious Few Heroes (London,1981), p 26
- 67 EMB Film Progress Report, 28 February 1929, PRO, CO 760/37,
EMB/C/24 , in Swann, p 47
- 68 Harvie, p 45
- 69 Kine Weekly, 14/11/29
- 70 Progress Report, 18 September 1930, PRO CO 760/37 EMB/C/38 in
Swann, p 49
- 71 Swann, p 49
- 72 Constantine, p 200
- 73 Dakin, p 208

CHAPTER TWO

EARLY YEARS 1930/31

In The Times of the fourteenth of June, 1907 was announced the birth, two days earlier, of Basil Charles Wright to Lawrence and Gladys Wright. Basil was the first-born of the family and was to be joined by the twins Peggy and Barbara two years later.

The Wright family lived in a large house in St John's Wood, London. After serving as a Major in the war, Lawrence Wright followed his father into the insurance business and became an underwriter at Lloyds. Gladys Wright had been an accomplished dancer from the 'Five Towns' before marrying Lawrence in 1905. The family were financially secure because Wright's grandfather had worked his way up to the board of Lloyds and provided large annuities for the children. The Wrights were artistically inclined and could count Arnold Bennett among the regular visitors to St John's Wood [1]

When Wright was seven years old, he was sent to Sherbourne - one of England's more prestigious public schools. Although the school had a fine academic tradition, Wright found the discipline severe and he became a rather introverted student whose chief interest was in Greek and Latin poetry. In his exams Wright did well in the Classics but failed the science subjects. Nevertheless his results were good enough to secure him a Mansion Scholarship and a place at Corpus Christi, Cambridge [2]. Wright was sent up in the autumn of 1926.

Thus far, Wright had followed a traditional path for a son of the wealthy middle-class. He felt no pressure to worry about a career and approached university with nothing more than a vague desire to become the 'World's Greatest Poet' [3]. Wright chose to study the Classics at Cambridge, continuing a childhood fascination with Greek culture that was to last a lifetime. But Wright soon found his time taken up with the unofficial study of film. Cambridge was one of the first universities in the country with a Film Society which took the new medium seriously.

as an art-form Wright was privileged to see the work of the Russian Masters, films like Dovzhenko's *Mother* and Eisenstein's *The Battleship Potemkin*. These films raised considerable excitement at the time. The prints had a limited availability because of the BBFC's decision not to award them a certificate [4]. As a result only the most sympathetic of councils permitted cinemas to screen them. The films themselves afforded glimpses into the social revolution which was taking place in Russia. The meetings of this small society had a clandestine flavour that Wright found intriguing [5]. This clubbish atmosphere was to become an important part of the ambience that existed in the unit. Wright was one of the more vocal members of this coterie and contributed articles to Granta and some of the more 'underground' magazines on campus. Wright used his reviews to criticise the state of British cinema and to applaud the artistic innovations of the Europeans [6]. But it was as a young aesthete that Wright was inspired and not as a social revolutionary.

By the time his second year at Cambridge had ended, Wright was determined to make a film of his own. But in the twenties a movie-camera was a very expensive item costing about £100. Wright managed to persuade his family to club together so that they could get him a camera for his twenty-first birthday. Wright's first film was written, directed and mostly shot by the author. Entitled *Poodabear* it featured the adventures of a country boy coming to the big city with high hopes, who ends up underneath the wheels of a bus. The film has since been destroyed (accidentally by the Luftwaffe), but it is interesting to note the thematic link with Wright's first film for the unit - *The Country Comes to the Town*. The film also established Wright as 'The Film-maker' in Cambridge and *Poodabear* soon became a sort of code-word for cineastes at the college [7].

Wright's second film was an exercise in cutting that involved frustrating the efforts of many high-divers to reach the pool below. Entitled *Strandfest*, the action concluded with all the divers reaching the bottom in one big splash. The film was carefully edited and clearly a response to the fashionable belief that the cutting bench was the 'holy of holies' in film-making. Wright entered *Strandfest* in an avant-garde festival at Cambridge where one of the judges was John Grierson. The two men did not meet at the time but Grierson noted down the young film-maker's name - possibly for future reference [8].

Wright was now nearing the end of his university career and took his finals in the summer of 1929. Despite devoting all of his free time to film Wright was awarded a first in Greek and a third in Economics. The imprint of his studies in Greek was to stay with Wright for the rest of his life and played their part in influencing the style of his work as well as his political thinking. But the result in Economics should not be interpreted as a disaster for Wright. He had drifted into the subject almost by accident and attended very few lectures. Although Grierson was to write a great deal about Economics Wright's work confirms his lack of interest in the subject.

Wright's generation at Cambridge included some of the foremost artists and writers of the twentieth century. People like Mansfield, Bronowski, Arundel, Empson, Redgrave and Auden were all contemporaries of Wright. This was a generation who, in Wright's words, 'felt we knew better, wrote letters to The Times and all that' [9]. They were determined to improve upon the world their parents had left them and expressed a typically rebellious attitude to all the 'old gangs' in art, politics and literature. But while it could be argued that every generation necessarily rejects the ideas of its forefathers Wright's contemporaries distinguished themselves for a variety of reasons. To begin with they were acutely class-conscious. The artists of the group blamed the public schools for inculcating a superior attitude. Wright expressed a loathing for his early school-days while Auden described his schools as 'fascist state' [10]. What the intelligentsia wanted more than anything else in the thirties was 'freedom from the principals endorsed by the authorities at public schools' [11]. But as we shall see, being aware of these principles did not mean they could be automatically shaken off. Spender expresses this well -

The writers of the thirties are often sneered at because they were middle-class youths with public school and posh university backgrounds who sought to adopt a proletarian point of view. Up to a point this sneer is justified. They were ill-equipped to address a working-class audience, and were not serious in their efforts to do so. (If their poetry strikes one as addressed to anyone in particular, it

is to sixth formers from their old schools and one another) But having said that, it should be pointed out that up until the Spanish Civil War, when some hundreds of workers joined the International Brigade, the thirties writers represented a middle-class *crise de conscience*. And there is nothing despicable about this. The middle class were the beneficiaries of the system which had made victims of the workers. Moreover some of these writers were travelled and had an awareness of what was going on in Europe, not just of the complacency of the middle-class England and the apathy of most workers.

Thus the thirties was a time when, under the extreme complacency of English governments, members of the younger generation felt themselves divided by the thinnest of walls from the destructive forces which seemed absolute, from terrible suffering and pure evil [12]

We could argue that Spender is adopting a rather high-handed approach when he speaks of the 'apathy' of the workers - after all, as he explains, his class had definite problems communicating with the workers. But his summary makes two important points. The language these artists spoke remained determined by their background and as a result was not always comprehensible to their intended audience. Spender also expresses the desire of this generation for change.

Although not as radical as the Cambridge generation of communists in the thirties, Wright's contemporaries looked upon the Russian experiments in social planning as an inspiration. The 'Five-Year Plan' seemed like an intelligent and rational operation when contrasted with the the sleepy rule of 'farmer' Baldwin. This generation had seen the Labour Party in government but had discovered nothing revolutionary about them. As writers such as John Scanlon and A J P Taylor have pointed out, the Labour Party had no radical reforming zeal, and soon become assimilated into the establishment [13]. The Liberal Party as a political, if not as an ideological force, was fading away. In none of these parties could this young generation find a faith or an outlet for their energies. The clearest example of the mis-match between generations is the case of Oswald Mosley and the reaction he inspired amongst his contemporaries.

Mosley crossed the house from the Conservative benches to join the Labour Party in the late twenties. He was quickly spoken of as a potential leader by a party courting respectability anxious to welcome an aristocrat. However Mosley developed some radical plans to deal with the unemployment crisis of 1931 and he put these before the Cabinet. Much to his dismay they were rejected as unorthodox and in frustration Mosley left Labour to found the New Party - a crypto fascist organisation which created a stir in the thirties and won the whole-hearted support of the Rothermere Press for a spell [14]. This episode illustrates some relevant themes. The frustration of ambition by the old guard, jealous or wary of the young, the ease with which a Tory could cross the house to a party once feared as revolutionary, and the desperation of a man whose challenge to orthodoxy was eventually to result in the formation of the New Party and the virtual end of his career.

It would be wrong to look upon Mosley as simply an odd case for he created an interesting reaction in all the major parties. In Harold Nicolson's diary we read-

meet Harold Macmillan in the train. He takes the usual Tory view that his heart is entirely with the new party but that he feels he can help us better by remaining in the Conservative ranks. He does not hesitate to admit that if we could obtain a certain number of seats in Parliament, most of the young Tories, all the Liberals and a large proportion of the Labour Party would come over to us [15]

Although this was written in the crisis times of the early thirties it is interesting to note that Macmillan was not the only Tory to support Mosley's plans. Letters of support were also sent from Walter Elliot, Oliver Stanley and Bob Boothby amongst others [16]. These men represented the left of the Conservative Party and their ideas about the role of the state and the expansion of the social services, while unpopular within their party, were shared by thinkers of various political persuasions. All of these ideas can be grouped around the word 'Planning'. As Taylor has written- 'Planning was the key-word of the thirties

planned economy, plan for peace, planned families, plan for holidays The standard was utopia ' [17]

The Labour Party manifesto for 1931 has a paragraph entitled 'We must plan or perish' In 1933, Attlee discussed adopting a 'Five-year Plan' [18] In 1934 Dalton wrote Planning Practical Socialism for Britain and was later to claim that the policies of the 1945-50 Labour Government were 'surprisingly close to what I planned in 1931-4' [19]

But it is possible to argue that the initiative for these ideas had begun with the summer schools set up by the Liberals in 1922 as a forum for political and economic discussion [20] One of the first speakers was William Beveridge, who, like Hugh Dalton, was a professional economist and later became one of the prime movers in the instigation of the Welfare State In the late 1920's Lloyd George was to finance a series of reports which resulted in Britain's Industrial Future [21] Although published before the crisis of 1931 this was to be an influential document and could count men such as Keynes as its principal contributors But the Liberal Party as a political force was fading and Lloyd George, while being recognised as a creative politician, had not created a reservoir of goodwill with Baldwin [22] The only way these groups could express themselves was in unofficial gatherings and these soon began to attract the attention of radicals from all parties

One of the first of these groups was Political and Economic Planning (PEP) set up by Macmillan and leading industrialists of the era in 1931 This group had a technocratic outlook and sought non-partisan solutions to the problems of the time - 'by collecting information, stimulating discussion and providing its reports PEP hoped directly to influence government action ' [23] Planning, if not quite a rigorous doctrine or an inspiring slogan , was at least an idea and both parties seemed very short on ideas

Planning is only a method of trial and error, an alternative to the trial and error of unplanned Capitalism Planners will make mistakes, miscalculate the future, sometimes waste wealth and opportunities, often change direction But they, at least, have their eyes fixed, not on

abstractions but on realities [24]

In 1933 Harold Macmillan wrote-

Planning is forced upon us not for idealistic reasons but because the old mechanism which served us when the markets were expanding naturally and spontaneously is no longer adequate when the tendency is in the opposite direction [25]

We will encounter these politicians and their ideas in the following chapters while discussing Wright's work. But we should note here that Wright's political interests were those of his parents who were, in his words, 'Gladstonian Liberals' [26]. Wright was never a member of any political party nor did he align himself with any one group's theories. This tentative approach to political factions was to become characteristic of the Movement. They called it 'not falling into the political trap' [27]. But we should bear in mind that many of Wright's generation were not obedient to any political line and this attitude was considered representative of a mild radicalism and impatience with the 'old gang'. It is against this background of intellectual and artistic discontent that Wright's work has to be understood.

After graduating in the summer of 1929, Wright began to look for work in the film industry. But he was to encounter the problems facing anyone looking for work in a national cinema which had long been starved of finance, talent and enterprise.

Since the early twenties the film industry in Britain had been dominated by the Americans. Fox, Warner Brothers and Lasky's had arrived during the First World War in search of profits. These companies already controlled the market at home and looked to Britain for extra profits. Their strategy was to offer films to British distributors at a cheap rate. This had the effect of prejudicing distributors and exhibitors against the already under-funded 'home-grown' product. Distributors were encouraged to adopt 'Block-booking' which tied the cinema up for months ahead [28]. A low point for the British industry was reached in November

of 1924 when not a single foot of film was shot or developed in the British studios [29]

We have already noted the anxiety of the trade but by 1926 the crisis had reached such a point that even Baldwin was prompted to speak

I think the time has come when the position of that industry in this country should be examined with a view to seeing whether it be not possible, as it is desirable, on national grounds, to see that the larger proportion of films exhibited in this country are British, having regard to the enormous power which the film is developing for propoganda purposes, and the danger to which we in this country and our Empire subject ourselves if we allow that method of propoganda to be entirely in the hands of foreign countries [30]

This led to the Quota Act of 1927 in which Exhibitors and Renters were forced to show a steadily increasing percentage of British films. The quota started at 7.5 per cent and was to rise to 20 per cent by 1935 [31]. The Act however led to a small renaissance in British films, which was to be described in 1937 as a 'Gold Rush' [32]. This renaissance was inspired partly by the Act which led to a new breed of film investors and partly by the success of Korda and his Imperial Epics. Nevertheless the home-grown product had to compete with the established American companies who soon found a way around the Act. These were the 'Quota Quickies' - cheap films made in Britain to satisfy the new Act's stipulation that a percentage of films had to be made in Britain with British labour.

Wright remembers the British films of the period as 'cheap, silly and badly scripted. We spat on them' [33]. We should understand that this is not so much the anger of a patriot but the contempt of someone who, in his own words, 'knew better'. Wright was, like many of his generation, appalled at the narrow range of representations produced by the home-cinema.

The existence of the censors ensured that an Establishment world-view of the monarchy, industrial and transport achievement, imperial

development and race hierarchies, continued to be peddled to the masses through cinema [34]

But the Quota Act did not produce a marked change immediately and in 1929 the British film industry was still a timid and unadventurous operation. This background may be part of the reason why *Drifters* made such an impression. The audience for the premiere had come to see Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* - already a recognised classic but a film which many of them had not seen before on the big screen. On Grierson's instructions *Drifters* was screened first. The film was a 'revelation' to Wright. Here was a film that combined social issues with the artistic treatment of working people. 'Suddenly I knew what I wanted to do' [35]

We have already analysed *Drifters* as a combination of Grierson's Calvinism and the propagandist aims of the EMB. But these were not the themes that were communicated to Wright. We have already noted that the film was cut in the modern style reminiscent of the Russian masters Wright had studied at Cambridge. The film also presupposed an exciting and adventurous director committed to capturing the dangerous lifestyle of the fishermen. The rocking of the waves and the calm bravery of the men would have opened up a world beyond Wright's experience. Wright's own work had been a series of rather timid experiments in technique. *Drifters* was a rough and tumble 'Boy's Own' adventure. What was more, the director of the film had obviously been in close contact with those working people the radicals at Cambridge had only theorised about - he was actually 'out there' in the real world. It was also encouraging that such a film could be made in Britain and this made it all the more exceptional considering the woeful state of the industry. Grierson's portrayal of the fishermen appealed to Wright's budding social conscience. By putting the working man on the screen it was thought that this made him a figure of respect. He was no longer a caricature. His valuable contribution to society was made clear, a vital part of the economy was uncovered. This in itself was considered radical. For Wright *Drifters* represented a perfect half-way point, contact with working people enough to express a social conscience and yet completed in a modern style.

We should point out that Wright failed to note that the EMB were behind

the film - this should dispel any idea that Wright had any intention of going to work for the Empire. However Wright noted that the director was John Grierson and he spent the next few days making frantic efforts to contact him. At the same time Grierson was planning to develop a 'producing and editing unit' and remembered the avant-garde film-maker from Cambridge. He left a note at Wright's home inviting him to come for an interview at the '1917 Club' [36]. Their first meeting set the tone for relations between the two men over the next ten years.

The '1917 Club' was a dingy but fashionable meeting place in Soho for those with left-wing sympathies. Precisely why Grierson chose this location we cannot say but it was sufficiently radical to unnerve the still shy young graduate. Grierson dispensed with formalities and immediately quizzed Wright on what he knew about the EMB. Wright replied that he knew nothing and recalled Grierson saying - 'Young man, if you want to work with me you should be better briefed' [37]. Grierson spent the rest of the meeting asking Wright about Cambridge and criticising the films he had made at college. This was hardly an ideal start to a working relationship but Wright did well enough to earn himself a trial. The most memorable factor about this first meeting was the powerful impression Grierson made upon Wright.

Although only nine years older than Wright, Grierson seemed to have travelled all over the world and lived life to an extent that made Wright sheepish about his own modest accomplishments and ambitions. Grierson taunted Wright - not for the last time - about his 'sheltered middle-class upbringing' [38]. The Scotsman came across as the archetypal 'Man o' the World' whose personality and manner demanded respect. Their relationship was firmly established with Wright very much the student to a powerful tutor. The school-room analogy can be continued because Grierson was to address all his 'students' by their surnames. This made for a rather formal atmosphere but established that Grierson was 'the boss'. It is important that this is understood as it affected the whole climate of the unit.

Wright's trial was to make a poster-film advertising cocoa beans from the Gold Coast. He was handed some old cans of film and allowed a budget of £7

and then told simply to 'get on with it' [39] Grierson was to use this 'sink or swim' method with all new recruits His judgment proved correct in Wright's case and despite the fledgling director being £2 out of pocket, both were happy with the result Wright had proved himself capable of working under pressure and with the cheapest equipment The new recruit did not ask himself whether advertising beans for the Empire was politically sound He was simply happy to be given a chance to work in the medium This is not a minor point but a useful indicator of the way Wright was to approach all his projects

After this test Grierson arranged for Wright to be given a contract worth £2 a week, as Wright put it -'thus my fate was sealed' [40]

However we should bear in mind that Wright has said on many occasions that he was working for the EMB, and that Grierson would remind the unit of their role as Civil Servants Nevertheless subsequent research has shown that Wright, like all the people who worked on EMB films, was employed by New Era Productions

The company's contract with the Board secured the business management of the undertaking and the provision by the company of labour and advice, in return for which it received a percentage of the annual expenditure of the film unit [41]

Perhaps Wright's memory was confused - £2 was a not a significant amount to a man with a private income, nor did it seem particularly important to him who his employers were [42] But it is certainly worth noting that Wright was not an official Civil Servant but an employee of a company headed by Gordon Craig - a man with some interesting links to the Conservative Party [43]

In our opening chapter we noted connections between Craig and the various film operations the Tories were involved in It is instructive to mention here while Wright was training to serve the 'cold-blooded ends of Government' Craig helped to form the CUFA in 1930 with the declared intention of reaching the working class [44] As early as 1926 the Conservative Party had seen the

possibilities inherent in the use of film for political purposes and throughout the thirties their cinema vans proved to be a big attraction-if not for the policies they promoted then for their entertainment and novelty value But in 1926 The Times had thought the use of film for propaganda 'the thin end of the wedge' and declared themselves against it from the start

the Conservative Party are now making use of the cinemato-graph regularly on propaganda work Political propaganda seems to be the thin edge of the wedge, the other end of which may be national propaganda [45]

The Tones had no paper which spoke directly to the working class in the way that Labour did through the Daily Herald and, as we have seen, the Tones understood the potential of cinema and had the finances to experiment with the medium There is no evidence to suggest that Wright or any others in the Movement were covert Tones creating propaganda for the Conservative Party But in the following pages we will note that some of Wright's work expresses themes which are at the heart of Conservatism Given Craig's connection to the Tory party and the new liberalism of his generation Wright's work becomes an interesting expression of the traditional and the modern

In Searchlight on Democracy Grierson wrote of these early days in the Movement -

a need of the times was with it and the young men who developed it were sick of the complacency and futility into which the democratic process was slipping, and like good men everywhere were willing to serve their generation as they knew best [46]

This pronouncement has the noble ring which we have come to associate with much of Grierson's writings but however grand he makes it all sound, Wright had signed himself up to make propaganda for the Empire

It should be understood that when Wright joined the Movement he was only twenty-two years of age and, like many students, had little experience of the world outside the classroom. Although possessed of the middle-class *crise de conscience* he saw *Drifters* as providing an aesthetic solution to the problem of a rapprochement with the working class. *Drifters* was a poetic answer to the problems of the times and Wright's ideas about the use and function of poetry were shaped by his study of the Greek Classics.

Wright has said privately that Aristotle's Poetics is essential to an understanding of his work and it is here that we might find the key to his own conception of democracy as well as discovering the meaning of poetry in such a system. [47] We will be wary of attaching too much importance to Wright's post-hoc rationalisations. But given the fact that Wright's interests in the Classics lasted throughout his lifetime it seems reasonable to suggest that the Greek system played a major role in the formulation of his work.

Poetry in Aristotle's sense is based on imitation, but not imitation as in copying or reproducing. What is imitated are 'the essentials of life and what is aroused in the poet' [48]. Poetry is compared to music and dancing rather than painting because the former arts are not based on mimicry. Central to this notion of imitation was the imaginative impulse of the poet. Through his mastery of the craft he produces something which is far more than a mirror to life. The object of this imitation is 'men in action'. This does not necessarily mean men doing things but 'things happening in terms of human nature' [49]. The most essential element is being human. The poet selects incidents from life to illustrate his own conception. Wright was to echo this when he said that he considered selectivity rather than objectivity to be the main problem of documentary. [50] As an artist Wright would not wish to be judged solely on the 'truth' of the subject he was presenting, nor on his knowledge of particulars - although both concepts were central to his preparation. What was important was that these particulars were combined into an aesthetically pleasing whole. It was this concern with aesthetics that led Wright into some disagreements with Grierson who had little time for artistic representations unless they had a clear purpose. If we are to take the example of Aristotle we can say that Wright was concerned not so much with verisimilitude but

classical realism It may prove useful to provide a brief definition of this-

Those who expect a one-to-one correspondence between elements in the artwork and their referents in the material world do a grave disservice to the realist aesthetic. What defines realism is a certain set of principles, such as Aristotle's laws of necessity and probability, which govern the internal relationships of the various parts of the representation and which are seen to have their source in the natural world. Thus when Aristotle upholds nature as the proper model for artistic imitation, he refers not to a series of objects in the physical universe, but to the movement from potentiality to actuality by which all things reach formal perfection. Since this ideal evolution, or *motus ad formam*, is hindered by the accidents and contingencies to which matter is subject, artists are able to improve upon their model by bringing to completion what nature necessarily leaves imperfect and flawed. In this way, Aristotelian mimesis is didactic and dynamic, unwilling to remain at the level of surface appearances. Aristotle argues that the ideal is indeed inherent in the real and artists should bear witness to the truth by purging nature of all obstacles to its perfect progress. [51]

In Aristotle's time, poetry was designed to reveal the laws of human connection, to discover the universal in the particular. The pleasure associated with this sort of imitative work was not sense-gratification but the sort of pleasure we associate with learning. Poetry was thought of, not as a private pursuit but as an act of public importance with a moral and ethical dimension. The poets were thought of as teachers preaching the avoidance of extremes. Poetry had a cathartic function in that it could enable man to discharge his pent-up emotions in a manner least likely to cause damage to his fellow human beings. [52]

But this theory of poetry has to be related to its time. The Athenian democracy was an absolute democracy with the people expressing themselves through legislature and being encouraged to take part in full discussion of political matters that would affect the community. But in this system the polis only

numbered a few thousand. Furthermore the existence of slaves was also sanctioned and they were denied the vote. Under such conditions the 'Golden Mean' may have been considerably easier to achieve.

We are not suggesting that Wright imagined he could resurrect the Athenian system of government in the Britain of the thirties. But we do know that he, like Grierson, was concerned with fulfilling the Athenian ideal of teaching men to be good men in the fullest sense and good citizens. [53] At the heart of Grierson's philosophy and the Athenian model is a desire to steer men towards a middle path or 'middle-way' and to teach them how to be good citizens. Grierson and Wright shared a faith in democracy and both considered themselves suitably qualified to pass their faith down to the masses. Grierson as one of the 'elect' and Wright as a member of a privileged elite. Their idea of democracy was designed without consulting the people but with their best interests at heart. We are not suggesting that there was a strong authoritarian element in Wright. It is simply that - as we saw earlier - his generation felt they knew better. We should bear in mind that this was in the thirties when the gulf between the middle and lower classes was considerably wider than it is today. It was only in 1931 that Wright was to meet the people he had seen on the big screen.

But despite Wright's classical education he was working for a company whose chief client was only interested in propaganda. It is important to establish the plans of the EMB.

We noted earlier that Tallents represented the official face of the Board. In his Projection of England - a pamphlet he was working on in 1930/31 and published in 1932 - we are afforded a glimpse of the English aspects that this senior Civil Servant thought worth 'projecting'.

Tallents writes of England's obligation to establish a supremacy in the world. The 'institutions and excellencies' that would find their way onto the list include-

Oxford and St Andrews,

Piccadilly, Bond Street, Big Ben, and Princes Street, Edinburgh,
The English Countryside, Villages, Homes and Servants,
Football and Foxhunting [54]

It would be a rather strange and antiquated picture of Britain that would emerge from a projection of these institutions. Particularly odd is his mention of domestic servants which, although still an important part of the British economy, would hardly convince the world outside the Empire that Britain was a modern and dynamic country worth investing in. But Tallents' belief in Britain and her Empire was not significantly different from that expressed elsewhere.

In our first chapter we noted how Grierson had the support of the cinematic intelligentsia. Much of the critical energy in the film critics of the thirties was directed towards a critique of the home industry. Not only were the British aping the Americans, they were turning their backs on their own country. As Lejeune put it in 1931-

What we want from the British cinema is *real* films. We want pictures of real life, of plain facts, of industries and expeditions as adventurous as the wildest tales of the woolly West. We want our own country put on the map, our cities, our pasturage, our machinery, our railways, our fisheries, our workers, our traditions, gnarled and rooted in the soil as grand old forest trees. It is time that we began to be country-proud and empire-proud in the cinema, to boast a bit, to be a little swaggering for once. God knows we have plenty to be swaggering about. [55]

Lejeune was part of a group based around publications like Sight and Sound and, Cinema Quarterly in which the cultural elite discussed which sort of films the populace should see for instruction and enlightenment. They rejected the more gung-ho aspects of Empire and settled for a more liberal Imperialism. What is most important is that they were not fundamentally opposed to the continuance of the Empire. Although these writers represented the critical establishment they too were bound into the 'matrix of perceptions' shared by the populace about the

Empire

Grierson was as loyal to the Empire as anyone in Whitehall. His conception of the role of the EMB Film Unit was made clear in a paper written in 1933. The unit had to

change connotations of the word 'Empire'. Our original command of peoples was slowly becoming a co-operative effort in the tilling of soil. For the old flags of exploitation it substituted the new flags of common labour. [56]

What this passage suggests is that the unit were to try and change the meaning of the Empire. Grierson seems happy with the concept of 'Empire'. Indeed he could hardly be otherwise as a loyal civil servant. He was often to tell Wright that they were first and foremost civil servants. Perhaps he meant public servants. But what could he mean by 'co-operative effort' and the 'new flags of common labour'? He makes no specific reference to any country but he seems to be referring to the evolving state of the Empire. The passage makes vague reference to changing labour relations but makes no specific mention of the situation in the colonies which, as we shall discover, was far from idyllic. It may have been that Grierson was suggesting that the films showed how all of the peoples of the Empire work together, are 'common labour'. Grierson was not against the idea of the Empire. He accepted the brief to make propaganda for the Board and he expected his 'students' to demonstrate the same loyalty. But Grierson's remarks are typical of those made at the time in that they display very little knowledge of the situation in the far reaches of the Empire. His reluctance to discuss the finer points of economic issues involved in the West Indies, for example, is more than just a reminder of his delicate position vis-a-vis the EMB, it is a clue to his ambiguous political position.

If Grierson's attitude to the Empire is well known then we should ask what Wright felt about the subject. The answer is surprising given the strength of feeling the subject has since aroused, but perhaps not untypical of the time.

'We didn't particularly approve I suppose but somebody had to pay us' [57]

Although Wright made this remark in the mid eighties he displayed a real irritation at questions concerning the Empire. In these early years Britain's role as a colonial power was not as important to those in the Movement as learning about the craft of film-making. When we analyse Wright's films we will see how the Empire ideology worked through the director while he tried to express himself with the new medium.

Wright's motivation was Grierson and the 'art of film'. It should be clear by now that Grierson was a charismatic leader - in the Greek sense of the word meaning one with 'specifically exceptional powers or qualities' [58]. This is certainly how Wright saw him. In Weber's classification this is the position of the leader who is either a prophet, messiah or a political figure 'whose organisation consists of himself and a set of disciples the disciples have the job of mediating between the leader and the masses' [59]. It is important to stress that the emphasis was all on pleasing the boss in these early years. Wright has spoken of the procedure adopted by Grierson when watching a film. He would stalk out of his office and sit before the screen. If he saw anything that displeased him he would shout and curse the offending material until it was removed [60]. This might be an amusing anecdote but it also points to the fact that Grierson had absolute control over what was to be released. The new recruit went through a baptism of fire and it seems clear that any gentle aesthetes would soon have been rejected. The rule was to fulfil Grierson's requirements.

Grierson's control extended beyond the boundaries of the studio to all areas of work. In the first issue of Cinema Quarterly - a magazine that was soon taken over by the Movement, Wright published an article entitled 'Let's be Perverts'. The thrust of the piece was an attack on the timidity of the subject matter chosen by the British film industry and the value of a psychological approach [61]. This was hardly a revolutionary idea, but Grierson rang the editor on the day of publication and was 'coldly furious' [62]. The reason for the anger was not the content of the article but the title. It was too late to stop publication but the editorial board - including Wright - got the message. The merest hint of scandal or mention of

sexuality might be enough to discredit the Movement. This illustrates Grierson's control but it also points to his puritan character. One of the factors noticed in the work of the Movement is the lack of sensuality. Wright's work is at least exceptional in this respect.

In return for being cowed by his intimidating manner and working long hours for little reward Grierson offered these 'tyros' the opportunity to make films in 'the only experimental centre in Europe' [63]. He inspired them with a faith, a direction in which they could channel their enthusiasm for social change. But a problem arises when we try to analyse this faith away from the films. There was little discussion on political issues, few policy documents were drawn up, and no plans for action made. The themes that Grierson emphasised were the vague notions of community and democracy. Those in the Movement were not artists in ivory towers but were told they were civil servants devoted to the 'cold-blooded ends of Government'. The Movement were to define democracy by venturing out into the new industrial landscape. In a vague way democracy would come one step further by the mere act of making a documentary. But the concepts 'community' and 'democracy' are open to a variety of interpretations. Yet it is precisely because they were so vague but made so urgent by Grierson that they appealed to well-meaning young middle-class men like Wright. By investigating the world outside they could satisfy a social conscience while ignoring complexities like union labour and the other power-relations of the modern world. In working for the community they could demonstrate a fashionable solidarity with the working classes while searching for the quintessential spirit of England. The contradiction lies in Grierson talking about the new world and the art of cinema while those in the Movement spent much of their time ignoring those realities of the market-place that defined the modern world for the majority of the population.

We do not mean to give the impression that Wright and the others were unaware of the political situation in the country. They genuinely believed that cinema could be used as a force to bind the country together. Theirs was a very responsible position defined for them, characteristically, by Grierson -

what final honours and final dishonours we shall reveal in this

English life of ours what heroism we shall set against what villainy? The field of cinema is not only a field for creators but also for prophets [64]

This illustrates how seriously Grierson took the power of cinema to influence people. Those in the unit were entrusted with a great responsibility to the new world. 'To command, and cumulatively command, the mind of a generation is more important than by novelty or sensation to knock a Saturday night audience cold.' [65]

Cinema was considered a very powerful medium in the thirties. Grierson believed in its power to influence and considered it essential that his young directors were trained carefully and made to appreciate the significance of the tasks they were undertaking. His concern with the power of cinema was shared by a wide range of opinion from the teacher's unions to the church - all of whom had ideas about the correct use of the medium - particularly with respect to that most susceptible and impressionable of groups - the children. We have already quoted the official interest of Cunliffe-Lister. The EMB was also aware of the potential film had to influence young minds.

Talents discussed the display of Empire films to schoolchildren with the Chief Inspector of schools and reported that 'the field was undoubtedly a promising one'. He later recorded that 'the making of films for schools was treated as an essential element in [the EMB's] programme' [66]

Grierson, with his own background and cultural tradition firmly rooted in the importance of education was to share this faith. We will note that Wright was often to feature children in his films and it is not unreasonable to suggest that his awareness of this audience may have predisposed him to concentrate on children in his work. As early as 1930 Wright would have been aware that children made up a large part of the audience at the Imperial Institute and a large proportion of the non-theatrical distribution circuit. When we combine this knowledge with the propagandist intentions of the EMB then Grierson's intention to 'to command the

mind of a generation' becomes clearer In our analysis we will estimate to what extent Wright was trying to impress the Imperial ideology on his young audiences

However before we can consider Wright's work we have to take into account the working conditions in the unit

In January of 1930 a few weeks after Wright joined the unit, Grierson 'asked for £2,500 to produce new films during the first six months of the unit' [67] It was with these meagre resources that Wright was to experiment during the following year It should go without saying that such limited funds had a considerable effect on his early work Money was always a problem and Grierson's approach to this problem was characteristic of the man He started the practice of confiscating the differences between the salaries the men received when hired out to commercial companies and the unit's pay As it states in one report- 'A percentage of these increased salaries was retained by the officers concerned but in all £17 was realised from their loan' [68]

But it would be naive to think that Grierson's control was greater than that of those who held the purse-strings to the EMB For all of Grierson's fiery rhetoric he was still a Civil Servant working for a government department One reputed example of his rather underhand methods was the acquisition of £7,500 to make a film about the Port of London This was a film he had no intention of making and he used the money to fund a variety of other projects [69] It was this reputation for sleight of hand with the treasury he brought to the GPO when he moved over with Tallents and the unit in 1933 What is clear from this example is that there was a constant tug-of-war between those holding the money and Grierson

The financial difficulties were compounded by the fact that in these early days Wright was working in the cloistered atmosphere of Dansey Yard

Life in the Movement in these early years was a rather hectic affair Because Grierson was often at meetings with EMB or badgering film companies for material there was no one left to guide the operations Work went on around the clock The day was divided so that the period from nine to five was taken up with

official EMB business while the rest of the time could be devoted to money-making projects like the editing of foreign language films for New Era [70] The Movement used any revenues gained to purchase new equipment

In January of 1931 Grierson put in a request for extra personnel Wright was soon joined by Elton, Taylor, Anstey, Davidson, Marion Grierson, Legg and many others [71] But the increase in personnel was not met with any substantial increase in resources As a result conditions in that tiny studio in Dansey Yard were very cramped Often the films had to be projected on a sheet on blotting paper hung on the lavatory door [72] There were constant arguments about whose turn it was to use the moviola etc And yet Wright and the others thrived on the situation because of their sheer excitement with film and their respect for Grierson

Much has been made of the collaborative working methods of the Movement It was a deliberate policy of Grierson's to create a community spirit and to instil a shared belief Some writers have compared those in the Movement to medieval artisans and this is a useful comparison It was certainly true that craftsmanship was highly valued - both inside and outside the Movement 'Training' in a 'workshop' gave the impression of a craft rather than an art and Grierson's use of these words helped to foster this impression The emphasis was on doing a job well - as well as those in the recognised and established skills outside the world of cinema The result of this approach can sometimes be detected in the rather stiff formality in the early films

This 'first year' can be compared with that of a modern film-school in which the students create eclectic little experiments which are appreciated by their colleagues but which are not immediately comprehensible to the outside world The fact that the unit were hidden away mixing with like-minded people and protected from the pressures of the market-place helped them to develop an attitude which was not unlike that of public school Given the fact that they were engaged on a non-profit making enterprise and had little contact with the harsh world of British film industry it is hardly surprising that they emerged with a 'self-intoxicated' attitude [73] Their formal experiments spoke a filmic language

which although fashionable was only fully comprehensible to insiders. It is this gap between the language of the Movement and the world outside that we shall discuss in our analysis.

But the remote attitude of the Movement may have been encouraged by Grierson's protective manner. Grierson not only determined the working policy of the unit. He also stood between the unit and the official world of Government in his role as spokesman and publicist for his 'young beginners'.

We should make it clear that egocentricity was not encouraged by 'the boss' and those who displayed an 'artistic' temperament or displayed ideas different from Grierson's soon felt the effects. Rotha was the first to go because he had trouble working as part of a team. [74] Harry Watt in 1935 made the mistake of claiming *Nightmail* for himself and was soon reprimanded by Grierson. [75] This is not to say that Grierson was opposed to individuality. It was simply that those in the unit were permitted a measure of individuality as long as it was within those limits set by 'the boss'.

For Grierson the main problem was to make the new directors realise that the camera offered a new way of looking at the world and, as such, it demanded discipline. In 1930 he wrote of how the 'subjective was the devil in the young director and had to be banished at all costs'. [76] However finely developed his aesthetic sense the film-maker was not to impose his personality on the subject.

Thus the problem for the new recruits was to be both objective in their approach and to express themselves - an act which was bound to be subjective.

Wright sought guidance from a variety of sources. To learn more about the art of cinema he was drawn to Eisenstein's lectures in London in 1930. Like many others he was in awe of the Russian since seeing *Battleship Potemkin*.

The Eisenstein lectures were quite something, erudite, surprising, provocative, encyclopaedic. Their greatest merit was that he constantly related film to the other arts, thus conferring on it a

dignity that it had hitherto been denied [77]

It may be a measure of Wright's insecurity about the new medium that he needed to be reassured of its status and importance. It was not uncommon for the old middle-class to look down upon film as an entertainment for the masses and Wright may have felt insecure about his chosen career.

For most of 1930 Wright was restricted to the studio. This was not due to some plan of Grierson's to frustrate his first recruit's ambition but because the unit were short of cameras. Wright spent this year developing his talents as an editor or 'cutter' as they were then more often called. Editing was important for two reasons. On the one hand it was considered the 'holy of holies' in film-work - this, no doubt because of the advances made by the Russians whose work Wright admired so much. But an equally important reason was that of economy. We have already noted how the Movement were short of resources. If Wright learnt the lessons of economical film-making then there was less chance of him wasting these resources when he went on location. Wright's work in this period represents his technical skill as a 'good cutter'. The films are not the impressionistic essays that were to become typical of his work.

And yet this is also a significant period in that it was in these early days that Wright developed a certain attitude towards film which may provide another reason why the emphasis in his work is all on style.

Wright's formative period in the studio was mostly occupied with putting pieces of film together to create new meanings. He experienced the joy of discovery at what could be done by clever cutting. Particularly memorable was the shock of seeing Vertov's *Man with a Movie-Camera*. 'The sudden realisation that anything could be joined to anything came on me like a thunderclap' [78]. But this concentration on the importance of editing influenced Wright to the extent that construction and combination became primary objectives. To put it another way, he did not need people to express themselves emotionally because he could provide them with emotional responses at the desk. He would make social actors fit into his pattern in keeping with the design which only became fully formulated at

the desk and the cutting stage Wright's lack of interest in the traditional story caused him to develop an interest in pattern

with montage the illusory reality on the screen was not tied to reality itself, but could be constructed on the cutting table by the director using carefully chosen fragments brought together to make a combined assault on the sensibilities of the audience that would achieve the required psychological affect [79]

One of Wright's first after hours experiments was the re-cutting of one of Franc's Matterhorn pictures The climax of these 'Mountain' pictures involved the hero scaling a peak to rescue a heroine from imminent death One evening Wright was struggling with the film when he decided to get the hero up the mountain 'in three jumps' [80] Instead of a protracted assault Wright cut together three shots of the hero's face, feet and arms In this way the viewer was intended to gain a psychological insight rather than follow the arduous physical struggle Grierson declared himself pleased with the result - 'Now you know what cutting's all about' [81] We do not mean to accuse Wright of being cold but simply to point out that this training and his aesthetic preference for patterns predisposed him to create structures whose meaning was not as straightforward as that of the traditional form

In the following pages we will also encounter Wright's claim that certain sequence were intended to 'demonstrate a criticism' etc Ivor Montagu has written of how the Movement were pleased they slipped a particularly 'critical' sequence past the EMB [82] But we have to ask whether these sequences are critical or whether they have been read as such because of Wright's post-hoc explanations which have become part of the Movement's history What we can say is that Wright's work was of an esoteric nature- an approach resulting from a combination of background, inclination and the laboratory conditions of the 'workshop' It should also be borne in mind that Wright was at the desk before he was at the camera in front of people of a social class he had only heard about It should be clear that this notion of pattern or 'art and combination', would be one way of dealing with the complexities of the modern world

This psychological approach to propaganda was very much in keeping with Grierson's writings-particularly the Report to English Film Producers already mentioned. Supporters like Buchan might quote Aristotle and talk about the 'main line of human affection' and Wright certainly believed in the value of what he was doing [83]. But his preference for the psychological assault on the senses known as montage was perfectly in tune with the propagandist intentions of the EMB.

Wright's first films are, as we have said, little more than compilation exercises on which he could practice his editing. Wright worked on *Highways of the Empire* which 'illustrated more general Empire themes based on materials from longer films made by others' [84]. Much of the film was made up of footage that Grierson had managed to secure from Paramount. The first task that Grierson gave Wright a free hand on was *Conquest* which has only survived as a positive print. This was also a compilation film strung together with footage from American Westerns and borrowed from Famous-Players Lasky.

Wright was assured of an audience for his debut work and had his first effort screened at the Imperial Institute cinema along with similar films advertising Canadian Apples and South African fruit.

Wright's next completed work was *Lumber*. This was a short film about the forests in British Columbia. Needless to say this was also put together from scraps of film Grierson had managed to acquire from several film companies. The film was graced with an original score by Denis Arundel - one of Wright's Cambridge generation who was to work with the Movement again. Lejeune was the first to draw attention to the 'Young Cutter' in The Observer [85]. *Lumber* was in part inspired by the Colonial Office who were trying to sell the idea of working in the forests to potential emigrants. But Wright's chief priority was to 'make a little work of art'. He was too 'wrapped up in the purpose' to debate the possible consequences [86]. Isolated from the rest of the world in a little studio in Soho, Wright worked on these films like an apprentice eager to please his superiors - specifically Grierson.

Important as these experiments were for Wright they represent little more

than projects, sterile operations conducted in the cloistered atmosphere of the workshop. Given this it is hardly surprising that Wright would have looked upon his materials with a certain detachment, as elements in a pattern. But the period discussed above is significant because this was the time Wright also began to absorb Grierson's creed of duty and responsibility to the community. Now he had a direction into which he could channel his energies for social reform. It is whether this burgeoning social conscience found its way into the films that we will be investigating in the following chapters. In the cramped studio at Dansey Yard Wright learned valuable lessons on how to function as an artist within the strict financial limits laid down by the EMB and the demands of his boss. To what extent Wright had taken on Grierson's ideas we shall discuss when we look at his first two films in the next chapter.

Notes

- 1 Interviews with Wright by author 1985-1987
- 2 Ibid
- 3 Ibid
- 4 B Hogenkamp, Deadly Parallels. Film and the Left in Britain. 1929-1939 (London,1986), p 73 ff
- 5 Interviews with Wright by author
- 6 Ibid
- 7 Ibid
- 8 Ibid
- 9 Ibid
- 10 A Symonds, The Thirties. A Dream Revolved, (London,1960), p 37/38
- 11 Ibid , p 36
- 12 S Spender, The Thirties and After.1933-1975 (Glasgow,1978), p 23/24
- 13 J Scanlon, The Decline and Fall of the Labour Party (London,1932), ff
- 14 N Branson and M Heinemann, Britain in the Nineteen Thirties, (St Albans, 1971), p 307
- 15 Harold Nicholson, Dianes and Letters 1930-1939 (London,1968), 30/05/31, p 76
- 16 R Skidelsky, Oswald Mosley,(London, 1975), p 240
- 17 A J P Taylor, English History.1914-1945,(Oxford, 1965), p 299
- 18 Sir Stafford Cripps (ed), Problems of a Socialist Government (1933) 'Local Government and the Socialist Plan' by C R Attlee, p 203-4
- 19 Hugh Dalton, Memoirs.1931-1945-The Fateful Years,(London,1957), p 59
- 20 J Campbell, The Renewal of Liberalism Liberalism without Liberals in The Politics of Reappraisal, 1918-1939, ed G Peele and C Cooke, (London, 1975), p 90
- 21 Ibid , p 102
- 22 R Blake, Baldwin and the Right, in The Baldwin Age, ed by J Raymond, (London,1960)
- 23 J Stephenson, British Society 1914-1945 (Harmondsworth,1982), p 323

- 24 Dalton, p 286
- 25 H Macmillan, Reconstruction (London,1933), p 18
- 26 Interview with Wright by author
- 27 Interview with Wright by author
- 28 M Chanan, The Emergence of an Industry, in British Cinema History,
edited by J Curran and V Porter (London,1983), p 57
- 29 Ibid,p 52
- 30 Hansard, Vol 185, col 2084 (HMSO, 1925)
- 31 S Hartog, State Protection of a Beleaguered Industry, in British
Cinema History edited by J Curran and V Porter, (London, 1983), p 64
- 32 World Film News 1, no 10 (January 1937), p 18
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 J Mackenzie, Propaganda and Empire,(Manchester,1985), p 91
- 35 Ibid
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 F Hardy, John Grierson. A Documentary Biography (London, 1979),
p 57
- 38 Interviews with Wright by author
- 39 Ibid
- 40 Ibid
- 41 House of Commons Select Committee on Estimates, *Report from the
Select Committee on Estimates* , London, HMSO, 1934 Appendix 12, p
243 Quoted in A Kuhn 'Independent' Film-making and the State in the
1930's, Edinburgh '77 Magazine, no 2 1977, p 46/47
- 42 Interviews with Wright by author
- 43 T J Hollins 'The Conservative Party and Film Propaganda between
the wars' , English Historical Review, Vol XCVI, April 1981, p 367
- 44 Ibid , p 361
- 45 'Political Propaganda Experiments', The Times, 13 April 1926, p 12
- 46 J Grierson, Eyes of Democracy, quoted by F Hardy in John Grierson and
the NFB (Toronto, 1984), p 109
- 47 Interviews with Wright by author
- 48 Ibid
- 49 L Abercrombie, 'Principles of Literary Criticism', in An Outline of

- Modern Knowledge, edited by Dr W Ross (London, 1931), p 883
- 50 Interviews with Wright by author
- 51 M Martin, Italian Film in the Light of Neo-Realism (Princeton University Press, 1986), p 6/7
- 52 H D F Kitto , The Greeks (Harmondsworth, 1957) ff
- 53 Interviews with Wright by author
- 54 S Tallents, The Projection of England (London, 1932) p 32
- 55 C Lejeune, The Observer, 27 March 1931
- 56 J Grierson, Grierson on Documentary (London, 1979), p 48 / 49
- 57 Interviews with Wright by author
- 58 H H Gerth and C W Mills (eds) From Max Weber Essays in Sociology, in Writers on Organisations, edited by S D Pugh, D J Hickson and C R Hinings (Harmondsworth, 1979), p 20
- 59 Ibid., p 20
- 60 Interviews with Wright by author
- 61 B Wnght, Let's be Perverts, in Cinema Quarterly, No 1 Vol 1 Spring 1932
- 62 F Hardy, John Grierson. A Documentary Biography (London, 1979), p 67
- 63 J Grierson, Grierson on Documentary (London,1979), p 64
- 64 J Grierson, Grierson on Documentary (London, 1979), p 31
- 65 Ibid., p 48
- 66 Constantine, p 213
- 67 P Swann, The British Documentary Movement.1926-1946. (Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Leeds, 1979), p 52
- 68 J Grierson, 'Progress Report', 11 December 1931, PRO/CO 760/37 EMB/C/63 in Swann , p 65
- 69 J Grierson, 'The Problem of the current year' 12 December 1931, PRO CO 760/37 EMB/C/68 in Swann p 64
- 70 Interview with Wnght by author
- 71 Swann, p 52
- 72 Interviews with Wright by author
- 73 T Harrison Films and the Home Front-the evaluation of their effectiveness by Mass Observation p 245 (note) In Propaganda. Politics and

- Film, 1918-1945, Ed D W Spring and N Pronay, (London, 1982)
- 74 B Wright, Interview Wright on Rotha Interview by L Freidlund and P Morris, in BFI Dossier 16 Paul Rotha (London, 1982), p 59
- 75 Interviews with Wright by author
- 76 J Grierson 'New Worlds for Old' Unpublished 1931 Grierson Archive C 2 21 3 p 14
- 77 B Wright in (unpublished) interview with E Edmondson, July, 1974
- 78 Interview with Wright by author
- 79 Leif Furkhammar and Folke Isaksson, Politics and Film, Studio Vista, 1971, p 12 in S Neale, Propaganda, Screen, Autumn, 1977, Vol 18, No 3
- 80 Interview with Wright by author
- 81 Ibid
- 82 I Montague, Old Man's Mumble, Reflections on a Semi-Retirement, Sight and Sound, Vol 44, No 4 Autumn 1975, p 220-240
- 83 Buchan to Tallents, 8 June 1927, PRO CO 760/37, EMB/C/3 in Swann p 41
- 84 S Tallents, A History of EMB (Typescript in Archive G 4 31 3), p 24
- 85 C Lejeune Film Review, The Observer 14/09/1930 ~
- 86 Interviews with Wright by author

CHAPTER THREE

THE FIRST TWO FILMS

This chapter will deal with the first two films directed by Basil Wright - *The Country Comes to the Town* and *O'er Hill and Dale*. Although Wright had been credited as director on *Lumber* the two films above represent his first excursions outside the studio. The procedure we adopt here will be followed throughout the thesis. We begin with an introduction in which we provide details of the shooting and give some historical background to the industry. This is followed with a close analysis of the text. We will conclude by assessing to what extent Wright's work is a that of an individual or whether it is merely a reflection of the Griersonian philosophy.

There are two main factors to be analysed. We should consider the dominant myths about the countryside in the thirties. But we should also take into account the condition of the agricultural industry. Wright's two films are both a report on the condition of British agriculture and a contribution to the myths about the English countryside.

By the 1930's of all the major industries competing in international commerce, agriculture was the hardest hit in Britain and the one most clearly in decline. 'Since the mid to late nineteenth century, foreign competitors had utilised large scale transportation to ship their foodstuffs to Britain and had begun to dominate world-markets' [1]. The British farmers and the old-style landlords had failed to respond to this challenge and had stood by while the import of foreign foods gradually increased. Part of the reason for this decline lay in the fact that the farmers remained devoted to a few crops and did not experiment with others. In 1913 there were 6.5 million acres under cereal and 21.5 under pasture. In 1932 this had been reduced to 4.7 under cereal and 20.3 under pasture. [2]. In 1927 the old landlords sold out to a new generation of tenant farmers and as a result 36% of the land changed hands. [3]. But this change in ownership did not bring about any significant changes in working methods and even if it had it would have taken a

mammoth and unified effort to dislodge foreign competition By the 1930's agriculture was no longer the great employer it had been In economic terms this meant that only five per cent of the occupied population were left in Britain's oldest industry, providing four per cent of the national income [4]

Particularly badly hit were the agricultural workers In their manifesto of 1929 the Labour Party had promised them a National Minimum Wage, Unemployment Insurance and the Abolition of the Tied Cottage [5] None of these pledges were honoured and this made the agricultural workers amongst the most poorly treated in the country It was, therefore, essential that something be done to help both industry and workers

the acute, and this time virtually universal, farming crisis between the wars forced governments to take action after 1930, and thereby to save British agriculture The essential devices were protection and the guarantee of farm prices, increasingly combined (as in potatoes, milk, and rather less successfully, pigs and bacon) with state-initiated Marketing Boards [6]

The idea of the boards first arose in the Labour Government of 1930 when John Addison was Agriculture Minister The Ministry of Agriculture had taken an interest in publicity as early as 1926 and were one of the biggest clients of the EMB [7] The subject of milk had already featured in some of the EMB's more innovative poster campaigns in the late 1920's and 30's

The National Milk Publicity Council, set up by the representatives of the dairy industry to increase milk consumption, was just one organisation which, in the 1920's explored the use of posters, the press, films, recipe books and a range of entertaining publicity stunts to improve their business [8]

The theme of bringing the milk to the town had been the subject of one of these early campaigns Wright's first film is one of a number of films the unit produced in 1931 and 1932 'to be shown in conjunction with the launching of a

National Milk Scheme which was then being jointly introduced by the Ministry of Agriculture and the Board' [9] But the propagandist message - essentially 'Buy British' and invest in your Empire - is quite subtly expressed

In the National government of 1931 John Gilmour was made Minister of Agriculture but he was replaced in the autumn of 1932 by Walter Elliot It was Elliot who put the new act to use His qualifications for the job were a good scientific knowledge and considerable experience of farm life - his father had owned the largest farm in Scotland Elliot himself had a farm at Harwood and it was here that he performed his own researches on the pig Elliot's biographer Charles Coote, describes his first speech as Minister of Agriculture -

His first point was that the interests of town and country were not conflicting but identical 'People were beginning to fear that something is happening to break the spring of the nation, and that if you lose agriculture you not only lose an industry, you lose your life If a nation loses the art of producing food from its soil it is not as if it loses some kind of skill or other, it is as though a man loses the power to breathe' [10]

Elliot was arguing against tariffs and for discovering a new market for farm goods But the new Minister was hardly the first to describe the countryside as being somehow the 'spring of the nation' The pastoral was part of Baldwin's carefully crafted public persona and the leader was often to explain the essential unity of the people by speaking of nature's ways and the 'common heritage' [11] Agriculture was presented by both men not as an economic activity but as something fundamental and central to the English character

Yet this concern for the countryside was being expressed by more than simply a few politicians Lowerson has written of -

the flood of writings that turned the countryside into an extra-urban service centre, the hardness of the agricultural economics was replaced by a series of service images that distanced the viewer by

their very selectivity as he came closer to the landscape itself [12]

Due to the wide ownership of the motor car and the introduction of cheap transport and cheap fares more people were visiting the countryside than ever. It was a time when the 'middle-class rediscovered romantic patriotism' [13]. These new tourists were encouraged and supported by the writers who created-

a sense of heritage where only a hazy perception had previously existed, in many ways the whole genre of these writings was a watered-down and distinctly liberal version of the much stronger folk vernacular elsewhere in contemporary Europe [14]

It has to be stressed that Wright's first film was part of a propaganda campaign by the EMB to boost the sales of Empire products. In other words the EMB's economic rationale was to be translated by Wright into art. Although his chief concern was to prove himself a competent director in Grierson's eyes, the film affords us the opportunity to see how Wright reflected the dominant pastoral myths of the period.

As indicated in the previous chapter the Movement were short of money. In January of 1931 Grierson asked for £2,500 for 20 short interest films, £520 for 26 poster films and £3,000 for 2 three reelers dealing with the subject of British Industry [15]. It was with these resources that the Imperial Six was created of which Wright's contribution made up 50%.

The procedure Wright adopted with his first film was the one he was to use for all of his work. After being assigned the project by Grierson he set about discovering all he could about the relevant industry - in this case the Milk Marketing Board whose new milking and bottling plant were to be the main focus of the film. Wright researched the history of the industry to learn about its structures and past methods. He filled his notebook with information culled from a variety of sources both inside the industry and out, and then sifted through this mass of information looking for material that he thought eminently 'filmable'. However this did not mean he prepared a shooting script or even planned a treatment. This initial

fact-gathering was a process of self-education which helped him to prepare for the sights to come and to display a working knowledge of the industry which would help smooth relations with the workers Wright was always careful not to seem high-handed with the people he was filming He was, as Grierson often reminded him, a diplomat for the Movement and a specialist on behalf of the people [16]

The second stage was the search for locations *The Country comes to the Town* was shot in two weeks, but Wright's crew spent a couple of weeks driving around Devon looking for picturesque sights Because this was his first film Wright was provided with the services of New Era cameraman Jimmy Burger, much in the way that another professional - Basil Emmott - was provided for Grierson on *Drifters* Wright was standing by on a DeVrie camera However the star of this crew was Robert Flaherty

Flaherty was in Britain at Grierson's invitation and was sent out to give Wright some professional tuition The influence of the American was considerable Wright has said that Eisenstein was one of his greatest influences and in the studio Wright applied the Russian master's ideas on montage to his early films But when it came to shooting Flaherty was to be his teacher ~ As Wright put it - 'Flaherty taught me the instinctual approach' [17]

Yet when asked what instructions Flaherty gave, Wright responds that he learned what he did 'by a kind of osmosis' or that 'he lent me his eyes for a few days' [18] These remarks are very vague and sound more like an exchange between mystics than film-makers, but they have a precedent in the words of Grierson himself

In the unpublished New Worlds for Old Grierson wrote of intuition and of the camera guiding him rather than vice-versa The camera was revealing the world to the young director - 'The magic of the camera-eye in a mind-tangled world is that it sees things suddenly for what they are' The camera is the 're-discoverer' of a lost world [19] In an interesting passage Grierson wrote-

The subjective, I know, is the devil in any young director, and has to

be exorcised daily and nightly for years I know, to my cost, that the camera will not follow me if I feel good about something, or even enthusiastic about something, anymore than it follows me in the wide-angled vision I have of everything I see But I mean more than this I mean that the camera-eye will pick out what I do not see at all, that it will give emphasis where I had not thought emphasis existed, that it will make me feel good and enthusiastic about something I had forgotten or never knew enough to feel good or enthusiastic about [20]

What both Grierson and Flaherty seem to be saying is that the camera's perspective can teach us about the world but in order to be taught we should not approach the location with ideas about what is 'aesthetically beautiful' but to let our instincts and intuitions be guided by what the camera reveals Objectivity here is not the pretence that it is possible to stand 'outside' a scene without preconceptions, but an attitude of 'openness' and a determination not to impose oneself on the material

Now while this is certainly an interesting perspective, it must be said that such an approach conveniently side-steps the ideological choices implicit in choosing between shots on location We have argued that Wright's interest in the poetics and the Greek concern with form inclined him to take refuge in 'classical realism' in which the artist brings all things to formal perfection And yet this kind of high-sounding argument provides an intellectual justification for side-stepping the real economic issues facing the workers Grierson, Flaherty and Wright all provide different reasons for taking the 'objective' approach they did None of them questioned what Arnes has called the 'implications of the 'mirror held up to reality' conception of realism' [21] One consequence of this is that the films 'present the status quo' which in itself, reflects the desire of the ruling class to present a picture of 'nature's immutable reality' As we shall see the choices made by Wright in shooting and at the bench have very clear ideological implications

But however much Wright might have wanted to practise the intuitive approach and experiment with the form he still had to 'do a job' in recording the

various operations on the farm and at the milking station Wright's way of resolving these two demands was to try and vary the way the camera is used - sometimes recording, sometimes depicting scenes like a painter

Flaherty's considerable presence ensured Wright a generous shooting ratio of about 6 | giving the young director plenty of room for error and a great deal of material to edit when the two week shoot was over [22]

The 'holy of holies' for the Movement was the cutting-bench but this stage of film-making held no fears for Wright who as we have seen had spent over a year practising for an opportunity to work on his own material As a result the film bears testimony to the hours Wright spent at the desk and features some dramatic flourishes that cannot have failed to impress his teacher - Grierson

The Country comes to the Town was released at the end of 1932 as one of the 'Imperial Six' Grierson seems to have taken some pride in the film -

Our film of the London Milk Supply Here was a decent but not very exciting subject and almost logically it became our best-looking job of the year Basil Wright photographed his pastures and his cows, his milking and his trains and his pasteurisation plant into a cocked hat, and even then he had to introduce a theme to give an air of importance to the material This is of course essential where ordinary everyday material is concerned [23]

But perhaps Grierson's pleasure is understandable - after all Wright's debut has a great deal in common with Grierson's *Drifters* We should also be wary of reading too much into Grierson's praise He was a publicist for the Movement and much of what he wrote or said was simply to encourage interest in the films This particular extract is a useful example of Grierson trying to promote a film he had a great deal of difficulty distributing

Wright's next film, made only a few weeks later, was not to meet with the same measure of approval

O'er Hill and Dale was shot in the Cheviot Hills over ten days in the spring of 1931. It features a study of the life of Mr Martin - a shepherd for some thirty years on a farm belonging to Walter Elliot [24]

Wright was assigned this production by Grierson who had been impressed by his first recruit's treatment of the countryside. The project was to make a film about sheep farming in the Borders but nothing more specific than that. Wright's first idea was to make a film about the community of sheep-farmers in the Cheviot Hills detailing the process whereby the flock are reared and sheared in the lambing season. Accordingly Wright did his research into the industry. But when he arrived at the Border country in spring he was captivated by the landscape and very much affected by the charisma and lifestyle of Mr Martin [25]. As a result the film is a far less analytical work than *The Country comes to the Town* and more an impressionistic portrait of the shepherd.

The shooting proved to be quite a trial for the budding director. Because he was filming alone Wright had to carry his equipment over the hills with Mr Martin as he went on his rounds. Periodically Wright would ask Mr Martin to stop so he could set up the camera and take a shot. Martin was most 'obliging and courteous' [26]. Wright thought the shepherd was 'born to be in front of the camera'. This sort of remark brings to mind Tallents' remark about the photogenic qualities of the fishermen in *Drifters*. But Wright's film goes beyond the search for 'nobility in labour' and tries instead to capture the shepherd's charisma. As we shall see in Wright's conception Martin was a man beyond mere politics and a model of the quintessential worker.

Wright's shooting ratio on *O'er Hill and Dale* was a mere 3:1 - considerably less than his allowance on *The Country comes to the Town*. It is a tribute to Wright's economical use of film that he became known as the 'cheapest' director in the unit after *O'er Hill and Dale* whose total cost 'came to £120 and made ten times as much' [27]. Wright had clearly absorbed his lessons about the economic use of film.

Wright has said he put his 'heart and soul' into *O'er Hill and Dale* and considered the film his best photographed before *Song of Ceylon* [28] Grierson however was not so impressed and was to criticise Wright privately for failing to use his creative powers. We shall deal with this criticism in our conclusion.

When the 'Imperial Six' were released at the end of 1932 Wright was responsible for three of the films - *The Country comes to the Town*, *O'er Hill and Dale* and *King Log* which was a re-cut by Evelyn Spice of *Lumber*. He was becoming known as one of the foremost directors in the Movement. But before we begin the analysis we should make clear what elements in the film were not of Wright's choosing.

As the films were assigned to Wright his freedom was limited to what he could do within the brief. Grierson may have instructed him to make a film about sheep-farming but Wright could choose which aspect of the industry to focus on. To an extent the situation was not unlike that operating in Hollywood where the major studios assigned directors to certain films. In order to confer their personalities on a film these directors had to create their own style. The auteur critics have devoted themselves to discovering the artists that expressed themselves through this system. Wright was also working on assigned projects but within the limits set by Grierson and as part of a movement with a social purpose. For Grierson this social relevance was of more importance than the question of a director's style. We have to analyse how Wright negotiated a 'space' between the conflicting demands of Grierson for social significance and his own desire to express himself as an artist.

We should also consider the vital question of sound. In 1931 the Movement were without 'synch-sound' cameras and so the soundtrack had to be added later. However in the case of the films which came to be known as the 'Imperial Six' it was not until late in 1932 that Grierson managed to get the films distributed [29]. We have already stressed the Movement were constantly short of money and so it was hardly surprising that they could not afford sound equipment. As a result their silent films seemed particularly old-fashioned at a time when audiences were adapting to the 'talkies'. The only way that Grierson could get the

films distributed was to sell them In 1932 Grierson and Tallents made an agreement with Ideal Cinemagazine - a company led by Andrew Buchanan who has since been described as 'a shorts king with a difference' [30]

Buchanan had started his Cinemagazine in the twenties and managed to run it until the mid-thirties when it was taken over by Gaumont British - a company who were soon to make their own entry into the shorts market [31] Buchanan was a skilled technician and a very economical film-maker who would shoot 450 feet for 200 [32] It was perhaps because of this skill and his undoubted energy that he was respected by Film Art and the BFI [33] In the former Buchanan wrote an article which encapsulated his ideas on entertaining the public in which he suggested that 'the surest way of pleasing the largest number of people is to include the smallest amount of intelligent material' [34]

Buchanan clearly thought that the only way he could sell the films of the 'arty' documentary boys was to add music and a commentary This may go some way towards explaining why the music and commentary are in a style far removed from some of Wright's later work The narrator chosen by Buchanan for both films was Douglas Calthorpe - precisely the sort of jolly 'BBC-type' that Wright later sought to avoid But Calthorpe's 'RP' accent was to find favour with the Movement in general As Armes has pointed out-

With the coming of sound there was the resistance to anyone who did not speak 'stage English' Accent, dialect, regional or 'class' intonations meant that you were restricted to character parts The lamentable preference was for the English of the drama schools and South Kensington [35]

The fact that the script of the film was not Wright's will be taken into account in our analysis Although Buchanan was close enough to the Movement to be the only non-mainstream documentary member to join the Associated Realist Film Producers (ARFP) in 1936, he could not actually be called a member or even a fellow traveller [36] His priority was to make and sell films - not to produce government propaganda Indeed it could be argued that his - and Calthorpe's -

contribution represent a different ideological level from Wright's. Buchanan's professed a contempt for the audience which the Movement would never have admitted to. His script translates sequences to give them a readily comprehensible meaning. Buchanan needed to make the films into viable commercial properties and, as such, he was not that interested in the movement's artistic experiments. As Swann has noted, Buchanan's contribution -

very effectively negated the effects which the documentarists had been trying to obtain in their films. Thus the only group of films which the EMB unit managed to get into the cinema were completely compromised, and went into the cinema in a form which was very different from what the documentarists would have wished [37]

In the preceding chapter we said that Wright had given up his freedom to serve Grierson and his aims. In these first films we meet with a director obviously influenced by *Drifters* and its director. And yet it is important to add that Grierson did not tell Wright how to film this or that - he let him develop his own style, although he sometimes made it clear in private what met with his approval. In these films Wright does his best to 'bring the Empire alive' and seems committed to selling the concept of the Empire. The film asks few questions and it is only when we look closely at Wright's style that we can understand the ideological import of his work. The aesthetic certainly took precedence over the social issues in these early years. What we will discover when looking at these films is how Wright had assimilated and translated the Griersonian creed into his own style - style being a factor Grierson was happy to encourage as long as it was married to purpose. In the following we will note certain stylistic touches that suggest Wright was not quite the obedient slave to Grierson's ideas some have suggested he was [38]

The Country comes to the Town

a nostalgia for a resurrected past, a re-discovery of yeoman roots, a search for a half-remembered countryside, what Raymond Williams so perceptively called ' the strategic formation in which observation, myth, record and half-history are so deeply entwined ' [39]

The Country comes to the Town is chiefly concerned with the production and distribution of milk to the cities of England and in this way connects with the advertising already mentioned by the Ministry of Agriculture Wright's first film is an impressionistic work and represents the first evidence we have of his particular shooting and editing style The reader is reminded that we shall have to discount the commentary for it represents the contribution of a man outside the Movement with very different i e commercial, aims

The film is twenty minutes long and can be split into two parts The first of these parts concentrates on traditional countryside activities, while the second half focuses on the achievements of the new technology The action of the film progresses from country to town but the final shot in the film is of the open fields In this way the countryside workers are placed within a frame or border which limits their world This is the first example of Wright creating a pattern and establishing a shape to his material and of course this shape has a certain ideological significance By returning to a similar shot at the end of the film Wright fixes the people in their place and establishes a sense of order

Wright's choice of establishing shot is important in this regard He chose a shot of a large thatched cottage and focuses on this in long shot before a pan to the countryside beyond As Colls and Dodd have pointed out -

Within the dominant documentary practice, including the traditions of social reportage, environment is overwhelming The grand design of the establishing shots is to fasten the people in their place [40]

At the beginning of the film, a contrast is made between the clothes of the city workers sitting on a hill-top and those of a rustic peasant. The eyes of the young city-dwellers drift across the fields and provide us with a point of entry into the world. What follows this constitutes the revelation of the pastoral world, recorded by the camera. What we are encouraged to become interested in, is how the people perform their task within this frame.

Rather like *Drifters* Wright follows a pattern from day-to-night and then to morning again. This is the 'life in a day' format but it is also meant to represent one of nature's cycles. By containing the workers within this pattern we get an idea of what Wright considered 'natural'. The workers seem to be acting in harmony with nature. But Wright is also organising and educating in the construction of this pattern. He is presenting us with an ideal within which the workers function perfectly.

The film begins at dawn - a time when work begins in the country according to the predominant myth - and finishes with the early morning in the city. A contrast is made between the measured ease of the former and the bustle of the latter. In this way the myths of each are maintained.

The film follows the course of the day and as it progresses the countryside workers perform their allotted tasks within it. The only aspect which unites these workers, apart from their surroundings, is the useful and productive activity which binds them together. Each group connects with the other and Wright stresses the inter-relationships and the inter-dependence of people on one another. He demonstrates the network of co-operation that exists among the country people by pointing out that they are all working in an orderly fashion and, as such, have much in common with the city-dwellers. Their activity is geared to the market-place - not the cottage industries that are ordinarily associated with 'rustic types'.

Thus far agriculture=industry in a more agreeable setting but Wright, like Grierson before him, makes all the relationships in the film dependent upon work. This suggests that the business of work is the over-riding issue in these people's lives and more important than anything else. No explanation is offered of what

might make the country people actually different from the city-dwellers

What makes the film interesting for us in the light of Wright's future development is his practice of mixing the picturesque and romantic with the technological. It is the harmonious coming together of these forces that represent his vision of a gently changing world. The meeting of old and new is not an occasion for conflict but proof of man's adaptability. But one need only glance at the history of agriculture, let alone contemporary accounts, to see that this is an unusual representation to say the least.

Wright's use of the camera reflects the functions being performed on-screen. Activities that seem wayward and undisciplined, those that correspond to 'our' illusion of the countryside, are recorded in all their disorganised glory. But when Wright is studying a machine he uses the camera as a scientific instrument. He echoes the machine's function in geometric shots or in precise, rhythmic cuts. In order to 'educate' us Wright often puts these two styles side by side to underline the changes that are taking place in the countryside.

Perhaps the most striking example of Wright's deliberately alternating style occurs at the start of the film. A group of children are seen running around a yard scattering corn and trying to catch some chickens. Wright follows their movements, clearly enjoying the disarray. He notes their tattered clothes and their urchin faces and in doing so supports our illusions about country life. But then Wright switches from this happy scene to a right-angle cut of a chicken factory. The screen is divided into austere geometric shapes in contrast to the earlier scene. The following shot is of the interior of the factory where we see the serried ranks of chickens in their boxed compartments. The formerly 'free' animals are now trapped in the factory. The camera that had enjoyed recording their movement now soberly records their imprisonment. Thus the change in style reflects the change in circumstances. This abrupt technique is one that Wright will use again when he wants to introduce 'the future'. The eye drifts over the scene and is then thrust into a new perspective. (It is interesting to note that at this point the narrator speaks and, to prevent us from considering the inhumane consequences of the factory-farm, jokes about 'reveille' and goes on to compare the chicken's life to that

of a soldier in barracks) The sequence ends with a head-on shot of the factory as the chickens emerge en masse to be fed The screen that was cut into rigid geometrical shapes is now flooded with specks of white Apart from this pleasing aesthetic effect Wright suggests that whatever man does, 'nature' will find a way to overcome his efforts at control As well as contradicting what has gone before, it also bears little relation to the earlier shots We are reminded once more of the young cutter at his desk One could argue that the contrast is being made for the sake of style rather than to tell us something about factory farming

Despite the march of progress Wright is at pains to point out that 'simple' rustic activities are going on alongside the more modern ones This state of affairs is made possible by man's adaptability This ability is underscored in a scene that features three labourers at milking time

The men are seen sitting on a fence in a pose reminiscent of the much-loved 'country-bumpkin' Once more Wright is asking us to dwell upon a stereotype The men are 'waiting for the cows to come home' Wright cuts from this relaxed scene to a shot of a boy emerging from a cottage He has come up from the town to learn about the work being done in the country and looks like one of the youths at the start of the film who enjoyed the scenery but who were designated (by the commentator) as being ignorant of the work being done in the countryside We follow the boy's path through the winding lanes until he arrives at the farm where the three men are waiting Finally the cows do 'come home' and the milking can begin What gives this sequence a significant air is the way a change is effected in the boy Wright frames him against the sky as he discards his city clothes and puts on the uniform of the modern dairy hand - a white coat and cap He is being transformed by the process and demonstrates his adaptability and willingness to work for the community The boy is experiencing what we are seeing This change of clothes and image is a fore-runner to a scene in *Song of Ceylon* when the dancers put on the 'Apparel of a God' The point is the same in that the new identity is adopted to serve the community Even the way Wright photographs the boy is similar to the later film - from beneath with attention paid to the folds in the cloth etc The point Wright is making is that man can adapt The lazy 'bumpkins' have been transformed by the arrival of the cows and are seen

operating the new machines in the station This adaptability has been necessitated by the demands of a modern industry - a major theme of the Movement and one of Wright's biggest interests

All of this is most eloquent but we might ask why the people should have to adapt Furthermore - what are the forces instigating such changes? Wright seems more interested in the details of the boy's costume than the industry which demanded such adaptability Wright makes the coming of industry a natural and simple process rather than a disruptive force in the community He does not investigate the rationale for changes nor have we time to contemplate them ourselves before being moved on to the next scene

The arrival of the boy indicates the close of the first half of the film and the beginning of the second which is about the increasing mechanisation of the country Wright makes the change correspond to the time of day It is dusk and the workers are finishing for the day before returning home At this mid-point in the film Wright's instinctual technique captures a moment of spontaneity

As the sky darkens and the flower-girls wave their goodbyes Wright's camera follows them down the country lanes Suddenly three of the girls realise they are walking in the wrong direction and then turn and run towards the camera This is an unexpected act and its freshness makes a pleasant impression But in choosing to leave this 'accidental' sequence in the film Wright seeks to convince us about the 'naturalness' of the people-their essential simplicity He is also preparing us for the contrast between the world of the workers and the efficiency of the machines that follows later

In the following scene a girl jokes with a man at the side of the road while the sky darkens above them Her smile and his ramshackle cart are in strict contrast to the po-faced technicians and machinery that will follow in the next scene These are the last picturesque scenes featuring the community Wright allows himself before the function and use of the camera switches from painterly to technical to record the operations in the factory

The Milking and Bottling Plant is the bridge between the old world and the new. It is here that nature meets science and the result is milk that is both hygienic (science) and nutritious (nature)

In the first place the activity at the plant takes place when the people in the city are asleep. It is 'unknown' to them and perhaps this is why Wright gives the sequence a surreal dream-like quality.

Wright begins the sequence with a shot of the interior of the building. Thus we are not gently introduced into the hive of activity but 'thrust' into it. After giving us a general view Wright now focuses his attention on the '1,000 gadgets' at work to ensure 'absolute purity' for the milk. The soundtrack is useful here for otherwise it would be difficult to make sense of what happens because of Wright's ostentatious display of editing techniques. We will discover a similar scene in *Cargo from Jamaica* in which the bananas are shot in a way not dissimilar to this. Once again Wright is interested in the shapes made by the bottles as well as their function and operation.

The bottles are photographed in close-up as they pass through the various machines. Wright is fascinated with the process and builds his sequence in such a way that we can only be dazzled by the speed at which the bottles pass through one machine and into another. By speeding the operation like this Wright illustrates the increasing mechanisation of the countryside as well as admiring the skill of the expressionless technicians serving the machines. The men are not individualised but seem to become part of the machine. Wright concentrates on their limbs - their arms and legs - the vital parts of the human machine. This recalls Gneron's treatment of the men in *Drifters*. However, lest we think that Wright is decrying the role of man, he inserts a sequence that ties the workers to the other country folk in the fields.

A man is seen approaching a huge cauldron of milk. Wright takes a close-up of his calloused hands as he raises the lid and then inserts a ladle. This action is followed with a shot of a white sheet blowing in the wind, and then a large cloud before returning to the milk cauldron and the man wiping his brow. It is as if

in lifting the lid the man has revealed the chain of events that have led to the milk being there. The sequence conjures up the concept of 'whiteness' combining the purity of nature and the hygienic ideal being pursued by the workers in the plant. This montage sequence also puts us in mind of *Drifters* when a glimpse of the fishermen is seen rising from the smoke of the train's engine. The purpose is the same - to remind us of the chain of events that have led us to this point and to once more underscore the importance of inter-connection. In presenting us with this Wright breaks with the narrative at the risk of losing direction and this may be why Buchanan spent so much time explaining the operations at the plant.

After a few more shots of the factory workers grading eggs by a type of light-beam - illustrating the meeting of 'nature' as we know it and technology, Wright shifts his attention to the race for the town markets. Once again we are reminded of *Drifters* and the rush of the fishermen as they sail homeward to catch the dockside markets. However idyllic the earlier scenes may have been, the demands of the modern industrial economy are made paramount.

The penultimate scene takes place in Covent Garden at dawn. This is the eventual destination of the train carrying the produce of the country. We see women in doorways anxiously awaiting their milk or butter. The bustle and confusion of the city represented by this busy sequence provide a contrast both with the quiet village at the start of the film and the open fields which close the film. In finishing this way Wright makes clear the inter-dependence of the two formerly discrete communities. We have been taught that the people in town and country have more in common than we originally thought.

Two moments tell us a great deal about the different lifestyles in the country. We suggested earlier that Wright's camera-style was adapted to the type of activity that was being shown on-screen. In the following examples we want to suggest that an extra meaning can be gained from an analysis of the framing.

There is a scene early on in the film in which a woman is seen feeding some ducks. Wright films her from a low-angle so that all we can see is her dress, arms, and the animals walking around her. Wright lingers on this scene long

enough for us to notice that the dress is threadbare, her hands are bony and the earthenware pot containing the corn looks like an ancient relic. Although we gain some information from this shot, what Wright also conveys is the tone of the country, of the woman's lifestyle and history. She is a detail that gives a clue to the whole. It is only later that we realise this way of living is being changed by increasing mechanisation. Yet we recall this shot because of the eloquent way it connotes a passing tradition.

And yet this is a rather stereotypical presentation of woman as earth-mother, wedded to the land and - in this shot - almost growing out of it. Wright is able to present her in this way not only because it is an attractive shot, but because he later focuses on technology - which is the modern contrast. The pattern becomes clearer when we notice these contrasts.

Wright's depiction of the milking station and the men working there points to a future in which the human element is missing. There will be skill, ingenuity and invention as man demonstrates increasing command of his environment, but Wright implies that a certain grace will be lacking.

When concentrating on the men milking the cows, Wright concerns himself with their function. At each pull of the teat Wright changes shot to underscore the rhythm. He builds a sequence that matches the function step by step. This demonstrates his editing skills as well as illustrating the men's ability to maintain the rhythm. Nevertheless it shows man's increasing mechanisation as he struggles to keep up the beat of the modern machinery. Man's adaptability is praised but progress seems to be taking him further away from contact with 'the land'. We might attribute the sophistication of this scene to Wright's anxiety to prove himself a 'good cutter' but, as we shall see, Wright does have a very sentimental and romantic feeling for those who live off the land. He manages to convey the changing face of the countryside most effectively but his marked preference for the long take and slow pan demonstrated in his later work incline us to the view that he regrets the increasing dominance of the machines.

Wright's first film is interesting because of the account he offers of the

history of agriculture and because it reveals what were thought of as the progressive achievements of the time. There are stylistic touches here which will feature in the future. Also significant is his view of history as a smooth unbroken movement and the workers' apparent comfort and ease with the changing world. Wright provides a visual metaphor for this in the shape of a windmill whose slowly turning blades indicate the directors view of 'natural' progress and development. And of course in such a traditional and conservative view there is no place for an acknowledgement of the economic and political forces inspiring these changes. The evocation of atmosphere is the priority here.

Wright's idea of the countryside is, for the most part, a romantic one featuring ancient carts, thatched cottages, and farmers ambling through furrowed fields. As such it is a comforting picture and one which the reader of the novels of Mary Webb would feel at home with. Despite the sequence at the plant Wright's film presents precisely the same sort of illusions Hollywood maintained about English Country Life. All that is missing is the Lord of the Manor - or some comparable figure. But in Wright's country there are no masters or servants. Everybody is a worker with a job to do. In presenting this comforting picture of industrial relations Wright was following in the tradition started by Grierson in *Drifters*. The Movement had no time for the complications of power structures in their efforts to demonstrate community. The result of such an omission is that the workers are made to appear self-motivated. This is more a reflection of what Grierson and Wright would have liked to think than an accurate representation of how conditions were in these industries in the thirties.

But as we illustrated earlier Wright was hardly the only film-maker interested in the country. In order to boost the home holiday industry, free film shows were organised - 'See our Beautiful England' and tourists from the towns started to flood the countryside. [41] Wright makes a reference to this at the start of the film with a shot of some hikers on the brow of a hill. Perhaps these new tourists were encouraged by the 'flood of writings' we spoke of earlier. [42] But despite this contemporary reference Wright's film is a contribution to the various pastoral myths created around the countryside. We might add in fairness that Buchanan's contribution will have affected the reading of the film, but even without this text,

Wright's film still maintains popular illusions about the countryside despite its claim to educate

It is only when we look to contemporary accounts of the time that we realise how false Wright's picture of the pastoral actually was. Despite the new enthusiasm for 'Our English Heritage' the countryside was in very poor shape. Malcolm Muggeridge has written a rather different description of events

Motor coaches penetrated to hitherto remote and inaccessible places, quite filling country lanes, petrol-fumes mingled with spring and summer scents, and even rabbits became traffic-conscious. Fields were neglected, tall thistles showing above the golden corn, farmhouses and cottages, cleared of farmers and labourers were indications of a new prosperity tracks of country being bought to prevent them from being built upon [43]

The Preservation of Rural England was a force in the land and was buying up tracts of land to prevent, rather than encourage, the development of industry [44]. Paradoxically, Wright's first film for an organisation concerned with the health of the economy focused on an industry which was rapidly being turned into a leisure based enterprise

Wright's film may blend 'Olde Englande' with the new England of industry but it reveals nothing about the economic situation of the people. We learn nothing about the unemployed and how technological advances may have put their jobs in jeopardy. The point is that Wright is optimistic about the future. He places his faith in the march of progress - even the picturesque rustics are found work in the new world. No one in the films of the Movement is idle for long - everyone has to be seen to be doing something. But perhaps this is the whole point. Why dwell on the past and the complications with labour when we all have a job to do rebuilding Britain and learning about citizenship?

The future will be efficient. Various unseen experts have designed ways in which the charming but unreliable methods of the past can be replaced by

modern machinery Efficiency and planning are the key-words of this new world of the farmer For the first time his planning was part of a national campaign to rescue British agriculture from a period of crisis Wright's role seems to be to give the impression of progress We are reminded of the scientific approach to problems being advocated by the progressive centre

For all of Wright's reported affection for the people he filmed he still assigns them limiting and limited roles to play The charming little girls we saw feeding the animals are given tasks similar to their mother They too will spend their lives on the farm Wright links them to the mother and the land and in this way our perception of their horizons is limited From the women toiling in the fields to the girls buried to their knees in the tulip fields - all are elegantly framed but they are never seen stepping out of their roles In these sequences we see Wright framing his most attractive shots and yet even here everyone is photographed for a purpose In order to avoid the charge that the girls are there simply to be decorative Wright makes them workers with jobs to do But he fails to provide an explanation of their motives It is left to the narrator to explain that they are preparing their produce for the town-dwellers Wright himself furnishes no explanation Our role as spectators is simply to enjoy the scenes, to take a passive pleasure in the work of our 'country cousins'

It is worth bearing in mind that Wright's task was to advertise milk for the Empire It is open to question whether his almost surrealist sequence in the plant would have been effective in getting the populace to drink more milk As an advertisement Wright's debut is as non-specific as it's model *Drifters*

It is also difficult to see how educational such a film is It is certainly true that many functions are illustrated but they are never explained nor are they made to connect up to the wider picture of agricultural life It might have helped if we were given an explanation by one of the workers or if some titles emerged to make it clear to us who is doing what for whom But we never get to know the point of view of the workers They are observed rather than included in this picture This was an approach which was to continue in all of the films directed by Wright It is very much the work of one class observing the world of another and applying its

own middle-class values in selecting what is 'essential' about the country-the 'spring of the nation'

One final point is that this film, like many others produced by the Movement, does not reveal where it was shot. We only know it was Devon because of surviving records. But within the film itself there is no mention of any town or country - apart from a brief (spoken) reference to Covent Garden. By failing to specify a precise location Wright can present the notion that this is how agriculture 'is'. With no words or titles to guide them the audience may well have thought that these fine and efficient conditions were operating all over the country, rather than in isolated corners. Wright gives the illusion of a whole industry making progress in the same direction but in doing so overlooks the difficulties that were being experienced elsewhere. Wright can justify this approach because the notion of 'community' is made all important.

It is hardly surprising that Wright's first 'full' film for the Movement should continue the work done by Grierson in *Drifters*. In the first instance the aim is the same - to demonstrate inter-dependence and inter-connection through a revelation of what 'really happens' in a specific industry. As a result it is no surprise that Wright was praised so highly by Grierson. But there are significant differences. Wright did not have the drama of the high seas to make an adventure out of. There are no examples of bravery or 'high up-standing labour'. To put it another way - Grierson already had a story of excitement, Wright had to make his own at the cutting bench. When we see *Drifters* we cannot help thinking of the bravery of the camera-man as he struggles to frame a shot with the waves lashing all around him. Part of the reason *Drifters* may have been the success it was could be attributed to the fact that it suggested a wild and adventurous life for the film-maker recording every-day dramas. This was one of the qualities that attracted Wright to the Movement. But Wright's first film is an altogether more intricate work. It suggests a reflective artist interested in considering, for example, the links between a sheet and a pail of milk. As we have suggested this sequence owes at least an intellectual debt to Eisenstein. But this is the only clear evidence of the Russian's teaching. For the most part this film is very much in the English pastoral tradition. Wright aspired to the status of a poet and used the 'realities' he discovered to

weave sophisticated patterns for the viewer to ponder over. Although this was only Wright's first film we can already see the first glimmerings of an individual style - the shock-cuts to shake the viewer out of complacency, the slow pans to faithfully record the majestic movement of the clouds etc. and the instinctual 'feel' for the subject that was to produce such enchanting shots in the films to come.

Although Wright was to speak of his twin debt to Flaherty and Eisenstein the most obvious influence in this film is the one that attracted him to the Movement - *Drifters*. The most memorable example of this is the use of the train as a symbol for the connecting links of the modern industrial world. Wright uses it in precisely the same way here. But what is interesting is that the theme of inter-dependence reached its most forceful expression in *Nightmail* - a film in which Wright played a small creative role, and which, of course, is centred around a train. Wright's first film reveals him as a happy and unquestioning passenger.

O'er Hill and Dale

O'er Hill and Dale was filmed shortly after *The Country comes to the Town* and edited a few weeks later. The film is interesting because although it takes a different approach to that adopted in Wright's debut there are enough similarities to make it clear that he was beginning to develop his own style.

The subject of the film is a Mr Martin, a shepherd who, we are informed, has worked in the Cheviot Hills for some thirty years. But this pastoral connection is one of the very few that can be made to *The Country comes to the Town*. Wright's first film, despite being an idyllic evocation of the countryside, did make some connections with the modern world of industry. In *O'er Hill and Dale* Wright takes a different approach. Rather than illustrate the relevance of sheep farming to the national or even the local economy Wright chose to make Martin a figure of tradition. He turns the shepherd into a noble peasant much in the manner of Wordsworth's 'Michael'. Wright makes no reference to the present but provides us with a romantic portrait of a man he clearly admired.

However once again we should take into account that Buchanan's script is a rather prosaic and florid affair which necessarily alters the impact Wright intended to make. For example Wright's original title for the film was *Shepherd's Spring*, one which he felt was more fitting than the rather 'poetic' choice of Buchanan. [45] Our focus will be on the visual components of Wright's portrait.

Wright's strategy was to disguise the potentially soft and romantic aspect in some harsh scenes. Rather than linking man to the world of commerce and industry Wright demonstrates the unforgiving world of Mother Nature. The aim is to convey the strength of a tradition by painting a portrait of a hard-working man living apart from the community.

The film contains only the most modest of dramas. We follow Martin going through his routine of tending the flock and marshalling the dogs. There are no 'incidents' and the film is low-key featuring none of the technical ostentation we noted in Wright's debut. This altogether more restrained approach represents

Wright's attempt to convey the gentle pace of life and the character of Martin. But quite apart from the subject-matter being very much in the style of Wordsworth, Wright was also trying to respond intuitively to the 'kingdom' of Mr Martin. The result is a film which stresses the interplay between man and his environment.

The film begins and ends with a shot of Martin heroically framed against the sky. In a pattern not dissimilar to that adopted in his first film Wright creates a border for the character. The ideological implications of such a strategy are that Martin is framed by these borders. Wright suggests that he knows his place and is 'happy with his lot'. The shepherd seems content inside his 'kingdom' and who could fail to be living in such an idyllic world? In this very traditional narrative it is in the middle of the film that 'things happen' and only at the end we return to the same point where order is restored - this order being not one of commerce or economics but one of 'nature' of which Martin is made an integral part.

The method of framing adopted by Wright was that used by the Russians to indicate man's innate nobility. But Eisenstein's rationale was to connect this nobility to the political struggle. Wright's rationale is related to his romantic conception of nature which he considers quite divorced from politics. Grierson adopted this method of framing in *Drifters*. But in that film the sky was one of the forces of nature that the fishermen had to contend with. In *O'er Hill and Dale* the sky is, for the most part, as calm and peaceful as the life of the shepherd. Wright pans from Martin to the surrounding hills. We look over the hills with Martin and in the following shots enter into 'his' world. As we pointed out earlier the land does not 'belong' to him in the economic sense - it belonged to his employer Walter Elliot but this is not something we learn in the film. The implication is that it is Martin's land which he surveys at his leisure. This is only one of the economic factors that Wright overlooks. But of course he can by-pass such issues because he is interested in the man's nobility and with this conception in mind politics can be ignored.

Another contrast with *The Country comes to the Town* is in the way Martin goes about his work. The rustics in the former film were connected to the modern operations of the new world. They were working for a purpose - the

market. Martin seems to be working for himself. His distance from the modern world is further illustrated when we see that the 'tools of the trade' are the same as those of his fore-fathers. The sheepdogs and the shepherd's crook are precisely those objects that we would associate with the myth of the shepherd. Wright's only addition to this already well known fact is to show them in motion when they are used to rescue one of the lambs stuck in a stream. This is precisely the old world that was being replaced in *The Country comes to the Town*. But Martin appears to need very few tools or modern appliances. Instead he relies on the skill born of hard experience.

One example of this skill occurs towards the start of the film. After several shots of the flock being herded into a pen Wright focuses on a new-born lamb struggling onto its legs, separated from the rest of the flock. The lamb has been outcast because - we are told - its mother died giving birth. It is essential that the lamb is integrated into the 'family' otherwise it will die without being nurtured. From some ten feet away a stationary camera records the shepherd taking the skin of a newly-dead lamb and slips it onto the outcast. Because it has the scent of her offspring the mother cautiously approaches the lamb then sniffs in approval and leads it back to the flock where we see it merging with the others. Wright's camera affords us a glimpse into another world which the director captures with a reverential air. The struggling lamb and the uncertain mother are forced, perhaps tricked, together by the guardian of the flock. Wright's simple and unobtrusive camera-work evoke the calm measured ease of the shepherd comfortable in his world.

Wright avoids being overly romantic by pointing out that Martin works long hours. At the close of day we see the shepherd's small cottage at the bottom of the frame dwarfed by clouds and the mountains towering above it. During this long shot the narrator explains that Martin's 'instinct' tells him one of his flock is in danger. As if in response to these words the shepherd is seen leaving the cottage to search for the missing lamb. This is obviously Buchanan's gloss on what he may have considered a rather slow shot. But the result is that Martin 'instinct' makes him part of nature. The camera remains at some distance and then switches to a medium close-up of the shepherd as he struggles against the wind.

and rain to find the missing lamb. When the lamb is finally discovered trapped in a ditch this is seen as an explanation of Martin's night-time departure. Wright moves his camera in close for intimacy and a sense of contact with the drama. We see the injured animal put inside the shepherd's coat and then the camera moves to middle-distance to record the long trek home. Once again Wright eloquently expresses Martin's concern for his flock. And yet it was not the case that Wright just happened to be filming at the very moment Martin had this 'intuition' and was therefore on the spot to record the rescue. Leaving the cottage and searching for the lamb were two very different incidents that Wright joined together at the cutting bench. It is, therefore, a tribute to Wright's skill that we are not prompted to ask such questions when watching the film because the drama fits in so well with the rest of the action. The cutting together of these two incidents is justified because they play a part in Wright's portrayal of the man's essential nobility. But this is not an attempt at objectivity. Wright is making a film about how he felt and celebrating man's ability to understand and respond to nature. This is a very romantic notion. Martin is made into a mythical shepherd whose closeness to nature means he can remember every one of his flock.

In fashioning such a romantic world Wright has left no room for the intrusions of the modern world. Having already established Martin's place inside the border represented by the hills, it would be inappropriate to discuss anything as complex as land ownership. As a result of this framework a different set of criteria apply to those living in such a world. In short, Martin is made into a special case. But in order to excuse such a blatantly romantic picture Wright includes some details which show that life is not particularly easy or relaxing for the shepherd. In place of the brutalities of the modern world are the unpredictable gestures of a sometimes cruel Mother Nature. In the middle of the film is an example of this cruelty.

In one corner of the field beneath a ramshackle wall is a sickly lamb. But we are not given the chance to feel any sympathy before Martin strolls into the frame and examines the creature. He is almost dismissive as he throws the lamb back on to the ground. The following close-up of Martin reveals no emotion on his face. In such circumstances he can hardly afford to be sentimental and Wright

quickly passes on to the next sequence. Once more Wright is trying to be as purposeful as the shepherd and the point is well made. But it might have added some depth to the portrait to have shown Martin registering some emotion at this point. It is interesting that Wright chose to present the shepherd as po-faced throughout the film. Martin is as expressive as the hills that border his 'kingdom'. He may well have felt regret at the dead sheep but this emotion is buried beneath his granite exterior. The shepherd exhibits precisely the same limited range of emotions as the fishermen in *Drifters*.

Wright seems anxious to express how the control he has imposed on his material also exists in the shepherd's world. When one of the lambs is seen wandering away from the flock, Wright tracks her as she leaves the pack then follows this with a close-up of one of the dogs looking quizzically after the escapee before rushing off to bring her back and round into the pen. The pack is once more united, the natural order rules again. The dogs, like the shepherd, have their place in the pecking order and correct the imbalances in the world of nature.

It is in details that we come to understand the shepherd's life. When Martin is about to go looking for the missing lamb we see his wife at the doorstep putting a scarf around his neck. This moment is only glimpsed from a distance but it has connotations of warmth that come as quite a surprise after the cold scenes earlier. This is one of only two glimpses of Martin's wife. It is the subtlety of this revelation which gives the scene an added power - we see only her hands and face in profile and even then from a distance of some thirty feet. It is as if Wright was afraid of revealing too much about the private life of the man. He gives us just enough to indicate that Martin's life is not entirely solitary. It need hardly be added that this is another traditional role for women but given the context we could hardly have expected anything else. Wright's presentation of Mrs. Martin as home-maker is in keeping with his romantic approach to the subject. In the natural order postulated by the film this is her 'place' in the scheme of things.

When Martin returns to the cottage with the injured lamb we see the interior of the cottage and within are more details that give clues to the whole. Mrs. Martin takes the lamb from her husband and places it tenderly in an ancient unit

oven. This is the only interior shot in the film. The whole scene is rather dark and the lighting is low-key, and as a result the impression is given that they lead a rather primitive existence. All we see of the woman is her coarse woollen dress and her hands opening the oven-door. One could argue that she is thus reduced to a function in that the only part of her we see is directly involved in a task. But the restricted movement of the camera reminds us of the cabin scenes in *Drifters*. The cottage, like the cabin, is a haven from the outside world but not a very comfortable or roomy one. Both shepherd and fishermen have to fight the elements. This scene presents a contrast to the wild winds that Martin has just struggled through and has an emotional power continuing the theme of loving and caring for the community. Glimpsed in the frame behind the woman we see an old brass kettle and a rickety chair. Wright just avoids sentimentalising the scene by refusing to linger on these details. This would constitute wasting time and indulging in a sort of whimsy. But such a moment is effective precisely because it is understated. These lines from Wordsworth's 'Personal Talk' might well have been written for the scene -

To sit without emotion, hope or aim,
In the loved presence of my cottage-fire ~
And listen to the flapping of the flame
Or kettle whispering its faint undersong [46]

This is a key scene uniting the trio in the cottage in a warm aura. But while this is certainly an attractive picture it is only in the context of the surrounding shots that the scene connotes warmth. The old furniture and the stove etc. all suggest a tradition, a way of life untroubled by the outside world. One could imagine this sequence being used to illustrate how primitive conditions were for the poorly paid agricultural workers. Such a scene would not be out of place in *Face of Scotland* where Wright depicts the rural life of Scottish peasants. But in *O'er Hill and Dale* such conditions are part of the romance of life in the hills. The implication is that the people are happy or at least contented to live like this. Wright could have chosen this moment to show a moment of communication between the lonely pair but we never hear the point of view of the social actors in the film. Instead we are left with Wright's romantic and idealistic picture.

One of the central maxims of the Movement was to teach, to educate the public into an awareness of the world around them so they could make connections with their own spheres of activity *The Country comes to the Town* went some way towards explaining how the work of those in the countryside connects to those in the town but *O'er Hill and Dale* makes no such connection. Even the educational aspect of the film is minimal and, as we have seen, only demonstrates a pastoral myth in action. The accent is on the aesthetic and the romantic. What we have to learn from Martin is not how he contributes to society - this does not seem to be an issue, but how he goes about his work without complaint. In this he is an ideal worker - both industrious and happy with his lot. Martin appears as a man with no desire to step beyond the border of the Cheviot Hills. Wright may have belonged to a movement that prided itself on being modern but the impression he gives of rustic life is as traditional as any that was created in the thirties.

The film ends where it began with the shepherd staring over the hills. Despite Wright's artistry all that has been reinforced is the stereotype of the shepherd. Despite Wright's claim that the film was intended as a tribute to Martin it is essentially a portrait of little depth or insight.

To understand why Wright fashioned such a portrait it is essential to consider his situation. He was away from the hectic life of the studio and the 'self-intoxicated' company of his friends in the unit and suddenly alone in the undeniably romantic atmosphere of the Cheviot Hills. Martin was unlike anyone Wright has ever known whose lifestyle was completely alien to the sheltered middle-class world Wright knew. These were ideal conditions to develop the intuitive approach which Flaherty pioneered. But rather like Flaherty's work the resulting film makes no reference to the economic climate in which the man lives. Nor is any reference made to the 'outside' world. Wright may have argued that he was setting out to capture a way of life before it disappeared but we will see that this romantic conception was to be deployed often in the future. Wright presents Martin as a one-dimensional figure and reveals himself to be a romantic celebrating his own conception of nobility.

Conclusion

Wright established a reputation as an economical film-maker after making *O'er Hill and Dale* and he also gained himself the honour of being called the poet of the movement. Gerson was soon to call him the 'finest lyrical director' in the country [47] (Although we might ask who constituted the competition) But what is the meaning of this 'poetry'?

Quite apart from the stylistic flourishes already discussed we can note the way the way Wright lavishes attention on certain subjects. Both children and animals play a large part in these films and Wright seems to take delight in recording their free and spontaneous movement. This is the clearest evidence of his debt to Flaherty who encouraged him always to be 'in' on an action before it took place. Wright is being manipulative to a degree but he is also expressing how he feels about the people on screen. This is the realm of emotionally-charged propaganda where the intention is to move the viewer while informing him. In these early films Wright was more concerned about recording his feelings and demonstrating his skills than the propagandist intentions of the EMB. And yet despite Wright's understandable concern to experiment it is interesting that in the process of expressing himself 'as an artist' he provided precisely the sort of comforting illusion of consensual unity that was acceptable to the propagandists at the EMB.

What these two apprentice pieces share with *Drifters* is a reluctance to address certain issues. Questions concerning labour relations, union labour and other political matters are all avoided. Instead we are presented with a well photographed pair of films featuring 'pastoral calm, harmonious trade, industrial and agricultural progress'. The use of montage may have been considered revolutionary but the presentation of pastoral bliss is anything but

Another useful indicator for the future is Wright's historical approach. Although the subject is never tackled as such the past is evoked by Wright in order to make a contrast with the present. His rationale for this approach is to document the achievements of science. However in Wright's vision these achievements have

just evolved and our role is simply to adjust to the forces of the new world and not to question the implications

Wright's flirtation with romanticism failed to impress Grierson. Although he approved of Wright's first film he was clearly disappointed with the second. On an unpublished page of an article written to sum up the achievement of the unit in 1932 Grierson makes a strong criticism of *O'er Hill and Dale*. He wrote of how Wright made the film 'without disturbing a molecule of his creative make-up' [48]. As far as Grierson was concerned the subject failed to connect with the modern world.

in a world too organised and with an economy so powerful to organise it what have we to do with these idylls anyway. Let little literateurs and later poetasters of the cinema have their way with them [49]

Perhaps Grierson decided not to publish this page because it was not very encouraging to a man still learning his craft and there is no record that Grierson ever expressed these feelings to Wright. But what is clear is that *O'er Hill and Dale* represents an approach to the subject that Grierson disapproved of.

We might argue that Grierson's remark is rather hypocritical. After all his portrayal of the fishermen could hardly be described as entirely free of the idyllic approach. Grierson's workers may have had contact with the marketplace but what they share with the shepherd is that they both work within a clearly defined world - both are traditionalists and 'working men' and eulogised by the Movement for being so. Grierson's criticism of Wright's second film may have been inspired by his preference for action and adventure as seen in the manly pursuits of the fishermen. However despite these criticisms *O'er Hill and Dale* is a more romantic work than either *The Country comes to the Town* or *Drifters*. Wright may have framed a more lyrical scene than Grierson but the message about purpose and unity in the community is the same. In all three films an ideal is imposed in which the worker knows his place and carries out his role without the supervision of bosses or other power-structures. This may have been easy to assimilate but it is

politically and socially naive. However Wright's approach to industry is not unlike that of the planners who also sought to create controlled environments for maximum efficiency.

We have already suggested that Wright's reflective approach may be explained by his absorption in new surroundings. In this he shares some characteristics with Wordsworth.

In Revaluation Leavis quotes a letter written by Wordsworth to John Wilson. The author is discussing the 'social and moral preoccupations of his self-communings in solitude' -

I return then to the question, please whom? or what? I answer, human nature as it has been and ever will be. But, where are we to find the best measure of this? I answer from within, by stripping our hearts naked, and by looking out of ourselves towards men who lead the simplest lives, and most according to nature, men who have never known false refinements, wayward and artificial desires, false criticisms, effeminate habits of thinking and feeling, or who have known these things and have outgrown them. This latter class is to be depended upon, but it is very small in number. [50]

In Wordsworth's time the idea of elevating the common man was considered revolutionary. What the poet was doing for verse and the working man, was the same as what Wright was doing in film for the solitary figure of the shepherd. In Wright's romantic vision all men are reduced to the same level. Men are linked to nature and are essentially equal because of this. The purest man is he who has been uncorrupted by the vanities of the world. In *O'er Hill and Dale* Wright gained an insight into the 'simplicity, dignity and strength of rustic life' [51]. Such a vision accorded with his rather naive and romantic view of the working man. But could such a portrayal be considered revolutionary in the early 1930's - a time described by Macmillan as one in which 'Something like a revolutionary situation had developed'. [52]

We should not forget that Wright's two films were propaganda items and that whatever aims the artist might have their purpose was to encourage the consumer to invest in the products and the concept of the Empire. The films of the unit also tied in with Empire Shopping Weeks, in which massive advertising campaigns were mounted in order to persuade consumers to purchase the goods of the Empire [53]. And although Wright's films were hardly at the forefront of propaganda they would have played a small part in bringing about what was essentially Conservative party policy. Given the romantic England theme expounded by Baldwin and the connections of Craig's New Era to the Conservative Party it is increasingly difficult not to see Wright's first two films as being unintentionally expressive of Tory ideology. Furthermore Taylor has pointed out that not only are agriculture, trade and protectionism politically linked, but on a cultural level such themes are said to 'enshrine historic England' - precisely the idyllic land envisaged by 'Farmer' Baldwin [54].

We have already noted the Conservative Party interest in the use of film. They used their own CUFA to produce films which promoted their own political plans. In *Red-tape Farm* they satirised Labour's plans to reorganise the agriculture industry. The film begins with a series of titles containing the message 'Farmers and Landowners Do you know your job? Or would you prefer to be taught and controlled by officials?' The film continues with a character entitled 'Mr Nosey Parker' and exhorts the farmer to vote Conservative for 'Help not Interference' [55].

Many of the Conservative films were shown in the travelling cinema vans which toured the country-particularly at election time. These vans were great crowd-pullers - if not for their films then for their novelty value. However it is instructive to note that the unit used these vans when the Tories were not utilising them [56]. In these circumstances we could argue that the political connotations would 'rub off' on the products of the unit. In other words they could have been seen as part of a Tory propaganda exercise. It is interesting to note that while 25 thousand adults saw the films in this context this figure was eclipsed by an estimated audience of half a million children [57].

In all of these different locales the films would have had a different meaning but what cannot be denied is that they disseminate the Imperial ideology and as such are fine cases of propaganda, encouraging the populace to rejoice in the concept of Empire. But we should examine the context in which they were shown for this will have determined their meaning in the 1930's

In 1932 the unit were exploring the non-theatrical distribution system [58]. This was not purely down to choice but a response to the fact that of all the Imperial Six it was only *Lumber* (by then entitled *King Log*) which won commercial distribution in 1931 [59]. The main market for the unit's films were the schools. In its first year of operation only 517,000 people saw the EMB films - and most of these were schoolchildren [60]. By 1932 the unit were already working with the Empire library which sent films out to schools. In this way the EMB became one of the pioneers in the use of film for education [61]. This service was said to have fulfilled a definite and important need.

In a careful and detailed report recently drawn up by a Chesterfield school, it was stated in the preface to a list of various agencies from which schools could obtain films, that the EMB had the best of all the film libraries [62].

Within five years of its creation this library had grown into one of the biggest in the land. While it is possible to make an estimate of the numbers of schoolchildren who saw the films we cannot estimate the effect they had. However we can say that the EMB disseminated messages about the importance of the Empire. The ideological purpose of these films was to make clear to children the centrality of the Empire to their lives. Once this was established it was hoped that economic patriotism would follow.

Wright was closely involved with his audiences. When touring with his films he could not have been unaware that many of them were composed of children. This has particular implications for our reading of his work. It would, for example, explain why certain approaches were utilised and how the educative function took precedence in his work.

But we should bear in mind that Wright's first two films were seen in a package of six and so their impact would be blunted by being part of a programme. We might also point out that not all schools had projectors and staff trained to operate them [63]. Despite a lack of commercial success the plans of Tallents, Cunliffe-Lister and Crawford for influencing children by implanting the concept of Empire at an early age, were certainly being carried out. Whether these plans were successful or not is another issue. Nevertheless this dissemination of the Imperial ideology was clearly directed at the consumers of the future.

1931/2 was the most productive period for the unit [64]. They were expanding their personnel and beginning to use their resources as well as continuing to attract friendly press criticism-particularly from papers like The Times and the critical journal Sight and Sound. But despite this acclaim their films were not doing spectacular business at the box office. Rowson has estimated that 963 million people went to the cinema during 1934 [65]. The films of the unit reached only a fraction of this number and were seen either in a bastardised form in a pack of six or on the small if growing non-theatrical distribution network. In 1932 the British Cinema was on its way to recovery and 151 films were produced [66]. Although this was a market still over-shadowed by the Americans the British industry was staging a mild recovery. However the Movement, for all of Grierson's skills as a publicist, was very much a fringe activity and cannot really be described as part of this development.

Given their lack of commercial success, Grierson took to saying how well the films of the Movement were doing on the non-theatrical circuit. However it is noticeable that in 1932 voices were raised complaining that the films were doing nothing to alleviate the worsening trade depression [67]. In this hostile climate it is surprising that the unit lasted as long as it did. In the following we shall expand upon the difficulties the unit experienced with regard to their financial situation. But we should add the proviso that Wright himself never experienced any difficulties acquiring film-stock and, for the most part, had little knowledge of the Civil Servants Grierson was battling with. Although Wright cannot have been unaware of the links between New Era and the Tory Party he seemed relatively

untroubled by the pressures on the EMB as he went around the country seeking suitable subjects for his essays in mood and atmosphere

For all the critical talk of innovation Wright's films are first and foremost propaganda items. But in the sheltered world of the EMB, protected from the realities of the market-place and mixing with people with the same interests, it is hardly surprising that Wright and the others conceived of their work as significant and important.

However it would be a mistake to believe that the Government were very interested in the work of the Movement - if the amount of money given to the Movement were any indication, they were hardly interested at all. But they were concerned with propagating the Imperial ideology. The EMB may not have been having a great success with the public, but the Tories were still interested in the use of film. We have already noted their own political propaganda. In the next chapter we shall note how the Imperial ethos was portrayed in the commercial cinema and how Wright's continuing work in this field has a surprising number of similarities.

Notes

- 1 R S Sayers, A History of Economic Change in England 1880-1939 (Oxford, 1967), p 106
- 2 E J Hobsbawm, Industry and Empire (Harmondsworth, 1969), 199/200
- 3 Hobsbawm, p 201
- 4 Hobsbawm, p 195
- 5 J Scanlon, The Decline and Fall of the Labour Party, (London, 1932), p 242
- 6 Hobsbawm, p 204
- 7 P Swann , The British Documentary Movement 1926-1946, Unpublished PhD thesis,(University of Leeds, 1979), p 62/63
- 8 Alan Jenkins, Drinka Pinta,(London, 1970) in S Constantine 'Bringing the Empire Alive' , op cit , p 201
- 9 Swann , p 62/63
- 10 C Coote, Walter Elliot. A Companion of Honour (Glasgow 1965), p 139/140
- 11 S Baldwin, Our Inheritance (London, 1938), ff
- 12 J Lowerson, The Battle for the Countryside, Class Culture and Social Change, ed Frank Gloversmith (Brighton, 1980), p 262
- 13 Rene Cutforth, Later than we thought,(Vancouver, 1976), p 39
- 14 Ibid , p 264
- 15 Swann , p 55
- 16 Interviews with Wright by author, 1985 - 1987
- 17 Ibid
- 18 Ibid
- 19 J Gneron, 'New Worlds for Old', Unpublished 1931 In Gneron Archive C 2 21 3 , p 14
- 20 J Gneron, New Worlds, p 14
- 21 R Armes, A Critical History of British Cinema (London, 1978), p 134
- 22 Interview with Wright by author
- 23 J Gneron, Loose notes for a review, unnumbered pages In Gneron Archive G 2 8 7

- 24 Interview with Wright by author
- 25 Ibid
- 26 Ibid
- 27 Anonymous profile in Documentary Film News, Vol VII, No 63, 1948),
p 34
- 28 Interview with Wright by author
- 29 Swann , p 60
- 30 R Low, Films of Comment and Persuasion of the 1930's
(London,1979), p 93
- 31 Swann , p 73
- 32 Low op cit , p 94
- 33 Film Art 1935 No 6 Autumn pp 64-7
- 34 Ibid
- 35 Armes, op cit , p 79
- 36 Low , p 94
- 37 Swann , p 60
- 38 Swann , p 23
- 39 R Williams, The Country and the City (London,1973), in Gloversmith,
op cit , p 260
- 40 P Colls and R Dodd, 'Representing the Nation' British Documentary
Film,1930-1945, Screen, Vol 26, No 1, p 42
- 41 Lowerson, p 264
- 42 Ibid , p 262
- 43 M Muggerdge, The Thirties (London, 1967), p 180
- 44 Ibid
- 45 Interview with Wright by author
- 46 William Wordsworth, Personal Talk, in Zen in English Literature and
Oriental Classics, by R H Blythe (Tokyo, 1942), p 413
- 47 J Gneron, Gneron on Documentary, Ed Forsyth Hardy (London,
1979), p 50
- 48 J Gneron, Unpublished extract, 1932 In Gneron Archive G 2 I5 I
- 49 Ibid
- 50 William Wordsworth, Letter to John Wilson, in Revaluation by F R
Leavis (Harmondsworth, 1963), p 143

- 51 A F Bell, Leaders of English Literature (London, 1915), p 132
- 52 H Macmillan, Winds of Change, quoted in The Slump by J Stephenson and C Cook,(London,1977), p 265
- 53 Swann , p 52
- 54 A J P Taylor, English History 1914-1945,(Oxford, 1965), p 342
- 55 Low , p 171
- 56 Swann , p 35
- 57 Stewart Committee Report 12/4/37 POST 33/5089 M 18036/1936
in Swann op cit , p 116
- 58 Swann , p 56
- 59 Ibid , p 58
- 60 Ibid , p 62
- 61 'Report on the non-theatrical distribution of EMB films', 19 March
1932, PRO CO 760/37 EMB/C/71 in Swann , p 61
- 62 Ibid
- 63 Constantine op cit , p 214
- 64 Swann , p 58
- 65 S Rowson, A Statistical Survey of the Cinema History in Great
Britain in 1934 Journal of the Royal Statistical Society; Vol 99, pp
67-119 quoted in A Aldgate, Cinema and History. British
Newsreels and the Spanish Civil War (London,1979), p 54 ff
- 66 J Richards, The Age of the Dream Palace. Cinema and Society in
Britain 1930-1939 (London,1984), p 253
- 67 Swann , p 71

CHAPTER FOUR

THE WEST INDIAN FILMS

In this chapter we shall analyse *Cargo from Jamaica* and *Windmill in Barbados* both of which were shot in the West Indies in the spring of 1933 and edited on Wright's return in the summer. Although they were made some three years after Wright started to work for the EMB they represent his first direct experience of life in the Colonies.

At the time Wright was dispatched to make these films the EMB were losing favour with the Government because they had proved to have little effect on the trade depression. [1] In the early months of 1933 the recently knighted Tallents made it a condition of his employment with the GPO that he could bring Grierson and the Movement along with him. [2] Although this move was not to take place until 1934 these films are amongst the last to carry the EMB logo. And yet despite these upheavals we will see evidence in Wright's letters of the apparent ease with which Grierson was able to replenish quantities of Wright's film stock. The EMB may have been slowly closing its film-making operation but Wright, far away in the colonies, hardly felt the heat of these troubles. The actual circumstances which surrounded the closedown of the EMB unit will be dealt with at a later stage.

Wright was hardly the first middle-class Englishman to visit the West Indies but he was certainly among the first men to visit the islands as a film-maker. His brief was to make propaganda for the EMB - specifically the activities of the Imperial College of Tropical Agriculture which had been set up as a research station to improve conditions of food storage. [3] The films that resulted from this trip are both a report and a response to the conditions and the people he saw there, as well as being exercises in style.

Wright prepared for the trip with the same thoroughness he applied to all his work by reading about the history of the islands. But if Wright had done any research at all, he could not have failed to discover that the history of the West Indies is, by any standards, a history of exploitation. Barbados was settled by the

British in 1629 while Jamaica had 'belonged' to Britain since 1670. The islands were of great strategic value to the old Empire as well as being of significant economic importance [4]. For a long time they were considered the most valuable of the colonies due to the high demand for sugar both at home and on the continent. According to Bowle -

Jamaica experienced roaring prosperity as sugar exports surpassed tobacco, cocoa, indigo, hides and logwood were booming. Barbados became even richer [5].

But the plantation owners had grown too dependent on the sugar crop and the industry suffered from the intervention of the refrigerated ships - an invention which, as we noted earlier, had also hit the farmers at home. By the time Wright arrived in the colonies Cuba had already replaced the West Indies as the major sugar supplier. The protectionist policy of the Government had produced a glut of tropical products but no money was going back into the industry [6]. As Lloyd George put it - 'the once most-prized possession in the Americas had become the slums of the Empire' [7].

Although slavery had been abolished in 1833 most of the workers on these islands were working for rich English plantation owners and being paid a pittance - 'In 1932/3 40% of the field workers and 10% of the factory workers received less than 75 cents a day' [8]. This critical situation was considerably worsened by the fact that the islanders suffered severe unemployment between January and June when the cutting and grinding season was over. As a result the population was considerably undernourished [9]. In 1935 the weekly budget of the Barbadian labourer was less than two dollars. Of this, food cost him seven cents a day. He was said to be fed 'less than a jailbird, he could not afford to drink milk with his tea. The planters replied that he did not like milk' [10]. But as Cross has written-

There was however a steady progress towards universal literacy and, as a consequence, increasing unrest. Under such leaders

as Alex Bustamente of Jamaica it expressed itself as a form of vigorous trade unionism (and) strikes leading to riots and killings [11]

These conditions were caused by the inefficient colonial administration whose policy innovations included increasing the number of labourers while decreasing the wages, and rotational employment where one worker performed for two weeks before returning to unemployment again [12] In 1931, two years before Wright sailed for Jamaica, the British were so far from attempting any programme of development or aid that they 'ludicrously accepted from the Trinidad legislature (not a properly elected body) a grant of £5,000 a year for five years to help the U K in its budgetary difficulties' [13]

Into this potentially explosive atmosphere came Basil Wright to make films about people working for the Empire - an Empire that was clearly experiencing considerable difficulties with its loyal subjects

Wright set sail in early January 1933 on the 'SS Orford' The EMB could not afford to fly Wright out to the islands so he had to go the long way round To pay for his trip Grierson had arranged that Wright make a film of the cruise as a publicity film for the Orient Line In return Wright would be granted free passage [14] When we consider that the work of the EMB was essentially propaganda through advertising and that Wright was about to make a film promoting bananas and sugar, then this project for the Orient Line could be said to constitute ideal practice Wright certainly looked upon it as such and took such a leisurely attitude to the project that in the month it took to get to Barbados - the first port of call - the film was still not finished [15]

As a representative of the EMB Wright was very well treated by his fellow-passengers He soon made contacts who wrote him letters of introduction to various dignitaries This meant, for example, that once he arrived at Barbados he met the editor of the local paper who lent him his Buick and gave a dinner in his honour [16] The Buick was used to tour the country and to meet people at the factories Wright wrote home that 'The EMB are a great power over here and of course the West Indians are all hospitable beyond words' [17] But when we

consider the tense political situation on the island we wonder exactly which West Indians Wright met. We only mention this to make it clear that Wright was moving in the sort of circles that constituted the old middle class. The young director would either be sitting at the Captain's table, attending cocktail parties, or dining with those in positions of power and influence on the island. All the information he gathered would have come from them. The comfortable middle-class constituted his guides, they took him round the islands and introduced him to the workers. It may well have been that Wright was protected from some of the more troublesome areas of the island by his gracious hosts. As a result Wright was separated from the people he was filming and hardly had the time to establish any sort of rapport with them. Under these conditions it is hardly surprising that no clear plan emerged to shape the films. Wright was under the pressure of time and had to take what he could from the surroundings.

A further difficulty was that Wright's already limited access to the islanders was further restricted by the departure times of the ship. Wright created a schedule which involved him rising at 6.30 and finishing at 4 in the afternoon but this proved difficult to maintain [18]. He was forced into a situation where he had to be intuitive. This presented him with a perfect opportunity to develop the instinctive approach recommended by Flaherty -

Non-preconception is a state of mind - surrender to the subject and try to achieve close attunement with the individuals being filmed. Respect for the subject demands open-mindedness and concern for the feelings of the people concerned [19].

The result of this approach is the 'impressionistic' style we will see hints of in *Windmill in Barbados* and which Wright was later to develop in *Song of Ceylon*.

As we might expect from a man interested in developing his talents as a cinematographer Wright planned some exciting shots. He may have been interested in the lives of his subjects but his chief concern was to make 'little works of art'. As he said elsewhere, 'My first priority is to please myself' [20].

Early in February he went out with the flying fish fleet where he hung out of the side of the plane to get shots of the fish as they flew past over the water, in Trinidad a few weeks later he filmed workers in the fields around the College of Agriculture [21] But neither of these scenes found their way into the completed film - they just represent Wright's attempts to capture some impressions of the islands His brief to cover the activities of the College was treated rather as a chore and he wrote home of how he filmed around the college 'of course' [22]

While in Trinidad Wright heard the natives singing in the fields of sugar cane

They played a special brand of tunes composed by the natives here and called Calypsoes They are a sort of folk song with very amusing words and perfect rhythms I am trying to get the music to some of them to bring back but it's rather difficult as they sing and play by ear [23]

This music did find its way into the film on Barbados where it was used to recreate Wright's experience of the island The director was delighted to discover the natives creating their own headgear-

I got some wonderful scenes in the coconut grove All the picking boys who climb the trees for the nuts had made themselves hats out of green coconut thonds and coloured flowers so I really made whoopee thank you with my camera [24]

From these letters it would appear that Wright was simply trying to capture the mood and atmosphere of this foreign culture rather than investigating the working conditions of the natives Wright was merely taking impressions like a gifted amateur cameraman It was only later at the desk in London that he gave his material any shape

But Wright was aware that his work was not of the highest quality We

read that he is 'disappointed' with himself and is 'afraid the stuff won't come up to expectations' - meaning, presumably, Grierson's expectations [25] In desperation he managed to get 'the boss' to send him another 10,000 feet of film to add to the 20,000 he had already used [26] This then is another example of the way Grierson found his way around financial restrictions It is this footage Wright would have used in Jamaica in April towards the end of the cruise

Wright has since said how he was appalled at the conditions the Jamaican workers had to suffer while loading bananas onto the ships for England He discovered that they were being paid 'something like a farthing a day and that as a result most of them were in debt to the Chinese money-lenders ' [27] He decided to film the loading of bananas The shoot lasted a day and was filmed entirely by Wright using a variety of lenses on his DeVue and a hand-held camera

However, while Wright may have remembered his outrage at these conditions in the seventies and eighties he was not unaware of the cinematic possibilities of the industrial scene at the time He conveyed this excitement in a letter written to his mother-

It was by now dark and everything was lit up by bare electric light bulbs At the entrance to each moving band a constant stream of men arrived and departed, carrying on their shoulders one stem (weighing about one 60 lbs) which, as they passed the band, was swung by the shoulders and onto the band by two huge Negroes Occasionally a huge alarm bell clanged - a signal from the packers in the hold to speed up and slow down the moving band Imagine four of these machines all being fed at the rate of about 35 stems a minute Trainload after trainload of bananas being emptied A huge pile of rejected stems, picked out by two men sitting on high stools like tennis umpires, flowing by each machine of colossal proportions - all this time in a setting of electric lights, jets of steam, hundreds of men swarming backwards and forwards, shining with sweat, shouting to running faces, into each other from train to carrier, alarm bells clanging, machinery

grinding - and imagine this - continuing without pause for thirteen hours during which no less than ten and a half MILLION bananas pass from the wharfs into the ships hold - imagine all this and you won't even get the faintest idea of the excitement and loveliness and impressiveness of the whole thing ' [28]

Once again the evidence suggests that Wright was chiefly concerned with the style of his films before anything else In this description the workers become cinematic elements rather than the exploited natives of a colonial power

The material shot at the dock went on to constitute the bulk of *Cargo from Jamaica* and represented Wright's last major expedition to the islands

Wright returned to Britain on the 'Orford' towards the end of April of 1933 In his absence the Movement had secured the services of Alberto Cavalcanti - the avant-garde film-maker who had come to Britain to experiment with sound because he was bored with the 'talk, talk, talk' of the French studios films Grierson suggested that Wright work with Cavalcanti on the West Indian projects

During Wright's trip the Movement had acquired the British Visatone sound system Although this was recognised as being an inferior system it was cheap at £1,050 and all they could afford [29] However it did provide Wright with the opportunity to conduct his first experiments with sound Due to the various administrative and technical problems encountered in the Summer of 1933 and the units' change of address to Soho Square, *Cargo from Jamaica* was never to receive any sound [30] But *Windmill in Barbados* used the 'Calypsoe' tunes that Wright had heard in Trinidad It seems unlikely that there was a recording of such songs and the quality of the sound in the film is primitive to say the least What probably happened was that some West Indians were invited to the studio and asked to improvise In one of his letters Wright talks of his plans to bring the natives over but this never came to fruition [31] The resulting music is not entirely successful but it does give a little 'atmosphere' to the film Wright has said he was in awe of Cavalcanti and took a back-seat while the latter experimented with a variety of sounds [32] Cavalcanti was one of the teachers who made a deep impression on Wright, who still saw himself in

the role of apprentice The Brazilian repaid his student's respectful attention by calling Wright one of the most intelligent and gifted of the young men he worked with [33] But it was Wright who choose the West Indian narrator and Wright who wrote the script

Wright was to have another collaborator on *Cargo from Jamaica* This time it was Grierson himself who came to the rescue As Wright put it -

I'd got this material which I knew was going to lead up to this appalling scene on the dockside with all these men being paid about a farthing a day for doing this tremendously hard work I filmed it from every possible dynamic angle because my desire was to show the toil and sweat involved in this particular work - and, indeed, the exploitation Then it was Grierson who said 'Of course we've got a lovely contrast' because he was shooting some stuff preliminary to the film he never finished - the *Port of London* film He'd done some of these very calm shots of the bananas in London coming along those endless belts with nobody touching them, nobody doing any hard work at all He said 'You can have that You can stick that on the end and make your contrast, so you can have your violence' [34]

This is a revealing statement We should bear in mind that Wright was making these remarks some forty years after the film and had perhaps forgotten the excitement he felt at the loading scene A further irony is the mention of Grierson's *Port of London* film which, as we have already noted was not a film at all but a 'ghost' project used to raise £7,500 but for which Grierson had shot some footage Wright explains here that he wanted to make a strong criticism of the workers' conditions and Grierson sacrificed his own footage to help In allowing use of his own material he was acting in the community spirit he had helped to foster But he was also directing Wright in a sense by suggesting that he create a contrast by using the sequence in question Grierson was once again making his presence felt but in a way Wright could hardly object to To refuse such an offer would constitute an indication of disloyalty, or even worse, egotism

The two films were released in the Summer of 1933 to an enthusiastic review in The Times. The critic writing on *Windmill in Barbados* said - 'the film gives us a better sense of the windmill's comeliness and place in nature than Herr Pabst was able to achieve in the windmills charged by Don Quixote' and went on to say that the unit had 'flung a filmic girdle round the Empire' [35]. There is a sense of patriotic pride in the reviewer's comments, a pride that was not echoed by Grierson-

Wright's film is long, and too long. It smacks esoteric lips over fine photography, slow pans, repetitions of revolving sails, and makes the audience wait until Wright and his windmills have enjoyed themselves [36].

Grierson seems reluctant to admit, 'But it sinks in. You would not easily forget the Barbados atmosphere it conveys. Nevertheless I do not defend its length or its measure' [37]. Despite this criticism *Windmill in Barbados* was released as part of the 'Weather Forecast' group - a collection rather like the 'Imperial Six' which were given special quota status by the Board of Trade [38].

Grierson thought *Cargo from Jamaica* more impressive-

Wright, out of respect for the medium has made a composition in movement of it, given it tempo, given it design in time. I might go on to say that Wright (and Elton) represent in such work a new and almost revolutionary attitude to the handling of real life material in England, for this essential freedom from literary shapes and references is something which Wardour Street does not even begin to understand [39].

We have quoted these two reviews because they represent Grierson's feelings about what he saw as the two distinct types of film that Wright was making. It is probably not irrelevant that the film he favoured included some of his own footage strategically placed to 'make a contrast'. What should be borne in mind is that Wright was working within the economic and technical limits determined by his employers - the EMB, and responding to the West Indies as a middle-class Englishman making

quick forays into the islands and then returning to the comfort of the ship. The films are testimony to his skill as a cutter rather than records of his understanding of alien cultures. Wright's busy schedule coupled with his role as an ambassador for the EMB - one of the organisations responsible for the conditions of the natives - worked against him coming to terms with the islanders or developing a rapport with them. The films are interesting because they show what Wright achieved working with these various restrictions. Once again we shall focus on the ideological significance of Wright's style.

Cargo from Jamaica. A critique of colonialism?

Cargo from Jamaica is an eight minute film describing the delivery, shipping and packaging of bananas from Jamaica to London. The film is without a soundtrack for the reasons already explained. The end credits are also missing. The opening credits are simple to the point of being blunt - **Production - Grierson; Direction - Wright.** This no-nonsense approach prefigures the economic control of the editing. It is rather like a report in which the authors quickly introduce themselves before getting down to the business of delivering their findings.

Most of the screen time is taken up with the loading and unloading of bananas. But Wright provides an introduction and a conclusion to his film which gives it a symmetrical shape and pattern as well as illustrating the journey the bananas go through before they reach the (hidden) consumer.

Wright's establishing shot is an aerial view of the island. The camera drifts over the peaks and the lush vegetation. This locates the viewer in the 'mysterious world' of the colonies. Rather like the idyllic 'olde country' offered in his debut Wright presents us with a stereotype then moves on - this move representing our introduction to the modern industrial world. Wright invites our participation as he pans down to reveal a group of people in the jungle cutting down bananas from the bent branches of a tree. The camera now closes in to middle-distance and picks out a small boy picking up one of these branches and hoisting it onto his shoulders. Wright now switches to a hand-held camera and follows the boy as he walks along a well-trodden path in the jungle. Our position is that of fellow-bearers. This is a technique Wright will utilise again to 'personalise' our experience and bring us into contact with the physical nature of a people's work. But this emphasis on physicality of labour reminds us of Campbell's comment on the Movement's preoccupation with the male form.

The journey through the jungle is paced by a series of fades. As the day grows darker the boy is joined by other carriers - although we do not see them join the chain - they appear with each fade. The change in surroundings and the darkening sky suggest a long journey. Those carrying the bunches of bananas do not appear to be from the same community but are linked by their shared destination. It is economic

necessity that binds them together Our camera position remains that of fellow-bearers

Thus far Wright has laid out a purposeful sequence but we might ask why he has chosen to give us this point of view Are we to identify with the workers? Or has Wright presented this gently paced opening movement as a contrast to the confusion that follows? Although the journey is skilfully evoked we are provided with no reason why the workers are moving in this direction This is part of the mystery which is itself part of the larger mystique which was created around the colonies

The journey ends at the harbour where an explanation is provided-the men are loading their cargo onto a boat which is soon seen leaving the dock Once again style is important, for the scene takes place at dusk and we are reminded of the Movement's preference for shots that take place either in dusk or dawn In this darkness the workers are robbed of their individuality The darkness of this sequence (coupled with the absence of sound) gives an eerie atmosphere to the scene Those who had struggled through the jungle are forgotten by the camera now - they are no longer relevant to the story To follow them back to the village would be to lose sight of the purpose of the film which is to look at the packaging of bananas Like the fishermen in *Drifters* , they too are forgotten The little boat is seen in the shadow of a larger liner standing in the dock The contrast in scale emphasises the fragility of the boat This is also a conflict of volumes - a powerful way of illustrating the solidity of London and all that it stands for in terms of financial and economic power and the delicate position of the West Indian economy In these first few moments of the film Wright has portrayed the small contribution the West Indians make to the Empire's store of provisions

The following sequence is the most dramatic in the film Wright abandons the steady pace and gentle fades to present us with the action at the docks in which all appears to be thrown into confusion The strategy of identification - through camera position - is discarded in favour of a range of shots which make it difficult for the viewer to relate to the workers or to make sense of their activity The ship is the scene of chaos

The first shot reveals the men lined up on the ship with their bunches still on their shoulders. But Wright quickly cuts to another shot where another group are seen in a zig-zag formation on the upper deck. This zig-zag represents the last stage in the journey before the bananas are loaded into the hold.

Wright set up a camera about twenty feet above the deck to get a bird's eye view of the confusion. After picking out the zig-zag he cuts to a middle-distance shot of two white men sitting on chairs whose role appears to be that of some sort of quality control operatives. They are seen handing out chits to the natives as they pass with their bunches. But this shot is not held long enough for us to establish their precise function. We do note however, that they are the only white men and the only people whose position on board the ship is stable. They constitute a calm centre to the frenzied activity but their role is not made clear. The zig-zag formed by the queues of natives on deck serves as a centre to Wright's pattern for it is this shot that Wright returns to when he leaves the deck to film the activity on the dock. In order to create the impression of confusion Wright reverts to a hand-held camera which he uses in the midst of the crowd. Faces swarm past the lens but none of them has any direction. Wright moves through the crowds with his camera taking the point of view of one of the natives looking for the entrance to the ship. We get a sense of a great deal of activity but no direction or end-point is apparent. It is only on deck, when the workers are under the instruction of the white men, that their utility as human machines is made clear.

Wright returns to his vantage point above the deck and presents us with the now-familiar pattern of men bustling through the zig-zag towards the checkers. This is followed by a shot of a native sitting on the edge of the hold. From five or six feet we see the man receive a bunch and then lower it into the hold. He is the end-point in the chain and has established a rhythm to his work. The shot is framed so that all we see of the man are his arms receiving the bunches then lowering them into the hold. He too is a functionary - a human part of the ship's machinery. Yet Wright does not linger too long on this man - his rhythm threatens to create a stable centre to the activity and Wright seems anxious to convey the apparent lack of rhythm and organisation.

When we looked at Wright's first two films we saw how he framed his

workers in the 'heroic' style to emphasise the nobility of labour. It was only in the factories that men were reduced to component parts of a machine. But it is interesting that in *Cargo from Jamaica* no such 'heroic' framing takes place. One of the reasons for this, perhaps the chief reason, would have been Wright's problems in getting a camera-set-up. One could argue that the lack of 'noble' framing is to emphasise the poor conditions of the workers. Yet for that to be true and effective the audience will have had to be able to discern the contrast between Wright's style of framing in one shot and another. Not only is this improbable but in light of the excitement we get from his letters it seems more likely that Wright is simply trying to recreate the impression of noise and confusion that he felt when visiting the area.

As this section closes Wright increases the pace and cuts between the various, apparently unconnected, operations on the ship, to make it clear that all is getting more confused and chaotic rather than settling into a stable pattern. The work is coming to a close and the crew must soon depart. Once more Wright is illustrating the 'rush for the market' theme that featured in *Drifters* and his own first film. But in both those films this rush was the end-point of a film in which workers were seen as noble and in some way connected to their work through tradition or skill. The market was the unquestioned rationale between two different communities. In *Cargo from Jamaica* the workers are only functionaries. What Wright has done is to take the view of people as simply being unthinking parts of the industrial machine to its logical conclusion. The workers have no depth or character, they are not involved in 'heroic' struggles, nor are they part of a picturesque community. The result of taking the workers from the jungle to the ship strips them of any cultural identity. In Wright's presentation they become part of a machine, united only by confusion.

The last shots of the workers reveal them moving in opposite directions as they rush to complete the task. There is no smooth transition to the next stage, no end-point for them to move towards. Once again Wright concentrates on the next stage of the journey rather than follow the workers back to the jungle. Wright is as purposeful as the forces conveying the cargo to Britain.

The rest of the film details the unloading of the bananas at London. After a shot of the ship's hull which fills the screen we cut to a sequence featuring a man and

a conveyor-belt Half of the frame is taken up with the belt unloading the bananas while the other half shows the London docker in a cloth-cap pushing the bunches to one side He too is an adjunct of the machine but his work is almost comical because it seems so ineffectual His function is simply to nudge the bananas with his hand It seems particularly effortless when we compare it to the strenuous work of the West Indians The symmetrical framing of this shot lends a certain order to the activity which also contrasts with the zig-zag patterns in Jamaica This is the last worker featured in the film and it is interesting to note how he differs from the first West Indian boy we saw in the jungle The latter had to journey with a bunch of bananas on his back for what seemed to be several hours whereas the English docker simply stands at the side of a machine giving the bunches a gentle shove with his hand A difficult and time-consuming task is contrasted with what seems to be a very easy job When we recall that the only other white men in the film were also seen doing virtually nothing it seems reasonable to suggest that Wright is underlining the efficiency of the home operation We might also note that such a presentation skilfully avoids mentioning the industrial conditions for the workers in London One possible reading for the dockers would have been -'You've never had it so good' This may have been cold comfort to the dockers at the time especially when we bear in mind that such a slow and graceful operation was by no means typical of their work

The final sequence in the film has an eerie quality The bunches are seen passing through a maze of tunnels In a series of dissolves they almost merge into one another as they glide over the conveyor belts This slow gentle sequence is in strict contrast to the frenzy of the loading sequence earlier This is the last part of the journey where the machines take over This can be compared to the finale of both *Drifters* and *The Country comes to the Town* where the trains take over from the men But there is a critical difference In those films we were given flash-backs which merged the work of men with the machine - both were seen as part of the same chain We are reminded of the noble physical effort that went into the work In this way we are able to see dignity of labour as part of the machine In *Cargo from Jamaica* no such link is made The machines here are simply an impersonal end-point The trains had a destination - the town or the Empire - the bananas simply fade into the dark and no connection is made to the wider world or community From the jungle to the London dock we have seen the increasingly important role of mechanisation

Wright appears to take a very purposeful approach to the work process. But this should not conceal the fact that his representation of the Jamaican workers robs them of dignity and turns them into undifferentiated parts of an industrial machine. If the Movement had an equation at this stage in their development it was that man gained dignity from the work he performed. If his work was ignoble then there was always the danger that the worker would become ignoble - like the nepman haggling in *Drifters*. Wright's approach to the workers in *Cargo from Jamaica* would suggest that there is no dignity to be found in their work.

Earlier we noted Wright's claim that this film was intended to constitute a criticism of colonialism. But when faced with the evidence of the film and Wright's reported excitement at the time itself it is very difficult to substantiate this claim. What is true was that the film was part of a propaganda campaign to sell Empire products - in this case the humble banana. As such it was part of the same enterprise that produced booklets like The Behaviour and Diseases of the Banana in Storage and Transport. [40] Propaganda like this was intended to develop pride in the efficiency of Britain's services and this, it was hoped, this would lead to more sales. Wright's film has to be seen as part of the same theme - albeit on a more elaborate scale. It is only because the film was made by one of the British Documentary Movement and has since received critical attention that it has avoided being tarnished with the same propagandist brush as the more obvious material. The film is at most ambiguous. What is undeniable is that Wright was not concerned with economic affairs and more interested with capturing intangibles like mood and atmosphere.

Of course if the film was part of a discussion on the conditions in the West Indies, then it is possible that this context would predispose the audience to interpret the film as critical - but critical of what? The film makes no mention of those responsible for the conditions. No one has a chance to air their views. It is equally possible to suggest that Wright is demonstrating how hard the natives work. In this light it is worth pointing out that one of the EMB posters featuring the loading of bananas depicted a scene which bore a distinct similarity to Wright's shots of the deck - even to the extent of including a supervising white man. [41] It is possible to argue that Wright was simply intolerant of inefficiency and slipshod loading techniques. The film

presents us with a fine example of how Wright could be powerful in his editing and at the same time ambiguous in that he fails to accuse anyone for being responsible for these conditions. Wright's film certainly illustrates the fact that the work ethic has been successfully transplanted to the colonies in his portrayal of such a busy workforce.

Given that Wright was to spend so much time covering the separate culture of the Sinhalese in *Song of Ceylon*, it is strange that he makes no effort to investigate the lifestyle of the Jamaican people. The first moments of the film are quite idyllic but we are not in the jungle long enough to consider whether the islanders have a separate culture. Because we have no opportunity to identify with them, we do not get the feeling that they are being wrenched away from one world and thrust into another. They simply follow one another to work with blind obedience. Wright might have chosen to show the workers rising above the process - not necessarily in rebellion but as men who are so much more than parts of a machine. The restrictions of time prevented Wright from establishing a rapport with the West Indians. The result is an exercise in style which the director later claimed as a portrayal of colonialism at its worst. Perhaps Wright was confusing his experiences with the Chinese money lenders with the scenes in Jamaica. The film itself is an exercise in cutting and the atmosphere of excitement is skilfully evoked. Whether it actually constitutes a criticism of colonialism is rather more difficult to substantiate.

Windmill in Barbados

Windmill in Barbados is a minute or so longer than its twin film, and is an example of Wright moving towards a more impressionistic style. In this film are none of the dynamics and fast cutting that propelled *Cargo from Jamaica* and the result is a more complex work. Part of the reason for this complexity can be attributed to the use of sound, and of particular interest to us, the narrator. But there is more to it than this. We have already noted that Grierson found little to praise in the film. What we hope to show here is how Wright's film makes a tentative step away from the philosophy of the Movement and is a clear fore-runner to *Song of Ceylon*.

The film is in two parts: the first half details the history of the island and describes the old methods of producing sugar-cane, the second gives a brief impressionistic account of how the islanders are living with the changes in production demanded by the modern economy. The transition between these two parts is made very gently. Rather than compiling a report in the manner of his previous film, *Windmill in Barbados* represents Wright's attempt to evoke the atmosphere of what he considered to be a beautiful and idyllic island.

The film begins with music. Even before the credits emerge from darkness we hear one of the 'Calypsos' that Wright heard on the island. The first shot is of an ancient map of the island. The unseen and uncredited commentator sounds like a West Indian who then describes the history of the island. We hear that Barbados is-

the only island which has remained British since its settlement in the reign of King James. Many royalists took refuge there till Cromwell forced them to surrender. The early settlers found that Barbados was a very good place to grow sugar. Soon there were sugar plantations all over the island and today the sugar industry is the most important industry on the island.

Given Wright's position as an employee of the EMB he can hardly have

been expected to introduce the film with a record of the British involvement with the slave-trade - we could not have heard that from a native of the island. What is interesting is the way Wright presents history through the man's eyes. The narrator situates the audience by putting them in the position of the uneducated. He guides them through the material, links the pictures, and creates a meaning for those watching. As this voice represents Wright's first choice of several interesting narrators we think it worthy of examination.

The first point to note is that Wright has chosen to use an unusual and distinctly foreign accent. The voice is an important part of the film's atmosphere. Wright creates a conjunction between the islander's accent and the old map. The implication is that this man is telling the story from a West Indian point of view because it is his history. This may of course be true but it seems unlikely that the worker would describe the past in this way. His version papers over a great deal of information - events the Colonial administration would rather forget. He speaks as the authorised version of history, a past without conflicts. The reading is 'If the West Indians say this is history then it must be'. It does not sound as if Wright put the words in the man's mouth - but we know that he did. Wright's version of events gains validity because the speaker is reciting them as if he wrote them himself - although the stiff and mechanical tone of his voice serves to work against this reading. It is important to note this here because the rest of the film appears to be the work of the speaker as he takes us on a tour of his homeland. Wright's direction hides behind the speaker's version.

The use of the map underlines the fact that we are receiving an education. It seems to have been drawn on an ancient scroll-type surface. But while this may be picturesque the map only features drawings of the products made on the island. In this way we learn what is important about Barbados - what it can give to us as consumers.

After this introduction we are afforded a glimpse of the island. Several small fishing craft are seen moving from left to right across a calm sea - at the end of the film the craft move in the opposite direction indicating the close of day. This circularity indicates an untroubled life on the island where the rhythm of life is gently maintained by nature. The foreignness of the speaker and the circular form are stylistic devices that Wright will deploy again in *Song of Ceylon*. But this circular form cuts the island

off from the rest of the Empire - again this goes against the grain of Grierson's philosophy. This serves to enclose the culture with an attractive border but it also suggests that the island is another world. Perhaps Wright is abdicating responsibility for what goes on there.

We have already heard that sugar is the biggest industry on Barbados - although we have learned nothing of the conditions the workers live in. Wright now sets about describing the various processes involved in its production. The work is followed methodically - from the cutting of the cane to the boiling inside the vats. This may be picturesque and atmospheric but it belongs to the past and the old days of King James. Wright's purpose in showing us these old techniques is to provide us with a historical context so that we too can understand the changes being faced by the islanders.

Wright picks out a windmill in the distance, its arms barely moving in the breeze. This is followed with a shot of some men ambling up the hill at the same lazy pace of the 'country bumpkins' in Wright's first film. Finally the group take hold of a long pole and slowly bring the windmill to life. Wright now brings his camera in close to record the unified effort of the men. He cuts from the group to a shot of the windmill which is now moving at the same pace as the men. In this way the men appear to dictate the pace at which they live. This scene forms the centre-piece of the first half of the film. The windmill is the place where the community gather and all work leads to this place. The heavy oxen collect cane while other men carry it up the hill but all of them move at the gentle pace dictated by the windmill. Thus nature - through windmill and man - measures the pace of life rather than economic forces - a romantic view we might have come to expect by now and one not entirely removed from that presented in Wright's debut where the windmill was also used as a metaphor to describe the gentle pace of life lived by the agricultural workers.

During this leisurely sequence we hear the commentator say that the windmills must have been 'very well built to have lasted so long'. To illustrate this point Wright focuses on the date '1743' inscribed on the side of the building. But what is the meaning of this praise? To indicate respect for the craftsmen of old or to imply a continuity in the community? This is followed by shots detailing the men's costume of

white pinafores and turbans The men here are carrying on a tradition that has been maintained up to this period and beyond

There are two subtle hints of the changes that will come to the island in this first half During a rest period we see one of the islanders in a pair of spectacles Wright frames this woman in close-up so that we can hardly fail to overlook this detail The other sign of the West is the two white men riding past on horseback and then stopping to look at the labouring islanders We are reminded here of the checkers on board the ship in *Cargo from Jamaica* Once again the white man is seen to be doing very little physical work while the islanders toil in the sun The white men are seen from a distance - from the perspective of those working But the shot is not dwelt upon long enough for it to have any great impact It could be argued that this shot illustrates the kindly benevolence of a colonial administration EMB posters of the period certainly presented the public with a similar relationship between the white man and the 'native'

Wright leaves the activity outside the mill to concentrate on the vats of boiling cane inside He frames a striking picture of the molasses being turned by an old metal ladle while a shaft of sunlight picks out the rising steam Even this operation is slow and graceful with no sense of rush or urgency The impression gained is of an industry run at an agreeable pace by the islanders themselves No connection is made with the forces that are responsible for the industry

When putting sound to this communal activity Cavalcanti decided to impose the voice of a 'foreman' giving instruction and encouragement to the men at the windmill But while the effect is not entirely successful, it does show that the film-makers were suggesting that the driving force behind the community is not the business interests of the Colonials on the island, but the community themselves This is reinforced by the use of community singing in which one man's lead is taken up by the others This use of singing as indicative of unity anticipates those 'Negro railroad workers' that were to feature in Hollywood films of thirties However Wright's use of music is to lend colour to the scene - and is made to fit in with the beat dictated by the windmills In this first half of the film we are treated to a glimpse of a virgin island in which the workers go about their duties untroubled by the outside world

But it should be pointed out that the sugar industry of Barbados was not a gentle community operation. In 1931 the Oliver Commission reported on 'the degradation and squalor of those in which the lower classes were labourers on the sugar plantations' [42]. So bad were conditions on Wright's idyllic island that as early as 1928 the Commission 'refused to recommend the revival of the sugar industry in those places where it had died a natural or artificial death' [43]. Of course Wright was in the business of selling the concept of Empire. But in this instance he was giving a very misleading picture of an industry which even the officials had declared dead. How far is this from the sort of fabrications Flaherty practised, and was chastised for, in *Man of Aran* ?

To close this first half of the film Wright features a group of workers in close-up looking to the East while the West Indian commentator says that the days of using windmills for grinding sugar-cane are over. This information produces a forlorn expression on the faces of the children. Wright then concentrates on the head and torso of a middle-aged man turning (rather awkwardly) to the right. The 'voice of the people' explains his dilemma: 'these days the majority of the work is done by tractors and factories are being built all over the country. Some of the old people don't like to see things change.'

The commentator has now 'revealed' himself to be one of the young people who is helping to bring these changes to all parts of the island. He is ready to discard the past and become part of the drive for the future. Bright days ahead are indicated by a shot of the formerly sad child in close-up smiling broadly.

This is a pivotal sequence in the film and quite complicated. On the one hand we get a sense of sadness that this gently paced lifestyle with its picturesque windmills is passing away. The old folk are seen looking uneasy. But the children look to the right East - the future - with eager anticipation. They will be part of the 'Brave New World'. Yet even this change is presented as part of a gradual evolution and is not sudden or shocking - it fits the pace and pattern of the film.

This sequence also raises the important question of why Wright chose to

film the windmills. If they were nothing more than a picturesque anachronism why bother including them at all? Part of the reason would have been Wright's desire to provide a pictorial motif for the change. This would tie in with his interest in the more attractive aspects of the culture. We should point out that Wright did not set-up the scenes at the windmill as Flaherty did with the sharks in *Man of Aran*. He was fortunate enough to be on the island while the last of the mills was still operational. The fact is that although they make an attractive link with the past they had very little to do with the future of the island. The windmill can be linked to the mill in *Industrial Britain* in which it was used to illustrate the continuity between old and new in Britain. Wright's past was centred around the community who all worked together at the pace dictated by the windmill. The future will see the community break up as the children explore other areas of the island. Community was very important to the work of the Movement because people are united by effort. The coming of machinery threatens to break up this community. What Wright does not investigate are the invisible forces behind these changes. There is a measure of truth in Gerson's remark about 'esoteric lip-smacking' photography. Wright does not appear to be interested in analysis. What he is concerned with is mood and this is the reason he features the anxious faces of the old folk when they hear the news of the changes. Wright rejects the tricky subject of analysis in favour of the acceptable 'atmospheres'.

The remainder of the film deals with the changes taking place on the island. The emphasis shifts from the small community to the new network of connections created by the expanding industries.

One of the 'new' inventions - a tractor - is seen from the perspective of the anxious crowd. The children approach it and seem fascinated. Over this shot comes the sound of a train and the scene changes to reveal a worker in a suit. The native garb is discarded in favour of the costume of the Western World. Is Wright suggesting that all men will become 'standardised' in the modern world? Will the march of progress rob all cultures of their individuality? This shot is followed by more 'natives' in modern dress. In this way it is suggested that Barbados is 'on the move'. The country is now so up to date that the West Indians have the same problem as those of us in the West - dodging the city traffic that fills the screen and coping with the less-than-musical sounds of the modern world. The foreman's instructions and the

community singing are replaced with city sounds - horns, shouting, etc. Also noticeably absent is our narrator. His disappearance means the loss of that sound - his accent - that gave the islands 'colour' for us. It is one of the features that will be lost in a world of increasing standardisation.

And yet while Wright gives the impression of modernity he soon returns to the more colourful aspects of Barbados. He spends only a moment or so on the changes taking place on the island before returning to the beach where the film began. In a series of dissolves we see the windmill turning slowly and then several shots of the waves curling up on the beach. Over these shots are heard snatches of Calypsoe being sung by the workers who have disappeared from the scene - presumably to take part in the march of progress to the cities.

The final sequence in the film features the sea-shore and the little fishing craft returning at the end of the day. The music is now fully restored to the soundtrack in the form of the folk-song that began the film. The final shots are a study of the waves as they roll onto the beach. Wright placed his camera at a diagonal angle so the waves seem rather strange as they cut the screen into unusual shapes. It is precisely this sort of 'arty' photography that Grierson was against, but the final dissolve from the waves to darkness makes a fitting end to a film that has mostly been paced at a gentle rhythm.

The film concludes by returning to the point at which it started. By adopting this form Wright suggests that nothing fundamental has changed the island and for all intents and purposes Barbados remains a beautiful place unspoilt by the inroads of the West. We are left reflecting not on the situation of the people but admiring the scenery captured by Wright's fine photography.

Windmill in Barbados would at first appear to be a film of greater sophistication than *Cargo from Jamaica*. It makes an attempt to evoke the lifestyle of the West Indians and pictures them in their environment. The use of a native commentator gives the film colour and the 'feel' of authenticity. But although the film has a certain visual subtlety the West Indians are still made part of the Western machinery. They are part of the march of progress and are seen as willing participants.

of the new culture. For all the grace of his camera-work Wright never gets close to the people or gives them a chance to speak. Indeed the possibility of them having a different opinion is ruled out from the start by the use of the English language and a commentator speaking very precisely - albeit with a 'foreign' accent. In the end all workers are reduced to functionaries - however attractive their environment. But Wright created a false impression of the island by suggesting that the workforce was busy and that the sugar industry was thriving. What Wright neglected to mention were the troubles that the island was going through at the time. By giving the narration to a West Indian we are asked to believe that this is his impression of history and so the knowledge that we receive from him must therefore be true. The reason for Wright's choice may not have been to deliberately delude his audience. We cannot even be too harsh with him for 'creating' work and workers - this after all was the ethos of the Movement and one he may perhaps have been reluctant to dispute at this stage in his career. What inspired Wright was the art of film and in order to make the correct artistic shape he used whatever material were available. It is this interest in style and atmosphere that predisposed him to make the choices he did. The director's social conscience was slow to develop. Despite the rhetoric Wright's two films were as shy of the realities of colonial exploitation as those in the commercial cinema.

One result of Wright's approach is that the economic forces shaping the island are hidden. The workers in the Jamaican film are certainly not seen to be reaping the profits of their labour. The cargo in question is clearly marked 'London' where we see it arrive at the end of the film. Those in Jamaica are working for the planters - who are also British - but Wright seems coy about this point. This is work - pure and simple. Furthermore this is work derived from its economic motivation. The produce of the island is transported to Britain. The same argument could be levelled at *Drifters* in which the fish are sent out to all corners of the Empire. But in the latter film the men were seemingly involved in a heroic struggle. There is no heroic aspect in *Cargo from Jamaica* but the message is the same - co-operation through labour. This central ethic is never questioned or in dispute. The workers in Barbados in their new suits are merely being modernised to fit in with the new world. The new production methods symbolised by the tractor are like the new inventions in the countryside. In both films we are presented with illusions concerning how the people are adjusting to the modern world. In *Windmill in Barbados* we even get a scene that reflects a

culture-wide concern with the future when we see the apprehensive face of the older sugar-workers. The West Indians are given the same concerns as those of us in the West. But the essential cultural differences, as well as those of work and politics, are obliterated and we are simply left with the colourful and attractive aspects of island life.

It was clearly important that a culture should not be so alien to that of the Mother Country that it threatened to break up the stability of the Empire. After all the message of the EMB was 'One Family'. But Wright's approach meant papering over huge inequalities and maintaining a fiction for the sake of style.

What Wright shared with the commercial directors of the time was an inability to let the people speak for themselves. While this was taken as established in the commercial cinema we might expect something different in the films of a movement whose rhetoric was full of words like 'democracy' and 'citizenship'. In fact quite the opposite takes place - the West Indian narrator tells us an authorised sanitised text-book version of history, complete with the recommendations of those people whose task it is to 'bring changes all over the island'. We could argue that Wright helped to integrate the image of West Indian workers into the Empire by pointing out that they were on the 'same job as ourselves'. But he does not seem to have asked the crucial question of whether they wanted to be.

It may be instructive to look at some of the other Imperial images being manufactured in the 1930's.

Grierson was often to make the distinction between the interests and working methods of the commercial sector and the freedom to create those in the Movement were permitted. In his view the Movement could experiment and innovate while those in the commercial world were only interested in the pursuit of profit. But despite Grierson's rhetoric connections can be made between these two apparently discrete groups. As Armes has written-

The products of the 1930's documentary follow the ethos of the establishment no less than the imperial epics of Alexander Korda [44]

In 1934 when the West Indian films were released there was an increase in British film production, a figure which rose to 185 Feature Films in 1935 [45] One of the reasons for this was the introduction of sound Although many companies played safe by filming stage plays some of the enterprising producers mounted more elaborate productions The shrewd amongst them realised the potential for profit in the American market The most famous and successful of this new breed of producers was Alexander Korda

Korda made his mark with the flamboyant *The Private Life of Henry the Eighth* (1934) [46] The film's success in America encouraged Korda to feed this interest in English heritage, and so he produced a trio of Imperial epics - *Sanders of the River* (1935), *Rhodes of Africa* (1936) and *The Great Barrier* (1936) all of which were successful

Hollywood had already investigated the Imperial theme with films like *The Four Feathers* and *King of the Khyber Rifles* both made in 1929 Throughout the thirties there followed a series of films portraying the quintessentially English character *Clive of India* and *The Lives of a Bengal Lancer* both made in 1935 portray individuals facing heroic struggles in a dramatic and inevitably romantic Imperial landscape Korda provided an economic reason for supplying this theme but American producers thought it important to flatter British audiences because they were part of the dwindling European market The rise of home-grown film industries in France, Italy, and, of course Germany, had meant a slow decline in European sales The themes of these Imperial epics on both sides of the Atlantic were -

Loyalty as the supreme virtue no matter to what you are loyal, courage, hard work, a creed in which noblesse oblige is the most intellectual conception, those ideals are easier to grasp and very much easier to dramatise on the screen than social responsibility, the relation of the individual to the state, the necessity for a pacifist to fight tyranny, the nature of democracy, and the similar problems with which the intellectuals want the movies to deal [47]

It is interesting to note that the Government was indirectly involved with these experiments in Empire-projection

As we saw earlier the Tory Government demonstrated a keen interest in the medium as early as 1926 Korda and Balcon expressed their 'patriotism' in the thirties by offering advice to the Conservative government on the making of its propaganda films But their connection to the Tory Party went deeper than merely that of advertising consultants [48] As Jeffrey Richards writes-

There were particularly close links with Korda, as Sir Joseph Ball, deputy director of the National Publicity Bureau, reported to the Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain in 1938 But Gaumont-British the biggest British film company and the one for which Balcon worked, was also close to the government - and, indeed, in 1935 Isidore Ostrer, the company's chairman, made a secret agreement with the government to place his entire organisation at its disposal The fact that the scripts of the Gaumont-British imperial epics were all vetted and passed by the BBFC, and that the Korda epics were produced with the full co-operation of the army and the Colonial authorities in India, Nigeria and the Sudan, confirms that the government was happy with the Imperial image that was being projected [49]

In all of these films the past is reconstructed in order to re-present the myth of the Empire and to help us find an identity in the present These Imperial epics are rather like a British version of the Hollywood Western Rather like that classic genre, the British film producers used the ideological landscape of the Empire in order to ground the modern British character and to provide the populace with updated versions of the past In this way present troubles are ignored while the past is investigated for the 'roots' and traditions that made Britain 'great'

In re-creating these Golden Days of Empire the producers created a history for a generation whom it was feared were jaded with the homeland and were

turning towards American culture [50] The Empire was made into a specifically British romance in which every subject of the realm had a part to play The messages disseminated in these epics would have re-inforced school lessons about Britain's glorious past

It is interesting to note that the teaching of history from the turn of the century onwards had focussed very largely on the role of the Empire In one instruction manual teachers were advised to 'select only those factors relevant to an understanding of the present' and to concentrate 'on events that lead up to the Empire' [51] As Mackenzie has suggested 'In convincing children of the need to secure and hold Empire, it was the economic value of all the component parts that was stressed' [52] On the classroom wall children might have read an EMB poster declaring

'Jamaica has advantages over every other country in the world for banana cultivation' [53]

When we consider that Wright opened his Barbados film with a map featuring products alone and that the real star of the Jamaican film was a banana we can see that he too was foregrounding the economic value of the colonies Furthermore the sheer abundance of raw materials in these films also helped to maintain myths about tropics being 'the land of plenty' [54] But perhaps most significantly Wright's films do little to counter the stereotype of the native reproduced in many textbooks of the period For example in Fletcher and Kipling's History we find the West Indians defined as 'lazy, vicious, and incapable of any serious improvement on work except under compulsion' [55] In the history books of the period the children were encouraged to take a superior attitude to the natives

In such a climate a few bananas will sustain the life of a Negro quite sufficiently, why should he work to get more than this? He is quite happy and quite useless, and spends any extra money he may earn upon finery [56]

Can Wright's films be described as combating such a presentation? In

both films the workers are seen to be far from lazy and this may be said to challenge the prevailing stereotype. But the crucial point is that the work is done under the calm compulsion of supervising white men. In both cases it is clear the fruits of the worker's labour are coming to Britain and that this work is for 'us' British. When we consider the lessons being taught about the Colonies in the schools where Wright's films would have been screened it becomes increasingly difficult to read them as critical of colonialism.

But this concern with the image of the Empire has to be placed in a European context. The films and the literature of the thirties were struggling to define the specifically 'British Character' whilst Germany and Italy were re-designing themselves as great nation-states. Britain still retained an Empire and however shaky her 'command of native peoples' was looking, the populace were told it was an essential part of the British identity. Grant Robertson expressed this old-world British arrogance when he spoke of how cinema could be used as 'a tremendous instrument to maintain what I like to think of is the supremacy of English-speaking and British people over all others in the world' [57]. The Empire was something that brought all the people together under the banner - 'For King and Country'. It had been verified by tradition and was a force for unification against the outside world.

But it should be clear that Wright's presentation of the Imperial world does not differ substantially from those of Korda and Balcon. As we have seen there was an economic motivation for Wright's experiments in Empire projection - 'Buy British'. But by bolstering the Empire like the commercial producers Wright was helping to maintain the hegemony of the ruling classes and assisting in the preservation of the status quo. The Establishment approved of the big screen re-creations of Empire. Both Korda and Balcon were rewarded with honours for their propagation of the Imperial ideology in the thirties and their patriotic films during the war. Wright's work was not similarly rewarded but his contribution is simply to have replaced the faceless savages of old with the faceless workers of the new democracy. This is less a shift 'up' than a shift sideways. One stereotype is replaced with another. The workers do not become any more individual simply because they are workers. Although Rotha was writing in 1935 his comment on *Sanders of the River* seems particularly apposite here.

It is important to remember that the multitudes of this country who see Africa in this film are encouraged to believe this fudge is real It is a disturbing thought [58]

How much more disturbing that the audience - albeit hardly multitudes - watching Wright's film are encouraged to believe in his portrayal because of its point of origin - one of the respected members of the British Documentary Movement - and its realistic mode?

Conclusion.

We have already seen that Grierson was less than enthusiastic about the Barbados film. He thought it lazy and esoteric and while giving Wright credit for creating 'atmosphere' he felt this was not enough. But what the film points to is an impressionist approach to the material. When Henn Breitrose was writing his taxonomy of documentary films he suggested -

One can conceive of the impressionistic documentary as a means of eliciting a complex set of responses from the audience by means of exposing that audience to a series of images and sounds in much the same way that a poet or musician might [59]

We cannot claim that *Windmill in Barbados* is a purely impressionistic film according to this definition. Wright was still developing his style in the early thirties and had yet to find his 'voice'. But the film does have a few moments which are interesting because they set up a conflict and although they are not sustained they call forth such a 'complex response'. Of particular interest in this regard is the use of Calypsoe music in the credit sequence and the ambiguous mood of the community when the tractor is introduced in the second half of the film.

What is interesting about *Windmill in Barbados* is that it represents Wright expressing his feelings within the Griersonian code while also taking impressionistic sketches. It was the latter that were on the border of what 'the boss' thought relevant. Grierson wanted films of 'industrial and social function' [60]. Wright achieved this in *Cargo from Jamaica*. The film is precise because nothing is wasted. The camera does not meander over the scene, nor spend more than a few moments surveying the habitat of the natives. Most of the time is spent demonstrating the conditions of the workers in Jamaica. The difference between 'us and them' is plain to see - we have it easy due to the invention of machines, while the dockers in Jamaica have to do everything by hand. From the business-like credits to the step-by-step treatment of the bananas Wright seems to be devoted to lighting up the facts - even if they are a carefully selected group of aesthetically pleasing facts. But such an approach reduces the film-maker to the

level of a reporter rather than an artist who is bound to have a complex response to the world around him. Grierson would have his work fit into a preconceived plan. Wright was still learning about the world and despite being under Grierson's influence he was to continue to develop his more ambiguous style.

For Wright film-making was -

a wild act of faith. I try to express a subject in my own way, because the only way I know how to express it, is to try and make a satisfactory aesthetic statement, in terms of the art of the film, in expressing the message which I put across which is always on my behalf, even if it is also on behalf of the Gas Company etc. [61]

What we note here is Wright's insistence on the personal aspect - the need to fashion an artistic statement before other considerations. This was an attitude he was never to lose entirely-even when working on social projects like *Children at School*. Although Wright was later to modify his position slightly his chief interest was to remain in the art of the film.

This represents quite a contrast to Grierson's socially aware attitude, in which ideas are to be explained to the audience.

Western civilisation is moving down quickly on every native village and the only guarantee that we have that the natives will not be exploited lies in those services of education, mission or colonial - which will fit them to take their part in the new world and in turn become masters of it. [62]

Grierson speaks as a filmic missionary with a decidedly paternalistic attitude to the 'natives'. The films have a definite function to educate and as such there is little room for the 'atmospherics' that Wright was developing. As we have already noted Grierson had no problem with the concept of Empire and approved of Wright's

purposeful Jamaican film Perhaps he considered the film had an educational lesson for the 'natives' in the village

However the main market for such films was Britain and the non-theatrical circuit We have to know about the composition of the audiences because films of such limited appeal such as these depend upon their context for understanding Wright spoke of how he went on tour with his films and discussed them with the audiences It may have been that those in the burgeoning film societies had a chance to decipher his meaning [63] But as we have seen the films were propaganda and EMB - organised lecture tours on subjects such as 'The British Empire and What it Means to You' and 'Life in the British West Indies' would have been more directly relevant to a screening of Wright's films [64]

We have already established that schoolchildren made up a substantial part of the Movement's audience and were a group specifically targeted by the EMB By 1934 54% of all loans went to schools and another 13% went to juvenile organisations [65] There is little in this pair of films that would dislodge the stereotype of the 'native' in the minds of the children One indication of the EMB's success in promulgating the Imperial ideology is revealed in a letter written to the board by a teacher who records how their films have 'implanted the idea of Empire in the minds of the slum children here' [66]

But our concern has been with the style of Wright's work What makes the West Indian films interesting is how Wright presented the history of the islands to explain the present This approach gives the impression of wide learning on the film-maker's part but conceals the fact that only certain pertinent details have been selected Wright was implanting a message about the native workers of the Empire which backed up both the 'official' history lessons and the more exotic presentations of the commercial producers who pictured the natives in similarly mysterious surroundings The propagandist message about the importance of the Empire was aimed at children from many directions and while the epics of Korda could be ignored as 'simply' entertainment children were asked to treat the subject as fact when it came to the classroom

But interesting as this is we should be wary of over-estimating the impact of the films -

The substantial limitations to film propaganda in schools were the scarcity of film projectors in schools and teachers trained to use them. After much official encouragement including the offer of sizeable Board of Education grants, it was reckoned in 1935 that there were only about 1,000 projectors in the 32,000 schools and colleges in Britain. Cost, ignorance and hostility significantly blunted this EMB strategy [67]

Furthermore the EMB were facing competition. In 1933 Gaumont-British Instructional announced they were entering the market. They expected to take over the non-theatrical circuit developed by Grierson and the EMB [68]. The films of the more established company were also based on Imperial subjects but were guaranteed the sort of distribution rarely granted the work of the Movement.

Like most of Wright's work both films received critical acclaim in the The Times. As far as these critics were concerned the Movement were doing important and significant work. *Windmill in Barbados* seemed to prove their point, as it secured some theatrical bookings in the *Weather Forecast* group which containing five other films. But this 'package deal' was often the way in which the films reached the schools and usually the only way they could gain distribution. Furthermore being featured in a showcase would have a significant effect on an audience's reading of a film. In these circumstances how many could have decoded the criticism of colonialism Wright has said he intended? His artistic subterfuge may have been appreciated by the privileged few but theirs was a minority taste not shared by the masses who patronised the work of Korda *et al*.

By 1934 Grierson and the EMB had done a great deal to expand the non-theatrical circuit. This, combined with the growing Film Societies and cinema clubs made up an interesting cul-de-sac in the world of cinema. We mention this to make it clear that the short film as a commercial proposition was by no means dead - yet. But the sad fact was that many distributors and exhibitors were beginning to

actively dislike the films of the Movement. The remark that a documentary 'never set the Thames on fire' is typical of the sort of reactions the films received [69]. The non-theatrical circuit and the schools were fast becoming the only outlet that would welcome EMB films with open arms and even this may have only been the case simply because they received them on a free loan basis.

By almost every measure available the EMB was a failure. By the middle of 1933 when Wright was still editing the West Indian films the EMB was slowly closing down its film-making operation while its publicists were dispersed into a number of semi-public and public utility concerns. It is hardly surprising that Grierson spoke of the virtues of working for a government department - no commercial venture would have lasted as long as the unit with their financial results. As Swann has written-

The EMB disappeared at a time when, because its work seemed to have little effect upon the prevailing economic depression, its popular support was waning. Sir Edward Parry was not alone in welcoming the abolition of the Board as 'a piece of national economy long overdue' [70].

The Movement was not without friends in the Establishment. William Crawford defended its role and described it as 'the greatest and most successful co-operative educational and advertising effort of recent times' [71]. But these are the words of a professional advertising man with financial links to the Empire and as such cannot be regarded as objective criticism.

Although much of the material written about the Movement focuses on its artistic innovations it is sometimes overlooked that its original brief to 'Bring the Empire Alive' was often only sketchily adhered to. As advertisers the Movement were quite vague and whether they actually created goodwill for the workers is very difficult to assess. But when we bear in mind that only a fraction of the mass cinema-going audience ever got to see these films, any interest they might have generated would not have reached enough people to make a substantial impression. For all their talk of citizenship the academic and stylistic exercises of the Grierson group were actually turning people away and making the job of 'commanding the mind of a nation' rather a

difficult one

Despite this relative lack of success Tallents was rewarded with a knighthood. The EMB was eventually closed down in September of 1933 and the Movement moved over to the GPO for a six month trial period [72]. It is worth quoting Tallents's Projection of England to remind us of how he felt about the Movement and the ideas they stood for-

I see the members of this school as a small group, selected less on account of their existing affiliations than by reason of their diverse personal qualities. It must be their business to study professionally the art of national projection, and to draw for the materials of that art upon all the resources of English life. They must have something of the sense of responsibility, the prestige and the opportunities of government and entry to the fields of government activity but they must be more free to make experiments, to make mistakes, than the ordinary government department dares to be [73]

For all of Wright's well-meaning efforts he was working for an organisation whose aim it was to uphold an Empire which was under attack from within and without. However casual Wright may have felt about his employers - 'somebody had to pay us' - he played his part in sustaining the myth of the Empire and in so doing helped to paper over its political and economic strife. This was not simply a Tory exercise because the Labour Party also considered the EMB a non-political body. Such a consensus on the centrality of the Empire to the British identity only goes to show how deeply the roots of Empire were planted in the political culture [74]. Wright's experiments in the form may have been rewarding for the few but for the most part their subtleties went unnoticed by the majority and they were seen as simply one more contribution to the prevailing myth of the times.

It is, however difficult to disprove the contention that the EMB confirmed in the minds of the majority a world view, a broad conception of the nation's status and power in the world as a centre of a legitimate and uniquely favoured imperial

system The concepts of the wider world presented by the EMB conformed to those emanating from other official and unofficial services Together they dominated the media and infiltrated the educational system [75]

Notes.

- 1 P Swann, The British Documentary Movement, 1926-1946,
Unpublished PhD thesis, (University of Leeds, 1979), p 71
- 2 Ibid , p 69
- 3 Letter from Wnght to Mother,dated -12/03/33
- 4 D Meredith, Imperial Images, The Empire Marketing Board
1926-1932 History Today Vol 37, Jan 1987, p 33/34
- 5 J Bowle, The Imperial Achievement (Aylesbury, Bucks , 1977), p 148
- 6 Bowle, p 409
- 7 Ibid
- 8 Enc Williams, From Columbus to Castro. The History of the
Caribbean, 1492-1969 (London,1970), p 444
- 9 Ibid., p 450
- 10 Ibid
- 11 C Cross, The Fall of the British Empire (London, 1968), p 206
- 12 Williams, op cit , p 446
- 13 Cross , 206
- 14 Interviews with Wright by author, 1985 - 87
- 15 Ibid
- 16 Ibid
- 17 Letter from Wnght to Mother dated - 22/02/33
- 18 Ibid - 19/02/33
- 19 G Dufaux, The Documentary as an Instrument of Knowledge, Citect
Review Vol 2, No 1, November 1986, p 32
- 20 Interview with Wright by author (Undated)
- 21 Letter from Wnght to Mother dated-12/03/33
- 22 Ibid - 12/03/33
- 23 Ibid
- 24 Ibid - 27/03/33
- 25 Ibid - 12/03/33
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Letter from Wnght to author - undated
- 28 Letter from Wnght to Mother dated - 08/04/33

- 29 Undated Report, POST 33/4927 M 19592/ 1935 (in Swann, p 78)
- 30 Interview with author
- 31 Letter from Wright to Mother dated - 08/04/33
- 32 Interview with Wright by author
- 33 J Bevendge, John Grierson Film Master (London, 1979), p 59
- 34 E Sussex, The Rise and Fall of the British Documentary Film Movement
(Berkeley, 1975), p 33
- 35 The Times 13/07/33
- 36 J Grierson, Film Review, New Britain, 11/10/1933, p 654
- 37 Ibid
- 38 Swann, p 109
- 39 J Grierson, Film Review, New Britain, 22/11/1933, p 14
- 40 Constantine p 205
- 41 Reproductions featured in History Today, Vol 37 January, 1987 p 30-36
- 42 Williams, op cit , p 441
- 43 Ibid, p 442
- 44 R Armes, A Critical History of the British Cinema (London, 1978), p 134
- 45 J Richards, The Age of the Dream Palace. Cinema and Society in
Britain 1930-1939, (London, 1984), p 253
- 46 Karol Kulik, Alexander Korda. The Man Who Could Work Miracles
(London, 1975), p 89
- 47 M Thorp, America at the Movies, (New Haven, 1939), p 294 - 5
- 48 J Richards, 'Patriotism with Profit' British Imperial Cinema in the
1930's in British Cinema History edited by J Curran and V Porter,
(London 1983), p 249
- 49 Ibid
- 50 S Dark, Birmingham Mail, 22 March 1933 in J Richards, The Age of the
Dream Palace. Cinema and Society in Britain 1930-1939
(London, 1984), p 39
- 51 H M S O *Handbook for Teachers* quoted in J Mackenzie, Propaganda and
Empire, (Manchester, 1985), p 178
- 52 Mackenzie, op cit , p 187
- 53 Macmillan's Class Pictures, notes to illustrations 111, 118, 128 (In
Constantine, p 215)

- 54 Mackenzie, op cit , p 184
- 55 Fletcher and Kipling, History , 240 in Mackenzie, p 184
- 56 Ibid
- 57 National Conference on Problems connected with the cinema, held at Birmingham University, 27 February 1932, BBFC Verbatim Reports 1932-5, 52 In Richards op cit , p 59
- 58 P Rotha, Cinema Quarterly, No 3, 1935, p 175
- 59 H Breitrose, The Structures and Functions of Documentary Film, Cilect Review, Vol 2, No 1, November 1986, p 48
- 60 J Grierson, Grierson on Documentary (London, 1979), p 64
- 61 Wright interviewed by E Edmondson, 1974, (Unpublished)
- 62 J Grierson, New Worlds for Old (Unpublished book) Chapter XII
Archive G 2 21 3
- 63 Interview with author
- 64 Constantine, op cit , p 204/5
- 65 P Swann John Grierson and the G P O Film Unit 1933-1939
Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television, Vol 3, No 1, 1983 p 27
- 66 Constantine, op cit , p 224
- 67 Constantine, p 214
- 68 Swann, op cit , p 73
- 69 T Fligelstone, Moyne Committee minutes of evidence, 26 May 1936,
PRO BT 55/4 CC F 2 in Swann, p 184
- 70 P Swann, p 71 includes quote of Sir E Parry , The Times 1,
September, 1933, p 12
- 71 W Crawford, The Times, 12, July, 1933, p 15, in Swann , p 69
- 72 Swann in Historical Journal, op cit , p 22
- 73 S Tallents, The Projection of England. In Swann , p 67
- 74 Constantine , p 223
- 75 Ibid , p 199

CHAPTER FIVE

SONG OF CEYLON

In this chapter we shall look at *Song of Ceylon*, a film regarded by many as the masterpiece of the British Documentary Movement. What makes the film unique is that it represents the efforts of a man to make a propaganda film for the Ceylon Tea Board - and to express the mystical experiences he underwent on the island. These apparently conflicting aims are the result of the pressures Wright felt at the time. In the following we shall discuss the meaning of Wright's private pattern. The film works on several levels and can be read as a critique of colonialism as well as a graceful evocation of an alien culture. We will also discuss to what extent Wright's masterpiece is an expression of the Empire ideology.

Because *Song of Ceylon* has a special place in the movement's *oeuvre*, something of a legend has grown up around the film. This myth has been fuelled by Wright's comments that 'mystical experiences' were essential to his determining the shape which *Song of Ceylon* eventually took [1]. But he was only to realise the full significance of this some 14 years after the film was finished [2]. Obviously we have to take this realisation into account when examining these 'mythical' aspects and will treat this post-hoc rationalisation of Wright's with considerable caution. It is certainly true that when we take Wright's terms on board, an interesting second analysis can be performed, but the danger of this is that we lend too much credence to the director's interpretation and see the film as he would like us to see it. To take such an approach would be to contribute to the myth that has grown up around the film. As such 'the mystical' will be looked at only briefly in the conclusion.

It was in the Autumn of 1933 that Gnerson told Wright he was to go to Ceylon to make four one-reelers for the Tea Propaganda Board. Wright was at first reluctant to make the journey. He had spent most of the year travelling and was in the process of moving home in London [3]. But after making an initial protest he agreed to the assignment. Gnerson was not to be denied.

It was perhaps fortunate for Wright that his next trip abroad would be at a time when the Movement were leaving the EMB and moving over to the GPO for a six-month trial period. As a result Wright would be away from the difficulties the others were going through.

The break up of the Movement did not mean the end for those whose careers had been associated with government propaganda. One of the officials who survived this break up was Gervas Huxley who announced in The Times of 14/07/33 that he intended to begin making propaganda films for the Ceylon Tea Propaganda Board 'as a public relations exercise' [4]. In this way something like the 'old boy' network was maintained and Wright was able to find another place in which he could continue his experiments in the art of film.

We have already recorded that Grierson was not altogether happy with Wright's *Windmill in Barbados*. But Wright may have been chosen because he was fast becoming an ambassador for the unit and could use his connections to establish relations with the colonialists quickly. His idyllic portraits of life in the troubled West Indies would have demonstrated that he was a man who could be trusted to produce safe and picturesque propaganda.

Wright spent the last few months of 1933 researching the island and learning all he could about the Tea Industry. He studied scientific material and became 'an expert on leaf diseases in Coffee and Tea' [5]. One particular influence was Leonard Woolfe's book on Ceylon. This is essentially an autobiography but it is interesting in that it reveals one man's feelings about the island -

the flavour and climate of one's life was enormously affected both by this circumambient air of a tropical suburbia and by the complete social exclusion from our social suburbia of all Sinhalese and Tamils [6]

We quote Woolfe only to show that his remote attitude to the natives of the island was typical of that of the colonialist abroad and one Wright has said he was

anxious to avoid

We shall acquaint ourselves with a brief history of Ceylon and indicate the political and cultural situation of the island in 1933/34

Ceylon had been a British Colony since 1790 when the island was acquired from Holland for strategic reasons - it being close to India. From 1840 it became an export economy with coffee as the main product. English planters had moved onto the island and many had grown rich on the industry which provided a third of the government's income in the mid-nineteenth century [7]. But by 1886 a rare leaf disease had killed the crop and many of the planters were ruined. Those who chose to stay now concentrated on tea, and replaced the casual methods of the past with the more efficient estate system. It was during the final days of the coffee boom that the land was cheap and a small percentage of the Sinhalese community bought land for rice cultivation.

By the mid-nineteenth century the island was already divided into three groups - the planters, the native Sinhalese and the Tamils. The latter had to be imported by the planters because few Sinhalese were willing to do estate work. They had a code of independence that forbade working for the 'outsiders'. The Tamil population from India totalled 200,000 in the 1880's. They lived in barrack-like huts and practised Hinduism instead of the Buddhism of the Sinhalese [8].

In the 1870's the government started to build the rail network and to establish schools on the island. When the whole of the island turned to tea production the profits for the planters increased. By the 1930's Huxley noted a series of 'satisfactory results in the way of increased tea consumption' [9]. We should stress that few of these profits found their way back to the islanders. The plantations were mostly British owned and those peasants who did own tea plantations - about 5% - had to suffer the costs incurred in sending the leaf to the factory for processing. The Sinhalese tried to remain apart from the work being done on their island by the immigrant population but this became increasingly difficult as the Tamils numbers had multiplied to over 600,000 by the 1920's [10].

In time, Sinhalese peasants came to supply a fair proportion of the labour services used by the estates - by the 1930's they represented 20% of the workforce - but this remained a minor tie between the two worlds of the estate and the village 'Most peasants had no contact at all with the estates the villagers' ideal was self-sufficiency and the ideal came close to being realised in practice' [11]

To safeguard themselves against an over-dependence on tea, some of the planters had turned to coconut production This grew steadily between 1870 and 1930 until it became one of the main industries on the island [12] Despite the huge profits being made by the planters little of this money found its way back into the rest of the economy By the time Wright arrived on the island three discrete groups existed - the Tamils living in barrack-like huts and practising Hinduism, the planters making high profits off the land, and the native Sinhalese trying to remain self-sufficient and independent from these two growing rivals for their land

Ceylon was unusual amongst the British Colonies for several reasons On the one hand it was the only British Colony government in which every adult was entitled to a vote Another unique aspect of the island was that the Sinhalese could gain entry to the Civil Service through the Eastern Cadetship exams - this was unusual for a system which was dominated elsewhere by the British As a result a third of the Civil Service was made up of Sinhalese [13] Also notable is that fact that those in the Colonial service were said to have established a good working relationship with the Sinhalese counter-parts - far better than the educated Indians [14] All of these factors helped the people to perceive their island as being separate from India and having a strong identity of its own

Wright sailed to Ceylon on the last days of 1933 with John Taylor as an assistant Taylor had just finished working on *Man of Aran* and Flaherty had given him a Leica as a parting gift The other equipment comprised two cameras - a deVrie and a Newman Sinclair - several lenses and a couple of tripods They had 20,000 feet of film - more would be sent later [15]

They arrived on New Year's day and were met by G K Stewart, the

Chairman of the Tea Board He invited them to dinner and introduced them to some of the planters and colonial officials on the islands But unlike the West Indian experience this was to be one of the rare occasions when Wright actually mixed with the white population of the island Stewart's role was to instruct Wright in some of the essentials of the language and to point out some of the scenes he thought would be of interest But most of Wright's research was done with Taylor driving around the island [16]

It was during these first few weeks Wright felt himself 'being taken over with the spirit of Buddhism ' [17] By this he meant that the mood of the island and the many religious sights had a fascination for him and their power was such that his original brief to film four one-reelers of discrete aspects of life on the island was gradually being superseded by a desire to reflect this spirit This can be read either as a covert religious feeling coming to the surface or as indicative of Wright's absorption in the culture in his search for atmosphere

Despite having acquired a rough knowledge of the language Wright was not fluent enough to communicate his exact wishes to the Sinhalese people It was in this respect that Stewart proved his value to Wright by arranging a meeting with Lionel Wendt [18] Wendt was a native of the islands, a product of a mixed marriage between a Sinhalese and a Dutch Burgher At first he regarded the 'civil servants' with suspicion But when Wright explained that his aim was to capture the spirit of the people he agreed to act as an interpreter His role was vital in translating Wright's ideas to the people

It was fortunate that Wright was in Ceylon in the early months of the year He had arrived at the time of the annual pilgrimage to 'Adam's Peak' This is the tallest mountain on the island and has great significance for the Sinhalese Buddhists because it is said that the Buddha left his imprint on the mountain before stepping off into another world But we might also note a Christian rendering of the myth

Adam who is believed by all true followers of the Prophet to have been hurled from the seventh heaven of Paradise upon this

Peak, where he remained standing on one foot until years of penitence and suffering had expiated his offence [19]

The pilgrimage was a cross-cultural affair in which devotees of all creeds came to pay their respects Wright decided to film the pilgrims climbing the mountain On February the eleventh he wrote -

Tomorrow we are starting our own grand filming expedition to Adam's Peak, spend the night on top of the mountain seated on deck chairs! 7,000 feet up - very cold! It's a huge expedition In addition to ourselves and Mr Scott there will be our own camera crew of 8, 15 local coolies and our own troupe of actors - 40 pilgrims who are motoring up from Kandy by night in ancient motor buses [20]

No details exist of how Wright managed to pay the coolies But we do have a parallel in the case of photographer Henry Cave who made a similar expedition to photograph the Peak in the 1890's He also recorded the extraordinary cold and wondered how the natives manage to keep warm despite wearing only the flimsiest of garments Cave is another interesting example of a white man striving to capture the atmosphere of the 'mysterious east' for picturesque purposes [21]

We should point out that Wright was not using actors in the commonly accepted meaning of the term but pilgrims who had agreed to be filmed in exchange for a free trip up the mountain The Adam's Peak sequence was the first to be filmed and it was at this early stage that Wright had his first contact with the priests of the island Wright managed to convince them that he was there as a respectful Westerner trying to convey the essence of the religion With a little help from Wendt they agreed to him setting up cameras and even permitted him to see the sacred footprint which is enclosed in a shrine at the Peak This, however, he was not allowed to film [22]

After this experience Wright spent most of the next two months living with

and filming the Sinhalese all over the island. He found the people charming and was particularly delighted with their sense of humour. Wright took his camera to the beaches, to the plantations and into the fields in an attempt to film all aspects of Sinhalese life. But it was the spirit of the religion which had the greatest effect on him, and this was one of the main factors that shaped the film. Wright found himself filming incidents 'for no apparent reason' but 'simply because it felt like the right thing to do' [23]. It was only later in London that the sequences in question 'made sense'. Perhaps the most famous example of this is the flight of the bird over the lake.

Wright and Taylor were sitting on a verandah after a day's shooting. Both men were tired and ready to stop for the day when Wright ordered Taylor to unpack the camera. The latter duly obeyed and Wright snatched the camera away to record the flight of a kingfisher swooping over the lake and past the mountains [24]. At this stage of filming the project was still four one-reelers on separate aspects of life on the island. The bird had no place in such a scheme but Wright filmed it because he was responding to a feeling, an impulse. It was only in London that he understood why he had filmed the bird.

On another occasion Wright and his crew of eight were at the temple of Andraphur where the giant statues of the Buddha and his favourite disciple Ananda can be found. For no reason at all Wright felt himself once more 'taken' by the atmosphere of the temple. He sent the crew away so he could reflect alone on this mood. After a few minutes a coolie emerged from the forest to make an offering and to pray before the statue. This only lasted one and a half minutes but during these moments Wright experienced a sense of participation in the act, a feeling of communion with the man and the statue [25]. He decided to recreate this and include it in the film. Wright records that when this sequence was filmed later the crew 'maintained an extraordinary silence' [26].

Given that Wright was captured by the atmosphere of the island and the good humour of the people it is hardly surprising that he wanted to capture this on film. But it was these essentially private impressions of Ceylon which Wright used for the film. We wonder whether this is exactly the 'serving the community' notion

that Grierson was to speak of so often

Reluctantly Wright left Ceylon in mid-April with Taylor, Wendt and some of the dancers who were coming to England to work on some of the music. One of their roles was to teach some of the local choir to sing in Sinhalese [27]

Conditions in Ceylon had been such that Wright had no opportunity to monitor the quality of the rushes. However Grierson had seen them and sent telegrams indicating his approval [28]. Back in London Wright was permitted to see the film but Grierson decided not to let him edit the material for a while. Instead Wright was given the 'universally loathed' job of production manager at the G P O studio [29]. This was a deliberate move by Grierson calculated to give Wright some breathing space to mull over the material. It is also a further reminder of his hold over the members of the Movement.

When the month was over Wright began editing. His first move was to call in the services of Walter Leigh - a colleague of his from Cambridge. Leigh worked closely with Wright not only in the writing of the score but in all the details of the soundtrack. At the time there were very few Indian music records available. Leigh's strategy was to listen to those records he could and then to create a soundtrack which was an amalgam of English and Indian music. Because recording equipment was considerably more primitive than it is today every single sound had to be noted down on the score - even to the detail of a dog barking. Wright credited Leigh with much of the innovative soundtrack to the film.

The more Wright studied the material the more he became convinced that the four one-reelers would fail to capture the spirit of Buddhism, for even back in England a month later, he still felt himself to be under the spell of the religion. It is this 'mood' that he felt guided him to edit sequences in the way he did. He was 'amazed and delighted' the way 'everything happened by chance' [30]. For example Wright was looking for a text to supply the commentary to the film. He had tried several books and had found them all unsuitable. One day he was walking past a second-hand bookshop in London when he glanced upon a copy of Robert Knox's Ceylon. Knox was a pirate who had been captured by the King of

Ceylon in the seventeenth century and had been detained in the country for 20 years. When he returned to Scotland he became a priest and wrote about his adventures. Wright found the archaic prose fitted in perfectly with his conception of Ceylon as a timeless island [31]. But we should also note that the choice of such a text made it clear that Wright was involved in creating a stylish and evocative portrait rather than a strictly factual report.

Wright also put the choice of narrator down to luck. The film had almost been finished and several members of the Movement were gathered in the studio to audition 'voices' to narrate the film. A lot of 'BBC-types' were tried but Wright found them too stiff and formal. Then he had the idea of asking Wendt to audition. As Wright records 'He was perfect - distant yet intimate' [32]. This was the quality Wright was looking for to convey the mystery of the island - a gentle fabric to be woven into the texture of the film.

After two months of editing and recording Wright presented the film to Grierson for a private screening. Grierson was enthusiastic but felt that Wright had made a critical mistake. In this original version Wright cut from the man at prayer in the Temple to the frenzy of the last dance. The two men 'argued a lot about Aristotle and dialectics and all that' before Wright stormed out of the studio [33]. He returned in the middle of the night to re-cut the film so that the prayer scene was separated from the dance by a procession of the villagers. Grierson saw the re-cut in the morning and declared the film 'absolute genius' [34]. Once again Grierson had not told Wright what to do but had let him find out for himself - albeit after some fairly strong hints.

The film was premiered in November of 1934 and received widespread critical acclaim. Graham Greene applied the 'epithet of perfection' and praised its air of 'absolute certainty' in The Spectator [35]. *Song of Ceylon* later went on to win several international awards including the Grand Prix at Venice in 1934.

At 27 years of age Wright had made his masterpiece. He was moved by the spirit of Buddhism for the rest of his life but he was never to make a film like it again. Indeed it was only in 1948 when leafing through a copy of Wilhelm and

Jung's Golden Flower that he began to understand the significance of the film [36] It was then that he realised he was making a mandala for himself - a magic circle [37] But once again we should stress that Wright was making a film for himself first and foremost - not for the islanders, not for the community in Britain or Ceylon, but for himself This was a private experiment and as a result it is a very private film What we want to analyse is Wright's presentation of Ceylon as an idyllic land and how this vision relates to the ideology of the Movement

The four sections of the film are-

- 1 The Buddha In the first part of the film Wright details the Devil Dancers in the forest and then shows the pilgrim ascending Adam's Peak The section finishes with the ringing of the sacred bell
- 2 The Virgin Island A study of the work and traditions of the Sinhalese
- 3 The Voices of Commerce A look at the effects western man has on the island with particular emphasis on the use of sound to express this
- 4 The Apparel of a God A moment of prayer and then a final dance of celebration involving the whole community In this way the film returns to its theme of Buddhism being the guiding force of the island

Analysis.

1. A Maid decked with jewels The Buddha

We noted in the previous chapter that Wright's portrayal of the natives had much in common with the work of commercial film producers. Although Wright did not go to the extent of presenting the natives as savages he failed to examine them in any depth. In the first few moments of *Song of Ceylon* Wright seems to fall into the trap of stereotyping the Sinhalese in the commercial fashion.

The film begins with an Indian chanting in the darkness. After the opening credits the screen fades up from black and there follows a slow pan over some vegetation. The eerie atmosphere is compounded with the words describing the 'perils' in 'dark and ancient times'. The stereotype seems confirmed when Wright suddenly reveals a group of dancers in the woods wearing strange masks and gesturing wildly. The music changes to a faster rhythm played on 'tribal' drums. Wright thrusts his camera into the action so that we see the details of the masks and the angry participants. The sequence finishes with a close-up of the lead dancer - his tongue protruding, frozen in the posture of the dance. Wright then pans to the right and to the accompaniment of the words 'these rites they celebrated till the coming of a great lord whom they called Goatama and to who the salvation of souls belonged', then we see the pilgrims' feet as they begin to climb the mountain.

What Wright has done in these opening moments is to create a horrific and frightening start to his 'song'. The shock cut, the change in music, the journey into the unknown, all of this seems particularly odd in a 'creative treatment of actuality'. Wright has begun his 'song' with a very dramatic chord. The picture of the native Sinhalese that emerges from these opening moments is as savage as any created in the thirties. The native appears to be the very opposite of the white man in his tribal mask and woodland setting. But Wright's purpose is to explain that all of this belongs in the dim and distant past and that the savage acts of yesterday have been transformed by the presence of the Buddha - indicated in the shots of the pilgrims' feet. But this is an interesting presentation because it is not

true

In her book on Buddhist beliefs and practices Lynn de Silva makes it clear that not only do these dancers still practice today but that they have a distinct function in the community. The 'Devil Dancers' are shamans living alongside the Buddhists and are consulted by them in material matters.

Psychologically the distinction is clear in the minds of the Buddhist Sinhalese between the precepts and doctrine of Buddhism inculcating the righteous way of life and spiritual salvation, and the cult of the High Gods, propitiated with prayers and offerings for help and divine intercession in the problems and difficulties that beset man in his day-to-day life. The harmony of religious and social life is thus maintained. No conflict arises between the two systems of religion. [38]

In short this system of worship is co-existent with Buddhism. Instead of investigating this Wright chooses to portray the Devil Dancers as part of a primitive past. It is true that these 'rites' make a very powerful opening to the film, and their practices are different from Buddhism but it is not true to suggest they belong to the past of the people. We should not forget that Wright was a young man anxious to demonstrate his talents and this opening is certainly stylish. But there may be another reason for this approach.

By casting aside the Devil Dancers, banishing them as it were, to the past, and then fading to the pilgrims Wright defines the limits of what is acceptable as 'foreign'. Christmas Humphreys has defined Buddhism as a very English religion because it has a stress on politeness and outward calm - those qualities considered by outsiders to be quintessentially 'English'. [39] The Buddhists who make the ascent of Adams Peak are very gentle and gracious beings - very much the acceptable face of the native. Rather than present a threat to the White Man - as the Devil Dancers certainly did - the Buddhists are amenable folk, hardly different from the British at all. In these opening moments Wright has set the limits of 'difference'. The Sinhalese are not alien to us at all because that which defines

them is the same force that is meant or supposed to define us - religion

Having said this, Wright's project is to convey the spirit of the religion of the Sinhalese. What is interesting is that he spends no time investigating the rites of the Devil Dancers or the Tamil's Hinduism. Such a study would add a complexity that might detract from Wright's quest for the 'purity' of Buddhism.

After the fade from the 'Devil Dancers' Wright now details the ascent of the Peak by the many pilgrims. People of all nationalities make the climb and Wright cuts between shots of old men and mothers with their children. In one particularly memorable shot we are reminded of Wright's penchant for photographing children when a boy is seen staring at his feet in a pool of water before fading to a shot of the sky above him.

At a half-way stage in the climb a family group gather at a resting place to hear the scriptures being read by one of the men. This is a very tranquil sequence featuring dissolves to the wide valley below. Wright focuses for a moment on the man, and the sermon we hear appears to be his own interpretation of scripture. Indeed the audience will have taken it for such. But the sermon is an interpretation of a Buddhist scripture completed by a British officer stationed in India in the nineteenth century [40]. This is not to suggest that it sounds out of place. It fits in perfectly with the mood. But it is interesting that this is the attempt of another westerner to assimilate the culture of a foreign peoples. Wright would have been limited in his choice of such writings in the thirties. But we mention this only to show that the Sinhalese have, in a sense, had the words put into their mouths, in a way not dissimilar to the narrator in *Windmill in Barbados*. The most important factor is clarity and a more 'difficult' translation might have obscured the impression Wright was trying to convey.

The community who are gathered at this meeting-place are all dressed in the same white robes and are concentrating on the same material - the 'sermon'. Wright frames each person in the same way. Not even the Sermon-reader is held up as anyone of particular value. The camera's slow pan is indicative of the slow and dreamy mood of the religion in Wright's eyes.

The final sequence in this first section features the pilgrims at the shrine each holding branches of the Bodhi Tree - the tree under which the Buddha is said to have gained enlightenment. Wright focuses on the group as they all kneel together before the shrine. The final shots feature the old man ringing the bell and the bird flying over the lake. These shots are interspersed with flashes to the stone Buddha. Those at the mountain top have reached their goal and now celebrate the Buddha. But even here Wright does not frame the old man in the 'heroic' fashion often used in the Movement to signify the dignity of man. He is shot side-on ringing the bell in middle-distance. None, but the Buddha is seen to be above any other in this community.

This first section of the film is very beautiful but we can note in Wright's presentation of the pilgrims some affinities with the community ethic of the Movement.

For example, Buddhism demands that the follower remove the sin of individuality from his heart and that he devote himself to the religion and its tenets. What Wright has given us here is a people who seem to have these priorities in the 'right' order. By discussing the religion first, Wright seems to be saying that religion is the most important factor in the life of the people. Now this may well have been true but there is a social side to the religion that would have appealed to a follower of Grierson. Wright's interpretation of the Sinhalese thus far re-states the priorities in the Calvinist system of order. First and foremost comes God who is the centre of life and the reason for living. Secondly comes the community in the service of God. Any individual that looks like breaking the community is excluded. We are not suggesting that Buddhism is Calvinism in Eastern dress. What we are saying is that Wright has presented us with a community which holds God at its centre and is bound together in worship of Him. In this way we can make a connection with Calvinism. This is a theme we will develop in the following pages.

2. The Virgin Island.

The title of this section conjures up all sorts of questions about how

'virginal' the island actually is We saw in our introduction that the island had been occupied by outsiders for over 300 years and that in the 1930's the British colonists and the Tamils made up a large section of the population What we want to look at here is what Wright seems to have meant by 'Virgin' and why he chose to present the island in this manner

This ten minute section is primarily concerned with the work processes of the native Sinhalese The words used to describe them are not Wright's but those of Robert Knox [41] But in choosing such a text Wright suggests that these processes have not changed since 1680

The first thing we note is that those in the community have strictly delineated roles and tasks After a shot of the women at a stream we hear - 'it belongeth only to the women to fetch both wood and water' After they arrive at the house we hear what the men do - 'All except ironwork they make themselves' The men are seen weaving at an ancient machine and Wright focuses on the spinning wheel with the sort of concentration that recalls *Industrial Britain* Even the smallest of the children has a role to play in the community and we see an infant pounding mud at the side of a partly built house In these few opening moments the theme is set - the Sinhalese are a working people who know their place in the community Wright does not criticise this and admires the efficiency of their organisation He appears to find something satisfactory about a community in which each member knows his place and in praising this suggests that such traditions are worth upholding We are left to wonder whether, for example, the women were happy fetching wood and water

Further to this it is because they know they live in tradition that they have survived for so long We hear that it is 'reckoned for a great shame to work with them for hire' and 'few here are to be found who will do so' Wright finds something praiseworthy in the independence of the Sinhalese But one 'accidental' effect of this speech is that we are reminded that the Sinhalese were having to adjust to the unspecified 'them' as early as 1680 - the time Knox was writing For the rest of this section Wright makes no further criticism or mention of 'them' - he will leave this to the next section

In our introduction we learned that Ceylon is not a Virgin Island. But for Wright it is important to point out their working traditions have survived the island's invaders. It is notable that all the crafts featured have a picturesque aspect and this makes for an attractive work-scene. In this way Wright takes the same approach to the workers as he did in *Windmill in Barbados* where the islanders also performed picturesque tasks on a sunlit island. Perhaps the director was suggesting that Ceylon, despite its history of invasions, still manages to maintain a lifestyle of its own. The people have adjusted to their circumstances and adapted. But Wright only hints at this and prefers to present the craft of the Sinhalese as part of their nature which has been undisturbed on the Virgin Island.

The good life of the Sinhalese is seen as inspired by religious belief which is related to their sense of communion with nature. To illustrate this Wright stresses the connection between the people and the animals. For example in one scene a mother bathing her child is followed with a shot of an elephant tending her own baby. The connection is obvious. Both are performing 'natural' functions as God intended. To make this point even clearer Wright follows this with a shot of a boy climbing up onto an elephant's back - the child is in harmony with nature. Such moments indicate Wright's conception of the people living a life that is virginal because it is unspoilt by outsiders.

The importance of the community is the central theme of this section. After a shot of the old men inside the house we see some children pounding mud to make bricks for another house. The women are seen attending to the framework. Everyone has a part to play in this society. Wright makes everybody active and in this we find another link to the ethos of the Movement - the community work for the good of their members. Perhaps the best example of this occurs in the rice fields.

A long shot introduces the subject. We see symmetrical fields of rice laid out 'in the English manner'. This is followed with a middle-distance shot of the women bending down to pick the rice. All of them wear the same costume and are in similar postures. We hear from 'Knox' that they tend their neighbour's field before moving onto the next. This appears to be a pre-industrial organisation, not

a part of the massive trade in tea. But the economic factors are not as important to Wright as the fact that the community work together. We have to assume that the peasants own this land - the section, coming as it does after the house-building by the people. But the facts about land ownership are not made clear here. Wright is careful to note the skills of the workers. The final shot in the process is that of an old man framed against the sky sifting the rice with a platter. All of this takes place in the sunshine and Wright portrays the scene as idyllic by interspersing leisurely fades to the clouds drifting lazily overhead. This work seems to be an activity undertaken for the community when they feel like it. We get no sense of need or of the economic forces acting on the community. The whole enterprise has the same tranquil air as the sugar plantation in *Windmill in Barbados*. But we now know that this self-sufficiency has been forced on the islanders by the Colonialists.

We have already noted elsewhere Wright's fondness for photographing children and there is much evidence of this in *Song of Ceylon*. What is interesting about his portrayal of the Sinhalese children is that although they have a certain exuberance in Wright's presentation they are principally workers with a sense of duty and responsibility towards the community.

The first shot of the children in this section has them drawing up water from a well. They walk along an ancient wooden pump while Leigh adds a creaking sound to underline the age of the machine. When the water is drawn out some of it splashes over one of the boys. But this is a purposeful activity - the children wash in the water and in the next shot one of the women takes a pail of water to one of the houses - that being their duty.

After the scene in the rice fields Wright shows a group of children running through the tall grass while the women look on. This scene has all the exuberance of youth but we soon discover that the children are running to school. We learn however that the school is not for education about the new world nor indeed anything to do with the twentieth century but a dancing school where the children will learn how to perform certain ritual movements.

The first shot of the school- which is in fact a hut in a forest clearing - has

the children bowing down before the dancing master This is a gesture of respect and as such similar to those adopted by our own children when, for example, they rise as a teacher enters the room The children are seen limbering up at a bar All of them wear the sari in the same fashion and have turban-style headgear The teacher arrives and the movement begins They follow his every step perfectly and Wright brings the camera round in a circle to capture the sense of movement Leigh accompanies the dance with music and adds some drums to provide rhythm And yet all we learn about the dance is that the children must keep their limbs supple to perform it The full significance of this activity does not become clear until the end of the film when we see these motions repeated in the ceremonial dance What is significant here is that the children are having their energies channelled into a dance and that this dance is a force that binds the community together It is not a secular activity or an example of the children at play but a socially cohesive force whose function is to celebrate the religion of the people Given that a large majority of the audience watching Wright's film would have been children his inclusion of this section may have provided a point of identification The children smile throughout the 'class' but the dance is not their expression or an indication of individuality but a form that has been handed down to them and one which they have to learn Once more the community is paramount

The dancing class is the only example of education the children receive If they live on a 'Virgin Island' they need no other But we are reminded of Grierson's words about 'western civilisation bearing down on the native village' and how important the services of education will be in adapting the 'natives' to the new world This question does not occur to us until the following section in which the modern world is seen to have an impact on the lives of the Sinhalese It is then that we wonder whether dancing classes will be enough

The final sequence also features children as the community come together by the side of a hut and gossip The children leave the group and dive into the water with their hands thrust towards the sky There is a certain humour in this scene and Wright cuts back to show the women laughing But even this does not represent the community at ease As the women talk they attend to their children's hair or start to cook a meal Only the children seem to be enjoying a

moment of leisure Wright's community is always working but this is no hardship because in such a climate it hardly seems to be work at all

In the first section we noticed how Wright set out the limits of 'difference' The 'otherness' of the Sinhalese was seen to operate in limits that would be acceptable to westerners In this second section he has further defined these limits so that the Sinhalese appear to be quite like 'us' For example they work together to build a community Work itself occupies much of their time and energy They have skilled craftsmen who, according to the seventeenth century narrator, are justifiably proud of their independence and there are indications - in the framing of the old men - that the children respect their elders They even go to school - just like our children do Perhaps it is more accurate to say that they are a model of the ideal community on an ideal island in which each member knows his place Does Wright mean them to be a good example to us? When he wrote that he hoped 'audiences would get something out of Ceylon' he was not merely pointing to the religious atmosphere but to the unwritten code the people follow

It need hardly be said that the film is the work of Westerners coming to terms with the 'Mysterious East' but it is instructive to note the techniques Wright uses to express his feelings about this other world

Leigh's music is graceful and charming but it only has the flavour of the east Part of the reason for this would have been the unavailability of authentic Indian music But the fact is that the music only goes half-way Leigh does not employ the time-scales of Indian music nor does he attempt their tonal range What we have is a synthesis of two styles The music is a Western translation of an Indian phenomenon We only mention this because Wright could have chosen to use more of the music of the dancers imported with him in the summer of 1934 This is not to say that Leigh's music is unsuccessful but that it is not radically difficult to understand The soundtrack is at its most effective when it directly accompanies the action - a good example being the drum beat that follows the rhythm pounded out by the women on ebony pestle and wooden mortar

Wright's choice of the Knox text is also interesting It is as if the man's

ghost still hovers over the island But quite apart from suggesting that little has changed in 300 years Wright has unconsciously revealed his attitude to the people In short - they are not permitted to speak After 300 years it is still Knox whom Wright chooses to explain the situation of the Sinhalese All we hear of the Sinhalese is an occasional laugh Wright, like Knox, is at one remove from the people For all of his obvious affection for the Sinhalese they never 'come out' of the film to meet us We are still looking at them through Western eyes and get no idea about their feelings or motivations This is an approach we have encountered before in Wright's work His concern with pattern and style leave no opportunity for the workers to speak for themselves for that might entail a rupture in the fabric of the film As a result our impression of the Sinhalese is one of a happy but rather one-dimensional people who simply work and endure In this respect the representation is not significantly different from the presentation of workers in the other films of the Movement

Towards the end of this section is a sequence involving a boy jeering at a fisherman standing knee-deep in the water We hear the boy joking and laughing at the man's expense and Wright cuts between the two In this way he conveys enough about their exchange for us to catch the humorous mood Finally the man rises out of the water and throws a net over the boy who struggles for a while while the fisherman laughs In this way Wright creates an attractive metaphor - the net represents the power of the community in which the boy is caught But this scene represents the limits of rebellion for the Sinhalese youth It is from the children that we expect change and development but in this film, and in others by Wright, their role is to accept and continue the traditions of their forefathers It is only the idyllic setting and mood of the film that prevents us from reading this as a rather reactionary idea What this section stresses above all is the importance of the community - a central theme of the work of the Movement

3. The sound of invasion.

The third section of the film is entitled Voices of Commerce and it was here that Wright said he intended to demonstrate the 'bloody-mindedness of capitalism' (Although we should perhaps bear in mind that this remark was made in

the late eighties) [42] This is the fastest section of the film and the one with the most experimentation with sound Wright has claimed his criticism was intended to come through the use of 'western' sounds in juxtaposition with eastern scenes It is intended to be contrasted with the idyllic scenes we have just witnessed in 'The Virgin Island'

The first scene features the sound of a train engine and the sight of an elephant in the forest The engine slows down as the elephant struggles to uproot the tree Eventually it crashes to the ground to the accompaniment of a cymbal and the 'voices of commerce' arrive on the soundtrack talking of market prices This is a very eloquent expression of the theme of invasion The voices and the train are seen as responsible for the destruction of the forest for 'New roads, new machinery and the development of natural resources' This sets the tone for what is to follow But what is interesting is that we never see the owners of these voices This effect works in two ways On the one hand there is something sinister about an 'unseen force' commanding the machines But then again not seeing the voices leaves us wondering exactly who is to blame All we know about them is that the majority are English, or rather speak the English language, and are concerned about the price of tea in the market They are certainly different from the Sinhalese in this respect but that is all we learn over the next ten minutes Rather than name those responsible Wright has chosen to be atmospheric about them instead of making an accusation It was in keeping with his style to create a mood rather than aim directly for those responsible

The second scene features a boy approaching a coconut tree As he presses his hands together in an attitude of prayer we hear the dour English voices reciting 'Yours Faithfully' as they close their letters The contrast is clear - a living faith is played against the cold courtesies of business The boy then climbs the tree and in a series of zip-pans Wright shows the coconuts falling to the ground We then hear a schoolgirl reciting the many uses to which these coconuts can be put in the West One child is seen labouring for another But once again we might point out that Wright's film would have had a large school audience and this would have been one way in which they could have made connection with their own world In this way a dull lecture on the colonies would have come alive The

connection between the two children and their separate cultures is made through the coconut but it is not clear whether Wright is making a criticism here. What we do not learn in the film is that the coconut trees being grown by the planters are a sacred symbol for the Sinhalese as well as having many practical uses. [43] The emphasis in this section is on the West and how it is using Ceylon's resources.

Wright pans a collection of coconut shells on the ground while we hear about the price of tea. The nuts are handled roughly and then thrown into a cart being hauled by an ox. Wright uses a hand-held camera to capture the lurching motion of the animal. The effect of the words and the picture combine to create a feeling of disorder which is created by the demands of the voices. Nature is being harnessed to industry rather than working for the islanders as in the preceding section.

Another example of mis-match occurs when we see an elephant struggling through the forest while we hear the clicking of a typewriter tapping one of the endless letters. The 'natural' tones that had been designated to the elephant earlier have been replaced by a mechanical and inappropriate sound. In this manner hard labour is contrasted with the ease of a typist. Strenuous effort is compared with the ease of work in the Western world.

The theme of invasion continues. The camera pans a collection of open coconuts lying on the ground, observing their decorative pattern, then dissolves into a shot of the radio-tower. The camera swings to take in the mast and then pulls down to a radio office and its inhabitants. In these three shots a connection is made between physical labour and how its fruits are translated into the codes of the West. In the radio office we see the operators but the sounds that predominate are those of the radio signals. These blimps and squeaks almost obscure the muffled French and German voices in the background. This is all part of the discordant 'song' but Wright has avoided directly attacking the world of commerce. Indeed by including French and German voices he obscures the fact that it is the English who are primarily responsible for the situation in Ceylon. It now seems to be a European conspiracy, and while it is true that international finance was involved this constitutes a rather vague target. Wright's point is that what is native

to the islanders is taken from them and turned into a commodity with exchange-value and that this new value is expressed in a language alien to the natives

To remind us of the idyllic world of the Sinhalese Wright re-introduces some music from the previous section to accompany a shot of several natives picking tea. The music is in a melancholy minor key. In a long shot Wright shows us the barren trees and the islanders in the corner of the picture with baskets on their backs. When Wright moves in for a close-up he photographs them from the side. This is an approach different from the head-on shots of earlier. The voices now return and talk about the quality of 'Pikkas'. This juxtaposition turns the workers into employees of the invisible forces. But this scene raises another question about Wright's presentation of the islanders.

In the first place just 20 per cent of the Sinhalese worked for the tea planters. Wright's cutting between this section and the last would suggest that their world is being manipulated solely by the planters but this was only partly true. If Wright were to explain this it would complicate his film. He is searching for atmosphere.

What is undoubtedly true is that Ceylon is being invaded by British commercial interests and this has been going on a long time. But if this was true then why did the people not resist such an invasion? The picture we get from Wright is that this peace-loving nation are too mild to fight back. The problem here is that Wright is expressing his private discontent. It is not seen to be the reaction of the Sinhalese.

We should also entertain the possibility that some of the islanders - perhaps the children - were not entirely unopposed to the Western invasion. It offered them a paltry sum of money and a chance to escape the community. But once again to consider this would destroy the community and fragment the pattern Wright has been so careful to create.

After the brief sequence with the tea-pickers Wright deals with the factory

side of the industry This is the only time in the film that Wright uses library footage [44] The noise of heavy engines dominates the soundtrack while we see workers throwing tea, or perhaps sifting it in a factory In this shot the islanders are far removed from the village life on the 'Virgin Island' The activity seems dull and monotonous and the setting turns the workers into parts of the industrial machine This scene acts as a prelude to the end of the section in which the action moves from the factory to the dock where a group of men stand around supervising the loading of materials onto a ship While at the dockside the music changes and Leigh introduces a new theme perhaps signifying the destination of the cargo, or representing the mix of peoples at the scene Interspersed with this music are the low moans of a liner as it sails into the dock Contrasts are made between the fragile boats of the Sinhalese and the massive cargo ships coming to take the produce of the island away In this way Wright has continued the progress started by the train at the start of this section which appeared to be slowed down by the elephant but has now reached its destination - the port and the long way home The soundtrack is less congested than it has been earlier because there is less conflict with the community and more a concentration on life at the port

Comparisons can be made between this section and *Cargo from Jamaica* and *Drifters* In both films these docks represented important centres for the workers *Cargo from Jamaica* concentrated on the hard work being done by the labourers without actually saying who was responsible for them In Voices of Commerce the dock is also the place where the fruits of exploitation are harvested but once again Wright is non-specific in his attack Like Grierson in *Drifters* he is interested in the many different activities and costumes that can be seen there As much as Wright has said he wanted to criticise capitalism he found it difficult to resist an opportunity to dazzle the viewer with a display of technique - an example of this being the cutting between the various forms of transport at the harbour Another connection with *Drifters* can be made because those who performed the hard labour - fishermen and tea-pickers are forgotten at the dock Their purpose is over In both cases the product is about to go to the corners of the Empire We noted earlier that Grierson was both melancholic about the way the work of the fishermen was forgotten, as well as being respectful of their craft If we are to interpret Wright's dockyard scene as a critique of capitalism we should recall the

juxtapositions of sound and the earlier idylls, and make the connection ourselves. There are, for example, no cuts back to the workers. Instead of this we get a shot of an anonymous town house and some of the words repeated from the 'Sermon on the Mount' -

'The crown of the Virgin Islands, rich in mines of all kinds of precious stones, like a maid decked with jewels'

This is used ironically here for these words describe the island in its mystical aspect. It also provides a contrast to the very unpoetic language used by the 'voices'. Wright's film is a far more complex work than Grierson's but the message of this section is the same - the modern world starts at the harbour where the connections with the new industries can be made. And yet the relative calm of Wright's final dockyard shot compared with the noise and confusion in the section's opening would suggest that he finds these industrial connections less of a problem than we might have thought earlier.

To understand the force of this section the viewer has to bear in mind the unspoilt picture of the island Wright presented in 'The Virgin Island'. Once again a certain sophistication in reading is called for. We now know that Ceylon is far from virginal and that the modern world has made efforts to exploit 'natural resources'. This leads us to ask what Wright intended by presenting Ceylon as an idyllic paradise. He was not mounting an historical reconstruction à la Flaherty but re-presenting part of the island as he experienced it. We are reminded of the two parts of *Windmill in Barbados* in which the windmills were replaced by machinery but only after Wright had demonstrated some 'esoteric lip-smacking photography' as Grierson put it.

Ceylon is certainly no longer a 'Virgin Island' but how far have the forces of the West gone in exploiting her? To what extent have the old traditions died out? The film gives no answer to these questions. It makes a protest that is well-meant but not carefully aimed. Part of the reason for this approach had to do with Wright's tentative position vis-à-vis the sponsors. But we should also note that this is very much Wright's style.

We wonder how the Sinhalese felt about the invasion of their island Wright presents them as simply following the orders of their unseen masters This approach is no different from the strategy adopted for the workers in *Cargo from Jamaica* who also endured apparently without protest It is Wright who decided to fashion a subtle protest We get no idea of the power of the Sinhalese If they wanted to stop the invasion could they? Because they are seen as powerless it is possible to read the film as the triumph of capitalism rather than a critique of it After all the train does reach its destination and the work of exploiting the 'natural resources' of the island is done without any protests from the work-force Furthermore Ceylon, like the other colonies, is seen to have resources which the west actually needs

What we keep returning to is the question of Wright's style *Song of Ceylon* was praised in intellectual circles in The Times, Cinema Quarterly and at the BFI for its innovative use of sound and this is the section in which these experiments are most obvious But how will audiences in general have reacted to Wright's very modern ideas? Would it have required a degree of sophistication for the viewer to see what Wright was trying to say? The film is so stylish that one is drawn away from the subject matter at times and left to consider Wright's mastery of the medium

We began this section by saying that Wright wanted to criticise the 'bloody-mindedness of capitalism' but we have seen that his style has made this critique quite sophisticated and therefore not that easy to read Perhaps more importantly he has failed to give the Sinhalese a chance to express their feelings about the situation The result is a record of a sympathetic Englishman upset at the developments made by nothing more specific than 'Voices of Commerce'

4. The Apparel of a God.

The final section of the film comprises three inter-locking parts which also make connection with the first section - 'The Buddha'

The section begins with a shot of the stone Buddha at the temple. The camera is positioned at the side of the statue's head so that half of the screen is filled with his impassive expression. After a little radio-sound dies away, the slow and mournful theme music returns. Into this shot comes a coolie on his way to the statue. He is dressed in the costume of the Sinhalese with a white loincloth and a loose turban on his head. On his back is a pole with two bundles attached to either end. The small jerky movements of the man are contrasted with the solidity of the Buddha. Wright has said that the following sequence was intended to demonstrate his feeling of communion with the man [45]. This is something we should consider for it was intended to be Wright's expression of a personal feeling. What we want to ask is how 'individual' the man really is for this is the first time in the film that Wright concentrates on an individual rather than the community.

After this long opening shot Wright now changes camera position so that he is at the man's level looking up at the Buddha. The camera studies his preparations for worship - the rearrangement of his sari, the untying of the bundles and the cautious approach. These details are inter-cut with pans up to the Buddha.

The man walks towards the statue with an offering of rice which he places on a stone step. Wright then switches position to give an extreme close-up of his face. At the bottom of the frame we can see the tips of his fingers pressed together in prayer. This close-up is the longest in the film and is designed to represent Wright's experience of communion. But we also note the intense concentration on the man's face as he stares into the camera lens. This shot is cut to the sleeping Buddha as if the man were trying hard to merge with him.

This whole sequence has an aura of secrecy about it, as if the man was sneaking away from his work to worship. This reading is supported when we think of the mass activity that follows this scene and by the fact that he arrives with bundles on his back. He is also separated from the community. And yet he is so clearly a member of that community - he wears the same costume and worships the same God. The link is made even more explicit when we recall the scripture

reading in 'The Buddha' Here Wright demonstrates that there are other forms of worship apart from community celebration This scene is to be contrasted with the mass of people at the end of the film It is not without significance that this section follows the 'Voices of Commerce' in which there were no signs of the Buddha - apart from the quote at the end of the section Wright suggests that the Buddha is a sustaining force for the individual and reminds us of the central position of religion to the Sinhalese

The scene with the coolie has a western theme in that the gestures of prayer and the offering recalls the western Harvest Festival Once again Wright defines the limits of difference by suggesting that the Sinhalese forms of worship are not dissimilar from our own In such a way the potentially alien qualities of Buddhism are toned down and made acceptable

As the man returns to his work - to the left of the frame - Wright returns to a shot of the Buddha and then pans up to a dissolve over the clouds while the voice of Wendt returns 'and became Goatama' This technique is reminiscent of the close of the first section and it is here to demonstrate the mystical air of the Buddha

The next scene provides a link between the coolie and the final dance by featuring all the people moving in the same direction - to the right of the screen This direction is significant when we recall the leftward push commanded by the voices earlier The train and the cattle and the boys had all been moving to the left where the dock was finally located The engine that had started the great push at the start of that section finally met up with other machinery in the final moments Another clue about the significance of this move to the right is the fact that the women are all wearing the tea-baskets on their backs - the signs of their labour for the commercially-orientated voices They are now moving away from all that these forces represent

The idea that this represents a procession is reinforced when we note that all the members of the community are involved Even the elephants join the long thin line of people as they move to the right Wright's camera position returns to that of an 'outsider' He photographs the line from an aerial position and then from

the side but not from behind. In this way he makes it clear that he is not part of this procession. It is something the people have to do. All we notice is the one-direction of the people with its suggestion of resolution.

Intercut with this march are shots that remind us of village life. Wright positions his camera inside one of the huts but only to note that the house is almost empty. We see a mother running after her child and then pick it up before making her way to the right - presumably to join the march. If the villages are deserted and the people have moved away where are they going?

Wright now positions his camera behind a bush to see some of the people arriving and taking their seats on benches by a hut in a clearing in the forest. By adopting such an approach we are turned into spectators again, rather like we were at the beginning of the film. Once more we are in the role of outsiders peering in at another world.

After noting that people of all ages have arrived at the clearing Wright now switches to a detailed examination of the costume worn by the dancers. To the words describing the celestial body of the Buddha we see the dancers putting on appropriate ornaments. For example when Wendt tells of the 'Beams of light that shone a fathom round his head' we get a shot of one of the dancers adjusting his jewelled crown etc. The function of this recital is to explain to those of us in the West the significance of the ritual. There is no evidence that the Sinhalese are 'hearing' this reading. It is assumed they understand. Wright is again translating a foreign phenomenon for western minds and in the process limiting the 'difference' factor as well as robbing a little mystery from the scene.

Wright has used a close-up to examine these costumes which are certainly as alien to us as those worn by the Devil Dancers. But in this case there is none of the fear that we felt with the natives in the forest at the start of the film. Part of the reason for this is that we have come to know the people and have gained a rough understanding of the religion - in a sense the film has been designed to educate us about this. But we are also reminded that this is presented as the 'true' religion of the people in contrast to the horror of the unknown. This

celebration is a way of banishing that memory but it obscures the significance of the 'Devil Dancers' for the people

When the costumes have all been fitted Wright pans the dancers as they hold their positions. Then a cut to the waiting audience, a return to the dancers, a close-up of an old man ringing a hand-bell and then the dance begins. Wright re-creates the frenzy of the dance by cutting rhythmically between the drummers and the old man and then focusing on the strange convoluted actions of the dancers in the ritual. Obviously this ritual has a religious significance but it is also important as a socially cohesive force for the community.

The movements of the dance also serve to remind us of the boys in the dancing school whose own motions are much the same as those seen here. The dance is not an expression of the individual demonstrating his own ideas and feelings but a ritual designed to unite the community around the image of the Buddha. Wright makes this plain by dissolving from the dancers to images of the Buddha in the stone temple. The end result of all this fevered activity is a celebration of the force that sustains the people. Wright has said that he considered this ritual of celebration the most important factor in the life of the Sinhalese and the foundation for their community life [46]. In a reference to the first section he makes it clear that the Buddha was their salvation. These rites take place in the light rather than the dark of the forest. Yet while this may be Wright's interpretation, all of this splendour leaves unanswered questions Wright raised in the 'Voices of Commerce' section about the economic and political control of the island. Indeed the religion is presented as such a power in the land that it appears to be a valid excuse for avoiding such issues.

The community have all appeared to move away from the commercial world and turned their back on it but this hardly represents a protest confined, as this activity is, to another section. At best the people are demonstrating the Buddhist ethic of peaceful demonstration but even this seems a little strained.

The final scene is a repeat of the first except that this time Wright pans from right to left - the opposite direction to that he began with. As the camera

moves over the foliage the soundtrack is silent and then the screen fades to black. This return to the foliage completes the circle motif which was to gain a profound significance for Wright in 1948 when he began reading Jung. But such a circular pattern also suggests something entirely alien to the Griersonian philosophy. It suggests that Ceylon is a self-contained world with no links to the rest of the Empire. The film does not finish by 'reaching out' to the rest of the world in the way that *Drifters* did. Despite the fact that Wright gives Ceylon some link to the rest of world the director does not finish with this message. The reason for this is tied up with Wright's intimate experience of the island which was of primary importance to him when cutting the film. But to close the film in this manner is to suggest that the Sinhalese are themselves securely 'wrapped' in the religion to the extent that the outside world is of little importance. This is very much in the style of Wright's work. The pattern is paramount and the people are given places within it. Wright's own feelings coupled with the influence of the religion led him to construct priorities which justified relegating the political and economic matters to a poor second place behind the atmospheric elements.

It is because *Song of Ceylon* is such an attractive film and an engrossing experience that it almost seems perverse to ask what we actually learn about the island. Wright was sent to Ceylon to make four one-reelers about the island for the Tea Propaganda Board. Originally the subjects were to cover industry and culture on the island.

but in all the shooting, our idea, apart from the production of certain one-reelers, was to achieve a co-ordination of all the primary elements in Ceylon into a construction which should carry a conviction not merely of what Ceylon now superficially is but out of what Ceylon stands for in the line of that vital history which is measured in terms of statues, monuments, religion and of human activity. It can be seen how the inter-relation of our three high spots forms the controlling factor of all the material
[47]

We can see from this that Wright is not very concerned with what 'Ceylon

now superficially is' and as a result the picture we get of Ceylon is a mix between the past and the present. Wright is concerned with 'vital history', not with the here and now. But what can he have meant by this phrase? In referring to the statues and monuments he is clearly relegating the importance of economics and politics. Furthermore his concentration on 'construction' lends weight to our contention that his chief concern is with the pattern of the film.

For all the grace of Wright's design his account of the people is only superficially charming. We wonder whether the Sinhalese were concerned about 'vital history' or the forces bringing changes to their island. We get very little idea of what motivates the people. In Wright's view the religion is clearly of fundamental importance but even this is not given a clear philosophical or ethical background. It glitters on the surface and appears to attract much respect and devotion- but why? The people are independent but it is not pointed out that the circumstances affecting the island forced them to be so. It is a character trait much in need of an explanation. Above all the people themselves are not individuals but part of a community grouped around the Buddha.

We have already established that the notion of community was central to the Movement and Wright's earlier work proved his own adherence to this notion. But Ceylon was a moving experience that altered his way of thinking. What is odd is that Wright has produced a film that represents Grierson's ideas about community without apparently trying to. Historical data points to the fact that there were several communities living on the island with conflicting interests. Could it have been that Wright's community was as perfect as he presented it? Those working with them 'for hire' would have had ambivalent feelings about the colonialists. How did the Sinhalese feel about the Tamil Hindus? Were the youth interested in change? What effects did the Westerners have on their lifestyle? Wright's community seems stuck in time. Ceylon appears to be an ideal place where man can carry out the craft traditions the Movement were so fond of, and where the children are obedient and there are no masters. No individuals speak through the film to tell us how true this is. Instead we have Wright, Leigh and Knox to speak for them.

The film is also very vague about the forces invading the island. Wright could have chosen to be more specific about the colonialists but if he had that would have meant specificity and perhaps even naming someone and that might have disturbed the atmosphere of the film. It is this question of atmosphere and mood that is essential.

Wright's over-riding concern with the aesthetic found its finest expression in *Song of Ceylon*. The film fulfilled Wright's private criteria of an art-form. Every detail was carefully blended into the fabric of the film.

In the first section Wright concentrates on the pilgrims ascending the mountain. On the soundtrack we hear we hear from Wendt of the sacred footprint of the Buddha that lies at the top of this 'vast and high mountain'. When Wright cuts to a boy the soundtrack is quiet while the camera lingers on the feet of the child, close together, balancing on a rock under a few inches of water. This is clearly intended to be a reference to the footprint of the Buddha just mentioned. But Wright follows this with a pan up from the child and then dissolves to the misty mountain-top. The sequence is completed with the words 'vast and high mountain'. In this fragment, Wright connects the purity of the child with his aspiration - to climb the Peak. The clarity of the child's feet in the sparkling water contrast with the clouds surrounding the distant mountains. Even in small moments like these Wright points to the meaning of the pilgrimage for young and old - the salvation represented by the temple of the Buddha at the Peak.

The first section of the film is almost entirely linked by dissolves as Wright tries to evoke the mystical atmosphere of the Peak. But there is one particular scene he captures that has a magical power of its own. After the sermon and the last stages of the climb Wright pans a group of pilgrims standing at a mountain ledge with their arms outstretched. At first we might take this to be a sign of devotion. But Wright slowly revolves the camera and focuses on the valley below where a great triangular shadow lies - 'composed, it seems, of strange vapours, for it lies, not on the land but a little above it so that the hills and valleys appear veiled beneath'. Wright's graceful camera action reveals this shadow which is in itself another reminder of the 'vast and high mountain'. Our position is that of

fellow-worshippers absorbed by this strange phenomena. The cinematic value of this shadow is obvious. We might note that Cave was also fortunate enough to capture this phenomenon on film during his expedition [48]. But even though this scene is memorable it does not strike us as particularly odd or unusual because it is part of the mood that Wright has so carefully developed.

A far more technical and calculated example of Wright's style occurs in the second section and again features children. The camera is at a low angle observing an old man sifting rice. The next shot features two women beating the rice out of the husk and is part of the process. Here then is a smooth transition and an easy pace. But then Wright switches to a middle-distance shot of the children walking through the fields. At first they move in an orderly line as if they intended to keep the beat dictated by the women. Leigh then begins to add a faster beat with some, possibly native, percussion. Wright now features a close-up of the wooden pestle and ebony mortar 'keeping time' to Leigh's beat and then cuts to the children as they run through the fields. In this short sequence Wright manages to convey youthful exuberance and excitement with the older more stately beat of the elders. One does not cancel out the other. They co-exist in a musical harmony that symbolises the social cohesion of the community. Wright's control becomes particularly evident when this frantic group arrive at their dancing masters. Rather than track the group as they run past, Wright now adopts a fixed position before gradually building another beat with the dance. It is possible to read the ebony pestle and wooden mortar as phallic symbols and the women as mothers and such a reading might reinforce our ideas about the use of rhythm. But what is interesting about this little sequence is that it underlines the care the director has taken to give significance to every moment. Despite the leisurely pace of the film nothing is allowed to reach the screen without being fully exploited for its stylistic potential.

Perhaps the best example of Wright's painstaking method occurs in the fourth section. At the start of this final section of the film we see the coolie approaching the Buddha. Wright begins this sequence with a middle-distance shot of the man from the rear rising through the bushes. The next shot is the one already discussed in which the camera observes the coolie from its vantage point.

alongside the head of the Buddha. What links these shots - quite apart from the man himself - is the sound of radio bleeps and squeaks that seem to have strayed over from the 'Voices of Commerce' section. Although this disquieting sound lasts less than ten seconds it is worth mentioning. Is it intended to represent the business world from which the natives have returned? This reading is supported by the fact that the sound is cut dead by the presence of the Buddha whose own mystique is evoked by Leigh using some mellow tones on a wind instrument. Could these squeaks be a reference to the radio towers - the metal totems that appeared in the previous section - whose power is replaced by the other-worldly magic of the Buddha statue? These are merely two possible readings for this fragment. The point is that Wright's film is such a meticulously crafted work that these sound-image juxtapositions give rise to a variety of meanings and interpretations.

Even the way Wright utilises sound demonstrates his painstaking method. For example, the opening scenes of the film when Leigh's percussive score adds menace to the strange actions of the Devil Dancers, or the lyrical strings that accompany the pans of the valley from Adam's Peak. Here the music actually helps the viewer towards an understanding of the images. We can gain a sense of security from the match of picture and sound. This use of sound is hardly exclusive to *Song of Ceylon* - Wright had already used music in this fashion in his earlier work. It is only when he departs from the norm that experimentation begins.

Sound is sometimes used in the film to disquiet and disorientate the viewer. Perhaps the clearest examples of this occur in the 'Voices of Commerce' section when the natural sounds of earlier are replaced with those that do not seem to fit. The sound of a train engine hardly fits with that of an elephant. The mis-match is even clearer when we recall that the sound designated to the elephant was a low tone on a bassoon. The sound of a typewriter to accompany the picking of tea that follows the heavy movements of the elephant does have a connection in that both typing and picking are delicate tasks but the typewriter is a tool of the voices and the women have already been designated 'lyrical' by the use of music in the previous section. This is what Eisenstein called the 'non-naturalistic' use of sound. [49] The intention is to confound the viewer's

expectations Wright makes this use doubly effective because he has already suggested what is the 'correct' sound The mis-match of sound in the 'voices' section is certainly creative but whether it can be read as a critique of capitalism is quite another matter and dependent upon the ability of the audience to read the text the way Wright wanted them to But if this is dependent upon a certain cultural sophistication the same cannot be said of the third category

The gongs and cymbals Wright uses to signify the presence of the Buddha are meant to signify also glimpses of Nirvana or Sartori or quite simply insight These sounds are not part of the Buddhist ceremonies nor are they seen to be They represent Wright and Leigh's attempt to match the appearance of the Buddha with appropriate tones The disquieting use of sound is the result of an intellectual process But these gongs are meant to work simultaneously with the image They only 'work' if it is understood that Buddha and gong are one and the same phenomenon This is something that has to be grasped intuitively and as such is open to viewers of all cultures If the harmonious use of sound follows the conventions adopted in western cinema then the disquieting sounds have affinities with the experimental music being produced in the period

It would of course be possible to base an analysis purely on the style of the film Our purpose here has simply been to draw attention to the fact that despite being a film rich in associations *Song of Ceylon* is also a superbly crafted work and an impressive tribute to Wright's skills as a cutter only four and a half years after he joined the unit

But we must point out that much of what Wright was trying to convey would have been accessible only to those capable of comprehending such a sophisticated work It would have taken a knowledge of editing techniques and an acquaintance with the latest word from the Russian avant-garde to know that Wright was trying to be critical of capitalism in 'Voices of Commerce' Because of his over-riding concern with style Wright could avoid facts about politics and economics and make his critique part of the mood It was not that Wright was ignorant of these forces but that his taste was for the aesthetic

We conclude this analysis appropriately enough with an extract from a letter written to Grierson by a Sinhalese in 1938

I am not sure that its poetical presentation was fully appreciated. It contains a good deal of matter relating to the Sinhalese customs but possibly the appeal to the Sinhalese to whom it should be a source of delight and congratulation is not as strong as it might be in the absence of - 1 a commentary or dialogue in Sinhalese and 2 the absence of a story [50]

What this writer makes clear is that although *Song of Ceylon* is a beautiful film it is a minority taste appealing to an audience sophisticated enough to understand its complexities, as well as sharing its priorities. It serves as a further reminder of Wright's rather esoteric approach to film-making

Conclusion

Song of Ceylon has been hailed by even the most hostile of critics such as Hood and Arnes as a masterpiece of lyrical film-making [51] When we consider that the director was only 27 when he made the film then it is undeniably quite an achievement In the following we will discuss the meaning of Wright's style But before we can do this we should briefly discuss the 'mystical' aspects

We have already discussed Breistrose and his ideal impressionistic film in which poetry, images and sounds work work together on the consciousness of the viewer In *Song of Ceylon* Wright crafted just this sort of film In a sense he was prepared for Ceylon by Flaherty who taught him to have respect for his subject and to 'get inside' it by adopting the instinctual approach Wright's instinct was at work when he captured the bird flying over the lake But the experience that really crystallised Buddhism for Wright was the 'Man confronting God' sequence at the temple Here Wright went past instinct and towards intuition and experienced what has been called the 'participation mystique' This occurs when the level of consciousness is lowered -

The affinity which all the things bearing the stamp of 'mineness' have with my personality is aptly characterised by Levy-Bruhl as 'participation mystique' It is an irrational, unconscious identity, arising from the fact that anything which comes into contact with me is not only itself, but also a symbol [52]

This line of enquiry could shift the debate into the province of the so-called 'art film' Critics like Don Friedrickson have compared some sequences in *Song of Ceylon* to those in the work of Bunuel and Fellini [53] In a similar vein we might discuss how Wright's masterpiece touches on those enquiries into the 'mysterious East' conducted by 'abstract' artists such as Miro, Klee and Kandinsky in the thirties They spoke of how they gained access to another reality in their work and their approaches to the subject do link-up with Wright's recollections For example, rather than trying to 'force his way into reality, Miro let himself be infused by it and by the sensations and state of mind it aroused in him' [54] The paintings

of these men remain difficult to read unless the viewer abandons his traditional ideas about what painting should do and opens himself up to their imagistic power

If we took such an approach to *Song of Ceylon* we might be able to discuss the 'separate reality' Wright claimed to have gained (an insight into) whilst in Ceylon. He has always maintained that it was the force of his experiences there which shaped the film when he was editing it in the far from mystical atmosphere of Soho Square. But to follow this path would be to obscure the fact that Wright was supposed to be a form of public servant explaining the workings of democracy to an audience who needed to be reminded of their responsibilities as citizens in the modern world. For all the artistry of the film we should not forget that Wright subverted his original brief and chose instead to weave a personal and introspective pattern.

Song of Ceylon was clearly important to the director but when we look at the film what we are seeing is very much a private experiment, a seamless web, perfectly crafted but ultimately not a very informative or even progressive film. We saw earlier how Wright linked the 'three high points' and how this was central to his conception of the film. We could analyse this pattern and perform a reading to explain Wright's point. But in performing such a task we make our own contribution to the myth as well as appearing to justify Wright's essentially private exercise. As we noted earlier he saw the project as 'my film', as a 'mandala' for himself, as 'a magic circle'. He was permitted such a luxury because of his prestige within the Movement and the artistry of the film. The job of making the four one-reelers was quietly handed to an unknown assistant [55]

And yet for all the talk of mysticism we should note that the circular pattern and the impressionistic treatment of the islanders is not substantially different from that we have noted in Wright's other films. Perhaps the most significant factor is that work still plays a fundamental part in determining the relationships between people. Furthermore, for all of his affection for the Sinhalese they do not come out of the frame to meet us. Our position remains that of spectators passively receiving information about a culture whose main difference from us is reduced to a question of environment.

If the film was an advertising exercise intended to sell more tea or at least to give a good impression of the sponsoring company it is reasonable to ask whether seeing *Song of Ceylon* would make someone drink more tea. It seems almost impolite to ask such a question given the aura that surrounds the film but as the film was sponsored by a commercial operation such an inquiry should not be out of place.

We have no wish to detract from praise of Wright. Our analysis has shown that *Song of Ceylon* is undeniably a finely crafted film and a tribute to Wright's skill as a photographer and editor. But it should be clear by now that Wright was very much an individual pursuing his own ends rather than simply towing the line. As an artist he is worthy of praise but as a public servant his work seems distinctly esoteric and introspective.

And yet curiously enough there is a point of contact with Wright's Greek studies. We noted earlier how in an opening sequence Wright had re-stated the Calvinist priorities and the place of God in the centre of the community. In this respect the film can be linked to Grierson's creed. However the 'mundane' aspect of Buddhism is known as 'The Middle Way'. The ideal in everyday behaviour for the Buddhist meant the avoidance of extremes and the need to steer a middle-course in life. This is precisely the Greek virtue of moderation, striving for the mean between two extremes. In Ceylon Wright discovered a sort of gentle tropical liberalism whose easy-going code and fondness for tradition accorded perfectly with the Greek ideal he found so impressive. We need hardly point out that such a presentation gives the impression of a happy status quo and as such was precisely the sort of picture those in the EMB could be proud of. For Wright, as we have seen, pleasing himself was the most important factor.

Once again we have to ask who constituted the audience for *Song of Ceylon*. By the end of 1934 the majority audiences for the films of the Movement was still composed of children. Like the West Indian films Wright's depiction of the Sinhalese does little to advance the stereotype of the native advanced in the schoolbooks of the period. We might also note that Wright's concentration on trade

and industry in the second and third sections of the film re-create the myth of tropical abundance and bring to mind the earlier films

This question of the film's various meanings can be related to the new administrative and technical problems of the time the Movement were experiencing in their new home at the GPO. Although the film was sponsored by the Ceylon Tea Propaganda Board, Wright was working on GPO time and the Treasury asked how such a project related to the operations of the Post Office [56]. As far as they were concerned the film was 'other business'. However they did give permission for it to be finished. But in the years that followed there was to be considerable conflict between Grierson and the Treasury as the boss gave sanction to a variety of projects whose precise relevance to the GPO escaped the Treasury [57].

In the commercial sector Wright's film faced difficulties from two sides. His esoteric approach made distributors and exhibitors wary of booking his films. The work of the Movement played free on the art-house circuit and was seen by the trade as constituting unfair conditions [58]. Similar complaints about the esoteric nature of the films and their unprofitability were to plague Grierson and his followers in the future.

Wright and the Movement also had to contend with the rise of the double-feature which was edging the short film out of the market. In 1935 the Board of Trade reported that '1,600 of the 5,000 cinemas submitting quota returns reported that they no longer included short films in their programmes' [59]. And so even with the support of the most enlightened critics, there were fewer outlets for films of 'specialised appeal' like *Song of Ceylon* [60].

In Ceylon, Wright discovered a colony in which harmony prevailed between the British Civil servants and their Sinhalese counter-parts. He presented a land relatively untouched by the inroads of the West where the craft traditions the Movement were so fond of were still operational. Furthermore he discovered a community that seemed self-regulating which based its life around religion. When we compare the situation in Ceylon to other parts of the Empire then the

island does seem like a virgin paradise. The 'gradual development of self-government proceeded with remarkably little friction', and the leading personality on the island - a hefty tea planter named D S Senenyake - managed 'to combine a belief in nationalism with collaboration with the British' [61]. In Ceylon Wright had the option of making the sort of film even the old Colonialists could have been proud of. And yet given all these factors Wright chose to make a film for himself and ignored all of the more unique aspects of British rule on the island. Whether the film is a criticism of colonialism or a harmonious picture of the status quo is debatable. What the film really informs us about how the artist Wright turned the complexities of Ceylon into an attractive pattern whose subtleties remain fascinating and whose exact meanings remains a puzzle for viewers to ponder.

Notes

- 1 Interview with Wright by author
- 2 Letter from Wright to author (Undated Spring,1986)
- 3 Interview with Wright by author
- 4 The Times 14/07/33
- 5 Interview with Wright by author
- 6 L. Woolf, Growing. an Autobiography of the Years 1904-1911 (London, 1961), p 18
- 7 D R Snodgrass, Ceylon. An Export Economy in Transition (Illinois, 1966), p 35
- 8 Ibid
- 9 G Huxley, Both Hands (London,1970), p 171
- 10 C Cross, The Fall of the British Empire(London,1968), p 133
- 11 Snodgrass, p 38
- 12 Ibid, p 42/3
- 13 Cross, op cit , p 134
- 14 Ibid
- 15 Interviews with Wright by author
- 16 Ibid
- 17 Ibid
- 18 Ibid
- 19 H Cave, Picturesque Ceylon (London,1895), p 73
- 20 Letter from Wright to his mother Dickoya, Ceylon Feb II, 1934
- 21 Cave , p 77
- 22 Interview with Wright by author
- 23 Ibid
- 24 Ibid
- 25 Ibid
- 26 Ibid
- 27 Ibid
- 28 Ibid
- 29 Ibid
- 30 Ibid

- 31 Ibid
- 32 Ibid
- 33 Ibid
- 34 Ibid
- 35 G Greene, The Pleasure Dome The Collected Film Criticism 1935-40 (Oxford University Press), 1980, p 25
- 36 Interviews with Wright by author
- 37 Letter to author from Wright-dated-Spring, 1986
- 38 L de Silva, Buddhist Beliefs and Practices in Sri Lanka, (Colombo, 1980), p 198
- 39 C Humphreys, Both Sides of the Circle (London,1978),p 56 ff
- 40 Interview with Wright by author
- 41 R Knox, Ceylon (Glasgow,1918)
- 42 Interview with Wright by author
- 43 de Silva op cit , p 56
- 44 Loose notes by Wright Held by author
- 45 Interviews with Wright by author
- 46 Ibid
- 47 B Wright, 'Shooting in Ceylon', Cinema Quarterly, 1934, Vol 2, No 2
- 48 Cave p 77
- 49 S Eisenstein, Essays in Film Theory. Film Form (London, 1977), p 24
- 50 Letter from J C W Roche to Grierson 21/03/1938 In Grierson Archive G3 I5 2
- 51 S Hood , John Grierson and the Documentary Film Movement British Cinema History Ed , James Curran and Vincent Porter (London,1983), p 102
- 52 C G Jung, Collected Works. Vol II. Psychology and Religion(London, 1958/1969), para 389
- 53 Don Friedrickson, Jung/Sign/Symbol/Film, Quarterly Review of Film Studies, Vol 5 No 4 (Fall 1980), pp 459-472
- 54 M Bucci, Miro. Twentieth Century Masters (London 1938), p 28
- 55 Interview with Wright by author

- 56 Robinson to Tallents, 21 January 1935, PRO T 160/742
F13860/03/2 Quoted in P Swann The British Documentary
Movement, 1926-1946, Unpublished PhD thesis, University of
Leeds, 1979) p 89/90
- 57 Swann , p 65 ff
- 58 Swann , p 74
- 59 Board of Trade memorandum for the Moyne Committee, April
1936, PRO BT 55/3 CCF 1 in Swann , p 111
- 60 ARFP, 'Memorandum on documentary and cultural films and the
quote regulations of the Cinematograph Films Act, 1927', 12 May
1936, PRO BT 55/3 CCF 1 in Swann , p 108
- 61 Cross op cit , p 250

CHAPTER SIX

A CHANGE IN DIRECTION

Thus far in the thesis we have been discussing Wright as an individual developing his own style. Before moving on to his next film - *Children at School* we shall discuss his involvement in the changes the Movement went through during 1935 and 1936. Although these were significant times for the Movement in terms of institutional and policy changes Wright was not involved in many film-making projects. In this chapter we shall consider his new role as an organiser and collaborator.

When it was revealed that the GPO had taken over the EMB's former film unit the decision was applauded by the trade as a brave gesture of faith in the powers of film. [1] But this 'honeymoon' period did not last long. When it was discovered that Grierson's 'documentary boys' intended making films for other government departments the industry complained that they represented unfair competition. [2] This six-month period from the Autumn of 1933 to Spring 1934 marked the beginning of the end of Grierson's individual style of leadership as he was forced into repeated confrontations with the Treasury. [3] Their attack was mounted on two fronts: on the one hand they were unhappy about Grierson's creative accounting. When the Treasury tried to impose restrictions on Grierson in November of 1934 his answer was to make a 'division of the staff between the officials and the commercial contractors'. In this way he could claim that there were only a few 'creative' personnel employed by the GPO. [4] The Treasury also noticed that the majority of the movement's films were not successful at the box-office. [5] Between 1934 and June of 1937 when Grierson left the GPO this tense and unhappy working relationship steadily deteriorated. Wrangles over staff and accountability became one of the main reasons why the Movement finally broke-up. The films of this period have to be seen against the background of this complex and administrative situation which created new problems for the film-makers involved.

Although 1935 is best remembered for *Nightmail* most of the work

undertaken for the GPO was the production of simple instructional films in which the employees were taught how to perform tasks such as sorting letters [6] The Treasury Select Committee had tried to limit the Movement's brief to those projects which had a direct connection to GPO business [7] It was on these modest little didactic films that a large number of tyros started their careers [8]

Given these new restrictions the experimentations of an artist like Wright were no longer financially viable But it was while Wright's intuitive style was becoming impracticable that Harry Watt began to pioneer a different approach to documentary

In *Six Thirty Collection* Watt made a 'brave attempt' to let the workers speak for themselves [9] The success of this film encouraged Grierson to give Watt the opportunity to direct *Nightmail* In giving the film to Watt, Grierson unwittingly created the circumstances that would lead to the break-up of the Movement - a split that has as much to do with the style and form of documentary it does with Grierson's iconoclastic style of leadership

Nightmail was to be a prestigious production Although the Post Office spent more on film publicity than any other government department, the £2,000 allocated for the film represented just under 20% of their annual budget for film production and exhibition [10]

Although Wright was credited as co-director of the *Nightmail* -for reasons we shall explain later - he only had a peripheral role in its production The film is relevant to this enquiry only because it represents a summing up of the achievements of the past and points ahead to the style of the future

Wright's role was to travel on the Nightmail train and note down the conversations of the postmen with the aid of a stenographer Wright can also be credited with shooting some of the exteriors After putting together a rough script he was in charge of the small second unit which comprised himself and the cameraman Fred Gammage This unit was mostly concerned with shooting the landscape the train passed as it made its way through the countryside But many of

these exteriors were not shot specifically for *Nightmail*. As we saw earlier Wright featured some train-shots in his earlier *The Country comes to the Town* and some of these were used in the GPO film. Wright borrowed some other sequences featuring a train from the Movement's film library [11]. The most famous moment in the film of the mailbag being clipped in from its pole is one of many that Watt must take the credit for. It was just this sort of dramatic touch that was to feature in Watt's later work.

At the same time Wright was travelling up and down the country Watt was shooting at the station and at the large studio set with a crew of six. Wright had nothing to do with this part of the film but he was responsible for the recruitment of W H Auden whom he had met in 1929 when visiting a friend at Oxford [12].

Nightmail is interesting because it represents the unit's swansong to the poetic treatment of actuality. The accomplished skills of experienced film-makers coupled with the contribution of Benjamin Britten and Auden all work together to create an attractive and poetic treatment of the mundane business of the mail. Gloversmith's comments on Auden's poetry of the period seem particularly apposite here - 'Its approach is direct. The stripped rhetoric whose mode declares a meaning. Everything is made urgent, the address is immediate, the listener must respond, now' [13].

But what is there to respond to? The film is certainly craftsman-like and represents the harnessing of a number of diverse talents on both sides of the camera. All are unified, driven to the same goal. Yet the result is a film of clock-work like precision but without any depth of feeling. *Nightmail* is a committee film, didacticism raised to the level of art, but without any warmth, colour or atmosphere.

Auden's craftsman-like contribution to the film has been much praised and is one of the reasons why the film has been so well remembered. But the poet's approach to his material is not unlike that which Wright brought to his work. As Spender observed-

he made no connection between his politics and his poetry His whole view of poetry was that it should have nothing to do with politics, or indeed, with opinions of any kind The poet should be as detached from his material life as the scientific worker from the experimental specimens under his microscope [14]

What *Nightmail* does tell us about is the ideas of those on this side of the camera As Stead has written the work of the Movement as well as that of Spender and Isherwood 'tell us more about the artistic tasks of intellectual elites in England than they do about British society ' [15]

Nightmail became significant not only because it represented a rare example of one of their films gaining commercial distribution but because in this film the social actors actually spoke Although their conversations were not entirely spontaneous and had to be filtered by the editors, the very fact that they were speaking was perceived by those in the Movement as radical This more dramatic treatment of social actors represented the style which Watt was later to develop But the production of the film also affords us the opportunity to note that Grierson remained very much the man in control - An example of this is his punishing Harry Watt for having a tantrum about 'authorship' by giving Wright half of the director credit - something the latter had plainly not deserved [16]

When we consider that *Nightmail* was such an interesting co-ordination of talents and gained commercial release it seems odd that Grierson decided a change of direction was in order Wright recalled this decision-

Grierson suddenly said, 'Stop, this is about as far as we can go along this line There are four and a half million unemployed in Britain, there are a number of problems on the horizon There could be a coming world war Let us stop looking at the beautiful sunsets, let us try and find some beautiful sunrises And if not, let us just issue a series of warnings And in order to do this, we must shed our halos and our pretensions, and get down to brass tacks' [17]

We should recall the fact that Wright was speaking about the past from a distance of some fifty years. But the films made by the Movement did change in theme and approach during this period. Precisely why Grierson made this change we cannot say. But it may well be that he was restless and keen to experiment away from the watchful eye of the Treasury. The new direction would be carried out principally by those working outside the GPO in what came to be known as the 'independent' sector.

Wright demonstrated his loyalty to Grierson by considering this new direction 'a challenge' [18]. Although Wright was one of the three directors on the creative staff of the GPO he felt the atmosphere was stifling and like Grierson, had no wish to be limited by the petty demands of the Treasury. This, coupled with his antipathy towards Watt's new dramatic model, made him eager to seek new vistas. Grierson's 'challenge' seemed to provide just such an opportunity [19].

In response to the bureaucrats of the Treasury, Wright left the GPO in 1936 to develop his own company which was officially launched in February of 1937 as the Realist Film Unit (RFU).

Wright chose the name 'Realist' because he felt that 'documentary' had become 'too vague in its meaning' [20]. The films of the RFU would be straightforward and deliberately forego the aesthetic approach. This, it was thought, would make them more 'realistic'. The subjects to be covered were 'industry, agriculture, science, education and all problems facing the community' [21]. This was a fairly wide brief but we can note the use of the word 'problems' and this indicates a subtle shift away from the films of the past. The new investigations of community would reveal discrepancies in British democracy.

To set up the RFU Wright sold shares to his friends and family at £50 a time [22]. All of this money was to go into purchasing equipment. The production side was run on 'strict economic principles' and tight budgets were enforced [23]. When times were hard the company sub-let the cameras to other film-makers. Wright was now a business-man and a producer preparing to compete in the commercial world [24].

The years 1935 to '36 were 'a time of expansion in the whole documentary movement' Wright set up a film-school which operated two afternoons a week Senior members of the Movement would give up their time to train 'raw recruits' the rudiments of film-making In this way a new generation of documentarists were trained [25] The films they worked on would be of a rather different nature to those exercises in Empire-projection that Wright had experimented on

It is indicative of the way the documentary idea had grown into many institutions that the Movement had already established covert links with the Gas Company in 1931 when A P Ryan was recruited to set up their PR department Ryan had been one of Tallent's assistants at the EMB and, like Huxley, had carried the propagandist message to the new company The machinery for documentary-style propaganda was therefore already in place when S C Leslie joined the company in 1930 [26]

Leslie had a successful career as an academic in Australia before coming to London in the late twenties His first job was publicist for the London Press Exchange in 1930 before he moved to the Gas Light and Coke Company It was in 1936 that he became 'instrumental in the sponsorship of some of the most important mainstream documentaries of the period' [27] He shared with Grierson a faith in the new medium and after a meeting at the Reform Club took a proposal to his employers Leslie thought the idea of sponsoring a film a 'marvellous public relations gimmick' and managed to convince his employers to make the necessary resources available There was not a reckless decision Many powerful companies in America had sponsored films with the hope of gaining reputations as benevolent organisations In Grierson's earlier 'Report made after a visit to America' (in 1931) he wrote -

Advertisers are content with the mere attachment of their name to the beginning of a film, the film in many cases having nothing to do with their own production [28]

Grierson discussed the project with Wright in 1935 and although he was not interested in directing the film he did act as the film's producer. It was after the making of *Housing Problems* that Wright set up the RFU who continued to derive sponsorship from the Gas Industry. This favouritism on Grierson's part was to continue when he set up the Film Centre who were biased in their allocation of contracts to the RFU [29]

Although Wright was committed to the new direction he was not sufficiently interested in the problems of slum-dwellers in Stepney to take on the new project himself. Instead he assigned the project to Edgar Anstey, Stuart Legg and Ruby Grierson. Wright acted as a remote producer and made only occasional trips to the location. But as *Housing Problems* constitutes the first example of the so-called 'new direction' we should give it some attention.

Housing Problems has a rather elementary approach to the subject. The film begins as the camera-

...moves the viewer into the slums from outside. The opening sequence of cuts is as follows (the voice-over of a councillor introducing the area and its problems) high distant shot of a slum area, pan on high from left to right of the building of new flats, mid-long shot of back slums, pan right to left of roofs, eye-level shot from within alley. The next five shots move us slowly and inexorably into a yard, three shots later we are inside one of the houses. We have arrived [30]

The remainder of the film records the squalor in which the inhabitants live. What makes this particularly effective is the use of interviews direct to camera - 'the camera keeps a discreet distance and in the most simple sense looks and allows its audience to look at these people'. [31] To inspire the people Ruby Grierson approached the inhabitants saying 'The camera is yours. The microphone is yours. Now tell the bastards exactly what it's like to live in the slums' [32]. The effect is striking and certainly different from the approaches of old. But the film's radicalism is limited to this effect because the root of the problem

is not analysed While the inhabitants are encouraged to complain about their physical squalor those responsible for their conditions are not mentioned This strategy, in which anger is created but given no focus, is very in the old style and is typical of the Movement It is also indicative of their new role as the discoverers of social problems

In *Housing Problems* we meet with the first of the 'omnipresent, omniscient' experts that were to feature in films of this type and which remain a staple part of the documentary format today [33] The first of these is represented by the voice of Councillor Lauder As the film progresses, we hear of other well-qualified men with the interests of the slum-dwellers at heart This use of experts was a technique Wright was later to utilise

But what does mark a break with the films of the past is that the workers in this film are not working Instead they are portrayed as unfortunate victims living in an ugly underworld They represent a problem that has to be dealt with rather than as people in themselves *Housing Problems* is a sort of 'slumming excursion' and is only saved from being a horrified stare at the underworld by a commentary that points to a bright future ahead

The film conceals far more than it reveals and in this respect it is typical of the new direction In Stepney there were 'over 50,000 people living in two or more to a room, while 16,000 lived three or more to a room' [34] The problem lay partly in the hands of the landlords who were exploiting their tenants, and partly with the government who did little to help the situation, by keeping a close watch on those local authorities who were trying to alleviate the situation with their meagre resources Different as this new approach was the film-makers were still not prepared to let the people speak for themselves and as a result we do not learn of the rent strikes in East London which demonstrated that the slum-dwellers were anything but helpless victims [35]

We should also point out that the thirties represented a boom time in the housing market as home-ownership through the new building societies became a possibility for thousands of people [36] Anstey's film will have reminded the

populace of the conditions of old and in this respect may have served as a timely reminder of their new-found privileges

Wright recalled a 'storm of protest' in 'high-brow' papers like The Times while Grierson gave the film his seal of approval in the Daily Herald (29/10/35) 'this new found method of conveying reality is the key to the educational future I want these unknown regions and communities about us to be given their voices' [37]

However the new producer was not enthusiastic about the film Wright thought it 'terribly amateurish First Mrs X, then Mrs Y' [38] Anstey had not created a model he wanted to follow However as a producer Wright was pleased with the critical success of the film because it meant continued sponsorship from the Gas Company, who 'were terribly pleased because they were getting political advantage out of the whole thing' [39]

Housing Problems is valuable for several reasons Quite apart from the fact that it took a new approach to the workers the film is one of the first filmic expressions of middle-opinion - that particular brand of political thinking that was slowly gaining attention in the mid-thirties

We introduced this group earlier when we were discussing the roots of the new liberal ideology which was finding expression in groups like PEP and The Next Five Years formed in 1934 We want to make it clear that those in the Movement had no links to these organisations but the films that came out of this new approach are expressive of the enthusiasm for social change being promoted by the progressive centre These various groups devised strategies and plans to alleviate society's ills - Housing was one of the problems they were dealing with Marwick has written of how they 'fostered 'middle opinion' 'a progressive consensus which embraced a broad spectrum of public opinion and pointed towards a managed economy and the expansion of the social services' [40] These groups contained some important figures for the future such as H A L Fisher the future Education minister But Fisher, like Macmillan, Dalton, and others prominent in the centre were not yet in positions of influence [41] But their concern for social

welfare and their belief that the State should take a fuller role in the planning and organisation of the country's social services were to play their part in shaping a new consensus. What the new films shared with the planners and those in the 'centre-ground' was an optimism for the future based on the role of the expert - the new social scientist with a rational approach not distorted by party politics.

This sentiment for change and organisation has to be related to its time. In Europe the new ideologies of Fascism and Communism were developing and something had to be done in Britain 'to prove that democracy can do better' [42]. While the commercial producers sought refuge and profits in the concept of Empire, those in the Movement now set about investigating British democracy. In this new conception it was admitted that Britain had her problems but these could be overcome by the creative work of the experts.

In 1935 Grierson was still writing of the success the films were having on the non-theatrical circuit. But he did not reveal that their audience was still primarily composed of children and that most of the films were shown in programmes of four or five and in these circumstances their individual impact and effectiveness would necessarily be limited. But the fact that this audience was young and receptive should not be overlooked. Grierson had often spoken of how he sought to 'command the mind of a generation'. What he shared with the planners was an interest in the future. If the children of the future were to build a new state, then they had to be convinced of its worth and so a new consensus had to be created. It is this young audience that we will investigate in the following analysis of *Children at School*.

Children at School

Concern with social engineering, seeing education as the crucible of a better society, also encapsulated many of the most fundamental philosophical and political debates of the period. For some, education was *the* social issue [43]

In Macmillan's book 'The Middle Way' published in 1938, we find the line 'Democracy can live only so long as it is able to cope satisfactorily with the problems of social life' [44]. *Children at School* is the most 'socially conscious' of Wright's films and an interesting indicator of how the director thought social problems ought to be approached. We will find Wright speaking of the need to 'make and keep the balance' and the film is best looked at as the attempt of a man to express his liberalism within his stylistic framework. Once again Wright's romantic and impressionistic tendency would bring him into conflict with Grierson.

Wright's RFU were awarded the contract to make *Children at School* by Grierson through the consultancy organisation Film Centre. Since Rotha had been away on a lecture tour of America, Stuart Legg was installed to look after business at Strand. Legg was thought of as a 'Grierson-man' and it is noticeable that in Rotha's absence, Realist became the largest of the independent units [45].

The subject of children afforded Wright the greatest opportunity for utilising the lyrical and reflective approach he had spent years developing. Children had already featured predominantly in Wright's work for a variety of reasons - the most obvious of which being their role as bearers of tradition and as the hope for the future of the community. They were to be used in this way in the new film. But another reason for choosing children would have been the fact that they made up a large percentage of the audience. Although Wright has said that he intended all his films to gain commercial distribution, the fact that he knew children would have comprised the audience cannot be overlooked in the analysis. In the following we shall discuss how Wright uses pictures of children for maximum emotional effect to manipulate his audience.

In 1936 when Wright started looking for locations the education system in Britain was slowly overcoming one of its worst crises. The teachers had been amongst the first to suffer in the budget cuts recommended by the May Committee of 1931 and had been forced to take a 10 per cent drop in salary [46]. One of the first measures of the new Baldwin government of 1935 was to restore what had been cut. But this was only one aspect of the crisis.

In the mid-thirties there were still 1,500 elementary schools on the blacklist that had been compiled ten years earlier [47]. Part of the reason for this was that the May Committee had held back plans for spending more on schools. As a result the burden of keeping the educational system operative was borne by the local authorities some of whom allocated as much as 50% of their budgets to the maintenance of schools [48]. There had also been significant changes in the system of schooling but this we shall discuss when we come to analyse the film. Wright was going into a demoralised and under-funded education system. *Children at School* is a report on this situation and a cultured call for change.

The subject of education was widely discussed by all political parties in the thirties. A type of literature was emerging 'which stressed the social and emotional needs of children' [49]. There was mounting concern about the sheer indiscipline of youth. This period saw a growth of the number of youth organisations such as the Scouts and the Boys Brigade [50]. Particularly relevant to us are those organisations which concentrated on the outdoor life for this stress on the physical and orderly conduct was to feature in Wright's film.

As Wright toured the schools he found many in appalling conditions - the sort of conditions overlooked by the enlightened articles in the women's magazines. Two-thirds of Britain's schools were over thirty years old and some ten per cent of children were housed in old church halls - some of which dated back to the early Victorian period [51]. Although the situation was clearly appalling the figures are only expressed in a vague way in the film.

Discovering such conditions was a shock to Wright. While most of the

nation were familiar with badly-built and poorly-lit schools Wright was the product of a privileged public-school background Like many of his colleagues in the Movement he began to realise the gulf between the upper middle-classes and the masses This accounts for his horror at discovering 'schools like dustbins which were absolutely incredible' [52] He would meet with harassed teachers and weary parents who showed him round the decaying buildings As he recalled 'There were complaints from all sides' [53]

After these brief forays into the educational wasteland Wright made a conscious decision to film the very worst schools he had seen - thus adopting the same policy as Anstey and others on *Housing Problems* But to 'make the balance' he also chose to film some of the new model schools in which children were taught in idyllic surroundings under the guidance and control of 'experts' using modern methods

Children at School gave Wright's his first opportunity to use the new synch-sound cameras Wright took along his favourite cameraman, A L Jeakins or 'Jeek' as he was known The crew came to eight in all, the largest Wright was ever to work with in Britain But part of the reason for this was the fact that the sound equipment was housed in a van and was so cumbersome it needed a crew of six to operate it [54]

The filming took place over six weeks in the Spring of 1936 At first the director was assisted on location by teachers who were understandably anxious to help any project that would highlight the crisis However after a few weeks the N U T ordered their members to withdraw from any co-operation with the unit Wright believes the N U T leader Fred Mander may have been 'got at' from within his own union [55] But it is difficult to substantiate this claim unless they were uncertain about Wright's motives The NUT were amongst the most vociferous critics of cinema which they saw as a encouraging 'mental and physical lassitude' [56]

In the course of filming, the crew did their best not to intrude upon the life of the children As a result there are a few very 'posed' shots in the film Wright

managed to capture most of the close-ups with the use of a 12 inch lens [57] By the time shooting at both good and bad schools was completed thirty thousand feet had been used [58]

It is indicative of Grierson's hold over Wright that despite the RFU not being under his control he was still exert an influence on Wright's work An example of this power was in persuading Wright that a certain shot - a pan from the trees to the school's new playing fields - was too 'aestheticky' for a film about the poor conditions in Britain's schools A similar fate befell Wright's plan to shoot some children acting out The Golden Road to Samarkand. [59] Any such shots were seen by Grierson as extravagances Wright took this advice and left the scenes on the cutting-room floor - although not without a little resentment However it is reasonable to argue that Grierson may have felt these planned sequences too difficult to read - particularly in light of the fact that a large number of the audience would have been children Because Wright was learning a new style, he abandoned his intuitive method in favour of the new reportage-style [60]

Wright called on Tom Driberg of the Daily Express to work on the script Driberg was the gossip-columnist of the paper but he was also known to have communist sympathies and was later to become a member of the Labour Party He was shown a rough-cut of the film and told to write a commentary in 'Daily Express journalese' [61] Wright's aim was to produce a commentary that would sound like impassioned reporting and yet put the message over in straightforward language The politically-motivated Driberg was eager to assist on a project that would uncover the plight of those in Britain's schools in the best tradition of an 'Exclusive-Expose' [62] However Driberg's name was not to appear on the credits of the finished film The only writer-credit that does appear is that of Wilson-Harris -the editor of The Spectator Harris was a friend of the Movement although his journal was said to have been directed at 'enlightened Conservatives' [63] Perhaps this is a reference to that left-wing Tory group that included Oliver Stanley, Macmillan and Robert Boothby It is interesting to note that Harris later became a 'truly' Independent M P thus preserving something of the illusion of impartiality [64] Wright explained the reason for the choice of narrator -

Someone had to be chosen who was above suspicion
Someone politically O K obviously not put up to it
We were regarded as the left-wing and treated with
suspicion It was our intention to make and keep the
balance and not fall into the traps of the Communists and
Fascists [65]

Although once again we should recall that Wright was speaking with the benefit of hindsight it is notable that this talk of keeping 'the balance' sounds very much like one trying to capture the centre-ground of political debate Harris may have seemed like a politically neutral choice to Wright but of course there are ideological implications about choosing such a man and these too will be explored in the analysis

Wright wanted to include a scene in the film that featured the teachers discussing ways to prevent the crisis from deepening But as we have seen, the N U T had instructed their members not to co-operate Wright decided to hire actors to play teachers He brought a group to the studio and forced them to improvise They were given a scrap of paper with some information and the situation in one bad area and then given only a few minutes before shooting to work out what they were going to say What we see in the finished film is a sort of inspired improvisation A similar technique was used on the actors hired to play the student-teachers - with equal success [66]

Also included in the film is a scene featuring the 'Committee for the Ten Year Plan for Children' This was a body set up with the primary aim of improving the health of children in the State elementary schools Among those appearing and discussing their ideas are Harold Nicolson, Freda Hawtrey, Dame Crowley and Lady Astor They were brought together in the studio and told 'to have a discussion' [67] This proved rather difficult under the conditions and a whole day's shooting resulted in only two minutes of worthwhile footage (It seems the Committee were rather intimidated by the cameras) It is interesting to note that Lady Astor's husband was the owner of The Times and it was said that her parties at Cliveden were the scene of much political discussion involving Tory Ministers

Nicolson had a colourful past as a prominent member of Mosley's New Party. At the time of filming he was an Independent MP for the National Labour Party. Nicolson's presence is another interesting indicator of the centre-ground - a man eager for change but not committed to any party. He stood for election in 1935.

He was to stand as a candidate backed by National Labour for a Liberal constituency with Conservative and National Liberal support. He refused to call himself a Conservative, although he supported Baldwin's leadership, and had offered himself recently as Conservative candidate for Sevenoaks [68]

To add to this confusion, while in the National Labour Party Nicolson hoped to practise 'a sort of Tory Socialism' [69]. We mention these details to indicate how some of the young generation had still not committed themselves to one of the old parties and we see evidence here of their campaigning for change outside the traditional channels. Furthermore the subject of education was often conceived of as a non-political one in which all interested parties could make a contribution to. In this committee we have a visible illustration of what Addison has called 'the energetic upper middle-class progressive' who 'itched to champion the League of Nations, the relief of poverty, the planning of towns' [70]

The film was completed in eight weeks and opened in the late summer of 1936 to enthusiastic praise in The Times and The Spectator. Wright recalls the Movement being praised for doing the work of the government in exposing a public scandal. But this is unlikely as the government had already backed one documentary about nutrition entitled *Enough to Eat?* and would go on to work with Commercial companies like Pathe in *The Great Crusade* (1936) [71]. The Movement may have scored a critical success but their films reached only a fraction of the public who saw the government backed films made by companies with good distribution deals.

Amongst those praising the film was Graham Greene who wrote of the same 'exciting lyrical quality' he found in *Song of Ceylon* [72]. This is instructive

comment Greene highlights the lyrical approach and this is a clue to Wright's concentration on style before anything else. But what the critic could not have known was that the film was not as exclusively Wright's as his others had been. Although Wright had the final word as director, producer and editor, his collaborators had a large part to play behind the scenes. This is not to say that Wright disagreed with what they were saying but that their input represents another set of 'voices'. The film does not have the intimacy of *O'er Hill and Dale* or the felt response of *Song of Ceylon*. Wright has said how he was trying to discard the impressionistic approach in an effort to highlight the 'message'. In the following analysis we shall see how Wright's style is foregrounded and despite his claim to be a 'practical reformer' the film lies somewhere between the social comment of *Housing Problems* and the intimacy of his earlier work. [73]

There is however, another critical reaction worth noting for it indicates the Establishment's response to the film. In 1937 when *Children at School* was being considered for the New York World Fair the British Council reacted badly to the film. Although admitting it was 'technically well made and full of interest' they did not think it a suitably bright picture of Britain as a functioning democracy. [74] The film was-

too impersonal and scientific and there seemed to be too little colour and movement too objective and unbiased. *Children at School* was thought 'too informative to hold the interest of any but a relatively instructed audience'. [75]

It is precisely this scientific and rational approach to social problems that the 'Middle-opinion' group were said to favour. This criticism also serves to illustrate how Wright's approach to the subject is a result of his having had no emotional contact with the education system of the masses. In the following we shall show that the film, far from being 'unbiased', is in fact representative of Wright's class-based education. What Grierson called the 'corporate outlook' is reflected in the social engineering which Wright depicts working in the film.

Analysis

a Overview.

Children at School is approximately twenty minutes long and is in two sections. These parts are not signalled in the way sections were in *Song of Ceylon* but the change in emphasis is clearly marked mid-way through the film when we hear one of the children reciting 'The Golden Road to Samarkand' while walking through a decaying corridor in one of the poorer schools. The connecting thread is supplied by the narrator Wilson-Harris who appears at intervals throughout the film.

The film opens with a series of images which locate the subject in the political climate of the thirties. Newsreel footage of children marching in the Fascist countries is followed by shots of English children. In this way the viewer's attention is drawn to the theme - the changing shape of education. The narrator then appears to take up the theme and speaks of the long tradition of reform that culminated in education for all. This is followed by a diagram explaining the system as it operates in Britain. The remainder of the first half concentrates on the ideal school - from nursery level to the well-equipped senior schools. This is an environment in which experts exert a kindly role over the children. Wright presents an idyllic picture in which teachers and children live in perfect harmony.

The second half commences with the recitation mentioned above. The narrator, who has so far spoken only in glowing terms of the system, now becomes critical as he expresses indignation at the crumbling buildings and packed classrooms. The system we were earlier given every reason to be proud of is revealed to be in a lamentable state of decay. As Harris puts it 'This is a different story isn't it?' These pictures are in stark contrast to what has gone before. The film concludes by returning the audience to newsreel footage and re-locating the subject in its political context. Harris introduces various groups who are seen to be united in their efforts to improve the situation. As the camera drifts over the children making their way to school the narrator asks whether the democracies can afford to overlook the care of the young.

Already we can note structural and stylistic motifs that have appeared in Wright's previous work. There is the circularity, the 'shock-tactic' cut at the start and the middle of the film to 'jolt' the audience and make them sit up and pay attention and the use of a narrator as guide. We shall note further examples of Wright's style in the course of the analysis.

b Voice

By 'voice' we mean what is said in the film, who says it, and to whom the voice is addressed. We will look at the ideological significance of this voice and discuss how the message is presented. But our emphasis will be on the narrator, the coordinator and organiser of the information in the film.

It is not without significance that the commentator has the largest credit in the film. He is 'Wilson-Harris - Editor of The Spectator'. This is the first of his cultural credentials fixing him in the audience's mind as a member of an educated class. After the title music Harris begins the commentary. His first line - spoken over shots of a Greek temple - further underlines his credentials: 'If you read the books by the Greeks written two thousand years ago'. After some library shots of the dictators Harris speaks again - 'England, like Athens, is a democracy'. Wright then cuts to a middle-distance shot of the speaker situated at a desk with a bookshelf behind him. Harris is dressed in a tweed three-piece suit and has a book in his hands. This cultured locale is one we might have expected from these opening words. He addresses the audience directly and wastes no time introducing himself. It is this shot that Wright returns to throughout the film. Harris is the (still) centre of the film, the oracle who disseminates knowledge. This straightforward manner of the shot is suited to the plain-speaking narrator. It is all part of the no-nonsense approach to the subject. The first words Harris addresses directly to the audience from his library are: 'In 1870 a new era of education began when the work of a generation of pioneers and reformers established a free education for every child in the country'. Wright then cuts to a pan of the newly-built London University 'rising over the Bloomsbury rooftops'. This, Harris explains, is a

symbol of what has been achieved. In these opening moments of the film the narrator has been identified as an academic with the facts at his fingertips. His role as our educated guide has been fixed. But what is interesting is the vague reference to Forster's Education Act of 1870. This was one of the most significant reforms undertaken by the Liberal government of 1868. But Harris does not mention the party responsible. The Act becomes the result of work done by 'pioneers' and 'reformers'. This is the first of several examples of progress in which Harris avoids any mention of party politics. Democracy is presented as something that has evolved gradually due to the discreet efforts of right-minded people-those same people who are to instruct us in the film. Harris is part of this tradition. His modulated speech and command of history coupled with his 'obvious' concern - why else would he be in the film? - all add up to make him part of this proud tradition.

By speaking about children Harris gains a further hold on our attention for this is an emotive subject with which we can all sympathise. Harris is helped in this by being 'one of us' in so much as he is British and plain-speaking. But it would be going too far to suggest that we are encouraged to see him as an equal. What percentage of the audience would have read 'books by the Greeks', contrasted England and Athens or been aware of the 1870 Education Act? Harris also sounds rather bossy - like a headmaster dealing with some dim-witted sixth-formers. His rather 'plummy' voice serves to distance him from the mass of people. Given the setting and the narrator's manner it would be fair to describe Harris as a lecturer. We are to be told, facts will be explained. Our position is very much like that of children who have to be educated. Given the fact that Wright would have known his audience to have comprised schoolchildren this is a good method for getting his point across. We might add that this is in a marked contrast to Wright's choice of narrator for *Song of Ceylon*. In that film Wendt was chosen for his 'intimate yet distant' quality. The viewer was to be lulled into a mysterious world. That voice was chosen for its tonal qualities which became an essential part of the film's mood. The only English voices in *Song of Ceylon* belonged to the unseen 'Voices of Commerce' and they were also chosen not so much for their informational value but because they too were part of the film's aural texture. In *Children at School* Wright signals his intention to communicate 'directly' by

choosing a distinctly English voice to lecture the audience. Wendt was part of the mystery, Harris is very much part of the 'real' world. It is important to the message of the film that he is seen as a contemporary - a link between the experience of the audience and the world of the children. This is one of the clearest indications of the change in style that Wright adopted. The film is not an indirect poem but a message aimed directly at the audience.

The images in the film are all used to support the narrator's carefully delivered argument. It is Harris who links the images and confers meaning upon them. He 'takes charge' at the beginning of the film with his opening remarks and continues to do so throughout. But if Harris is an expert specialising in cultural history then the other voices in the film are also 'experts'. The film lays great stress on the fact that 'experts' have been pooling their talents to create a perfect environment for the nation's children. As we have seen this emphasis on the social role of the experts was a trend established by Anstey in *Housing Problems*.

In the nursery schools we hear that experts have designed a diet that will ensure that children grow up healthy and strong. The curriculum has been arranged so that children use their minds and bodies equally. Architects have created environments with plenty of sunlight far away from the noise of the city. Doctors maintain close links with the children and give them regular 'unfussy' medical attention. In other words, everything possible has been done to help the child. By contrast there are no experts in the poorer schools and this is seen to be the reason why they are in such a pitiful state. The message is made very simple-planned environments work and unplanned ones do not.

The experts may well have the welfare of the children at heart but we get no impression of how these improvements are to be made, who will decide upon their implementation, or where they are taking place. It is also interesting to note that the experts are either absent or seen in positions of authority vis-a-vis the parents. One illustration of this occurs in a scene in which a mother explains her son's illness to a teacher. The mother is in close-up as she mumbles nervously to the right of the camera. It may have been simply the pressure of the occasion but she comes across as frightened and uncertain. This impression is reinforced

when we hear the 'bright and breezy' tone of the teacher telling her in a rather stiff and official voice to bring the child to the school when she will see what she can do. In a later scene another mother seems to be cowering behind her handbag as she watches the doctor examining her child. We get no sense of co-operation between the two. No exchange is made. The service is simply there - on show. The enlightened are handing down their expertise to the people who are mutely 'grateful' that the doctors and nurses are noticing health hazards that they may have overlooked. All of this occurs in the ideal schools and has the narrator's approval. This, he says, is how a democracy ought to operate. But it seems a strange sort of democracy in which the experts control all aspects of the children's lives.

In the second half of the film the narrator adopts a more colloquial tone to describe the decaying buildings and poor sanitation that many children have to endure. He appears to 'side' with the audience in his disapproval. 'Believe it or not this is a toilet' he says as Wright features a shot of a plank in a yard. But even in his anger Harris cannot forget his educated background. When describing a lancet window he remarks 'It may have looked picturesque to Ruskin'. Harris is always returning to the library, to his comfortable vantage point. In this way he is established as a model of cultured enlightenment. But this underlies his difference from the masses watching the film. Furthermore this direct approach prompts us to ask precisely who he is addressing, and further, who is to blame?

Harris can share our indignation but he gives us very little help when it comes to discovering the root cause of the problem. Nor does he offer the audience an active role to help alleviate the situation. The film's answer to these problems is to resort once more to experts, not to parents. In this way the limits of protest are set but nothing else.

In the final section of the film are featured four groups of concerned individuals representing a range of interests. The first speaker is Fred Mander of the N U T who is seen addressing a meeting. We hear that it is 'beyond the power' of a teacher to control forty or fifty children - a statement that has been illustrated earlier in the film with a chaotic shot involving a classroom of fifty pupils.

The Union are campaigning for change but we do not hear of any policy or planned industrial action This scene is followed by a return to Harris who describes another group - 'The Ten Year Plan for Children' The word 'plan' reminds us of similar organisations like 'The Next Five Years' group and the scientific approach to social problems Harris tells us that on this committee are ' friends of my own' This is clearly meant as a recommendation After all the narrator has already proved himself to be a trustworthy fellow as the man responsible for exposing the scandal of our schools This committee, it is implied, are composed of like-minded individuals with the same aims Over a middle-distance shot of the group Harris reads out their names clearly signalling their importance as figures deserving such treatment Lady Astor reports on how they have 'entirely eliminated rickets' in some schools before being interrupted by Nicolson who speaks about the importance of putting up new buildings This sequence - filmed entirely in mid-shot - is notable in that it is remarkably static and as such reminds us of the movement elsewhere in the film It serves no purpose other than impressing upon the audience the fact that even figures of national importance like the famous Lady Astor are sufficiently concerned about the crisis to appear in the film It is this brand of organisational vigour the viewer is asked to admire Here then is a visible expression of that energetic upper-middle class we spoke of earlier But the fact that our narrator has recommended such notables only serves to underline his social distance from the mass of the audience

The next two groups are those with a closer connection with the schools The actors playing the student teachers discuss their own childhood experiences of the elementary schools We hear that there were as many as fifty children packed into classrooms in 'their' day - at least five years ago The lack of progress is clear They resolve to campaign for change and adopt a slogan - 'All classes under thirty by 1940' The students then will also try to bring about the conditions they learned were ideal in training college In the final section featuring experts we eavesdrop on a meeting of the teachers themselves One of them has just returned from an encounter with the education department and brought back the news that 'there's no money' All they can have is some paint and a small grant to buy new desks After a little session in which every actor gets a chance to complain, they decide to 'paint the school from top to bottom' Although the situation is clearly trying the

teachers' nerves they 'muddle on' in true British fashion, and the closing shot in this sequence is of paint covering a bleak wall. The sequence seems to say - 'It isn't much but it's a start'. The initiative has come from the teachers dedicated to their profession who are made models of the ideal worker dedicated to their vocation. It is notable that these teachers speak in the same accent-free English as Harris, but this fits in with the tone of the narrator. It is all rather like the middle-class on the move.

The final scenes feature the children of England responding to a bell. As they march through the countryside or walk through the streets towards their respective schools, Harris makes his final announcement -

'The dictators know that children are all important. The dictators are acting on that knowledge. Can the democracies afford to fall behind? Should they, even if they could?'

This is an ominous warning. A contrast is drawn between the frail little children and the horrors of Fascism. Do we want our children to be drilled into little fascists? The answer will of course be a resounding 'no', but it is strange that Harris should ask this. Is it meant to be a rhetorical question? If there is a threat, what role have the audience to play? This manner of this 'signing off' is entirely in keeping with a liberal outlook - we are, after all, hearing 'both sides of the argument'. In this way it appears to be our decision even though all the answers have been prepared for us.

Throughout the film the audience have been addressed by a series of rhetorically accomplished voices united by Harris. Their chief characteristic appears to be that they are all experts. As Swann has noted - 'the notion of the important social role of the expert was close to the heart of the documentarists' own theories' [76]. We see the achievements that are possible when these experts are given the opportunity to implement their schemes. We are bound to appreciate any improvements in the welfare of our children but these wonderful plans are not only scarce but created by invisible men. The system seems to function independently of the public - indeed it usurps many of their functions. The voices that speak

through Harris are those who-know-better while the role of the public seems to be simply to accept what the experts decide. The rather patrician tones are not dissimilar to those adopted by other authority figures - in the BBC for example. For all his declared liberalism Wright presents a rather authoritarian approach to the public. However we should bear in mind that much of the audience for this film will have been children and this authoritarian approach may have been quite suited to a lesson.

c Systems of Education

In looking at the various systems of education discussed by Wright, we should recall that by the mid-thirties the threat of Fascism inspired many artists and intellectuals to defend democracy as a viable system. *Children at School* makes reference to the situation in Europe before defining a specifically British democracy. The film itself is evidence of the right of artists to be critical of their country - a right not permitted in Fascist countries. We will hear 'both sides of the argument' Wright begins with the ideal and then focuses on the all-too-common-reality of the bad schools.

Before Harris begins his investigation of the Nursery Schools a diagram is presented which 'shows how the system works'. In one of the few moments of silence in the film the camera pans up a tree-shaped diagram on which are marked the various stages of school life. The silence and the slow-pan indicate that this is an important part of our education. These are the facts we are being asked to absorb.

At the base of the tree is 'Nursery School 2-5 Years'. But as Harris later points out there are very few of these. What he does not mention is that only one in ten children attended a nursery school and that over half of these were run by voluntary organisations. [77] This section, on Harris' own admission, is more of an ideal than a reality.

At the next point we see 'Infants 5-7 Years' and then 'Juniors 7-11 Years'. This part of the system is not in dispute and has survived to the present day. It is

after this that the tree 'branches out' On the one side is 'Senior School II-15' and on the other 'Secondary School II-18' The diagram does not explain why the division into separate schools is made at eleven years of age This is an interesting omission because this division was a major issue in Education debates in the mid-thirties The number of people who went to secondary school was very small - less than 14 per cent [78] The majority of children went to state elementary schools and left at 14 - not 15 which was the figure many people, particularly in the Labour Party, were campaigning for [79] Those who were bright enough managed to get ahead by going to the better-funded and better-equipped secondary schools In the early thirties the government changed the system of giving free places to the poor children and as a result even fewer were able to make the jump into the much superior secondary education and the chance of a clerical job or even university [80] This is important because it is central to an understanding of why conditions were as bad they were were in the elementary schools - facts concealed by this diagram Although there were plans to rename the elementary schools 'Technical Schools' and to give them a more practical basis, this scheme never really developed until the fifties Thus far Wright has given a misleading picture of the education system

The next stage in the diagram features 'Technical Schools' and 'University' The children from the 'Elementary Schools' go up to 'Technical Schools' and the children in 'Senior Schools' go up to 'University' But this was only true in exceptional cases The vast majority of children (75%) left school at fourteen For many families it was essential that their children left school at this age because it was easier for them to find work than their parents The government did little to encourage further education by passing an Act in 1935 which permitted children to be excepted from staying on at school after the age of fourteen if they could secure beneficial employment [81] Only a small fraction of children left senior school to go to university - most graduates were from the public schools which are absent from this diagram As Stephenson has pointed out-

it is certainly true that expenditure on universities rose by over 90% between 1924 and 1937 But the sector remained small Only 13,200 of those entering employment in 1934 were from the universities out of

a total of 554,000 As late as 1938 only 2% of 19 year olds were receiving full-time education [82]

Wright's presentation of the system implies that all children have an equal opportunity to receive full-time education for a role in society

After leaving Technical School or University the child could expect 'Work and Wages' Quite apart from the fact that there were two million unemployed in 1936, educational accomplishments would have had a direct bearing on the opportunities open to children This is not clear from the diagram And yet Harris says 'This is how the system works' Perhaps Harris meant 'this is how it ought to work'

After this explanation the film begins with an aerial shot of one of the newly designed nursery schools In these schools the stress is on freedom of expression The exuberance of English children is contrasted with the uniformed children of the Fascists who have been 'drilled to believe the Dictator is always right' English children can do 'pretty much as they please' Before we are introduced to Harris in his library we hear him say that the children will be educated to 'grow up as individuals, are not forced into uniform and hear both sides of the argument' We too, will hear both sides of the argument because 'England, like Athens, is a democracy' In this reading English Schools are the proud bearers of a great classical tradition Yet it should be clear to anyone with the briefest acquaintance with the system that this claim is hard to justify Harris is referring to an ideal again rather than a reality

We hear that there are six and a half thousand children in specially-built nursery schools and many more in units attached to infants school These are the newest developments of the education system and provide benefits which 'experts declare' should be available to all children Ideally then the state should be able to take children into its care from three years of age This is necessary if 'good citizens' are to be moulded into shape We note the importance of citizenship before individualism and the fact that the state is offered as a neutral site for educational purposes This is a valuable reminder of Grierson's 'corporate

outlook '

One of the groups who recommended the establishment of the nursery schools was the Women's Group on Public Welfare. Although their rationale was the care of wartime evacuees they understood the importance of the new schools -

We cannot afford not to have the nursery schools, it seems to be the only agency capable of cutting the slum mind off at the root and building the whole child while yet there is time [83]

This makes it clear that the school was to be entrusted with the moulding of the child. The reference to the 'slum mind' is revealing. The problem was to be tackled not at the root where the slums were, but in the schools - thus social engineering would begin at school where the children would learn about a better world. This may seem a paternalistic and limited approach but it was considered progressive at the time. It is also worth noting that because the government did not fund nursery schools half of them were run by voluntary groups - an admirable endeavour but one which gave the middle-classes the opportunity to impose their own values on the children - values which Wright endorses in the film.

In these modern schools the children have the opportunity to wander off on their own or to read under the branches of a tree while the teacher's role seems to be no more than that of a casual supervisor ensuring the safety of their charges. The learning is done in what are now called 'life-situations'. At meal times the children 'learn naturally how to behave'. In the bathroom they learn that 'it's fun to be clean'. It may be simply a result of Wright's own education but these are the very lessons enforced in public school. And, as we shall see later, the public school ethos informed the policies of some of the new grammar schools. There is also something very English about 'Cleanliness being next to Godliness'. Meal times are an occasion for the children to learn how to 'get on with their neighbours'. This is the first reference to the importance of a community spirit which is integral to the fostering of good citizenship.

In the infant's school the children follow a modern curriculum. One of the

innovations is a movement class in which children are encouraged to 'imitate noises of the outside world' This is said to develop their sense of rhythm One of the most important lessons to be learned in these new schools is the necessity of keeping fit, healthy and active There seems to be little concentration on the traditional subjects The children learn 'life-skills' For example a reading lesson consists of one child reciting 'How do you do' before the rest of the class chant 'hurrah, hurrah, hurrah' They are seen to be unified in their happiness - all of this is in strict contrast to the children who will feature in the second half of the film

Although they were considered innovative at the time, these modern schools now seem cold and antiseptic and in this respect they are a fair reflection of the scientific approach of social engineering

But despite the modern setting the children are encouraged to adopt very traditional roles A small group try on a variety of hats while Harris tells us that the boys will 'grow up to be policemen and motor drivers' while the girls will become 'wives and mothers' Here the narrator reveals the inferior position of women in the educational system of the thirties Stephenson has written of how 'women, particularly working-class women, were the group least likely to receive higher education' [84] During the thirties most women were still doing domestic or unskilled work Furthermore their chances of finding alternative employment were not helped by the ethos that urged them to stay at home and look after their children - 'stress was laid on domestic duties and the child-bearing function of women' [85]

Despite Wright's contention that the RFU was an 'equal opportunities employer' ahead of its time, the reinforcement of these stereotypical roles suggests he was not quite as progressive as he claimed to be [86]

Another insight into the thinking of the film's creators is the discreet avoidance of the class issue We hear that parents are grateful that the school does so much for their children, but we also hear the incidental reference to the slums that some of these children have come from This is a subtle nod to *Housing Problems* But Wright can justify this approach because in an ideal school there

would be no place for class-distinctions to operate. The system is the great leveller - it even feeds them in a way which 'isn't always possible at home'. Is this a way of smoothing over the fact that many parents from the slums could not afford to feed their children or is it a reference to their lack of knowledge? The BMA had recommended a diet for pregnant women which, it was hoped, would prevent deaths in childbirth and rickets. But this diet cost five shillings a week and this was 'quite beyond the means of those women who needed it most' [87]. Linked to this is the fact that many women were considered ignorant about how to feed their children. The advisory committee on nutrition asserted that 'everything turns on the women' but in most cases they received 'insufficient education to do a good job' [88].

It is interesting that Wright has chosen to locate his ideal school in a sort of germ-free Utopia. It is not revealed where any of the schools are located but it is said that the bad schools are in the majority. The discreet avoidance of this issue clears Wright of the possible charge of regionalism. If any specific areas were mentioned then it might seem that Wright was making a political statement - perhaps about the North-South divide. The film presents an ideal that should be reproduced all over the country, regardless of location.

The last part of the child's education in the ideal school takes place in the senior school, but once again the emphasis is on physical rather than mental activity. One reason for this will have been that physical activity is considerably easier to portray than mental effort. But Wright's interest in pattern is once again foregrounded. He pans the playground and picks out a few groups of children performing 'physical jerks'. They wear white vests and shorts and are seen working in units. This is an aerial shot so we do not see individual faces but the interest in teamwork and unity is there. We are reminded of the youth movements that sprang up in the country between the wars and Wright's sequence here may be a reflection of this. During this sequence Harris speaks of how the children will be educated to 'think for themselves and act for the state'. Once more the corporate outlook is stressed at the expense of individual development.

The final sequence in the ideal school takes place in the classrooms

where the children are taught to concentrate on 'making and doing things' This is important because Harris speaks of how the school is to act as a bridge to the outside world Once again the emphasis is not on intellectual matters but on the skills needed by the outside world- utility is all A few of the boys are seen in a laboratory but Wright concentrates on the woodwork class where they are taught how to take 'fine shavings' by the teacher The children here are preparing to take up their roles as citizens in the new world It is revealing to note that once more Wright relegates women to traditional roles by focusing on them at a domestic science class The section finishes with a long shot of the canteen where the children sit at long tables Harris does not point out that only one school in ten had a canteen [89] The geometric framing of this shot signifies the uniformity of character that the school has created Harris speaks of how the diet has been 'planned by experts 'and is both nutritional and cheap- 'If you can't afford it - it's free' But even this revelation has to be qualified by the fact that it was only free in those authorities who were prepared to fund their schools to that extent

The canteen sequence sums up the achievement of the ideal school The children take it in turns to be waiters thus demonstrating the co-operative spirit specifically designed to foster the 'good citizens' necessary for British democracy to survive

It has been noted that many of the more modern schools were beginning to adopt the use of houses, rules and prefects very much in the manner of the public school One pupil who transferred over to a new grammar school described his experiences -

What amazed me was the elaborate apparatus devised to get boys to do what the staff wanted Essays and tests all reaped their quota of marks, religiously added up and announced at the end of term There were colours for doing well at rugger and cricket, points for one's house, prizes for this, lines or even the cane for that The grammar school's strangely formal rituals were in fact copied from the 'public' school Olympians [90]

This emphasis on sport and games was a way of manufacturing that team spirit which is so important a part of public school life. Such a life was made real to the populace through the literature of the period which described the ethos of the public school. Writers like Frank Richards and magazines like Magnet and Gem played their part in popularising that form of education which Wright and Auden had found so barbarous [91]. The subject of public school was soon to attract the attention of the commercial cinema. *Goodbye Mr Chips* is perhaps the most perfect example of the public school ethos in which the concepts of 'fair play' and a 'decent show' are celebrated. The exploration of this specifically British institution was another attempt to root and redefine the national character. Given the fact that Wright loathed his schooldays it is perhaps surprising to find him applauding those reforms which made the grammar schools more like his own. But if we bear in mind that both Driberg and Wilson-Harris went to Public School this approval is understandable. Wright may have seen the old system as the most efficient - even if the memory of it was painful to him.

In the second half of the film Wright concentrates on the more common type of school. This is the other side of the argument - a 'different story'. The education the children receive here is altogether more primitive and old-fashioned.

Wright opens the second section with a shot of a dirty corridor and the sound of a child reciting a verse from 'The Golden Road to Samarkand'. The irony is obvious and serves as a stylish introduction to the second half. The delicacy of the child's fragile voice is played against the strident tones of the narrator.

The first factor Wright focuses on is the lack of light. In a slow pan the camera reveals a dark, damp classroom with children straining their eyes to see. The chaos of the lessons is represented by showing two classes taking place in the same room. Amidst this confusion the teachers have to compete for the children's attention. Harris reappears on the soundtrack to repeat the fact that some of the classes have fifty or more pupils. In these circumstances the teachers are given little opportunity to develop the sort of personal relationship their colleagues had with their students in the first half of the film. Not only do they have to work in cramped conditions but they also have to deal with buildings which are out of date.

And while this is clearly Dickensian squalor it is not explained who is responsible Furthermore there is a sense in which this depravation is so elegantly framed that it becomes almost attractive

In contrast to the first half the second section follows no particular pattern and there is no sense of smooth progression or progress The children do not seem to be divided by age into groups Another reminder of the green fields in the ideal schools is a scene in which children play on the cracked concrete yard that constitutes their playground Once again we cannot fail to respond to this especially when Harris express his official displeasure But what are we spectators to do?

Under these circumstances the teachers obviously have no opportunity to implement the modern curriculum taught in the first half of the film Wright is not criticising the teachers but just explaining their predicament We see little evidence of any learning here The only unity the children have is that they are 'lumped together' in appalling schools What sort of citizens will be produced under these conditions? The only memory the children will have of school is of a cold and miserable place In schools such as these it seems unlikely that the children will emerge with a happy view of society Their first impressions of the 'outside world' will be of a society that seems unconcerned with their welfare This is a crucial point for as we saw earlier, it is the responsibility of the schools to produce good citizens

But this approach to the crisis is what makes the film frustrating For all his anger Wright never reveals the root cause of this situation The critique never shifts away from the children in the good or bad schools and so our primary response is an emotional one, not an active and analytical one Furthermore this concentration on the faces of the children reveals Wright's interest in the picturesque aspects of the situation He is still creating atmospheres and does not discuss the real economic and political reasons for the crisis But there may have been another reason for Wright's approach to the subject and we may find the answer in his own education

Earlier we noted that public schools were absent from the diagram illustrating the education system at the start of the film. Wright may have decided to leave them out because entrants to these schools represented only a small percentage of the nation. And yet it was precisely the public schoolboys who gained positions of power and influence. A high percentage went up to the 'old' Universities-

Oxford and Cambridge assembled the leaders of society and established a powerful social bonding between them. As a consequence, the cultural meanings of the old universities permeated the apparently disparate fields of writing, publishing and film-making on the one hand, and politics (of all shades) and mandarin administration on the other, today's undergraduates were inevitably to figure as tomorrow's leaders in all those fields [92]

It is strange but perhaps fitting in a film in which there is no mention of class that the system which nurtured the film-makers and their schooling is not mentioned at all. This may explain the approach taken by Wright, Driberg and Harris. Their presentation of the crisis follows the classic pattern of thesis and antithesis. The narrator has a grounding in Greek which does not appear to be one of the subjects being taught in the ideal schools. He has an impressive command of history and it seems unlikely that his last years in school were spent 'making and doing things'. It is hardly surprising to find that Wright's idea of democracy is based not on shop-floor negotiation but on Greek principles learned in the classroom. He looked at the education system of the masses and saw a situation which could be rectified by the intervention of experts. What Harris expresses is a vague displeasure that poor conditions are permitted to exist in a democracy.

In *Children at School* the gulf between the upper-middle class system structuring the film and the rest of society is inadvertently revealed. The film avoids the class issue because of the film-maker's apparent desire for a classless world based on planning in which each person knows their function. It has not occurred

to the writers to question their own class-based system of education. The issue they concentrate on is the education of the masses for citizenship. Their role is to oversee this and to make recommendations. This marks the limit of their involvement.

d Techniques of Persuasion.

In this final part of the analysis the technical components of Wright's style - sound, editing and camera-position, will be examined to see how he involves the audience emotionally while educating them.

By 1936 followers of the Movement might have come to expect an innovative use of sound in Wright's films. But one of the results of Grierson's call to 'get down to brass tacks' was the more restrained use of sound as evidenced in *Housing Problems*. The avant-garde experiments of Wright's earlier films were to a large extent forgotten when the new sound-synch cameras became available.

The unwritten policy of the RFU was to emphasise the message with a very straightforward approach. Experiment was to be at a minimum when the theme was the revelation of the 'hitherto unknown communities'. However Wright, despite his commitment to the new direction, was not willing to completely overlook the artistic possibilities that the new technique offered. We have already noted how Grierson and Cavalcanti persuaded him to drop one particularly 'aestheticky' sequence featuring the 'Golden Road to Samarkind'. But Wright was still eager to express himself as an artist while declaring his role as a practical reformer. It is then no surprise to find *Children at School* more adventurous than *Housing Problems* in its use of sound.

Wright did not have the luxury of a commissioned score for *Children at School* but he did have the experience of his previous films and knew of the emotional manipulation that could be practised by the creative use of sound.

The majority of the music in the film is provided by children. A selection of hymns and nursery songs are sung by a small choir at certain moments in the first

half of the film - for example while the children are sleeping in the nursery. We never actually see the children singing but associate the music with the harmonious school-life of those lucky enough to be in the ideal schools. 'Three Bags Full' is played over the opening credits and again when the children in the nursery school are put to sleep. The song has a universal appeal and Wright uses its strong associations to manipulate both young and old in the audience. As the camera pans the quiet classrooms or dissolves into shots of the sleeping children and their discarded toys a melody is played on a piano and this is soon supplemented by the invisible infant choir. The light and pure voices of the children underlines their innocence and represents the delicacy of their predicament. This is a graceful way of evoking the trouble-free life of the children, and closes the section in the nursery school. The second time we hear the choir is when the camera pans the children in the junior school playground and then fades into the senior school. Marking these transitions in the school-life with music is Wright's way of illustrating the harmonious passage from one stage of school to another. The lack of music in the second half of the film demonstrates the limited and limiting education that these less fortunate children receive. It is only at the close of the film that the infant choir returns as if in response to a distant bell. The music plays over a series of aerial shots in which children from all over the country are seen making their way to various schools. Once more we are reminded of the innocence of children - their frailty emphasised by their small size in the frame and their lack of direction in this final sequence.

As we saw above, the speaking voices in *Children at School* are almost exclusively those of adults. But there are notable exceptions. The boy telling the story in the first section has a pronounced cockney accent and this provides a link to the working-class accents in *Housing Problems*, but in *Children at School* he is the only child with a recognisable accent. The other speakers all enunciate in well-bred overtones and the contrast with the cockney gives colour to an otherwise antiseptic environment. It is his accent that is to be turned into the characterless 'Standard English' being taught in the language class. This is another indication of the standardisation sought in the corporate state.

The other accent in the film belongs to one of the mothers who has come

to the school to seek assistance for her unhealthy son. The rhythm of her monologue is played against the stiff tones of the teacher who is there to solve all her problems. But these two cockney accents are the only 'natural' sounding speech in the film and, as such, provide us with rare clues to the location of the schools. Everyone else speaks in the characterless tones of officialdom - like Harris they represent the sound of authority which was slowly being imposed on the nation through institutions like the B B C

It is, of course, necessary to use clear and precise speakers in a film when there is a message to be delivered. But Wright had not always chosen to work with identifiable 'BBC types'. In *Windmill in Barbados* the narrator was a West Indian, in *Song of Ceylon* we heard Wendt's strange tone. The difference is that in those films Wright was deliberately trying to create a mysterious mood. The tones were part of the film's atmosphere. The cockney child-orator is part of the atmosphere of the school but this is only an isolated incident. The choice of standard English speakers gives an impersonal tone to the film. The school system is likened to a machine run by officials whose aim it is to train all children to sound the way they do. They are part of the team driving towards the uniformity necessary to preserve democracy.

If the education of our children is to be run smoothly then it needs as little interference as possible. Harris tells us that the 'National Union of Women Teachers declare' that 'One of the greatest gifts an architect can bestow upon a building is the gift of silence'. The ideal schools are far enough from the industrial centres to be free from noise and yet close enough to the suburbs to be community centres. In these schools the noises of the outside world are 'filtered through' by the medium of film. In a theatre watching *Nightmail* the children learn about the importance of the train to a modern economy. The use of this clip is a subtle way of reminding the audience of the movement's past involvement in education. It also brings to mind the EMB's strategy to infiltrate the schools.

The scene with *Nightmail* can be contrasted with one in the second half of the film in which a small village school has its lesson interrupted by the rumblings of a nearby train. The engine-sound obscures the voice of the teacher.

as she clasps her head in frustration while her words fail to reach the children. Those in the ideal school will be gently broken into the reality of industry while the unfortunates in the village school will only know the train as a sound that disturbs their lessons. The latter will be more inclined to view the train as simply a noise. The roar of the engine fills the soundtrack creating a discordant impression on the viewer. The inappropriate location of the latter school is made starkly obvious. And yet once more Wright engineers a dramatic moment for maximum emotional effect. For all the force of this scene we still do not learn what we can do about the situation. Wright rejects analysis and uses sound as an effect to which we simply react.

However, for the most part Wright makes few experiments with sound. There is none of the sound/picture disjunction we noted in *Song of Ceylon*. The film avoids these complexities in order to make its message clear.

We have already suggested that *Children at School* is about the condition of British democracy and that education is the vital root of that democracy. But effective propaganda has to involve the audience emotionally. Wright's method is to try and bring the viewer into the film to give him a sense of contact with the children.

Generally speaking there are two levels of involvement in *Children at School* and these work in tandem with the narrator's direct address to complicate the position of the viewer. By varying his position Wright gives the spectator a variety of roles to occupy.

We have already discussed the camera-position in relation to Harns. The static head-on shot of the narrator is unfussy and concentrates our attention on the speaker. There is nothing on screen to distract the viewer's attention. The whole set-up is designed to facilitate maximum understanding. However in the scenes with the teachers and student-teachers the camera moves about following the agitated deliberations of those concerned. The viewer is invited into the debate. He has enough information to understand the despair of the teachers and is given the invisible role of co-worker.

The first few moments of the film position the viewer in a variety of roles Wright has since claimed that this was to disorientate them, however the reader is reminded of the caution we practise when discussing Wright's post-hoc rationalisations

The three shots of the Greek temple are taken at an easy pace, the audience becoming gradually involved in a lecture on Greek political theory But these shots are followed by some newsreel footage of children marching in front of Mussolini in Fascist Italy Both sequences are high in information value - the one cultural, the other contemporary They are connected by Wright who then cuts to some shots of English children splashing about in the water The sense of danger is replaced by one of relief More importantly the camera now moves After these library shots the screen is filmed with a living English reality - a sight the audience would have been very familiar with As the camera moves around the playing fields the children play the quintessentially English game of cricket The camera takes all this in and seeks to seduce the viewer into the illusion of actually being there The outside world is presented as impersonal in newsreel fashion but England by contrast seems to be very much alive The camera is at the child's eye-level as if it were being operated by one of them The sequence is completed by a cut to Harris at his desk He too is recognisably 'British' in his thick tweeds and spectacles The narrator is a check on the exuberance of the children and the film It is not accidental that he looks like the stereotypical headmaster We keep a respectful distance

There are further examples of Wright using his style to make social planning artistically satisfying

After an aerial-view of the Nursery school the camera is set at a low angle while we explore the world which, the narrator explains 'is still new to these children' Wright features a series of close-ups of the sort that have become standard in advertising in which the camera waits for the children to do something spontaneous - in this case they stare wide-eyed at cups and plates - and then burst out laughing As Arnes has written, Wright's 'best work always has a

genuinely poetic aspect and many of the images of children have a quality that anticipates the very best work of Jennings in the 1940's' [93] But in these opening moments Wright has made it clear that he wishes to engage our sympathies and the spontaneity of children is that much more affecting because of Harris's sober manner

The most graceful camera-work in the film occurs in this first half when Wright pans from the shady trees to the sun-lit interiors. The camera's ease of movement helps to convey the impression of an idyllic world. We are seduced into the illusion that the film will continue in its praise of such perfectly designed environments

The second half of the film begins with an overhead shot of a child walking along a cracked and dirty corridor. The narrator introduces this school with the words 'This is a different story isn't it?' The majority of scenes which follow are interiors with the minimal amount of lighting to make a strong contrast with the sun-lit world of the 'ideal' schools. Wright has said he wanted to 'rub the audience's nose' in the dirt that these schools rise out of [94]. In an obvious attempt to gain the audience's sympathy he focuses on children who are either unwell or seen struggling into desks jammed into ancient classrooms. And yet even here the classical frame is important. Because the children are so carefully framed within the shot they take on the appearance of picturesque urchins - as a result we have a cultured image of decay but one which is lacking in depth

Also in the second half is a doorway shot from a low angle so the camera seems to be on its side. The door with its embossed Victorian date looks more like a gravestone than an entrance. This is an expressionist technique for creating disorientation, and as such is reminiscent of the German Expressionists like Lang in the twenties. Later Wright positions his camera behind an old iron fence so the school looks forbidding. The cumulative effect is to create a sense of revulsion in the viewer. But these shots look like stylish outtakes from a horror film and not a sober report on affairs. Once again the director is making style the paramount factor. Wright can justify this approach because he feels the urgency of the crisis and wants to convey this to the people. The camera offers the audience a unique

opportunity to experience the horrors that their children endure every day. Given the slow rate of progress in the School Buildings Programme, it is reasonable to suggest that many of the parents in the audience may have been reminded of their own schooldays and their children will have been all too familiar with them. But when we consider that only a few schools had projectors and that these were likely to be the wealthier ones then perhaps the message to those lucky children was to appreciate what they already had. The anger that Wright was trying to create with his careful use of camera-position is justified and intellectualised by Harris and his expert displeasure with the state of affairs. We are educated and moved at the same time.

Although Wright was eager to embrace the challenge issued by Grierson to 'get down to the nitty-gritty' of reportage, it seems clear that he was not so willing to abandon the distinctive cutting-style he had spent seven years developing. As a result *Children at School* has the stylistic touches that are Wright's trademark, talents that are utilised to bring out 'the message'.

The first half of the film features a series of dissolves and fades. The second half is cut together without the use of any such methods. The faster the images appear the greater the sense of mounting crisis and the less chance the viewer has to resist their impact. The lyrical fades in the first half recall some of the sequences in *Song of Ceylon* in which Wright tried to evoke the gentle lifestyle of the people. But the fast cutting of the second half reminds us of the dockers in *Cargo from Jamaica* as they struggled to load the ship. Like the dockers the children seem to be under intolerable pressure. The chaos of this second half has arisen for similar reasons - a lack of planning and organisation. The concentrated sequence featuring the poorer children hammers home the point as Wright plays one style against another and his pattern begins to emerge. The scene in the ideal school featuring a child washing is an occasion for humour. It is followed by shots of the children laughing. At the poor school we discover that 150 children have to share three washbasins and this is followed by a shot of the blackboard where the children record the temperature for the day. The scene in the washroom at the ideal school is immediately brought to mind and Wright makes his point. Another pleasant scene in the first half involves the children sitting down to eat and read in

the sunshine Wright fades from the kitchen to the trees outside In the poor schools we see a coughing child followed by a cut to a broken-down schoolyard where the children risk injury from discarded masonry

The final scenes in the film are those of the children of England responding to the bells that call them to school every day Wright dissolves between the countryside, the town and then the city where we see children making their way to school We have returned to the theme that began the film - the importance of bringing up children in a democracy This is one of the few shots in which we see the children outside an institution and as a result they seem lost and delicate beside the adults As the camera moves in to close-up on a small group, Harris drives the point home -

'The modern schools you saw earlier are real community centres as every good school should be The trouble is that there are still too few of them'

Then a close-up of a pretty little girl laughing and then looking worried -

'A nation depends on its children The Dictators know the children are all-important The Dictators are acting on that knowledge Can the democracies afford to fall behind? Should they, even if they could?'

The film concludes with a low-angle shot of a small group of girls who appear to be standing on a ledge - perhaps another clue to underline their precarious position in the modern world - and then the RFU logo appears to close the film

Wright knows where the sympathies of the audience lie and uses every trick he can to arouse them This is certainly good propaganda - to work on the emotions of the audience while dressing the drama in the clothes of factual reportage On first showing the film would appear to be the very model of liberalism with its open modern methods and benevolent experts But our analysis

has revealed that there is very little room for the viewer to question the film's discourse, nor are we requested to do any analytic work ourselves. Everything has been planned without the help of the parents by unseen experts. The film is designed to convince the audience that an idyllic situation is possible. Wright cuts together a series of images designed to convince us that some of our children live in a trouble-free environment created specifically to improve their health and increase their opportunities. The parents need not worry - the children will be safe in expert hands. How can we fail to approve of the measures taken? In a similar way who could not be outraged at the conditions operating in the schools in the second half of the film? What we are urged to accept is the model presented in the first half of the film. We have a straight choice. The film appears to be 'open' in that it revealed a deplorable situation. But the emotional approach to the children distorts judgment. Furthermore the remedy for these ills has already been discovered by the omniscient experts.

Wright has claimed that the film was hailed as a pioneering work because it exposed the 'scandal of neglect' in Britain's schools. But while it was certainly the first attempt on the movement's part to document the crisis Wright can hardly be credited with being the first to raise the subject. We have already seen how the issue was raised in several publications and other media outlets. When we consider the squalor that was endemic in most schools, the only people to whom this will have been a shock will have been those educated like Wright in public schools. In its plan for reform from above the film brings to mind its director's remark 'We thought we knew better'.

The issues raised in the film are of national importance but the remedy seems to have been arrived at by an enlightened class who seem to be remote from the mass of people. Perhaps even more disconcerting to the modern viewer is the aim expressed by the film's narrator to produce adults who 'think for themselves and act for the state'. This definition of democracy re-states the Greek belief that the state comes before the people. [95] We are once again reminded of Wright's classical education and his privileged background - he was certain of his role in the 'polis' - the film was simply a way of telling the people theirs.

Conclusion

In *Children at School* Wright proved himself a skilful propagandist. The comparison with the children of the Fascist countries at the start of the film indicates how seriously the subject of education was taken by those in and around the movement. By skillfully evoking folk knowledge of the Fascists and their barbaric ideology it seems that we British are seeing 'Both sides of the argument'. Wright's presentation of both good and bad schools appears to be balanced and by making the ideal so attractive holds it out as a model of what can be done with creative and imaginative planning.

And yet Wright's message, despite its new style, is not significantly different from earlier work by the Movement. The corporate ideology had been an important component of Grierson's belief from the start and although he was never to make a filmic expression of his belief again this did not prevent him writing about it. In a paper written in 1941 entitled Education and the New Order Grierson set out his ideas about the importance of education:

Education is the process by which the minds of men are keyed to the tasks of good citizenship, by which they are geared to the privilege of making a constructive contribution, however humble, to the highest purposes of the community [96]

What Grierson conveys in this paper is simply a re-working of what he had been saying since the late twenties—that the individualist style of education was out-dated and positively dangerous in a world commanded by 'impersonal forces'. Grierson believed the country to be on the brink of a revolution - the impact of which had not been known 'for four hundred years' (this seems to be a covert reference to Calvin and the Institutes). He advocated a system of central planning - albeit with a little room for 'individual initiative'. Grierson writes that the heart of the matter lies in teamwork and unity. It is precisely this teamwork that is represented by the pupils and the energetic upper-middle class liberals in front of the camera and behind it in the form of the invisible experts controlling the environment for the children of the nation.

Grierson was inspired by the need to connect people with the modern world, to give them information which would enable them to understand the complex structure of that world. The school was the first place where this new re-education could take place.

When we talk of bridging the gap between the citizen and the community and between the classroom and the world without, we are asking for a kind of educational shorthand which will somehow give people quick and immediate comprehension of the highly complex forces which motivate our complicated society. We are seeking a method of articulating society which will communicate a sense of the corporate and a sense of growth. [97]

Such an education would gear all studies to the needs of society. Personal development and creativity become less important than fulfilling the needs of the collective. But what can Grierson have meant by 'quick and immediate' comprehension of the highly complex forces which motivate society? If the world is highly complex then no such quick and immediate comprehension is possible unless a great deal is simplified or neglected. Who is to decide on the form of this education? Wright's film seems to suggest that the answer lies with the omnipresent experts.

We have already seen that Wright's education predisposed him to conceive of democracy in Classic terms -

Democracy, in its characteristic Athenian form, meant direct government by the people, issuing in primary assembly, direct orders to their elected magistrates active and not merely passive citizenship was regarded as the normal duty and privilege of every citizen, and political consciousness was widely diffused through the entire community, which ranked political activity among its most constant and liveliest interests. [98]

But Wright's idea of democracy was a system operated from above rather than one which arose from conflict or discussion. It was part of the Greek ethos that 'Men who are highly endowed intellectually are intended to command' and Wright would have seen nothing wrong with devising a system with the best interests of the people at heart. [99] The fact that this plan seems rather cold to us may have to do with the fact that Wright has no emotional attachment and is primarily concerned to show how it 'works'

The Movement certainly intended films like *Housing Problems* and *Children at School* to raise the social consciousness of society. The impact and meaning of the films would have depended upon the environment in which they were seen. We have already noted how the rise of the double-feature was acting as another lever to force them out of the cinemas. As a result-

by the late 1930's the documentary film movement was claiming annual non-theatrical audiences of ten million people for its films. There was a tendency to give increasing emphasis to this type of distribution, in view of the persistent failure of the documentary film to be a success in the commercial cinema. [100]

Swann has quoted Sir David Milne-Watson's estimate that 'the gas industry's films had been seen by one million people (in 1938) through the different methods of non-theatrical distribution'. [101] The exhibitors and distributors were not keen to book the films and complained about 'the strenuous advocacy of them as the means of spreading culture and uplift' and were not sympathetic to their methods. [102]

We have noted that a large number of the movement's films found their way to those schools which could afford the equipment. But even here we should note some teachers distrusted the medium and preferred to work with BBC broadcasts. [103] The fact that a film like Wright's would have been only one in a programme of four or five would have considerably blunted its impact on the

audience, and the message - such as it is - may well have been lost in the company of other images. This in turn has to be balanced against the fact that they were seen in a learning environment and in such a situation Grierson's plans to 'command the mind of a generation', would have been made easier by the fact that these still impressionable young minds may have absorbed the corporate ethos in the sober environment of a classroom. The lecture format of Wright's film and the strident tones of the narrator would have made it clear that they were there to learn rather than simply to luxuriate in the images.

Wright recalled that as the years went by those fascinated by the art of film were replaced by people more concerned with social issues - an audience trend that reflected the changing interests of the Movement. [104] But we should bear in mind that Wright was speaking from memory and may have accidentally combined his interests with that of his audience. Some critics have talked of how the Movement were 'educating the middle-class' in the Film Societies. But there are no statistics available to support this assertion which itself is based on the premise that only the middle-class would be interested in films of this type. [105] It could be argued that for the middle-class who lived in ignorance of the education system *Children at School* may have constituted a revelation. But again we should stress that even this class is not allocated any role nor is any plan of action proposed that the audience could become involved in. The work has already been done by the absent upper-middle class experts.

In conclusion we should mention that Wright was dealing with an aspect of social engineering which was steadily coming to fruition. Towards the end of the thirties the pupil-teacher ratio was decreasing and the school building programme was proceeding at a satisfactory rate. Furthermore many of the ideas put forward in the film - the 'free expression' classes and the emphasis on nutrition were later to find their way into the influential Spens Report which in turn had a limited influence on the Education Act of 1944. [106] But it would be difficult to argue, given the small number who would have seen the film, that Wright's film paved the way for these reforms. It is at best an illustration of some of the ideas developed elsewhere by the 'progressive centre' and approved of by the Movement who broadly shared many of its fundamental assumptions. The most

characteristic aspect of the film and of Wright's work in general is the way it skirts around the root causes of the problem. The government's refusal to put more money into education, the crippling burden faced by the local authorities, and the fact that the system operated in such a way that children found it easier to find work than their parents, all of this is all passed over. Wright photographs the problem - he does not analyse it.

In the discussion above, we have focused less on Wright than in previous chapters. This is not to deny his authorship but to point out that he was also co-ordinating a range of talents. He was proud of the film and called it his most 'socially responsible'. But *Children at School* was not typical of Wright for although he was still demonstrating style, he felt frustrated at having to limit his intuition for the sake of 'the message' [107]. Wright may have been sympathetic to the new direction but he was happier with the 'art of film'. In his next major film he was to return to a more suitable subject.

Notes.

- 1 P Swann 'John Grierson and the G P O Film Unit 1933-1939'
Historical Journal of Film Radio and Television, Vol 3, No 1, 1983
p 20
- 2 Ibid , p 22
- 3 Ibid , p 24
- 4 P Swann 'The British Documentary Movement 1926-1946'
Unpublished PhD thesis (University of Leeds, 1979), p 89/90
- 5 Ibid , p 95
- 6 Ibid , p 100
- 7 Ibid , p 84
- 8 Ibid , p 89
- 9 'John Grierson and The G P O Film Unit', op cit p 25
- 10 Ibid , p 25
- 11 Interview with Wright by author
- 12 Charles Osbourne , W. H. Auden. The Life of a Poet (London,1979),
p 108
- 13 F Gloversmith, 'Changing Things Orwell and Auden, Class Culture and
Social Change.' ed F Gloversmith, (Brighton,1980), p 124
- 14 S Spender , The Thirties and After. 1933-1975(Glasgow,1978), p 16
- 15 P Stead , The People and the Pictures , Propaganda. Politics and
Film. 1918-45 (London,1982) ed N Pronay and D W Spring, p 89
- 16 Interviews with Wright by author
- 17 J Bevendge, John Grierson Film Master (New York, 1978), p 73
- 18 Interviews with Wright by author
- 19 Ibid
- 20 Ibid
- 21 Ibid
- 22 Ibid
- 23 Ibid
- 24 Ibid
- 25 Ibid
- 26 P Swann , 'John Grierson and the G P O Film Unit', op cit , p 20

- 27 R Low, Films of Comment and Persuasion of the 1930's (London, 1979), p 132
- 28 'Report by Mr Grierson on his visit to America' (09/05/31), PRO CO 760/37 EMB/C/57, in Swann p 58
- 29 Swann , p 169
- 30 R Colls and P Dodd 'Representing the Nation British Documentary Film , 1930-1945' Screen Vol 26 No 1 January/February 1986
- 31 Ibid
- 32 Interviews with Wright by author
- 33 Swann , p 178
- 34 Stephenson- British Society 1914-1945 (Harmondsworth,1982), p 226
- 35 Ibid , p 229
- 36 Cockburn,C The Devil's Decade (London, 1973), p 90
- 37 Daily Herald (29/10/35)
- 38 Interviews with Wright by author
- 39 Ibid
- 40 Stephenson p 322
- 41 Ibid p 323
- 42 H Macmillan , The Middle Way (London,1938), p 12
- 43 Stephenson p 264,
- 44 H Macmillan, The Middle Way (London, 1938), 1938 ,p 375
- 45 Swann , p 168
- 46 N Branson and M Heinemann, Britain in the 1930's (St Albans, 1973), p 193
- 47 Ibid , p 194
- 48 Stephenson , p 311
- 49 Ibid , p 244
- 50 Ibid , p 246
- 51 Branson and Heinemann, p 193
- 52 Interview with Wright by author
- 53 Ibid
- 54 Ibid.
- 55 Interview with Wright by author
- 56 R Ford, Children in the Cinema(London, 1939), p 186

- 57 Interview with Wright by author
- 58 Ibid
- 59 Ibid
- 60 Ibid
- 61 Ibid
- 62 T Driberg, Ruling Passions (London,1977), p 100 ff
- 63 A J P Taylor, English History, 1914-1945,(Oxford,1965), p 310
- 64 Ibid.
- 65 Interview with Wright by author
- 66 Ibid
- 67 Ibid
- 68 H Nicolson, Diaries and Letters.1930-1939 (London, 1966), p 215
- 69 Ibid , p 266
- 70 P Addison, The Road to 1945, (London, 1982), p 36
- 71 World Film News,1 No, 1(May, 1936), p 14 in Swann p 121
- 72 G Greene, The Pleasure Dome The Collected Film Criticism 1935-40
(Oxford, 1980), p 174
- 73 Interview with Wright by author
- 74 Jennings to Bridge, 14 January 1938, PRO BW 2/213 GB/30 in
Swann , p 208
- 75 Ibid
- 76 Swann , p 178
- 77 Stephenson, p 259
- 78 Branson and Heinemann, p 188
- 79 C L Mowat, Britain Between the Wars 1918-1940 (London, 1966),
p 365
- 80 Branson and Heinemann, p 189
- 81 Ibid , p 195
- 82 Stephenson, p 252
- 83 Ibid., p 259
- 84 Ibid. , p 257/8
- 85 J Lewis, 'In Search of a Real Equality Women Between The Wars',
Class, Culture and Social Change, ed F Gloversmith, p 215
- 86 Interviews with Wright by author

- 87 Lewis in Gloversmith op cit , p 225
- 88 Ibid
- 89 Stephenson, p 258
- 90 Ibid , p 255
- 91 Ibid
- 92 P Miles and M Smith, Cinema. Literature and Society (London, 1987), p 70
- 93 R Arnes, A Critical History of the British Cinema, (London,1982), p 140
- 94 Interviews with Wright by author
- 95 L C Wanlass, Gettell's History of Political Thought,(London,1961), p 67
- 96 J Gneron, Gneron on Documentary (London, 1979), p 122
- 97 Ibid , p 129
- 98 G D H Cole, Theones and Forms of Political Organisations in An Outline of Modern Knowledge (London, 1931), p 706
- 99 Wanlass ,op cit , p 64
- 100 Swann , p 187
- 101 Swann , p 158
- 102 Kine Weekly, 27 May 1937, p 4, in Swann , p 187
- 103 Richards, op cit , p 49
- 104 Interviews with Wright by author
- 105 Miles and Smith, p 194
- 106 Stephenson p 259
- 107 Interviews with Wright by author

CHAPTER SEVEN

FACE OF SCOTLAND

With *Face of Scotland* we come full circle. The film was made in 1938 almost exactly ten years after Samuels was persuaded to give Grierson the go-ahead to make *Drifters* - the film that inspired Wright to join the Movement in the first place. Now it was the turn of Grierson's first recruit to go to Scotland and deliver his own impression of the people there.

At first there would seem to be little to connect Wright's first film and *Face of Scotland*. The Gold Coast poster-film was a trial run set by Grierson to test the young graduate, *Face of Scotland* was intended to project the whole nation. However despite the difference in resources and the advances in technique the two films are linked because they are both propaganda and both connected by the guiding spirit, if not the presence of Grierson. But *Face of Scotland* is, of all the films we have seen so far, the one in which Grierson had the least control. It therefore provides us with a model opportunity to judge Wright's style in a 'pure state' away from the guiding eye of Grierson. It is this unique factor that makes *Face of Scotland* particularly worthy of interest.

Although our focus is on Wright's style we should point out that the production and particularly the distribution of *Face of Scotland* took place in a rather acrimonious atmosphere. There were two organisations behind the film - the British Council who worked through the Joint Film Sub Committee and the Films for Scotland Committee. Each of these groups had different ideas on how the films should be financed and what sort of portrait should emerge of Scotland. All these two Committees had in common was the membership of John Grierson.

The British Council's rationale was to stimulate interest in Britain and to distribute all types of British Film. It had a 'high-minded, if somewhat nebulous notion of the image of Britain which should be projected abroad' [1]. Their Joint Film Sub Committee first met in 1936. Their brief was to select films to be shown at the New York World's Fair taking place in 1939. [2] Grierson in his capacity as Film Officer for the GPO and Film Advisor to the Travel Organisation was a member

of this Committee [3] The chairman however was the novelist and historian Philip Guedalla who displayed a deep personal animosity towards Grierson [4] He was dismissive of the Movement's work and made off-the-cuff criticisms to the press about their output The Joint Film Sub Committee originally ranked documentaries the most important form but by 1937 newsreel had become equally important in their eyes [5] Naturally this view was not shared by the Scottish Committee

The Films of Scotland Committee was set up -

under the auspices of the Commissioner for the Special Areas and the Secretary of State for Scotland Its commission was to produce a series of films for immediate display at the forthcoming Empire Exhibition, which was to be held in Glasgow in 1938 These films were to be the basis for a series which would project Scotland overseas, to be incorporated in the film distribution plans of the British Council and the Travel Association [6]

It is interesting to note that one of the main figures behind this Committee was Walter Elliot Just as he had been Grierson's defender in that meeting with Samuel ten years ago, here too he was to be a force behind Wright's film In October of 1936 Elliot had taken over from Sir Godfrey Collins and become Secretary of State for Scotland [7] This was not Elliot's first ministerial position in his home country In the Twenties he had worked with Sir John Gilmour at the Scottish Office when unemployment was at a critical level By the time Elliot took this promotion things had changed very little According to his biographer Charles Coote, Elliot wanted to promote Scotland as a place worth investing in In 1936 Sir John McTaggart 'offered' to put up £5,000 for films portraying Scotland' According to Coote 'Walter got the figure up to £20,000 - which was the origin of today's 'Films for Scotland Committee' [8] He does not say how Elliot 'got' the money together but as we noted earlier Elliot had always been an enthusiastic supporter of the medium and had kept a close eye on Grierson at the EMB Film Committee

The Films of Scotland Committee wanted 'to project the country as a whole' [9] The venue they chose was the Empire Exhibition of 1938 which was to be held in Glasgow Elliot and Grierson saw this as the ideal stage to show the world what it owed to Scotland Grierson argued the event 'should provide the occasion for a Scottish national effort in film-making' [10] The newspapers took up the theme and Grierson was made production adviser to the 'Films for Scotland' Committee [11] He argued that film could be useful to promote the nation In a characteristic speech he wrote-

There is nothing like the films for showing the life of the country and here was the prospect of all sorts of people being interested in Scotland in 1938, and a chance to focus their interest in the life and achievements of our country [12]

Grierson was to use his connections in the press to call for a picture of Britain as a functioning democracy [13] But we should note that by 1938 Grierson's star was fading He had left the GPO in June of 1937 and even though he retained some old friends on the Travel Association, antagonism with Guedalla caused him to leave the Joint Film Sub Committee during 1938 [14]

Grierson gave a public pronouncement of the Committee's intentions in March of 1938 in an article in Men and Matters.

There is first of all a film which we will call at the moment a survey of Scotland but it will, of course, find a more exciting title before it goes to the theatres The theme of it is provided by a phrase in a recent speech by Mr Elliot when he said that Scotsmen having busied themselves over the past 200 years building everyone else's country are now turning their eyes homeward, and beginning to think of building their own [15]

But behind these impressive pronouncements there were arguments about who should finance the films The British Council offered to contribute £750 to the Films of Scotland Committee on the condition that the Joint Film Sub

Committee found their contribution acceptable for the display at the New York World's Fair [16] But the Joint Committee were not happy about the films and the money was not forthcoming They had no particular admiration for documentary and were aware of its failure in the cinemas The Joint Film Sub Committee were interested in the newsreels while the Films of Scotland Committee were concerned with promoting Scotland in a documentary format One indicator of the hesitation behind the scenes is the fact that Wright's film was at first rejected and then later accepted by the Joint Film Sub Committee However we should note that the subject of Empire and the connection with Elliot and Grierson provides another link to the start of the Movement in the late twenties

By 1938 Wright's RFU was two years old but it is interesting to note that the RFU was set up within weeks of the Films of Scotland project being announced in 1936 [17] Wright's Realist was awarded the contract to make the films The RFU may have been Wright's company but his independence was limited because he was still linked to Grierson through Film Centre The continued support of Grierson was important to Wright whose commercial company had to compete in the market-place with rivals like Strand Grierson's favouritism was not only important in keeping Realist a viable proposition, it indicated his level of support for the documentary model he preferred By assisting Wright in this fashion Grierson could keep his old colleagues under his direction Strand under Rotha represented a renegade force and one Grierson could never hope to control

Wright decided to use the services of the photographer 'Jeek' (A L Jeakins) who had worked on *Children at School* Aside from these two the crew was minimal - only increasing in size when the large-scale operation to cover the football match required many technicians The filming took place in the spring of 1938 and covered almost six weeks with a shooting ratio of 5 | [18]

Given that he made various suggestions on *Children at School* one might have expected Grierson to have taken a creative or advisory role but he was abroad for much of the production and so *Face of Scotland* can be seen as Wright's personal interpretation of the country with a shape and form determined by the director alone

Wright's recalled his brief was to 'project the country as a whole' [19] Although we are dealing with the director's memory this vague and non-specific instruction determined the first few weeks he spent in Scotland touring the country Wright decided to make a film about the 'spirit of the people and the place' [20] With this sort of loose frame-work Wright gave himself the opportunity to experiment in the same way he did on *Song of Ceylon* Given this attitude to the material it may be worthwhile our surveying the state of the nation before beginning our analysis

The decline in Scotland had set in during the twenties because the country's staple industries like shipbuilding, mining and heavy engineering, had begun to feel the effects of competition from American and Japanese firms The percentage of men in these industries had fallen during the 1907 - 1935 period from 53 per cent to 39 per cent [21] The early twenties had been a boom time for the Clydeside shipbuilders who had built liners for the American market But the consequences of the crash of '29 had meant an end to such orders and even the prestige liner - de - luxe - the 'Queen Mary' had work held up on her By 1935 the orders had completely dried up and imports were down to the levels of the 1850 's On the export side orders through Scottish ports fell 42 per cent between 1913 and 1937 [22]

But it was not only a decline in Scotland's industrial heartland that the new minister was faced with Elliot's speciality was agriculture As we have already noted he had much to do with the administration of the Quota regulations for Britain's farmers But this had not been enough to help farmers deal with the competition presented by the refrigerated ships of America and Japan As a result the number of employees in Scottish farming reduced from 126, 900 in 1921 to 105,300 in 1938 whilst output fell from £48m to £45m [23]

Scotland was hardly alone in suffering from the effects of competition in the new world, but when we compare figures there with those in the rest of the UK we can see that she was not making the sort of recovery that was being staged elsewhere in Britain For example between 1923 and 1930 14 per cent of Scottish

people were out of work compared with a UK average of 11.4 per cent. In the 1931-5 period these figures were 21.9 per cent against the UK's average of 16.4 per cent [24]. Much of the blame for the discrepancy between the two countries can be laid at the feet of central government. Out of total agriculture subsidies of £68.25m paid in 1935/36 only £4.2m went to Scotland. This represented only 6.1 per cent [25]. Elliot was facing a situation in which the country he was dispatched to represent was being marginalised by central government. From the Highlands to the blackspots of the Clyde, Scotland was racked by unemployment. What could Elliot do about it?

In 1937 the Scottish Economic Committee (SEC) was set up to report on 'Highlands, light industries and re-armament policy' [26]. According to Harvie the SEC was looked upon with mistrust by central government and quickly suspended on the outbreak of war. But it is interesting to note that the committee comprised several members with whom we are already familiar [27].

It drew on Boyd-Orr, whose Rowett Research Station extended its influence from agriculture into welfare, science policy and propaganda, involving Sir Stephen Tallents, John Grierson and E. M. M. Lloyd, as well as Elliot, its former research fellow. It rejected the somewhat abstract neo-classicist economics of Sir William Scott in Glasgow and Sir Alexander Gray in Edinburgh in favour of the Keynesian ideas of James Bowie, Director since 1931 of the new Dundee School of Economics [28].

Bowie's ideas about centralisation, the role of experts and administrative planning sound very much like those of the Middle-opinion groups already discussed. Echoes of Macmillan and the P. E. P. can be found in Bowie's belief in 'man's power to promote orderly development and social change through scientific research and control' [29]. Bowie wanted to create an informed public who would have sufficient knowledge to elect 'a professional body of men' (with the) 'competence to be carefully trained for the new and difficult art of public administration' [30]. But Bowie was not the only author working with these new centrist ideas. Boyd-Orr was Director of the Rowett Research Institute and had

published Food, Health and Income in 1937 This was chiefly a report on the nation's diet and revealed that a high percentage of the populace were severely under-nourished [31] The doctrine of planning was also advocated politically active groups- a good example being Douglas Jay's The Socialist Case [32] But what made Bowie's work peculiarly Scottish was his insistence that the collapse could not be blamed entirely on the economic system He thought that one of the greatest obstacles was the attitude of the Scottish people They had grown listless -

The race which produced the inventors of the steam-engine, the steamship, the telephone, the pneumatic tyre and television has apparently given up the task of pioneering invention in the commercial field [33]

According to Bowie the government was less to blame than the people who were 'stiff-necked and conservative' [34] What was needed was a 'regeneration of a common will' to adjust to the fast-changing times In time-honoured Scottish tradition he looked to the root of Scottish democracy - education - as the cause of this bad attitude and the place where a fresh start must be made

Our educational system seems to tell youth about everything except the conditions that govern their lives, and as a result we cling to antiquities of living as we preserve ancient monuments [35]

Bowie published The Future of Scotland in 1939 and it is here we can find the same strident tone and pragmatic philosophy that informed much of Grierson's writings But interesting as these connections are we should bear in mind that Bowie was a fringe figure with no legislative power and his ideas would only be of interest to like-minded men In Bowie the plans of the progressive centre had their Scottish base

However it is indicative of Wright's continued devotion to the 'art of film'

that these ideas had only a peripheral effect. He had decided from the outset that the film would not be a cold and technical affair but a portrait demonstrating the natural beauty of the country as well as focusing on how the environment shaped the people. *Face of Scotland* provided him with an opportunity to forego the 'nitty-gritty' non-aesthetic approach of *Children at School* and the chance to return to the 'art of film'. To this end Wright visited Glasgow and Edinburgh where he set up the camera in several pubs to capture the authentic sounds of the Scots - although very little of this material was used. He filmed the workers at the Clyde as well as the farmers in the Lowlands. The last location was a football match at Falkirk where a range of cameras were set up to record the reactions of the crowd [36]

To create a score for the film Wright called in the services of Walter Leigh - the man responsible for the innovations in sound in *Song of Ceylon*. Quite apart from the fact that Leigh was a friend and an accomplished composer he was also a Scot with a particular interest in his homeland. Rather than use music traditionally associated with Scotland, Wright chose Leigh because he thought he could be relied upon to come up with an intuitive and heartfelt response to his country [37]

The choice of narrator for the film would suggest the involvement of Elliot. According to Harvie, James Bridie (née Osborne Mavor) was Elliot's 'closest friend'. Their relationship had started at Glasgow University when they had both worked on the University magazine together [38]. In the thirties Bridie had become a successful playwright with several West End successes to his name. Although Wright recalled no intervention from Elliot it would seem quite likely, given the circumstances, that Bridie was 'suggested' to him as a contributor. Wright was close enough to Elliot to share his official car for the Scottish Cup final in 1938 at Hampden [39]. This was not the first time the Secretary of State granted official approval to Wright's work. Elliot had appeared on screen in the RFU's *Enough to Eat?* in 1937 - a film based upon the work of Elliot's friend Boyd-Orr - mentioned earlier. Wright could hardly refuse the services of an esteemed writer like Bridie - especially one who had the added attraction of being a 'name' who could help sell the film. Bridie not only spoke the narration but also wrote a little of it in collaboration with Wright - although his contribution was not great enough to merit

a credit The exact details of their working relationship are hazy - Bridie certainly does not reveal anything that Wright could not have found out for himself in the history books of the period But what is interesting is that Bridie was also part of the coterie centred on Glasgow University which included not only Elliot and Grierson but Boyd-Orr as well

Wright and 'Jeek' may have proved themselves distinguished filmmakers but we might ask why it was that so few native Scots were asked to produce films Furthermore Wright was an unusual choice for any film to promote Scotland as a country worth investing in Grierson better than anyone would have known that Wright was hardly at his best when focusing on the industrial landscape In our analysis we will discuss what Wright's film expresses about Scottish workers and whether it could be used to inspire confidence in the nation

Face of Scotland was both directed and edited by Wright and was shown at the Empire Exhibition mounted in Glasgow from May to October 1938 The whole extravaganza cost £10m and is said to have paid its way and 'kept industrial decay at bay' Charles Coote wrote that 'the long term result of these ventures was difficult to assess but it was nonetheless a sign that somebody was trying to do something' [40] We shall deal with this later

But the Joint Sub Committee on Film were less than enthusiastic about the project One British Council representative named J W Jennings described the films as -

uninspired from the point of view of national publicity For the most part they were too frank not enough selection and literary composition There was very little of the colourful or the modernistic, very little excitement, in short no showmanship In the average they were rather dismal and grim the films would have a narrow range of interest, they might even be harmful if shown to any but enlightened and already sympathetic audiences [41]

These were precisely the same sort of criticisms that had been raised by the Council against *The Smoke Menace* and *Children at School* earlier that year. But the criticism is interesting - especially when we consider Wright's film. Jennings raises the point we have already stressed about the limited appeal of Wright's films and the fact that they would only appeal to a select elite.

Finally - Wright was making his film in 1938 - a time when the possibility of war and the horrors of Fascism were featured in the newsreels. We have noted the range of writers and intellectuals who thought it necessary for the nation to defend democracy. But Wright's contribution to the ideological debate is an oblique one to say the least. Precisely why he took this approach will be dealt with in the following.

Grierson wanted 'a picture of Britain as a functioning democracy, for it is the only picture on earth I am interested in, and I begin to wonder if I may not have to press for it' [42]. But Wright was to take his own highly individualistic approach. Given that he was - almost for the first time - away from the supervision of Grierson, the film presents us with an opportunity to see how Wright portrayed those central themes of community and democracy without the guidance of 'the boss'.

Analysis

Before beginning a close analysis of the film we should make clear the shape and method of *Face of Scotland*

Although the film is only fifteen minutes long Wright attempts in this short space of time to present the history of Scotland from the Roman invasion to the present. In choosing such an ambitious project Wright has little time to paint any one particular period in detail - but this is the point. The director was interested in discovering the 'spirit of the people and the place' [43]. He was seeking to convey the underlying continuity in the Scottish character - the essence which could never be changed by time or circumstance.

However such a project needs a framework for even the 'spirit' needs direction and so Wright focuses on the theme of democracy. Three factors are responsible for creating Scottish democracy - the conditions in the environment, the role of the church, and the education system. These three follow one another and each will be studied separately in the analysis.

Scotland is presented as having her own distinct history and Wright evokes this by using modern-day scenes to illustrate the struggles of the past. We have noted Wright's historical method elsewhere and here we will again note how only certain incidents are selected from Scottish history in order to fit the director's 'Grand Design'.

An authentic Scottish tone is provided by the voices sharing the commentary - each of which contributes a new insight into this portrait of Scotland. We shall begin our analysis with a study of how these voices work through the film to engage the spectator and lead him into the romantic and mysterious world that is Wright's Scotland.

I Voices

We should like to examine here the mode of address used in the film. In his article on *Rotha*, David Pearson discusses the role of the commentator in documentary -

it is almost always a lone voice, and a voice which tends to cast itself in the role of an author, ostensibly structuring the diegesis of the film through non-synchronised direct address to the audience, with the images tending to be seen as illustrations, as 'proof' of the argument being put by the commentary voice [44]

Children at School was a good illustration of direct address in which the message was aimed straight at the audience. But *Face of Scotland* has a range of voices all of which are led - we might say controlled - by one central voice, that of James Bridie. It is only at the beginning and end of the film that we hear 'foreign' voices. This is significant because these points mark our entry into, and departure from, the world pictured by Wright and coloured by the voices. The first outsider speaks in Latin while the camera pans a stark and beautiful Scottish valley. This is our first glimpse of the country and the speaker's voice is soft and low. The sound he makes would have been as much a mystery to the mass of people as the chant that preceded the credits in *Song of Ceylon*. The words are soon translated by Bridie - they are the remarks of a Tacitus describing the forbidding sight of the Lowlands to the Roman army - 'not a soul came forth to meet us'. The stage has already been set for a romantic survey of Scotland. But the use of Latin reveals Wright's cultured tastes and, like the opening of *Children at School*, indicates a grounding in the classics. Although a translation is provided to open a film in this fashion suggests a rather esoteric approach to the subject.

To close the film Wright has an English speaker representing the sixteenth-century historian Holinshed. He describes the virtues of the people

'Thereunto we find them to be courageous and hardy and offering themselves to the utmost peril with great assurances so that a man may pronounce nothing to be overhard or past their power to perform'

Once again Wright is displaying his cultural credentials as he does throughout the film. The choice of this historian is revealing. On the one hand the point is made that the Scottish character is a consistent factor that has always been there despite adversity. But the choice of such an archaic source- like the use of Knox in *Song of Ceylon* - suggests that Scotland had been unspoilt by the presence of foreigners. This important summing-up of the people is given by an outsider who is judging them as 'worthy men'. Both beginning and end of the film are the viewpoints of outsiders. And yet while this is stylistically impressive the effect is that Scotland becomes an island bordered by the values of men from another time that Wright has selected to illustrate his viewpoint. But if outsiders mark the limits of the film's world, what of the voices working within the film articulating a sense of what it is to be Scottish?

The controlling voice of the film is that of Bridie who, like all of Wright's narrators, does not introduce himself nor does he appear on screen as Harris did, to enable the audience to get an idea of who or what he is. Bridie is both narrator and conductor orchestrating the voices in the chorus. What connects him to the voices under his command is his Scottish-ness. When we first hear him the camera is panning the deserted Lowlands. His voice is little more than a whisper. As a result we connect him to the land. He becomes part of the mystery, a ghost voice articulating the struggles of old. Like Wendt in *Song of Ceylon*, Bridie's tone as well as his language is part of the fabric of the film. But rather than recite a sermon with a 'universal' truth Bridie deploys a range of voice-tones that lend colour to the film. The most obvious example of this occurs in the first few moments of the film when Bridie is describing the tough peasant life. Suddenly he is interrupted by the sound of cannon fire and the clamour of battle. A new voice enters the soundtrack describing how 'Victory chanced to the English Bow or Scottish Spear'. As one might expect the voice is hard and craggy signifying the violence of battle. But this tone also serves to authenticate the violence - it is a

product of it. This, coupled with the contrast with Bridie and its sudden arrival, all indicate the devastating effect war had on the community. This is a skillful and clever way of introducing a note of menace that never leaves the film and yet never really explodes. Bridie is the ghost-voice drifting over the film, keeping the intruding spirits at bay.

In the second section Wright lets his camera drift over a cold huddled congregation, most of whom are dressed in black. We never see the preacher but we do hear another new voice on the soundtrack - that intended to represent John Knox. Once again the voice is exactly what we should expect - harsh, powerful, deep-throated. This tone belongs to many preachers of Puritan stock. Nevertheless it is because we expect this tone that the voice works so well to create a forbidding effect. 'God shall not pity them nor laugh at their calamities. The righteous company in heaven shall rejoice in the execution of God's Judgment and shall sing while the smoke rises up forever.'

As these words are solemnly intoned, Wright cuts to a grave with a skull clearly etched out at the top. Words, tone and image work together for chilling effect and the moral terror of Calvinism is well conveyed. All this is impressive but one wonders why the controlling voice is so determined to make these others all sing the same song of horror - even if they are allowed different tones.

For example at a later point in the film Wright features another war sequence this time using library footage from the First World War. Here is a fine opportunity for representing conflict - either between the enemy and the Scots or for demonstrating the tensions felt within the army. And yet no such opportunity is taken. All of the voices, however aggressive, are Scottish. The sub-text of this is the unity of all Scots and the impression is conveyed of a people who all share the same ideas and beliefs. The only voices allowed to speak on the soundtrack have to give the received version of events and nothing more. To have included dissenting voices might have added complexities and thus distracted from the drive and purpose of the film - to discover and convey the Scottish 'essence'.

The images provide the evidence for the discourse being advanced by

the narrator We hear of how the Book of Discipline was the source of the democratic education system To 'prove' this we are shown a variety of schools in various locations, all of which have a similar appearance The implication is that all Scots children have the same facilities, and therefore the same opportunities - all of this has been inspired by the Great Book Yet rather like *Children at School* the system is described rather than investigated Bridie, for all his accent and the identification that goes with it, is as remote from the main system of education as Harns was in *Children at School* But this scene like many others is all part of the history that Bridie unfolds and controls at the same time

Consider the tough and at the same time idyllic scenes at the start of the film Wright pans a crude dwelling reminiscent of the mud and straw huts in Ceylon To describe them we hear Bridie say - 'Coarse pastures for sheep, shallow soil for crops, heather for their roofs, peat for their fuel' All of this is spoken with a gentle rhythm that lends the scene a poetic charm Despite the land being 'ungrateful' the small communities come together The point is that even when faced with the hardship these people endured Wright makes poetry out of this and robs the scene of raw power to replace it with a sort of sanitised and timeless peasantry The voice works to support this - to prove that both narrator and picture are as one The section ends with a couplet from Burns-

'To make a happy fireside clime to wains and wife
that's the true pathos and sublime of human life'

By enrolling the national poet Wright and Bridie would appear to be making a deliberate aim for the hearts of the Scottish people and at the same time wrapping a harsh and uncomfortable reality in a gentle tartan haze But in choosing such lines Wright reminds us of his poetic intent

The voices on the soundtrack are clearly intended to be significant because very few of those captured on camera are permitted to speak The only examples of synch-sound occur in the pub and at the football crowd What makes the pub scene particularly 'Scottish' is the fact that the subject of conversation is the national sport - football and as such this sequence serves as a prelude to the

football match towards the end of the film. It was not that Wright was unable to use synch-sound. But in choosing to leave the cameras aside he also chose to create a sound for the people rather than taking what was 'theirs'.

As we might expect by now, no-one on screen actually speaks directly to us. Bridie and the other voices on the soundtrack serve as filters through which Scotland is translated for the audience. Bridie's commentary, like Wendt's in *Song of Ceylon*, is a cultured and evocative affair, sewn into the fabric of the film. But this picture of Scotland is being interpreted by artists and intellectuals from the country's history. While they may be an articulate screen they are not there to help the people speak. Further, the voices we hear are not only presenting the received version of history, their selected texts may represent interpretations radically different from those of the common man. This privileged account of the country's past presents a unified view of Scotland's past but rather like the Movement itself these views from above are handed down to the silent masses. The mute congregation, the kilted troops, and the toiling peasants are there only to follow.

There are other implications of the indirect approach. It is noticeable that the audience is never addressed in the way they were in *Children at School*. In the latter it was made clear that the future of democracy lay in providing children with the proper education. The camera-position and the use of newsreel footage added to the emotional manipulation and the shots of little children all served to involve the viewer. No such involvement is called forth in *Face of Scotland*. No face looks directly into the camera - all of the verbal communication and the 'message' of the film is communicated by the voices. No role is offered for the audience. After seeing *Children at School* teachers and parents might conceivably campaign for change - after all a neglect was exposed. But what response does *Face of Scotland* call forth? The spectator is offered an artful selection from history in which he might find a certain pride, but no specific reference is made to their present situation. Is the role of the spectator simply to receive the information being directed at him? David Pearson has written -

the commentary becomes crucial in ideologically fixing the spectator-subject, in locating the individual's relationship to

the conditions of existence haphazardly represented in the images. Contradictions are resolved for the spectator, who is thus encouraged to settle into a passive position of acceptance [45]

Wright's film is beautifully shot, artfully constructed and impressive in its range of eclectic sources. It bears eloquent testimony to his gifts as an aesthete. But his presentation does not suggest that the Scots are anything more than brave and hard-working. In this version of events the voices make clear the traditional place of the workers who are 'fixed' in the system. As a result we never hear what might have been a dissenting voice. Wright's 'voices' act as spokesmen bringing in the evidence of the past to back up this claim and the pictures 'prove' it to be true. The juxtapositions are given meaning for the spectator and as such he is not encouraged to think beyond the image. The conflicts are contained within the film and are quickly resolved by the controlling voices who interpret and then diffuse any potentially disruptive significance.

Our final point is that the source of these voices is not revealed. We are given little information within the film and none in the credits. In this way Wright conceals his inspirations and gives the film a professional sheen. The audience is persuaded to accept the message articulated by the anonymous voices and encouraged to feel a pride in 'their' history. The music of the accents encourages identification, while the skilful selection of poets and writers gives the impression of a close knowledge of the life and culture of the people. But the voices never descend to the level or the language of the working man. They speak instead a range of poetry that helps to build the romantic haze that passes here for Scotland. Thus far, Wright's film is the most traditional of portraits and very much a private impression.

II History.

The historical approach has always played an important role in Wright's evocation of a culture. Elsewhere we have noted how history was utilised to explain the conditions in the present. History is central to Wright's work for it is

through historical tradition that a people orientate themselves. In Wright's view those traditions that have survived are useful indicators of a people's character. In the films analysed thus far historical change has had a visible effect on the community which has been marked by Wright concentrating on a face or signalled with a series of sharp cuts. But in all of these films Wright presented us with a past only to show how it could be integrated with the future - with the honourable exception of *Song of Ceylon*. What makes *Face of Scotland* interesting is that Wright makes few contrasts between the past and the present. Instead he shows how the past is alive and well in the present.

The film begins with references to the past on the soundtrack in the words of Tacitus and in the portrayal of the peasant farmers. If we analyse this scene we can note Wright weaving past and present together to make a point about that spirit which is alive through all ages.

After a slow pan of the deserted valley Wright picks out a few isolated figures. At first they are so distant they might have emerged from the rocks themselves. Gradually Wright brings his camera closer - echoing the approach to the Devil Dancers in *Song of Ceylon* - for this too is a primitive tribe in an unknown land. As outsiders we approach slowly from middle-distance and note the threadbare clothes of the peasants as they load peat bricks on to a ramshackle cart. With the valley all around them their work has the quality of an elemental struggle. These people, coming as they do at the start of the film, are the original Scots, the settlers, the pioneers who first struggled with the cruel earth. Even their tools are like relics from the past. The commentary already cited further underlines the primitive existence in rude dwellings. All of this is most effective in setting the tone for the struggle to come. But of course this representation of the past is actually going on in the present. Wright did not reconstruct this scene 'à la Flaherty' - but photographed it 'as it happened'. What is the spectator to make of this? The commentary speaks of these conditions in the past tense and even brings in the national poet to back up this interpretation. But this is 'actuality footage' - people were living this way in the late 1930's. In another of Wright's films this sequence would have been used to show the developments necessary to pull agriculture into the twentieth century but here it is an elemental scene indicating

the hardy qualities of the Scots. This may well have turned the peasants into romantic figures but at the same time it ignores the reality of living under such archaic conditions. By using the past tense and old poets Wright consigns these people to the dim and distant past while at the same time presents them as noble and heroic figures engaged in a struggle with the 'ungrateful soil'. But Wright can justify his approach because he is searching for the 'essence' of Scottish-ness, those spiritual qualities that have endured through the ages. It was true that four-fifths of the Scottish people lived off the land for much of the country's history. It was also true that agriculture remained Scotland's biggest industry - even if it was in an advanced state of decay. Given his intention to capture 'spirit' Wright is bound to present agriculture in this way - as the first elemental indicator of Scottish hardiness. He need not dwell on the economic history of the industry or mention the exploitation practised by landlords - all of this is secondary to his search for the mystical essence. What better place to begin this quest than the magical mountains? It is important that we understand the impact and meaning of this first scene because it is referred to later in the film where it becomes even clearer that this elemental struggle produces exactly the sort of strong character Scotland needs to survive.

One of the closing sequences in this section shows two sheep farmers talking while one of them extracts something from a lamb's foot. We are reminded of *O'er Hill and Dale* and this is only one of the similarities to Wright's second film. This Scotland, like the Cheviot Hills of Martin, is bordered by the director and made into an idyllic island where traditions and customs persist, a place where, in the most shallow sense 'history is alive in the present'. Despite having paid lip service to the new direction Wright had not shrugged off the romantic tendency that informed his earlier work and was still concerned with the nobility of labour rather than investigating the problems of living in twentieth century Scotland.

This emphasis on the role of the environment in shaping the Scottish character is significant. While it is certainly true that most cultures have agrarian beginnings, Wright's decision to begin his film in this way suggests that he still considers it a prime determinant in shaping the Scottish character. This privileging of the pastoral over the urban remained an important theme to the director but it

says very little about modern Scotland nor does it help to promote her as a young and healthy country

Wright's second theme is religion and the influence of the Calvinist philosophy. In a sequence of stark beauty Wright pans the church where the congregation sit and then cuts to the deserted streets and villages, indicating that everyone has responded to the call that no work be done on the Sabbath. The commentary informs us that 'The Scottish Sabbath became famous throughout the world' - note the use of the past tense again. Wright did not reconstruct this scene either, but filmed a kirk in the Highlands. And yet once again the line between past and the present is blurred. No-one would dispute the fact that the kirk and the work of John Knox had a profound effect on the people and any wide-ranging portrait would look at religion. But by showing people in modern dress moving towards, or sitting in, the congregation Wright suggests that the influence is still strong and that Calvinism remains a vital force in the land. In this way Calvinism is taken as another opportunity for the director to demonstrate what an obedient race the Scots are. While it is arguably true that the spirit of Calvinism had at least a moral influence in the 1930's - we need look only to Grierson for evidence of this - attendance at church was considerably lower than it had been for some time [46]. But Wright could justify mixing the past and present in this fashion because he was searching for a way to express the grim power of the kirk. By including such a sequence Wright suggests that the kirk as an institution still exists as a powerful influence on the people. This sequence also serves to present Calvinism as a past force and as a present spiritual and ethical power over the people. As in the case of the peasants the two can merge because of this search for 'spirit'. But it does seem odd that in the process of celebrating Scotland, Wright should show that the shops are still locked up on Sunday nights. This would seem to underline Bowie's criticism (quoted earlier) that the Scots were a 'stiff-necked and conservative people'. While it may be true that most parts of the U.K. also closed their shops on Sunday, it seems odd to include such a factor in a film that was supposed to be part of a campaign to sell Scotland as a land of economic potential.

In the first five minutes of the film Wright has done a great deal to cement

Scottish stereotypes in the mind of the audience. The notion of the faithful at the kirk under a venomous preacher was to be parodied to great effect in the next decade but Wright's presentation only confirms the stereotype of a God-fearing people. This, coupled with the role of the environment simply turns the Scots into the tough and hardy characters of legend.

The third determining factor in Wright's historical equation is education. Education or 'schooling' follows the classes in the kirk because the Scot's unique system was inspired by religion. Once again, past and present conditions are an important part of the one great tradition. Wright presents a variety of buildings of equal size and then cuts to an interior where a pupil struggles in poor light to do some school work. A few shots later we are at an unnamed university where a student works by candlelight. No-one would deny the great influence education had on the Scottish young but there is much to protest at in the conditions these children have to work under for these are precisely the scenes that would have fitted well in the second half of *Children at School*. Whilst the audience would have realised that these shots were 'real' and contemporary, the education system is situated in the past for it is immediately after this sequence that we hear of the great achievements of Watt and Hume etc., and then move on to the achievements of industry and enter the last phase of the film. Wright's point is that important Scots have survived this system and gone on to great things. These deprivations, far from being criticised as reprehensible as they were in Wright's last film, are seen as essential tests of the Scottish character. And yet by locating the education system in the past Wright can avoid the question of conditions prevailing in modern-day Scotland. It may be worth pointing out that the system he praises so highly was in a poor condition and the numbers of those going on to university was actually falling [47]. But in Wright's picture such facts are less important than the message about how the past informs the future, and the spirit of Scottish-ness 'lives'.

The last third of the film is situated in the twentieth century - although no specific mention is made of the actual date or 'state of the nation'. But Wright continues to make historical references by linking the struggles of old to contemporary scenes. For example, after focusing on the workers pouring out of

the shipyard gates we hear that these men are of the same peasant stock that farmed the 'ungrateful soil' To drive his point home, Wright cuts from a picture of a small town to a shot of the busy city Wright's point is that the indomitable spirit and character of the people survive to this day Even if the growth of the Clydeside shipbuilding industry has drained the countryside, the essential Scottish spirit remains

One of the roles the Movement saw for itself was as teachers educating the populace, but this lecture, for all its undeniable elegance, still conceives of history in Carlyle's terms as the procession of great men leading the people to glory In this survey there is no space for mass movements outside of the Kirk or political meetings - nor indeed any politics, which is particularly odd when we consider the Act of Union Any history is bound to be selective and subjective, reflecting the ideas of the author, but what is interesting about this history is that it is free of conflict and moves with certainty through time Of course Wright had only had a limited period in which to put together his interpretation of Scotland But this is a poor excuse for a director who was able to suggest so much about the occupation of Ceylon by the colonialists in less than ten minutes in 'Voices of Commerce' It is true that Wright was not the first to suggest that Calvinism was the principal religion of Scotland but the reasons he gives for its emergence - the 'need' of the people to adopt or create a religion fitted to their 'harsh way of life' - are specious to say the least Another historian might argue that Knox came to prominence because the people were sick of the wealth and corruption of the 'accursed popery' Equally one might argue that history proceeds by a series of conflicts and struggles, not as the unfolding of a marvellous spirit It is true that Wright allows war to make a small break in the flow of the film but it is not presented as violent enough to break this 'spirit' On the contrary - it reinforces it The first war - unspecified and mysterious - in the first few minutes of the film is portrayed as simply a test of Scottish character While this is one interpretation of the effect of a war it does nothing to pin-point or explain the conflict nor does it suggest that it arose from some dispute with England - the 'auld enemy' The second war is used not to reflect on the pointlessness and futility of combat but to dwell on the bravery and courage of the Scots Wright's use of stock footage from the First World War makes the conflict very real but does not explain it Once more it is simply a test of

Scottish character How educational is such an approach? All it really informs us about is Wright's interpretation of Scottish-ness In this historical equation the Scotsman is moulded by tradition and his leaders are not self-serving or politically motivated men but the personification of the spirit common to all Scots

But there may be other reasons why Wright took the historical approach Quite apart from the fact that this method had by now become established as his trademark, the use of history is a powerful way of validating a message In the West Indian films we saw how Wright created a particular history for the islanders which gained extra credence because this history was spoken by a native Much the same approach is taken with the Scottish film Furthermore by evoking folk memories of Scotland, Wright is aiming for the audience's heart as well as its head He has a much better chance of putting the message across if he can convince the audience that they are part of a great and noble tradition By showing history being 'enacted' by ordinary people he gives the viewers a chance to orientate themselves to the action or craft on-screen Why should they despair of their present troubles when in the past their ancestors have overcome all to emerge victorious? This explains the strategy Wright adopts when discussing history Because he is searching for the essence or spirit of the Scottish character he can avoid those issues that disturb the smooth flow, like politics and economics Such factors can be passed over because they change over time, but the Scottish soul, born of the soil and given a direction by the Kirk, is an unchanging feature of the Scottish character

Wright remains interested in the nobility of man - a recurrent theme in his work from the earliest days and one unchanged in this instance by massive unemployment and the coming war

III The style of democracy.

In our last chapter we noted the wide variety of figures concerned with vindicating democracy as a viable alternative to the Fascism of the new Nation-States Wright's concern found expression in *Children at School* which

illustrated how English democracy depended on the education system In 1938 the dangers of Fascism were far better known and the possibility of conflict was much discussed We shall take this into account when analysing how Wright's presents the formation of a specifically Scottish democracy

Democracy begins with the early settlers binding together in a common fight against the hardships afforded by the land The family group in the rude hut is soon replaced by a shot of a white house, which is itself followed by a close-up shot of two farmers coming together - patriarchal figure-heads of the families By the end of this sequence, several dwellings - all of the same uniform design - have appeared on the Scottish landscape Wright uses this pictorial uniformity to express the equality of all Scots From the absence of any authority figures we must presume that Wright means us to see these dwellings as self-made community property We need hardly point out that this was some way from the truth and that most Scottish peasants rented land in exchange for their allegiance to the laird A modern example would be Martin and his landlord Walter Elliot But in Wright's picture the impression or the idea of a community is more acceptable than the complicated business of ownership

The section featuring the kirk begins with the sound of an anvil that recalls the bell in *Song of Ceylon* The purpose is the same - the faithful are being called to worship Black-hooded figures are seen in long shot scurrying past the church - again they all look the same and in this way their uniformity is made to represent democracy We hear about the enforcement of the sabbath and see a series of shots in which the shops stand empty and the boats are discarded on the loch No-one is exempt from this law What is signified here is a sort of democracy of obedience, the equality of all under God Inside the church Wright pans the stone interior while the words of Knox ring out But it is interesting to note that we never see the preacher - perhaps the director thought better of trying to find someone to express the presence of Knox At this point Wright seems more concerned with the community As the camera pans the heads of the devout what comes across most strongly is the pattern made by the rows The church, like the school in *Children in School* is the great leveller in which everyone knows their place and in which no man is above another - except of course the preacher This is important because it

is fundamental to the education system which Wright makes the basis of Scottish democracy. However, Wright is so intent on demonstrating equality through patterns that he omits to mention one of the strongest features of the church - the role of the various officials who regulated the behaviour and moral conduct of the congregation. The people may have been equal before God but strict rank was maintained amongst the officials. This is not surprising when we consider that Knox took as his model Calvin's theocracy in Geneva which itself had a ruthless system of delegated power and control. Wright presents the church as a sort of grim community centre in which each member takes upon himself the duty of monitoring his neighbours' behaviour. 'The forthright nature of the Scots demanded a personal relationship between man and God' (The people wanted) 'a code of duty that fitted the harsh realities of life'. In Wright's version the church arose because of the people's desire to impose an uncomfortable and restricting regime upon themselves. And although Wright acknowledges that their "leader and prophet" was John Knox, the implication is that the whole nation desired the change. This is not only debatable but, on the face of it, most illogical. But Wright is once again presenting a very simple picture. To have introduced the political and ethical complexities of Catholicism would have disrupted the flow of the argument and distracted from this essentially straightforward portrayal.

School is the second democratic system and born of the first. In this section Wright presents a series of identical buildings inside of which are children all dressed in the similar way. The commentary informs us that the education system is not based on privilege but that "brains and industry" are the keys to success. Here pictorial uniformity represents equality of opportunity. This is not dissimilar to the presentation of the education system in *Children at School*. But like that film it also conceals the fact that Scotland, like England, has never been without her public schools - for example the Glasgow Academy attended by Elliot and Boyd-Orr. Wright's cut between the schools and the Universities implies that these children will have no trouble entering higher education, but this was as difficult for those in Scotland as it was for the English children in *Children at School*. The truth was that even in the much-praised Scottish system only a tiny minority went up to university. It is fair to say that the Scots have always been proud of their education system, but Wright in his smooth cuts implies that this route

is open to all Wright needs this sort of progression to demonstrate that the system was successful in providing Scotland's cultural and scientific heroes

A shot of an operating theatre and one of a furnace are both signs of the achievements that have been made We hear how new machinery uses the mineral wealth of the country, and this is followed by a shot of a machine-shop It is at this point that the camera returns to a working man situated in the new setting of a foundry A group of men are then seen in front of the dock-gates - Scottish industry appears to be on the move - and these men have been drafted in from all over Scotland to meet these new demands We hear that one in five ships of the world was built on the Clyde, a statement which dissolves into a shot of an empty village These sequences demonstrate that Scotland has progressed along with the rest of the Western world Rather than considering the plight of those old communities broken up to feed the industrial machine Wright shows how Scotsmen - there are hardly any women in the film - are prepared to drop everything in the service of their country No doubt they are responding to the duty drummed into them at the kirk sessions But such a presentation portrays them as followers rather than men with control over their own destiny

These shots of the foundry and the shipyard suggest that we are now in the new cities Wright interrupts this impressive picture with a reminder of the war The kilted pipers are seen parading in the square and this is followed with library footage of a piper walking along the front-line apparently oblivious to danger The bravery of the Scots is well drawn but we are given no idea why they should lay down their lives for this conflict Are we to assume they are fighting to defend the democracy that has evolved since the kirk? Wright's placing of this scene after the industrial shots, would suggest this reading is intended

The action of the film does not return to the Clyde but focuses instead on the interior of another church Wright makes a slow and graceful pan of the interior that echoes his treatment of the other kirk A new voice enters the soundtrack to describe the deeds of the 'glorious dead' as Wright features a close-up of some names engraved in stone This scene has a certain grandeur but the men's motives remain explained We hear that Scots were mercenaries and in this way

the stereotype of the 'hard' Scotsman is reinforced, but we never discover why they chose to live this way. The harsh whisper and the stone engraving work together to give the impression of a cold world - but this is all. Wright makes these men as mysterious as ghosts drifting through his history.

Wright uses the war footage in much the same way. The piper is clearly from the First World War but who is he being brave for? Rather than investigate the image Wright just lets it stand for courage - the sort of strength of character we have noted throughout the film. When we consider how much the prospect of a coming war occupied the minds of many people this shot will have served to remind people of the sacrifices they had already made and may have to make again - for the sake of democracy. This war sequence finishes with a Scottish flag flapping in the breeze - the final acknowledgement that the Scots made a unique contribution to the war. Questions such as whether this separate nation would have wished to enter the war are passed over as irrelevant.

Up to this point in the film the only mention of England was in the conflict in the first few minutes of the film. Knox's pivotal role in politics and the Act of Union - hardly marginal issues in the history of Scotland - are not discussed at all. Wright might have been justified in excluding the English if he had only been investigating ancient days when England was less of a threat. But the links with England went back further than the twentieth century. Since Knox's time Scotland has been economically and politically tied to England, a union which has been the source of much conflict over the centuries. It is interesting that one political phenomenon of the inter-war years was the creation of the Scottish National Party, a move caused in part by the Scots dissatisfaction with the English. [48] It is not surprising that Wright makes no mention of these factors. Not only would it break the 'flow' of the film but it might also hint that what was left of Scotland's national identity was under threat by the English whose central government, as we have seen, was starving them of resources.

The final section of the film begins after the war footage. The world to which these soldiers return is one in which the countryside remains picturesque, where huge pipelines roll past the ancient villages. Past and present co-exist in

apparent harmony Another indicator of modern times is an aeroplane struggling against the sky All the signs are that despite the conflict the country is returning to its normally busy routine We could argue that the director had thus far ignored contemporary Scotland but then he presents the football match

Wright has since said that he chose to insert the football match in the closing moments of the film to express his sympathy for the massed ranks of unemployed As he toured Glasgow and other major cities he was surprised and appalled at the slums that still existed in some parts of town The football match was intended as a metaphor for the anger and frustration of the people As he put it

'These people had lived through the depression the marks of it were on their faces they had just been through a terrible war and were rewarded by inadequate rations and no work ' [49]

Although this is another of Wright's post-hoc rationalisations it is interesting that this sequence is cut differently from the others in the film This, coupled with the subject matter make it reasonable to assume that at least some dramatic effect was intended

The sequence lasts less than two minutes but is cut in such a dynamic fashion that it seems much shorter Although the spectators are watching a football match we hardly catch a glimpse of the action Wright focuses on the faces of the crowd and cuts quickly from one group to an individual and then to another section of the crowd What all of these people share is a look of angry frustration They exhibit no signs of humour or good nature but wear the expressions of embittered men It should be said immediately that the men are responding to the game and that passions run higher about 'fitba' in Scotland than they do in England Wright was trying to express his fury at the neglect of men who have proved themselves worthy in the war and who seemed to him to have gone unrewarded for their efforts Because this is the most arresting moment in the film and the point where Wright has said he wanted to make his critique, it is worth looking a little more closely at it

The match follows the relatively peaceful scene of an old village with a pipeline running through it. In cutting from this to the angry crowd Wright demonstrates the shock cutting technique that was one of his trademarks. Yet this is important in understanding how the sequence works. Rather than building up the tension Wright makes the impact of this scene dependent on an understanding of his editing style. This is not to say that the pictures are without power but that they gain extra power from being contrasted with what has gone before.

Wright's style was not to make crude accusations or to blame anyone for the condition of these men. His criticism had to fit into the fabric of the film - raising the tone but not departing from the 'tune'. The crowd's expressions are violent but they are not permitted to become accusatory or face the spectator - they remain contained within the pattern so carefully crafted by the director and act as more concrete examples of the violence hinted at by the voices used to represent the 'ghosts of war'.

Although this scene is more forceful and emotive than any other in the film, the people in it are still being observed. Wright is not alongside them in the crowd nor is he attempting to understand the roots of their anger. He is simply taking the most obvious mass demonstration he could find at face value and using it as a metaphor for the anger he imagines the people feel. It is his protest, his demonstration. The people themselves are not permitted to express themselves - Wright, like one of the new experts of democracy, makes the protest for them. In this way the sequence fits in with the rest of the film - the dynamic energy of the Scots is preserved while we are never able to understand them as individuals. They do not reach us but come filtered through the stylistic apparatus of the film.

The placing of this sequence 'stops' the film which, up to this point, has been an elegant demonstration of historical development. We are now in the present and although no words are used to cover this sequence it is clear from cultural codes like the clothing of the workers and the size of the football crowd, that we are in the thirties.

It is important to understand the socio-political significance of football in Scotland in the 1930's As Harvie writes -

For most Scotsmen, sport meant football Watching and discussing it took up much of the weekend, and it filled a third of the popular press football was politically important, it defined class, gender, religion, and nationality, and ritualised and contained all of these The period 1920-39 (was one of) potential social upheaval its skilled artisans were paid by little local oligarchies [50]

Football was overwhelmingly a working-class sport and would have been seen as such by the viewers of the film But Wright was not trying to make a point about class - he had avoided mention of this issue throughout the film emphasising rather that Scotland was without class He was using the atmospherics generated by the crowd as a metaphor for anger Wright may have intended the sequence to be about the neglect of these men but this does not come across as strongly as their anger and frustration It is interesting that this is the only time in the film Wright hints that things are not quite what they should be north of the border

Although this sequence might have been aimed at the socially conscious there are other ways in which it could be read Ambiguity was an integral part of Wright's style - something we noted when discussing the 'critical' sequence in *Cargo From Jamaica* Some might see the football match as portraying the Scots as a wild and violent race But even if we share Wright's interpretation- where is this anger to be demonstrated? How should it to be expressed? Above all, who is it to be directed against? In answering this we come up against the same problem we faced with *Children at School* In that film, as this, no-one is made responsible for the situation Instead of offering us an answer Wright decides to wrap the film up with another historical reference - that of the English historian Holinshed already quoted In this way the anger becomes part of the Scottish character, simply an expression of the nation's drive and energy that is historically directed into purposeful activity like building ships and fighting wars Another small note of ambiguity is sounded in the final shot of the film which features a glimpse of

Edinburgh Castle This may be intended to signify the aggression of the Scots ready to defend themselves in the coming war, it may be a symbol of the people's history as defenders of their land The cannon is only glimpsed in a fade and it would be wrong to read too much significance into it but it provides just enough ambiguity to make it typical of Wright's style

If Wright was concerned with presenting Scotland as a functioning democracy what sort of systems arise from this portrayal? In the first place, religion and education 'emerge' almost magically Although mention is made of the people's need to adopt a religion fitted to their harsh way of life, most of the inspiration seems to have come from John Knox We get very little sense of the Scot's role in the formation of the democracy, no idea of their feelings about what is happening to their country What emerges is a very stylish portrait but not one with any depth The country is seen to have its own traditions and customs but no mention is made of the fact that this culture is under attack from the English The most forceful quality of the Scots to emerge from the film is their aggression, which has to be given a direction or it becomes dangerous and ugly - like the football crowd The evolution of this democracy, like the progress of history, is a smooth passage, an unbroken line maintained by the people following and responding to the wishes of the leaders of the nation The style of the film makes Scotland into an island - like Ceylon But this was less true than ever before It seems strange that for a director trained to lay stress on the inter-connection of man in the modern world that Wright should have made a film that goes out of its way to obscure Scotland's relation and contribution to the rest of the world But perhaps the strangest feature of this presentation of democracy lies in the way the director hands down his idea of what democracy means to the masses Wright's approach can be symbolised by looking at the way music works in the film

As we noted earlier Wright called on the services of his colleague and friend Walter Leigh to work on the music in *Face of Scotland* Leigh would have seemed like a good choice Wright credits much of the success of *Song of Ceylon* to the innovations pioneered by Leigh Could he be counted on to do the same again? One of the less impressive features of *Song of Ceylon* was Leigh's attempt to produce an Indian-style music He was hampered in this research by the

unavailability of Indian music in the early thirties. But Scotland was his homeland - no such problems would have occurred in this sphere - Leigh had only to travel a little to hear genuine Scottish reels. One of Wright's reasons for choosing Leigh was that he could depend upon a heartfelt contribution from the Scot. How strange it is then that the music in *Face of Scotland* should be nothing more than a rather anonymous orchestral score. This is not to say that the music is ineffectual but rather that it is uninspired.

In the first few minutes of the film Wright pans the mysterious valley taking in the wild countryside. Leigh's response is to provide some shimmering violins of the most romantic kind. This slow shimmer returns to the soundtrack when Wright is showing how the old crofts are being supplemented with pipes and tubes signifying the new industrial forces. The pastoral meaning of the music is clear. Similarly when the film speeds up to show the increasing industrialisation of Scotland towards the end of the film Leigh jollies along the pace with some cheery rhythms provided by the orchestra. The point is that the music is simply complementary, reinforcing the meaning provided by the pictures and text. It is only when we compare this musical treatment to the sound in *Song of Ceylon* that we realise how impoverished the score is. Rather than investigate the possibilities of sound and provide an extra meaning to jolt the viewer or stir up contradictions, Leigh opts to give us a romantic and complementary score. Music is relegated to third place behind text and picture.

We have no explanation why Leigh took such an approach but when we consider what resources were available, it seems almost perverse. But the composer's approach to the country parallels that of Wright. Rather than seek out the music of the people he chose to interpret and impose his own musical ideas. In *Song of Ceylon* Leigh tried to fuse his own ideas about Indian music with the western medium - the result was an innovative if not wholly successful mix. But nothing about the soundtrack of *Face of Scotland* refers to the country's musical heritage. Leigh is even reluctant to use traditional Scottish instruments. The music intended to represent the Scots is like the pictures - at one remove from the people and divorced from their ideas and traditions. It is an interpretation that makes no use of what the people themselves might have been able to contribute.

But like everything else about the film it is not an expression of the people but something designed for them to respond emotionally to

Conclusion.

Face of Scotland was one of a series of films that were shown at the Empire Exhibition in Glasgow 1938. Amongst the other films were Alexander's *Wealth of a Nation* and Mary Field's *They made the Land* [51]. Ritchie-Calder wrote of how the films 'tell the world of the other side of Scotland, tear away the tartan curtains of romance and show a nation fighting for its existence' [52]. We have argued that Wright's film does nothing of the kind and only serves to cement Scottish stereotypes in the minds of the audience.

The Empire Exhibition provided Wright with a potential audience of thousands. It was in many ways an ideal setting for putting across a critique of central government and making a case for the Scots. But Wright's film is not significantly different from the propaganda he had been engaged in for the past decade. In that time Wright had developed such a sophisticated style that his critiques would have only been comprehensible to that select elite with whom he shared a taste and education. It is reasonable to argue that few would have been able to read the films in the way Wright has said he intended them to be read. For the most part they re-produce the 'scenes of Scottish life' seen elsewhere in the Exhibition.

At the Exhibition were reconstructed villages which sought to show life in the far colonies. Amongst these was a 'a clachan or highland village' with actors dressed as peasants living in these 'primitive conditions' [53]. Such an exhibit can be placed 'in the great Exhibition tradition, combining fun with information, economic propaganda with ethnic display' [54]. Although Wright's film did not quite go to the extent of reconstructing such scenes his work shares the same propagandist function. The Scots are turned into another tribe with their own picturesque contribution to make to the great family of the Empire. Furthermore the historical angle taken by Wright could be utilised by the schools who, as we saw earlier, were learning an Empire dominated history in the classrooms.

And yet despite its inoffensive nature Wright's film, like the others, was much criticised by the Joint Sub-Committee on Film. At first all the films were

rejected for showing at the New York World's Fair One of the reasons given by the council was that the films, when exhibited at the Empire Exhibition had drawn small audiences A G Hight of the Post Office reported that the newsreels were more popular than the documentaries [55] This confirmed Guedalla in his opinion that documentary was not a popular form When it was announced that the group would not be allowed to show any films at the New York Fair the critics came to the rescue of the Movement The Times printed a letter from Mr R Hurd of the Saltire Society who called the committee's decision 'unfortunate and tactless, for the films are good and they project modern Scotland in a lively and convincing manner' [56]

Hardy put the decision of the Council down to the fact that 'The films chosen reflected the Council's belief in the value of tradition and ceremonial knee-breeches rather than working clothes' [57] He goes on to recall the battle being fought between the two sides in the New York Times and the London Times. Eventually the Council capitulated and an award of £300 was made In January of 1939 it was announced that *Face of Scotland*, *They made the Land*, and *The Children's Story* 'had been accepted for display at the World's Fair' [58] However the criticisms remained For example Johnstone wrote that -

They are, in the main, neither bad or uninteresting, their main fault is in a too rigid determination not to emphasise the picturesque character of Scotland [59]

Having analysed Wright's film this seems a particularly odd remark, for *Face of Scotland* does indeed concentrate on the picturesque qualities of the country and is typical of Wright's work for this very reason

But despite these wrangles documentary as a form was not totally out of favour Watt and Cavalcanti had remained with the GPO and were now operating under strict rules and regulations since Grierson's departure Perhaps because of this they were now considered the most trustworthy of the film-making operations and had 'good official understanding' [60] Their continued development of the story-format was proving successful In the same year Wright was experiencing

difficulties with *Face of Scotland* Watt released *North Sea* which was also intended for the Empire Exhibition This was the biggest success of the movement's history

A total of 1126 column-inches in the British Press were devoted to reviews of *North Sea* as the most successful documentary film produced to date This amount of space would cost more to buy than the film cost to make [61]

It would appear that Watt's dramatic form utilising dialogue and sets had more public appeal than Wright's eclectic experiments

It is interesting that while Watt went on to work in the feature film industry where he developed his talents for story-telling Wright was never to work in the mainstream sector The split between the two men and the two styles that started in 1935 was to be maintained for the rest of their working careers

Face of Scotland is a useful point to end our enquiry for the film can be seen as Wright's last propaganda exercise for the Empire Rather like the EMB the film was specifically designed for boosting the concept of Empire at the Exhibition of 1938 After seven years Wright was still employed in the selling of Empire, still advertising an idea that was becoming increasingly untenable The Exhibition was intended to sell products and was seen as 'the climax of two decades of Imperial propaganda from the Imperial Economic Committee, the EMB and the Imperial Preference Movement ' [62] Although Wright's film was not an outright attempt to sell products it nevertheless is part of the same propaganda campaign

It is instructive to note that the Exhibition was planned in 1931 in the 'depths of the slump as a conscious effort to provide unemployment and to advertise home-based industries ' [63] While it was certainly true that the Exhibition did create work for thousands of people it is indicative of the short-sighted ideas of the Government that once the project was completed the problems of unemployment would return

Face of Scotland was Wright's last major film with the Movement and it also raises all the themes included in Wright's work since 1931

Wright begins the Scottish film by framing his peasants in much the same way he did in *The Country comes to the Town*. But in his debut the peasants were made part of the new network of communications inspired by the modern world. It was because of their new role that Wright could permit himself the indulgence of framing them for a Millet-style shot. But the agricultural workers in *Face of Scotland* are not connected to the modern world. By opening the film with the peasants in the magical mountains Wright suggests that the agricultural industry and its people belong in the past. *Face of Scotland* is closer to *O'er Hill and Dale* in which the world of Martin was sharply divided from that of the world outside. In these two films Wright creates a border and this suggests that Scotland is cut off from the rest of the world. In one sense this was true. Scotland was receiving so little money from central government it was like a forgotten corner of the UK. Here was an excellent opportunity to make a point about the interconnectedness of all within the Empire. Wright does not take that opportunity.

The link to *Children at School* is in the role of education in shaping the country. But Wright ignores the same factors, such as the role of public schools and government under-funding, in Scotland as he did in England. Furthermore, what is considered bad and destructive for English children is portrayed as a positive boon to Scottish children who are seen to need such obstacles to develop 'hardy' characters.

But the film to which *Face of Scotland* has the most obvious links is *Song of Ceylon*. Wright approaches Scotland as he approached Ceylon - as an outsider. He presents a poetic history of the nation and focuses on the unique qualities of the Scots. He treats Calvinism in much the way he treated the Buddhism of the Sinhalese - as a vital part of their culture and a force central to an understanding of the national character. Even the section on the Scot's education is similar to the Dancing school in *Song of Ceylon*. Stylistically at least it would be difficult to argue that the films do not have a great deal in common. Nevertheless there are several important differences which we would stress because the factors

Wright chose to omit in his later portrait tell us a great deal about his approach

Firstly, *Song of Ceylon* represented a mystical experience for Wright. It was precisely because he felt himself under the spell of Buddhism that the film took the shape it did - 'a mandala, film in four parts'. The film was a personal expression that affected Wright so deeply that Grierson gave him the opportunity to forego his initial brief. In *Face of Scotland* Wright did not have a 'mystical experience' nor did Calvinism leave any particular impression on him. Wright's film is indeed a poetic expression but not one that actually tells us much about the Scottish people beyond the stereotypes.

There is another significant difference. As Wright pointed out in *Song of Ceylon* the Sinhalese people had quite a measure of independence - and it was considered 'a great shame' to 'work with them for hire'. Historical records have shown that only 20 per cent of the population worked for the planters. Wright would have found no such independence in Scotland. The Scots might have certain characteristics that made them different to the English but no industry or culture that was specifically theirs. The only 'difference' Wright is interested in is that which can be photographed and made part of the pattern. As we have already pointed out, Scotland was tied to the purse-strings of Whitehall. But Wright's failure to focus on economic issues is typical of his work. Scotland was quite definitely not an island and to approach the country as if it were remote and distinct from the rest of Britain was not only inaccurate but ignores the fact that one of the country's greatest gifts to the world has been the achievement of her sons and daughters working away from home. It seems strange for a director trained under a proud Scot like Grierson that Scotland's connections with the rest of the world go unheralded.

In the third section of *Song of Ceylon* we saw that life on the island was not idyllic and that the 'Voices of Commerce' were making inroads on the land of the Sinhalese. This section broke the flow of the film and reminded us of the powerful world of capitalism. No such interruptions break the flow of *Face of Scotland*. The history of the people is presented as a smooth unbroken line only occasionally disturbed by conflict with an invisible army or foe. We need hardly

point out that a quick review of Scotland's history could have provided many examples of invaders disturbing the life of the people

The Films for Scotland Committee were inspired by a need to present the Scottish character and the industry as worthy of investment. Wright's film provides the historical framework in which this character has developed. But the resulting plan is esoteric to say the least. The film is not expressive of the people's feeling nor does it indicate what they have offered in terms of human input into the country. Instead of this the mass of Scots are seen as so many factors or units with certain contributions and duties to perform. This is not to say that they are without colour but that this colour has to have a purpose and is limited to a specific end. As a result of this the people never emerge from the film and reach us as vital human beings with a part to play in the democracy. Scotland works best, the film seems to say, when everyone knows their role in society. What is lacking in such a plan is an opportunity for fresh human responses. We are reminded of the scientific approaches of the social engineers. But we are also reminded that this remote approach to the subject is typical of Wright and expresses a great deal about his understanding of the people.

Of course the film has to be understood in the context of its time. Not only did Scotland live with a massive unemployment problem but another world war looked likely. Part of the meaning of *Face of Scotland* for a Scottish audience could have been that the country must put on a show of unity in the event of a war. If nothing else Wright's film is expressive of Scottish unity and the question of national unity and patriotism were to become important themes in British feature films of the period.

In *Face of Scotland* Wright featured a scene in which the congregation were seen responding to the words of an unseen preacher and the words of John Knox. This scene provides as a useful analogy for the work of the Movement. Gerson said that he looked upon cinema as a pulpit. But rather like a sermon the message handed down to the people by the Movement did not arise as a result of consultation with the masses. The rules were prepared by people behind the scenes who had their own ideas about what shape democracy should take. The

lesson may have been eloquent but its meaning was often obscure Whether or not the people responded to it could be measured by how willing they were to embrace a faith conceived - not through consultation - but with their best interests at heart The distance between the Movement and the working class is like that between the famous Thomas Chalmers and his congregation

It was a measure of the social gulf between them, and the identification of the Church of Scotland with the ruling orders, that the man whose oratory could so often move a middle-class congregation to tears and action left working-class audiences sullen and hostile [64]

Cinema may have belonged to the people as no other social institution in the world before but the language of the Movement, however well-intentioned, merely showed up the gulf between their own ideas of democracy and the situation of the masses on the other side of the camera

Notes

- 1 P Swann The British Documentary Movement 1926-1946
Unpublished PhD thesis (University of Leeds, 1979), p 203
- 2 Ibid , p 210
- 3 Joint Film Committee minutes, 23 November 1936, PRO BW 2/35
GB/3/86 in Swann , p 204
- 4 Ibid , p 204
- 5 Ibid , p 207
- 6 Swann , p 211
- 7 C L Mowat, Britain Between the Wars 1918-1940 (London, 1966), p 670
- 8 C Coote, Walter Elliot. A Companion of Honour (Glasgow, 1966), p 105
- 9 Swann , p 213
- 10 F Hardy, John Grierson. A Documentary Biography (London, 1979),
p 86
- 11 Ibid
- 12 J Grierson ,Film-Making in Scotland, 31/03/38 In Archive G3 A4 1
- 13 J Grierson , 'Propaganda for Democracy', The Spectator, 11
November 1938
- 14 Joint Film Committee minutes, 24 February 1939, PRO BW 2/31
GB/3/83 in Swann p 204/5
- 15 John Grierson, Film-making in Scotland. Men and Matters,
(31/03/1938), p 3
- 16 Swann , p 215
- 17 Ibid , p 172
- 18 Interviews with Wright by author
- 19 Ibid
- 20 Ibid
- 21 C Harvie, No Gods and Precious Few Heroes (London, 1981), p 38
- 23 Ibid , p 44
- 24 Ibid , p 47
- 25 Ibid., p 44
- 26 Ibid., p 51
- 27 Ibid

- 28 Ibid
- 29 J Bowie, The Future of Scotland (Edinburgh, 1939), p 152
- 30 Ibid , p 154
- 31 J Boyd-Orr , Food, Health and Income,(London,1937)
- 32 D Jay, The Socialist Case, (London,1938)ff
- 33 Bowie , p 140
- 34 Ibid , p 132
- 35 Ibid
- 36 Interviews with Wright by author
- 37 Ibid
- 38 Harvie , p 137
- 39 Letter to Mother from Wright 18/03/38
- 40 Coote , p 191
- 41 J W Jennings, memorandum, 11 October 1938, PRO BW 2/214
GB/30/1 in Swann op cit , p 214
- 42 Interviews with Wright by author
- 43 J Gneron, 'Propaganda for Democracy', The Spectator,11/11/1938
- 44 D Pearson, Speaking for the Common Man, Paul Rotha BFI Dossier 16
(1982), p 71
- 45 Ibid
- 46 T C Smout, A Century of the Scottish People 1830-1950 (London,
1986), p 191
- 47 J Stephenson, British Society 1914-45, (Harmondsworth,1982), p 252
- 48 C L Mowat, Britain between the Wars. 1918-1940, (London,1966), p 470
- 49 Interviews with Wright by author
- 50 Harvie, p 119/120
- 51 Hardy, p 87
- 52 Lord Ritchie-Calder, 'Scottish Testament', World Film News,
November 1938
- 53 J M Mackenzie, Propaganda and Empire,(Manchester, 1985), p 113
- 54 Ibid
- 55 Joint Film Committee minutes, 10 October 1938, PRO BW 2/31
GB/3/83 in Swann , p 213

- 56 Mr R Hurd of the Saltire society in The Times 22/11/38 p 10 in Swann , p 216
- 57 Hardy, p 87
- 58 Unsigned memorandum, 3 January 1939, PRO BW 2/215 GB/30/1 in Swann p 217
- 59 Johnstone to Bridge,13 January 1939, PRO BW 2/215 GB/30/1 in Swann , p 217/218
- 60 Ibid , p 133
- 61 Post Office memorandum, 28 July 1939, POST 33/5199 M16682/1937 in Swann p 135/136
- 62 Mackenzie, op cit , p 112
- 63 Ibid
- 64 Smout, p 197

Conclusion

We have brought this work to a conclusion in 1938 because after this period Wright's role as a film-maker changed considerably. During the war he remained with Realist who made propaganda films for the M O I and worked on the Documentary Newsletter. In 1945 Wright became production head at the Crown Film Unit. It was during this period that he over-saw Jennings' *A Diary for Timothy*. In this capacity he was producing the work of a man considered to be his heir in the poetic use of film.

Wright's post-war work suggests the strength of his attachment to the aesthetic. After a film with Rotha for UNESCO entitled *World Without End* (1946) he concerned himself with rather esoteric subjects such as *Stained Glass at Fairford* (1954) and *The Drawings of Leonardo Da Vinci* (1956). These films are not without interest to the scholar but have no place in an enquiry whose focus has been the ideological significance of Wright's style of documentary in the thirties.

When Wright joined the Movement his intention was to work in the art of film. This aim did not change substantially over the decade. For all the force of his leader's rhetoric this first recruit was never politically motivated nor have we been able to detect any evidence of a passionate social conscience in his films. Wright may have expressed a socially motivated concern in his writings but this feeling for change and the importance of planning was being advocated by many people in the thirties. While we have detected some evidence of the new scientific approach in Wright's work, the director was more interested in creating the atmosphere and mood.

We have noted that Wright's concern with the aesthetic sometimes brought him into conflict with Grierson but these disagreements were never sufficiently strong enough to cause a split between the two men. More serious conflicts - with Watt and Rotha - underline the fact that this was never really an ideologically monolithic 'Movement'. Wright's gentle rebellion against Grierson was the distinctive and intuitive method. This was some way from the 'nitty-gritty' approach Grierson is said to have favoured, but the originality of Wright's contribution and the fact that Realist toed the Griersonian line kept the two men together. Wright's individuality was encouraged by Grierson and this was repaid by the former demonstrating a high degree of loyalty.

In the foregoing we have encountered the problems facing any historian looking at the period. As Raymond Williams has written, even the most dedicated of scholars could never hope to capture the 'structure of feeling' of a period even if he had the time and energy to see all the films, writings and other cultural artefacts produced. What we have done is to make links to those other movements which we feel have a particular relevance to Wright. We have touched upon the socially progressive ideas of the middle-opinion group, discussed the attitude of the thirties poets to their work, looked at some films from the period, and discussed the political and economic situation. All of these factors have provided a framework into which Wright's work has been located. What we have discovered is an approach to the subject which was typical of his class at the time. This represented a combination of the remote rationalist organising the world into a comprehensible pattern and the romantic idealist ignoring the more unpoetic aspects of the modern world - such as politics and economics.

In the course of this thesis we have analysed Wright's concern with the pattern and form of documentary. The social actors in his films are decorative elements woven into a pattern rather than individuals with something to say about the world. Wright's reluctance to let his subjects confront us with their experience has the effect of distancing them from us. As a result we become spectators looking in at their reality. This approach tells us more about Wright and his class than it does about life in the 1930's. For all of his concern Wright remained isolated from the people he was filming. His technique may have been elegant and eloquent but it never advances a readily comprehensible critique. Wright's method calls to mind the painters of the nineteenth century realist school who presented the peasantry as figures worthy of our attention, but never more than that.

But Wright's position was not simply that of a middle-class man alienated from the working-class. His political and social instincts were guided by feeling and not by intellectual rigour. Wright's Liberalism expressed itself in the belief that social reform should evolve gradually from state and populace coming together. His faith in pioneers and reformers hints at his own self-image - that of a selfless individual aiding society without political motivation but with the interests of the people at heart. This is a combination of the elitism of the *Polis* and the Christian sense of responsibility to the

community Wright considered himself a 'practical reformer' and in this capacity wished to be placed in the same tradition as that foregrounded in his most 'socially responsible' film, *Children at School*

If Wright's work has any one point of origin it is the 'eternal centre' - that middle-ground of moderation preached by all comfortable men with good consciences. The Buddha's 'Middle Way', the 'Golden Mean' of the Greeks, even the philosophical tolerance espoused by Macmillan in his 'Middle Way' of 1938 all served as inspirations in Wright's search for the centre. There may be moments of excitement that threaten to disrupt the pattern but these are soon overcome by the return of harmony. We have interpreted this need for order as indicative of Wright's belief in the fundamental order of society. Such a philosophy made for a well-modulated temperament and it is little wonder that the various institutions which backed the films of the Movement found Wright a charming and diplomatic associate.

But society in the thirties was not perfect and Wright has since said how he intended to make criticisms. We have examined these claims and found some difficulty in substantiating them. Wright may have perceived himself as radical, but his work never looked to the root of any problem, but sought instead to recommend the solutions being suggested by the more radical members of his class. The socially progressive Middle-Opinion group, the new scientific rationalists, the left-wing Tones, all shared Wright's concern with the problems of society. But their plans were intended to organise and educate the nation rather than to fundamentally it. Any radicalism they have felt was, like Wright's work, limited by their interest in preserving the status quo.

Wright was not politically radicalised by what he saw in the thirties but he was sometimes moved and it is this emotionalism that finds expression in his work. Whether as a liberal imperialist or 'practical reformer' Wright's method of expressing himself was indicative of his romantic temperament. His privately recorded outrage resulted in a critique which was elegant and lyrical but often obscure in meaning. Here then is a perfect illustration of one class talking to itself in a language only they could understand. Rather like the poets of the thirties, our attention is drawn primarily to the style of the work and only secondarily to the subject. Despite the apparent realism, what we have discovered in looking at Wright's work is the evolution of a carefully

crafted style rather than a concentrated examination of the times in which he lived Wright's method was to use the 'realism' justified by Grierson's rhetoric and to exploit it for stylistic potential rather than using it as an analytical tool

It is important to remember that Wright's experiments in film would have had a differing meaning depending on the audience who saw them To some Wright's subtleties would have been incomprehensible, to a few others they may have demonstrated his gifts as a delicate and refined aesthete But as we have seen the audiences for these films were, for the most part, small The films therefore were not a major force nor a form with any proven power, but at most a forum for discussion amongst like-minded friends This lack of success with a mass audience is indicative of the gulf between Wright's ideas and those of the masses

Wright and his colleagues in the Movement genuinely believed that what they were doing would be of benefit to the populace but they were not sufficiently in touch with the public to understand what it was that would awaken their sense of responsibility and citizenship Wright was an artist and an intellectual emerging from a long tradition that suggested he was best qualified to provide solutions for the the masses

In the 1930's documentary was a form in which a privileged elite spoke to each other about problems they considered important while hoping others would listen Britain never had a New Deal Instead the Empire slipped away and a quiet revolution took place in which an elite developed the ideas that would form the basis of the Welfare State Wright's work is best seen as a romantic interpretation of these changes, a subtle rebellion against the old and a lyrical hint of the new

THE FILMS.

DRIFTERS (1929)

Production Company	New Era Films for the Empire Marketing Board (EMB)
Director/Editor	John Grierson
Photography	Basil Emmott
Running Time	Fifty Minutes
Distributor	Central Film Library

THE COUNTRY COMES TO THE TOWN (1931)

Production Company	New Era Productions for the EMB
Producer	John Grierson
Director	Basil Wright
Photography	James Burger and Basil Wright
Commentary	Written - A Buchanan Spoken - D Calthorpe
Editor	Basil Wright
Running Time	Twenty Minutes

Copy Held in National Film Archive

O'ER HILL AND DALE (1931)

Production Company	New Era Productions for the EMB
Producer	John Grierson
Director/Photographer	Basil Wright
Commentary	Written - A Buchanan Spoken - D Calthorpe
Editor	Basil Wright
Running Time	Eighteen Minutes

Copy held in the National Film Archive

***CARGO FROM JAMAICA* (1933)**

Production Company New Era Productions for the EMB
Producer John Gneron
Director/Photographer Basil Wnght
Editor Basil Wnght
Running Time Ten Minutes
Copy held in the National Film Archive

***WINDMILL IN BARBADOS* (1933)**

Production Company New Era Productions for the EMB
Producer John Gneron
Director/Photographer Basil Wnght
Editor Basil Wnght
Sound Basil Wnght and Cavalcanti
Running Time Ten Minutes (approx)

***SONG OF CEYLON* (1934)**

Production Company G P O Film Unit for the Ceylon Tea Marketing
board
Producer John Gneron
Director/Photographer Basil Wnght
Editor Basil Wnght
Assistant Director John Taylor
Script Basil Wnght/Unknown Sermon by
Nineteenth Century English Officer/
Knox's Ceylon - 1690
Commentary Spoken by Lionel Wendt
Music Walter Leigh
Sound Supervision John Gneron and Cavalcanti
Sound Recording E A Pawley
Running Time Forty Minutes
Distributors B F I + Central Film Library

***HOUSING PROBLEMS* (1935)**

Production Company Realist Film Unit for British
Commercial Gas Association
Producer Basil Wright
Directors/ Editors Edgar Anstey + Ruby Grierson
Commentary Stuart Legg + Councillor Lauder
Photography John Taylor + Edgar Anstey
Running Time Twenty Minutes
Distributor B F I
Copy Held in National Film Archive

***NIGHTMAIL* (1936)**

Production Company G P O Film Unit
Producer John Grierson
Director Harry Watt
Script John Grierson, Basil Wright, and Harry Watt
Verse W H Auden
Photography Henry Fowle + Fred Gammage
Editors R Q McNaughton, Harry Watt, John Grierson,
Cavalcanti, Basil Wright
Sound Supervision Cavalcanti
Sound Recording A E Pawley
Running Time Twenty Five Minutes
Distributor Central Film Library

***CHILDREN AT SCHOOL* (1936)**

Production Company Realist Film Unit For Gas Co
Producer/ Director Basil Wright
Commentary Basil Wright, Tom Driberg and spoken By H Wilson
Harris
Photography A E Jeakins
Editor Basil Wright
Running Time Twenty Minutes
Distributor B F I

***THE FACE OF SCOTLAND* (1938)**

Production Company	Realist Film Unit for The Films of Scotland Committee
Producer/Director	Basil Wright
Photography	A E Jeakins
Editor	Basil Wright
Music	Walter Leigh
Commentary	Basil Wright, spoken by James Bridie
Sound Recording	W F Elliott
Running Time	Twenty Minutes
Copy held in National Film Archive	

Bibliography.

Part One. Film

- Aldgate, A and Richards, J , Britain Can Take It. The British Cinema in the Second World War (Oxford, 1986)
- Alemandrez, V B , Jenkins and K , Strange (eds) Film Reader 3. Film genre. film and other Arts (London,1978)
- Alexander, W ,Films on the Left. American Documentary Film from 1931-1942 (Princeton,1981)
- Andrew, D , Concepts in Film Theory (OUP, 1984)
- Andrew, D , The Major Film Theories (OUP, 1976)
- Armes, R , A Critical History of British Cinema (London, 1978)
- Bennett, T , Boyd-Bowman, Mercer,C , Woollacott, J , Popular Television and Film (London, 1981)
- Bevendge, J and others, John Grierson and the NFB (Toronto,1984)
- Bevendge,J , John Grierson- Film Master (London,1978)
- Boorstin, D J , The Image (Harmondsworth,1963)
- Caughie, J (ed), Theories of Authorship (London,1981)
- Clect Review , Volume No 2 No 1
- Cinema Quarterly Vols 1-4
- Curran, J and V Porter,(ed), British Cinema History (London,1983)
- Documentary Film News , Vol 11 No 63,1948
- Edinburgh Magazine.1977 No 2, 1977
- Eisenstein, S , Film Essays and a Lecture (London,1986)
- Eisenstein, S J Leyda (ed), Film Form. Essays in Film Theory (London, 1977)
- Fielding, R , The March of Time 1935-1951 (OUP,1976)
- Film Art ,1935 - 1936
- Ford,R , Children in the Cinema (London, 1939)
- Goldman, W , Adventures in the Screen Trade (London, 1977)
- Greene,G , The Pleasure Dome. The Collected Film Criticism 1935-1940 (OUP, 1980)
- Grierson, J F Hardy,(ed), Grierson on Documentary (London,1979)
- Hardy, F John Grierson A Documentary Biography (London,1979)
- Hardy,F (ed), Grierson on the Movies (London, 1981)

- Heider, K G Ethnographic Film (University of Texas,1976)
- Hodgkinson, A W , Sheratsky, R E , Humphrey Jennings. More than a Maker of Films
(New England,1982)
- Hogenkamp , Deadly Parallels. Film and the Left in Britain 1929-1939
(London, 1986)
- Jacobs, L , The Documentary Tradition (Toronto, 1979)
- Jarvie, I C , Towards a Sociology of the Cinema (London, 1970)
- Jennings, M L , Humphrey Jennings. Film Maker. Painter and Poet (London, 1982)
Kine Weekly ,27/05/37
- Kulik,K , Alexander Korda - The Man who could work Miracles (London,
1975)
- Lindgren, E , The Art of the Film (London, 1972)
- Lovell,A , and J Hillier , Studies in Documentary (London,1972)
- Low, R , Films of Comment and Persuasion of the 1930's (London, 1979)
- Low, R , History of British Film 1918-1929 (London, 1979)
- Macpherson, D , Traditions of Independence. British Cinema in the Thirties
(London, 1986)
- Marns,P , Paul Rotha BFI Dossier No. 16 (London, 1982)
- Martin,M , Italian Film in the Light of Neo-Realism (Princeton University Press,1986)
- Mayer,J P , British Cinema and their Audiences. Sociological Studies (London, 1948)
- Miles,P and M Smith , Cinema. Literature and Society (London, 1987)
- Milner, R , Reith. The BBC Years (Edinburgh,1983)
- Monaco,P , Cinema and Society. France and Germany During the Twenties
(New York, 1976)
- Nichols, B , Movies and Methods. An Anthology (University of California, 1976)
- Nichols, B , Ideology and the Image (Indiana, 1981)
Observer , 27/03/31
- Orbanz,E , Journey to a Legend and Back. The British Realistic Film (Berlin, 1977)
- Pearson,D , Paul Rotha BFI DOSSIER (1982)
- Perkins, V F , Film as Film (Harmondsworth, 1986)
- Perry, G The Great British Picture Show (Frogmore, 1975)
Quarterly Review of Film Studies Vol 3,4 and 5
- Richards, J , The Age of the Dream Palace Cinema and Society in Britain
1930-1939 (London, 1984)

- Rosenthal, A , The New Documentary in Action A Casebook in Film Making
(University of California, 1971)
- Rotha,P , R J. Flaherty A Biography (University of Pennsylvania, 1983)
- Rotha, P , Documentary Diary (London, 1982)
- Rotha, P , The Film till Now (London, 1979)
- Rotha, P , Rotha on the Film (London, 1958)
- Screen Education, 1977 - 1982
- Spring,D W and Pronay N (ed) Propaganda.Politics and Film.1918-1945
(London, 1982)
- Stephenson, R J R Debrix , The Cinema as Art (Harmondsworth, 1967)
- Sussex, E , The Rise and Fall of the British Documentary Movement (London and
California,1975)
- Swann,P , The British Documentary Movement.1926-1946 - (Unpublished PhD
Thesis,University of Leeds,1979)
- Thomas, S , (ed) Film Culture Explorations of cinema in its Social Context (New York
and London, 1982)
- Vaughan, D , Portrait of an Invisible Man The Working Life of Stewart
McAllister. Film Editor (London, 1983)
- Watt,H , Don't Look at the Camera (London, 1974)
- Williams, C ,(ed) Realism and the Cinema (London, 1980)
- Woolen, P , Readings and Writings. Semiotic Counter-Strategies (London, 1982)
- World Film News, 1936 - 1938
- Wright, B , The Long View. An International History of the Cinema (Frogmore, 1976)
- Wright, B , The Use of the Film (London, 1948)

Part Two. Archive Materials.

The researcher visiting the Grierson Archive in the hope of finding any new material on Basil Wright for the period 1929-1938 will be disappointed. All of Wright's papers were discovered in his home shortly after his death but due to some confusion between Wright's lawyers and a representative of the family, most of them were destroyed. The author is in possession of all those that remain. These include notes, letters written to his mother, some juvenilia and various other documents mostly comprising photographs from a variety of locations. These have been used as well as a series of interviews conducted at Wright's home between 1986 and 1987.

Although it was our intention to concentrate on Wright, the Grierson Archive was invaluable in providing some of the essential background to Wright's story.

Grierson, J Sermons given in 1924- G 1 514, G 1 55, G 1 56

Grierson, J 'New Worlds for Old' Three Copies at G 2 21 3/4/5

Grierson, J Lecture Notes G 3 10 3, G 3 10 4

Grierson, J The Story of the Documentary Film-Reprinted from the Fortnightly Review (London) G 3 14 5

Roche, J C W Letter to Grierson, (21/03/38)

Tallents, S Letter to Grierson, (11/08/29)

Tallents, S A History of the EMB (Typescript-two copies) G 4 31 3

Taylor, J, Letter to Grierson, (Undated) G 4 24 175

Ibid, G 4 25 16

Wright, B, Letters to Grierson 28/04/43 G 4 27/37 (3)

31/10/39 G 3 15 124 (2)

17/10/39 G 3 15 136 (1)

17/01/44 G 4 12 16 (4)

Wright, B , Typescript of a Speech on Grierson given to ? on

28/09/72 GA 2 8

Wright, B , Typescript of Radio Interview on Grierson 16/08/72 GA 10 56

Wright, B , Typescript of Radio Discussion for BBC 31/08/47 GA 5 A 2 1

Wright, B , Typescript of article on Propaganda and the Political Idea G 4 18 4

Part Three. General.

- Addison,P , The Road to 1945 (London, 1982)
- Adorno, T , Minima Moralia (London, 1970)
- Anderson, N , The World's Religions (London, 1975)
- Baldwin, S , Our Inheritance (London, 1938)
- Baldwin, S , This Torch of Freedom (London, 1937)
- Baldwin, S , Service of Our Loves (London, 1938)
- Barnes, W G , Europe and the Developing World (London, 1967)
- Barker,E , Political Thought in England 1848 to 1914 (OUP, 1954)
- Barraclough, G , An Introduction to Contemporary History (Harmondsworth, 1967)
- Batsford,H and Fry, G , The Face of Scotland (London, 1934)
- Bell, A F , Leaders of English Literature (London, 1915)
- Blyth, R H , Zen in English Literature and Oriental Classics (Tokyo,1942)
- Blythe, R , The Age of Illusion. England in the Twenties and Thirties
(Harmondsworth, 1963)
- Bowie,J , The Future of Scotland (Edinburgh, 1939)
- Bowle, J , The Imperial Achievement. The Rise and Transformation of the
British Empire (Harmondsworth, 1977)
- Boyd-Orr,J , Food, Health and Income (London,1937)
- Branson,N and Heinemann, M , Britain in the Nineteen Thirties (Frogmore, 1971)
- Bronowski, J and Mazlish, B , The Western Intellectual Tradition
(Harmondsworth, 1970)
- Brown, J A C Techniques of Persuasion. From Propaganda to Brainwashing
(Harmondsworth, 1963)
- Bucci, M , Miro. Twentieth Century Masters (London, 1968)
- Calder, A , Britain by Mass Observation (Bungay, 1986)
- Campbell,B , Wigan Peer Revisited. Poverty and Politics in the Eighties
(London,1984)
- Campbell, J , Creative Mythology. The Masks of God (Harmondsworth)
- Campbell, J , Myths to Live By (London, 1975)
- Capra, F , The Tao of Physics (London, 1986)

Carlyle, T , Heroes and Hero-Worship (London, 1892)
 Carr, H E , What is History? (Harmondsworth, 1970)
 Cave,H , Picturesque Ceylon (London, 1895)
 Cockburn,C , The Devil's Decade (London,1973)
 Coote, C ,Walter Elliot. A Companion of Honour (London, 1966)
 Cronin, J E , Labour and Society in Britain. 1918-1979 (London, 1984)
 Cross, C , The Fall of the British Empire (London, 1968)
 Curran, J and Seaton, J , Power without Responsibility. The Press and
 Broadcasting in Britain (Glasgow, 1981)
 Cutforth,R , Later than we thought (Vancouver, 1976)
Daily Herald, 29/10/35
 Dakin, A , Calvinism (London, 1949)
 Dalton,H , Memoirs. 1931-1945 - The Fateful Years (London,1957)
 Dangerfield, G , The Strange Death of Liberal England (Frogmore, 1966)
 DeSilva,L , Buddhist Beliefs and Practices in Sri Lanka (Colombo, 1980)
 Dnberg, T , Ruling Passions (London, 1977)
 Edelman,M , The Mirror. A Political History (London, 1966)
 Eliade, M , From Primitives to Zen. A Thematic Sourcebook of the history of
 Religions (London, 1977)
English Historical Review - Vol XCVI April 1981
 Fischer,E , The Necessity of Art. A Marxist Approach (Harmondsworth, 1971)
 Forrest, W G , The Emergence of Greek Democracy (London, 1966)
 Frazer, J G , The Golden Bough. A Study in Magic and Religion (London, 1976)
 Ginsberg,A , The Psychology of Society (London, 1954)
 Gloversmith, F (ed), Class. Culture and Social Change. A New View of the
 1930's (Brighton, 1980)
Hansard Vol 185 Col 2084 (HMSO,1925)
 Happold, F C , Religious Faith and Twentieth Century Man
 (Harmondsworth,1966)
 Hargreaves, D H , The Challenge for the Comprehensive School. Culture.
 Curriculum and Community (London, 1982)
 Harvie, C , No Gods and Precious Few Heroes. Scotland 1914-1980 (London, 1981)
 Heller, E , The Disinherited Mind (Harmondsworth, 1961)
 Herrigel,E , The Method of Zen (London, 1960)

History Today , Vol 37, Jan 1987

Hobsbawn, E J , Industry and Empire (Harmondsworth, 1975)

Hodder, B W , Economic Development in the Tropics (London, 1968)

Hopfl, H , The Christian Polity of John Calvin (Cambridge, 1982)

Humphreys, C , Zen Buddhism (London, 1961)

Huxley, G , Both Hands (London, 1970)

Hynes, S , The Auden Generation. Literature and Politics in the 1930's
(London, 1976)

James, W , The Varieties of Religious Experience A Study in Human Nature
(London, 1966)

Jay,D , The Socialist Case (London, 1938)

Jung, C G , Man and His Symbols (London, 1978)

Jung C G , Collected Works Vol 9 Part 1 ed H Read, M Fordham and G Adler ,
(London, 1959)

Jung, C G , Collected Works. Vol 5 ed H Read, M Fordham and G Adler ,
(London,1956)

Kellett, K E , A Short History of Religions (London, 1954)

Kennedy, P , The Realities Behind Diplomacy Background Influences on
British External Policy. 1865-1980 (Glasgow, 1981)

Kingdom, R M and Linder,R D , Calvin and Calvinism Sources of Democracy?
(Lexington, 1970)

Kirk, J A Theology Encounters Revolution (Leicester, 1980)

Kitto, H D F ,The Greeks (Harmondsworth, 1957)

Knox,R , Ceylon (Glasgow,1918)

Korner, S , Kant, (Harmondsworth, 1955)

Langland-Casserley, J V , The Christian in Philosophy (London, 1951)

Leavis, F R , Revaluation (Harmondsworth, 1964)

Lester-Smith,W O , Education, (Harmondsworth, 1966)

McLaren,M ,The Scots, Harmondsworth, 1951)

Mackie, J D ,A History of Scotland (Harmondsworth, 1951)

MacDiarmid,H , Selected Poems, ed D Craig and J Mason, (Harmondsworth, 1976)

Mackenzie,J ,(ed), Imperialism and Popular Culture (Manchester, 1986)

Mackenzie,J ,(ed), Propaganda and Empire (Manchester,1985)

Macmillan,H , Reconstruction (London,1938)

Macmillan,H , The Middle Way (London, 1938)

Margach,J , The Anatomy of Power (London, 1979)

Men and Matters ,31/03/1938

Mookerjee,A , and Khanna, M , The Tantric Way. Art-Science-Ritual (London, 1977)

Mornson, A and McIntyre, D , Teachers and Teaching (Harmondsworth, 1976)

Mowat,C L , Britain Between the Wars (London, 1971)

Muggendge, M , The Thirties, (London, 1971)

Muir,E , John Knox (London, 1929)

New, J F H , The Renaissance and Reformation A Short History (New York, 1976)

New Britain, 1933 - 1934

Nicolson,N , Diaries and Letters.1930-1939 (London, 1968)

Noble, T , Structure and Change in Modern Britain (London, 1981)

Osbourne,C , W H Auden The Life of a Poet (London, 1979)

Payne P L , British Entrepreneurship in the Nineteenth Century (London, 1978)

Peele,G and Cooke,C , (ed) The Politics of Reappraisal.1918-1939 (London, 1975)

Phillips,G A and R T Maddock , The Growth of the British Economy
1918-1968 (Oxford, 1973)

POST 33/5/99 - M 16682/1937

Pugh, D S , D J Hickson and C R Hinings , Writers on Organisations
(Harmondsworth, 1979)

PRQ CO 760/37 - EMB/C/38

PRQ BT 55/3 CCF 1

PRQ BW 2/213 / GB/30

PRQ BW 2/35 GB 3/3/86

PRQ BW 2/31 GB 3/83

PRQ BW 2/215 GB/30/1

Rait, R S , History of Scotland (London, 1914)

Raymond,J , (ed) The Baldwin Age (London, 1960)

Reid, I , Sociological Perspectives on School and Education (Shepton Mallet, 1980)

Roberts, J , Europe. 1880-1945 (London, 1967)

Ross, W , (ed), An Outline of Modern Knowledge (London, 1981)

Sayers, R S , A History of Economic Change in England 1880-1939 (Oxford, 1978)

Scanlon,J , The Decline and Fall of the Labour Party (London, 1932)

Shannon, R , The Cnsis of Imperialism 1865-1915 (Frogmore, 1974)

- Skidelsky, R , Oswald Mosley (London, 1981)
- Smart, N , The Religious Experience of Mankind (Glasgow, 1982)
- Smith, J W D , The Pattern of Christian Belief (Edinburgh, 1956)
- Smout, T C , A Century of the Scottish People 1830-1950 (London, 1986)
- Smout, T C , A History of the Scottish People 1560-1830 (Glasgow, 1974)
- Snodgrass, D R , Ceylon. An Export Economy in Transition (Illinois, 1966)
- Spectator ,11/11/1938
- Spender,S , The Thirties and After. 1933-1975 (Glasgow,1978)
- Springhall,J , Youth. Empire and Society (London, 1977)
- Stephenson,J , British Society 1914 - 1945 (Harmondsworth,1982)
- Symonds,A , The Thirties A Dream Revolved (London, 1960)
- Tallents, S , The Projection of England (London, 1932)
- Tawney, R H , Religion and the Rise of Capitalism (West Drayton, 1948)
- Taylor,A J P , English History. 1914-1945 (Oxford, 1965)
- Thomson, S , England in the Nineteenth Century (Harmondsworth, 1977)
- Thomson, S , England in the Twentieth Century (Harmondsworth, 1976)
- Thomson, D , Political Ideas (Harmondsworth, 1977)
- Thornton, A P , The Imperial Idea and its Enemies. A Study in British Power
(New York, 1966)
- The Times, 22/11/1938
- Toynbee, A J , (ed) British Commonwealth Relations. Proceedings of the First Unofficial Conference at Toronto, 11-21 September 1935 (London, 1934)
- Vital, D , The Making of British Foreign Policy (London, 1968),
- Wanlass,L C , Gettells's History of Political Thought (London, 1961)
- Watts, A W , The Way of Zen (Harmondsworth, 1976)
- Wheeler, H ,Democracy in a Revolutionary Era (Harmondsworth, 1971)
- Wildon-Carr,H , The Philosophy of Change. Henn Bergson (London, 1911)
- Wiley, B , The Seventeenth Century Background (Harmondsworth, 1967)
- Williams,E , From Columbus to Castro The History of the Caribbean
1492-1969 (London, 1970)
- Williams, R , Keywords. A Vocabulary of Culture and Society (London, 1983)
- Williams, R , The Long Revolution (Harmondsworth, 1980)
- Wiskemann, E , Europe of the Dictators 1919-1945 (Glasgow, 1979)
- Woolf, L , Growing. An Autobiography of the Years 1904-1911 (London, 1961)