The way we were


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Few discoveries of recent years have more to offer students of film history than the 826 rolls of nitrate film that turned up in a shop in Blackburn, Lancashire, eventually making their way to the BFI's National Film and Television Archive. These were the work of pioneer filmmakers, Sagar Mitchell and James Kenyon and their work is explored and - rightly - celebrated in this anthology. It is hard to say which is more important: whether it is the cultural information about Edwardian life or what these restored films say about the state of cinematic art at the turn of the 20th century. Whichever, the stupid remark by Frederic Raphael at the head of the second essay -- "Seventy per cent of the film in the British Film Institute's archives are documentaries. Who really ever wants to blow the dust off any of them?' -- stands exposed for the philistine nonsense it is.

By fortunate chance, just as I was about to write a review of this book, I was able to see some of the restored footage, now available on DVD, and it is a revelation. To those who think the cinema proper began with sound, to those with no sense of film history, to those who think early cinema was mainly a matter of trick shorts, all I can say is think again. Here, in these beautifully restored films, and chronicled in this lovingly assembled scholarly anthology, is breathing, moving human life in a transitional age shortly to be swept away by World War One, and, in the process, the writing of film history can be undertaken in the light of new evidence of the most exciting kind.

The book, the result of the restoration work of the BFI and Sheffield University, is divided into three parts, entitled "Overviews", "The Films in Context/The Film Text" and "The Films as Historical Evidence", and the authors are academics, filmmakers, film historians (actually, they could all qualify as the latter), archivists and curators of various kinds, who exhibit a passion for the discovered work and make one long to see the findings in full. The first section is the most difficult for the non-specialist who will probably be grateful to move on to consideration of the content of the films. It lays the ground with information relating to the facts about the physical restoration of the films, often no more than a minute or so in length, and this may be of limited interest. However, it also suggests that the strength of the discovery is in its depth rather than its range, and that its social value is as much a revelation as what it says formally, about the nature of film's mediated reality.

The second part of the book explores this treasure trove of film survivals from a range of rewarding viewpoints. The Collection is seen as a uniquely valuable source of the local chronicle film. In fact, the "local" emerges as a genre, with "factory-gate" and "church-door" films in which crowds of people saw themselves on the screen in images advertised with the slogan, "See yourself as others see you". There was something magical about the idea of one's everyday life being available as images for audiences - and something very shrewd about Mitchell and Kenyon's practice of fitting as many people as possible into their films, thereby ensuring large local audiences. How often since have the subjects of films been their prime audience?

In this section, Tom Gunning's fine essay, "Pictures of Crowd Splendor",...
introduces his perceptive account of the surviving film stock with the concept of the 20th century as being "the century of the masses, introducing mass production, mass marketing, mass communication, mass culture", with the working class entering "onto a new stage of visibility" (49). He rightly sees these films as being of enormous value to "historians of daily life" (53). Vanessa Toulmin conjures up a fascinating world of showmen and itinerant exhibitors, distinguishing among the kinds of contexts in which the films were seen, in, variously, music halls, fairgrounds and public halls. There are other essays that analyse the ways in which class is represented in the films (e.g., in details of dress) and several which explore the films commissioned by Scotland, Ireland and Wales from Mitchell and Kenyon. And legendary names from the pioneering days of British - of any - cinema, including Waller Jeff, Captain Kettle and Linden Travers (grandfather of actors Bill and Linden Travers) flicker to life in the context of their dealings.

"Film as Historical Evidence", the third part, confirms one's sense that these films offer a wonderfully revealing window on a broad spectrum of Edwardian life: they recreate Boer War episodes, record moments from football matches, catch people at leisure by the seaside (the period of the films roughly coincides with the onset of the beach holiday, and indeed of the holiday as a regular element of urban life), and chronicle the parades that were part of the cultural scene. The essays in this section are uneven: there is a rather plodding account of "Ceremonial Processions and Folk Traditions", too prosaically descriptive to be very evocative; but Patrick Keiller's and Ian Yearsley's accounts of how the films encapsulate changes in the way people moved around in this "lost world" of Mitchell and Kenyon help to ensure that that world is restored at least in irresistible fragments.

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