



British  
War  
Films  
1939-1945



S.P. MACKENZIE

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1939–1945

*The Cinema and the Services*

S. P. MacKenzie

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## *Introduction*

As historians have come to recognize in recent decades, feature films are not only an engaging form of popular entertainment but also a vital source for understanding the social and cultural makeup of modern society. Nowhere has this been more true than in reference to the Second World War, years in which cinema-going reached new heights of popularity and British film production – hitherto written off as inferior to the Hollywood product – finally came of age. Combined with the issue of state involvement in the choice of subject matter through the Films Division of the wartime Ministry of Information (MoI) this has meant that the films of the war years now rank among the most heavily studied of British pictures.<sup>1</sup>

With so much already written about the production, nature, and reception of these wartime films, not least within the context of state propaganda policy, one might legitimately wonder if there is anything left to say. But there is never a last word on any subject, and there happens to be at least one aspect of wartime feature production that has not yet attracted much interest: the involvement of the armed forces in the making of wartime features.<sup>2</sup> Most historians have tended to focus their attention on the Ministry of Information in relation to government involvement in the making of war films. Yet

while the MoI bore overall responsibility for film propaganda in the Second World War, it is important to recognize that its powers with regard to the service ministries were by no means unlimited. Security censorship remained largely in the hands of serving or retired officers, and while proposals for film productions almost always passed through the hands of the Films Division, no film involving warships, tanks, military aircraft or uniformed personnel could proceed without it first being given the green light by the Admiralty, War Office, or Air Ministry.<sup>3</sup>

As we shall see, proposals for feature-length films could originate from a variety of sources, including commercial companies, the services, the MoI or other government departments. For projects to come to fruition, however, they had to be seen by the service ministry concerned as useful. An ambiguous attitude towards publicity within the armed forces, coupled with the number of parties involved, often made the creation of features about

the services a far from smooth process. The fact remains, however, that through involvement in filmmaking the publicity branches of the Admiralty, War Office and Air Ministry and their superiors were engaged during the war in attempts to sway public opinion in particular directions.<sup>4</sup>

Understanding what was being attempted, and why, necessarily involves placing events in the wider context of the evolving war situation and popular reactions to particular events. To grasp fully what was happening in the war years, however, and to appreciate the long-term significance of the wartime experience, it is also important to situate that experience in relation to the overall relationship between the services and feature film publicity. Hence, bracketing the main body of the text, chapters describing the evolution of this relationship before 1939 and after 1945.

The absence of much work to date on the services and cinema is understandable. The armed forces are rarely considered important in film history, the cinema is not often considered relevant to military historians, and above all the surviving documentary record is – to say the least – extremely patchy.<sup>5</sup> However, enough relevant service and other ministry files, film industry reports and publicity material, memoirs, diaries, and recorded interviews are now in the public domain for an attempt to be made to explain what was happening. Whether this particular effort is successful or not will be for the reader to judge.

## *The Services and the Cinema, 1900–1939*

The emergence of cinema as a major form of popular entertainment in Britain was quite swift. Beginning life as a mere novelty attraction at fairgrounds and in music-halls in the last years of the nineteenth century, film evolved within fifteen years into a potent mass medium. As technical and other problems were overcome, an extensive cinema industry developed that both catered for and stimulated popular demand. Between 1898 and 1914 the number and length of films produced annually in Britain had increased approximately tenfold, while by the latter year picture theatres – able to capitalize on imported as well as domestic product – numbered in the low thousands. In Manchester, to take a particularly striking case, there were 111 cinemas in operation, with a grand total of 920,000 available seats: one for every eight inhabitants. With tickets ranging in price as low as threepence, ‘going to the pictures’ had developed into a common leisure activity for much of the working population. Contemporary estimates of weekly attendance figures in the prewar years ran as high as seven or eight million.<sup>1</sup>

In a jingoistic age of militant patriotism in which positive representations of the armed forces appeared on everything from postcards to cocoa advertisements, it is not surprising to find military and naval subjects featuring extensively in the new medium. In the first decade of the century, for example, scores of short boyish adventure films with titles like *A Son of Mars* (Cricks & Martin, 1912) and *Lieutenant Daring* (British & Colonial, 1912) were shot.<sup>2</sup>

The services, however, kept their distance from this new phenomenon. Going to the pictures was a familiar enough activity for the humble urban families from whom the army and navy drew their recruits. Those in command, however, came from a very different social environment. Commissions still went to those of gentle birth or the sons of ‘respectable’ middle-class professionals, while the uppermost ranks in particular tended to be dominated by the gentry or the aristocracy. Whatever their origin, and despite a growing sense of professionalism, officers maintained the habits and prejudices of county families. As gentlemen, officers were expected to hunt foxes, shoot grouse, and engage in other country house

pursuits: they definitely were not supposed to go to the cinema. As representatives of elite society, they tended to view the mass culture of the lower orders with a mixture of incomprehension and disdain, despite – or because of – the evident growth in the power and influence of those orders as time passed. As one observer later put it, cinema was regarded in service circles as ‘a kind of music hall turn’, both ‘vulgar’ and ‘without serious importance’.<sup>3</sup>

Public pageantry, to be sure, especially royal reviews involving the display of traditional pomp and circumstance, had become by the early 1890s an accepted recruitment tool and prestige builder. Representations of Jack Tar and Tommy Aitkins on postcards, on the stage, in commercial advertising, and eventually on celluloid, were tolerated. But for the services to engage directly or indirectly in the manufacture of popular culture and the shaping of mass opinion was considered by most officers to be *infra dig*.<sup>4</sup>

There were, nevertheless, occasional signs of a more positive official attitude even in the early years of cinema. In particular, senior individuals in both services proved willing to engage in episodic collaboration with the film industry if particular circumstance seemed to demand it.

The Boer War witnessed the first instances of such collaboration. Defeats in the first campaigns aroused a storm of criticism directed at the army in press and parliament, while manpower demands imposed a severe strain on army resources. The navy, meanwhile, came under attack for being complacent in the face of public fears of a lightning French invasion attempt while the army was occupied in South Africa. It was in this context that the War Office and the Admiralty made their first, tentative efforts at employing film as an instrument of propaganda.

Sir Evelyn Wood was in most respects a conventional senior army officer, as his memoirs make clear.<sup>5</sup> But as Adjutant-General at the War Office he was very much aware of both public criticism of the army’s performance in South Africa and the manpower problem. He was therefore receptive when, sometime in the spring of 1900, he was approached by R. W. Paul, a pioneer in commercial film production, with a proposal to make a series of ‘Animatograph Pictures’ on the British Army. The idea was ‘to illustrate the life and career of a soldier, and the work of each branch of the Service’ by filming, for the first time, the real thing. In the hope that recruiting and public esteem might be stimulated at a particularly difficult time, Wood provided the necessary access to military facilities for the making of *Army Life; or How Soldiers are Made*. Episodes included actuality footage of cavalry, artillery and infantry at exercise, as well as staged scenes of soldiers joining up, enjoying themselves off duty, charging into combat, and retiring into the Commissionaire Corps. The War Office also authorized another successful

producer, Cecil Hepworth, to make a similar series, *The British Army* (which included scenes of tent-pegging and cavalry trotting in review). The Admiralty, meanwhile, almost certainly in an effort to demonstrate its readiness for war, gave permission for Hepworth to film sailors training ashore. *The British Navy* included shots of bluejackets at exercise and cutlass drill, probably taken at Portsmouth.<sup>6</sup>

Once the immediate crisis had passed, though, neither service proved eager to follow up on this first brush with cinematic propaganda. Despite plaudits in the *Morning Post*, *The Times*, *Daily Mail* and other newspapers for *Army Life*, it would be almost a decade before the War Office gave its help again to a film company, and even longer before the Admiralty made any further moves.<sup>7</sup>

It was another invasion scare in 1909, coupled with the usual problem of insufficient enrolment – both for the regular army and especially the new Territorial Force – that prompted the War Office to engage more actively in what the war minister of the day, Richard Haldane, termed ‘modern methods of recruiting’.<sup>8</sup> Among other things this involved providing help for another Hepworth effort, *In the Service of the King*. Directed by Lewin Fitzhamon and released in January 1909, this was a fictional account of the successful career of a young soldier from his enlistment to his return home as conquering hero.<sup>9</sup> This and other publicity measures appear to have had a positive but only short-term effect, and in early 1913 the War Office came to an agreement with Keith, Prouse & Co. – who passed production on to Gaumont – to make and distribute another film ‘illustrating the life of the soldier’. Approximately one-and-a-half hours long, *The British Army Film* was a mixed drama-documentary, partially staged but with no actors involved. Shot at Aldershot with over a thousand troops participating, it showed men of various army branches at work and play. The aim, as stated publicly by the war minister, J. E. B. Seely, was to ‘create an interest in the Army which will be useful for recruiting purposes’. The final product would be ‘subject to the final approval of the Army Council’.<sup>10</sup> Released in January 1914 as part of a major recruiting campaign and the biggest cinematic effort yet made with official cooperation, *The British Army Film* opened well but was rented at too high a cost to achieve wide distribution.<sup>11</sup> The Royal Navy, meanwhile, at least in reference to self-promotion, remained true to its motto: *acta non verba*.

That both the Admiralty and the War Office remained, at heart, seriously ill at ease with the film industry became apparent in the initial months of the First World War. As in the first phases of the war in South Africa fifteen years earlier, there was a boom in the production and popularity of commercial melodrama, comedy, and adventure films with war-related plots.



Dozens of films with titles such as *Your Country Needs You*, *England's Call*, *The Kaiser's Spies* and *The Heroine of Mons* were released in the last months of 1914 and on into 1915. Most involved characters in the services and all were resolutely patriotic.<sup>12</sup> Yet despite the fact that, according to a leading trade newspaper, 'Everybody is wanting Army and Navy films',<sup>13</sup> film manufacturers largely had to make do with prewar footage and staged scenes. Beyond allowing a few companies to shoot innocuous scenes of life in newly established training camps, neither service proved at all willing to have anything to do with the active creation of film propaganda.

The newly established government propaganda bureau at Wellington House under Charles Masterman, the Foreign Office, and the film trade – operating through a lobby group, the Kinematograph Manufacturers' Association Topical Committee, as well as through Wellington House – all argued that the image of the services could only benefit from war footage. For many months, however, both the War Office and Admiralty continued to insist that security considerations made the filming of operational units out of the question.<sup>14</sup> Such considerations were not entirely frivolous. But it rapidly became clear that refusal to cooperate in the making of films had to do as much with distaste for the medium as it did with worries about what the Germans would learn.

As Secretary of State for War, Field-Marshal Lord Kitchener, despite his role in raising Britain's new armies, exhibited a marked distaste for the mass media. Negotiations for the filming of military personnel dragged on so long that the setting for the London Film Company feature *You!*, sponsored by the Parliamentary Recruiting Committee and released in January 1916, had to be shifted from the army to a munitions factory.<sup>15</sup> Winston Churchill, serving as First Lord of the Admiralty until May 1915, was certainly more loquacious and at ease with the idea of promotional publicity than Kitchener, and may indeed have been responsible for a directive which 'instructed' the Neptune Film Co. to make a recruiting film on the Royal Naval Division (in which he had taken a great personal interest). But the senior admirals, including Lord Fisher, the First Sea Lord, and Sir John Jellicoe, Commander-in-Chief of the Grand Fleet, were just as uncomfortable as the Secretary of State for War with the whole idea of film propaganda.<sup>16</sup>

Service obstructiveness, indeed, could extend beyond a refusal to grant facilities. Even in the context of the super-patriotic commercial films of 1914–15, there is evidence to suggest that the War Office and Admiralty were distrustful enough of the trade to ask the British Board of Film Censors – the industry watchdog body formed a few years earlier which had been given official standing for the duration and solicited the opinion of the

services in doubtful cases – to ban some commercial products either on security grounds or because in their view there were ‘scenes holding up the King’s uniform to contempt or ridicule’.<sup>17</sup> To propagandists working in other departments it was clear that to many at the War Office and Admiralty the cinema was still akin to the mass-circulation yellow press and just as nasty: ‘a sort of moving edition of the “Penny Dreadful”’.<sup>18</sup>

By the start of the second year of war, it was clear even to some senior figures in the services that, as the propagandists and the film trade had claimed would be the case, stonewalling on film publicity was doing more harm than good. In neutral countries the strength and might of the enemy was being driven home by the images presented in exported film footage. At home the number of volunteers for the new armies was beginning to decline, while the shroud of secrecy surrounding the fleet had rendered it all but invisible. After prolonged negotiations with representatives from Wellington House and the film manufacturers’ association, the Admiralty and the War Office separately agreed in the autumn of 1915 to terms under which selected cameramen would be allowed to visit and take footage of the BEF and the Grand Fleet for propaganda purposes.<sup>19</sup>

This was a significant development. It did not, however, imply a whole-hearted conversion of the service Establishment to the propaganda cause. Sir Arthur Balfour, the highly cultured Tory statesman appointed to succeed Churchill as First Lord of the Admiralty in May 1915, and Sir Henry Jackson, the orthodox admiral he in turn appointed First Sea Lord, had accepted that film could produce impressive images after being shown prewar footage of ships at sea by Charles Urban (head of the Wellington House cinema committee) in the late summer and autumn: quite possibly the first time either man had actually viewed a film. Balfour had in turn persuaded Jellicoe to allow a camera crew to visit the Grand Fleet. The First Lord, however, made it clear that he shared Jellicoe’s distaste at having to participate in what amounted to mass advertising. Admiral Jackson, after putting his signature to the document allowing filming of the Grand Fleet to proceed, said: ‘Take it away. I don’t agree with any of it, though I have signed it!’<sup>20</sup> The War Office, meanwhile, in coming to an agreement with the Kinematograph Trade Association for filming on the Western Front, managed to delay the public appearance of films involving the BEF by insisting on an unnecessarily convoluted and time-consuming vetting process.<sup>21</sup> After agreements had been reached to allow filming, the task of day-to-day liaison with filmmakers was given over to censors working in the military or naval intelligence branch. These were officers whose prime function was to maintain security rather than to generate publicity, as numerous complaints from the press were already demonstrating.<sup>22</sup>

Nevertheless, by the last months of 1915 the way had been paved for films to be made of the services at war. In early October a three-man camera team under the direction of Charles Urban travelled up to Invergordon to take footage of the fleet, and in early November two trade cameramen were made official War Office kinematographers and set off for BEF Headquarters in France.

The quality of the resulting footage was not always very good. Quite apart from the limits imposed on what could and could not be filmed on security grounds, cameramen faced daunting technical problems in trying to shoot the services in action.<sup>23</sup> Enough quality footage emerged, however, for Wellington House and the manufacturer's association to produce full-length war documentary features of considerable visual power. Both *Britain Prepared* (in which the fleet played a central part) and *The Battle of the Somme* (chronicling the start of the first great offensive of the new armies on the Western Front) were both striking enough at the time to make both the Admiralty and the War Office adopt – up to a point – a more positive attitude towards film propaganda.

*Britain Prepared* was the first to reach audiences, premiering in London at the end of 1915 and going on general release in February 1916. Wellington House had been planning from the start to make a full-length film involving the navy, and its camera team had begun work earlier than the official cameramen in France. At a fairly late stage it was decided to incorporate footage of munitions workers supplied by Vickers and shots of troops in training at Aldershot. Projecting the power and majesty of the Royal Navy, however, remained at the heart of the enterprise.

Despite security difficulties and technical problems Urban had managed to capture scenes of submarines, minesweepers, and above all battleships ploughing through rough seas, and take footage – shot from another ship sailing astern – of the battleship HMS *Queen Elizabeth* firing her 15-inch guns broadside. Both the C-in-C Grand Fleet and the First Lord of the Admiralty were impressed enough to put aside their prejudices. Admiral Jellicoe 'threw himself into [the making of the film] heart and soul', and Balfour, though admitting that he found himself 'in rather unaccustomed surroundings', spoke to the audience at the first public showing about his commitment to the film. '[S]uch representations as you are about to see, which I have done my individual best to further, will do much in this, as in other countries, to put the great operations of the war that are now going on in their true perspective. The world has yet to know, and it does not yet know, how much it owes to the British Fleet.'<sup>24</sup>

Endorsement at this level meant that a galaxy of influential politicians, admirals, and others turned up for the premiere at the Empire Music Hall,

Leicester Square, on 29 December 1915. After a successful six-week run at the Empire, the film was booked at over a hundred cinemas around the nation.<sup>25</sup> The press was unstinting in its praise. In the *Evening News* it was described as ‘marvellous, wonderful, stupendous, magnificent’, while *The Times* labelled it ‘the finest thing ever produced in this country’.<sup>26</sup> The sheer length of *Britain Prepared* – over three and a half hours with minimal titles – may have made the culminating scenes of the Grand Fleet at sea, especially the *Queen Elizabeth* firing, all the more impressive. ‘I saw public shows of this film several times and noted the reaction of the audiences’, Lucy Masterman, wife of Wellington House chief Charles Masterman, later wrote. ‘The interest in the military half was lively, the applause enthusiastic. But there was a different quality in the deep roar that greeted the features of the naval section.’<sup>27</sup>

*The Battle of the Somme* was slower to develop but ultimately even more striking in its effects. In negotiating with the War Office for cameramen to be allowed to film the BEF at work, the film manufacturers’ association committee had been thinking in terms of newsreels rather than long features. The success of *Britain Prepared*, however, combined with the patchy quality of the short topical films produced in early 1916, led both the committee and some sections of the military to think in terms of a full-length documentary. The opportunity came in the wake of the opening of the great British offensive on the Somme at the start of July 1916. As much by circumstance as design, the two official cameramen in France at the time, Geoffrey Malins (formerly with Clarendon Co.) and J. B. McDowell (formerly of British & Colonial), had been in a position to take some impressive footage. This included shots of artillery in action, elements of the 29th and 7th divisions moving up, and various facets of the actual attack of 1 July. The explosion of a giant mine, activity in front-line trenches, the killed and wounded of both sides, and even a sequence of soldiers getting hit as they scrambled ‘over the top’ had been captured on film. On seeing the results the trade committee, in particular the chairman, William Jury (head of his own exhibition company), realized that they had in their hands the makings of a major feature.<sup>28</sup>

The War Office was in turn impressed by the imagery of the full-length film (one hour and seventeen minutes long) Jury and his colleagues had assembled in less than a month. Sir Reginald Brade, who as Permanent Secretary had played a major role in the negotiations surrounding the dispatch of cameramen to France in the first place, proved willing to renegotiate the War Office share of profits in a way that enabled the trade committee more effectively to distribute the finished product. The censoring of images and the creation of titles by GHQ and the War Office was carried

out quite expeditiously and with minimal interference. The new Secretary of State for War, David Lloyd George, issued a special public statement of support.<sup>29</sup>

Opening in London at thirty-four cinemas in the third week of August 1916, and then a week later around the country, *Battle of the Somme* was a huge success. Thousands upon thousands of people queued to see the film in its opening week, breaking box office records, with many still being turned away. The same thing later happened elsewhere, and the film was still being booked and drawing audiences in London into the autumn of 1917.<sup>30</sup> There were very few who did not share the view expressed in *The Times* that *Battle of the Somme* gave 'a glimpse not merely of the horrors of war but also of its glories'. King George V, after seeing the film in early September, stated that 'the public should see these pictures [so] that they may have some idea of what the Army is doing, and what it means'.<sup>31</sup> The public did so *en masse*, sharing the satisfaction of the *Manchester Guardian* in seeing 'the real thing at last'.<sup>32</sup>

Going to the cinema was by now more popular than ever. By 1917 weekly attendance at well over 4000 cinemas was up to twenty million.<sup>33</sup> The War Office and Admiralty, like the rest of the Establishment becoming aware of the extent to which popular support for the war could no longer be assumed, could not but be impressed by what was emerging as 'the most powerful agent for publicity now in existence'.<sup>34</sup>

In November 1916 the War Office set up a three-man cinema propaganda section, the War Office Cinematograph Committee, and disbanded the trade committee. Though this did not mean, as some thought, that the military authorities had taken matters entirely 'into their own hands' – the trade was still involved in the processing and distribution of official films and William Jury, chairman of the old trade committee, was a member of the new triumvirate – it did herald a more activist approach by the War Office.<sup>35</sup> The presence on the committee of the Sir Reginald Brade, the Permanent Secretary, was one indicator of the higher profile cinema now enjoyed in Whitehall. Another was the choice of chairman: Sir Max Aitken, the Canadian financier, Unionist MP and temporary lieutenant-colonel who had successfully organized film and other publicity for the Canadian Corps.<sup>36</sup> The official cameramen seem to have begun to receive more direction from the War Office, while BEF headquarters passed the word down to unit commanders to cooperate in the making of films when called upon to do so.<sup>37</sup>

In January 1917 a new battle film, compiled from footage taken in the autumn of 1916, was put on general release with the rather cumbersome title *Battle of the Ancre and the Advance of the Tanks*. The War Office cinema

committee evidently decided that the new film should adhere as closely as possible to the first hugely successful effort. In form and content as well as length, *Battle of the Ancre* was very much a *Battle of the Somme* sequel. Apart from shots of the first British tanks – thought to be of enough public interest to include in the title though making up only a fraction of the total film – most of the scenes, including men going over the top, were variations on themes already established.<sup>38</sup> Once more the public flocked into the cinemas and once more critics were impressed by the realism. According to the *Daily Mail* it was ‘all real, all unrehearsed’, and gave a more ‘complete and coherent picture’ of events than the earlier film.<sup>39</sup> Six months later a third feature-length film appeared: *The German Retreat and the Battle of Arras*. There were variations on by now standard themes, but the film’s lineage was clear enough. It was also a critical and public success, the *Evening News* calling it ‘the greatest war picture yet produced’.<sup>40</sup>

The Admiralty was rather slower to exploit the great success achieved with *Britain Prepared*. It did, however, allow footage of the fleet to be taken for the five-part film *Sons of Our Empire* (released in April 1917), and shortly thereafter merged its cinematic efforts with those of the War Office. Sir Graham Greene, the permanent secretary at the Admiralty, became in May 1917 the fourth member of the committee chaired by Max Aitken (elevated to the peerage as Lord Beaverbrook at the end of 1916).<sup>41</sup>

In bureaucratic terms, therefore, film propaganda had established a definite presence within the services by the summer of 1917. As trade and public interest in long films waned, more emphasis was placed on the sponsorship of newsreels and short documentaries focusing on specific units and tasks. Production of the latter type of film became regular, dozens of them appearing in the last year of the war. The messages being conveyed were not always subtle – especially in the naval films – but service interest seemed to have finally come of age.<sup>42</sup>

Old habits, however, died hard. The film industry continued to feel that those responsible for film propaganda – both at the War Office and Admiralty and at the Department of Information that had replaced Wellington House in February 1917 – lacked a true appreciation of the propaganda possibilities of commercial films. An editorial in the *Cinema News and Property Gazette* published in August 1917 complained that:

our hidebound officials, bursting with a sense of their own dignity and self-importance, and imbued with pre-war – that is to say pre-historic – theories about what is and what is not worthy of consideration, when they are not openly sneering at ‘the pictures’, still maintain a semi-condescending attitude towards a new-fangled invention.<sup>43</sup>

The red tape encountered by filmmakers was in large part due to the lack of coordination in film propaganda work.<sup>44</sup> But there were also specific problems with the services.

In France, the GHQ Intelligence Department, under Brigadier-General Sir John Charteris, refused to countenance any simplification of the cumbersome vetting process for film taken on the Western Front (involving dual censorship by GHQ and the War Office). Meanwhile, as one Admiralty supporter was forced to conclude, it was clear that 'the Navy did not want publicity'.<sup>45</sup> Certainly neither Sir Eric Geddes (First Lord since July 1917) nor Admiral Sir Rosslyn Wemyss (First Sea Lord since late December 1917) proved particularly keen in 1918 to support the making of a major new naval film as Beaverbrook was suggesting.<sup>46</sup>

The end result was delay and frustration, even when some form of official consent for a film was forthcoming. *Hearts of the World*, a full-length fictional drama produced and directed by D. W. Griffith about the effect of the war on life in a French village, was so fraught with overlapping and conflicting departmental interests – including those of the War Office – that it took fourteen months to reach the screen. Equally problematic was *The National Film*, sponsored by the National War Aims Committee, which dealt with a fictional German occupation of Chester. The sheer scale and complexity of the project (which involved among other things obtaining permission to use British troops to act the part of the Prussian occupiers), along with a disastrous fire which destroyed the first version, meant that the film, initiated in the autumn of 1917, was not completed until after the war had ended a year later. Hugely expensive, it was not released and the negatives eventually destroyed on the grounds that in the postwar environment the plot was too anti-German.<sup>47</sup> As for the new feature-length documentary on the navy, with the support of Admiral Sir David Beatty, commanding the Grand Fleet, it did eventually get made: but was not ready for release under the title *Rule Britannia* until after the fighting had ended in November 1918.<sup>48</sup>

There were thus still very real limits to the services' commitment to film propaganda in the latter part of the First World War. The outbreak of peace, moreover, brought with it a return of the prewar distaste for both popular propaganda and film. With national mobilization and neutral opinion no longer at issue, propaganda appeared both redundant and – in the context of traditional liberal values – rather un-English. The Ministry of Information and other wartime bureaucracies associated with either domestic or foreign propaganda were quickly dismantled.<sup>49</sup>

No tears were shed over this within the senior ranks of the armed forces. Admiral (ret'd) Douglas Brownrigg, the chief naval censor and the closest

thing to a publicity officer, in reflecting on his wartime work and the postwar navy, concluded:

The attitude of the Navy towards publicity was very slow to change, and I think I can say to-day [1920] with a perfectly clear mind that, though the officers of the Navy may grudgingly agree that some measure of publicity is an absolute necessity, since the Fleet belongs to nation (i.e. the public) and not to the Navy, they thoroughly detest it.<sup>50</sup>

There was certainly no sense that the services themselves might still have a role in shaping such publicity. With the end of official censorship, the services severely reduced or eliminated their publicity machinery, those involved with film production either retiring or moving on to more traditional intelligence work. In the late 1920s the Information Section at the War Office, C6, consisted of a single civil servant with one assistant, as did the Press Section of the Air Ministry (the RAF having been created as a separate service in 1917). The Admiralty dispensed with a separate office altogether, making do throughout the interwar period with ‘one passed-over Commander in NID [Naval Intelligence Directorate]’, as a later Chief of Naval Information trenchantly put it.<sup>51</sup> This was symptomatic of a broader trend. Within both the army and navy, and even the air force, attitudes and behaviour in the 1920s were often more evocative of the Edwardian era than of the wartime period of mass mobilization.<sup>52</sup>

This left matters very much in the hands of the commercial film industry in the immediate postwar years; an industry that continued to find it profitable to produce adventures, dramas, and occasional comedies with characters in uniform. Most appear to have been made without service cooperation. Assistance was provided by the army and navy for a series of quite popular documentaries made by British Instructional Films on the battles of the Great War.<sup>53</sup> The navy, in addition, allowed Astra-National Productions to film ships as a backdrop to the 1926 version of *The Flag Lieutenant*, an imperial adventure-drama play by W. P. Drury and Leo Tover first filmed back in 1919. The Admiralty, however, was suspicious enough of what it distastefully termed ‘the “romantic” type of film’ (i.e. fictional plots) to insist on complete veto power. The relevant contract clauses indicate the extent to which negative control might be exercised.

3. The Admiralty or any authorised Officer appointed by them, shall at all times have the right of censorship in every case and no copy of any film disapproved of shall at any time be exhibited without the special approval of the Admiralty in writing. The negatives and all copies of any film so disapproved of shall if so required be handed over to the Admiralty and shall thereupon become the property of the Admiralty.



4. Prior to the exhibition of the film it shall be exhibited before Officers to be nominated by the Admiralty for the purpose and any alterations required by them to be made to the film or to the titling shall be made by the Company at their own expense. The film in its final form shall before public exhibition be submitted to the Admiralty for approval and it shall not be exhibited in public unless and until the approval of the Admiralty shall be communicated to the Company in writing.<sup>54</sup>

Even with these restrictions, however, sentiment was strongly against extending naval facilities for non-documentary films. By 1926 there were 3000 cinemas in operation in Britain, and it was recognized that it was the fictional film which had a truly 'wide appeal'. But the very popularity of 'the pictures' made them suspect in the minds of social conservatives. In 1927 the Board of the Admiralty was informed that 'there was strong feeling in the Fleet against using Naval personnel and material to supply a background for romantic films', and decided that in future no support should be extended.<sup>55</sup>

This was evidently the policy followed throughout the 1920s by the army.<sup>56</sup> Even the new Royal Air Force, dangerously unorthodox in terms of its officer training and structure in the eyes of generals and admirals, did little to utilize the feature film as a medium of publicity. Though keen to prevent the service from becoming 'mere chauffeurs for the army and navy',<sup>57</sup> senior RAF figures such as Air Marshal Sir Hugh Trenchard, the Chief of Air Staff, were at the same time anxious to establish legitimacy in reference to the older services. Hence the RAF selectively adopted existing social traditions. Dining-in nights and formal parades were for officers to be 'affairs of gentlemanly ritual and elegance', complete with dress uniforms modelled on those of the Edwardian age. Both the Boer War era uniforms and the recruit training of Other Ranks were copied from the army.<sup>58</sup> Thus, though willing to develop its own versions of traditional service self-promotion in the form of the annual Hendon Air Pageant as well as gymnastic and other public displays, the Air Ministry did not embrace feature film propaganda.<sup>59</sup>

In 1922, a year in which the future of the RAF was in doubt due to budget cuts and hostility from the army and above all the navy, the obscure promotional film *The Eyes of the Army* appeared. Taken on manoeuvres, this film was apparently designed to show that the air force was still willing to cooperate with the other services.<sup>60</sup> The RAF's only foray into commercial films in the 1920s came five years later in the making of *The Flight Commander*. This Gaumont feature, directed by Maurice Elvey and starring Sir Alan Cobham, the famous long-distance flier, dealt with the foiling of an attack on a British outpost in China by the bombing of a village: a none-too-subtle allusion to the kind of air control practised in Iraq. Despite

the staging of the bombing scene at the Hendon Air Pageant amid much fanfare, *The Flight Commander* did not attract much public attention.<sup>61</sup>

This very limited output was not accidental. Film companies continued to approach the RAF with scenarios and requests for cooperation. But as one Air Ministry official put it to another in looking back on the latter 1920s, 'the Air Council are jealous of the reputation of the RAF and, as you are aware, no one has yet succeeded in satisfying their requirements'.<sup>62</sup>

In the following decade, however, things began to change in all three services with regard to feature film propaganda. The growing social acceptability of filmgoing among the middle classes, combined with booming attendance figures among the working classes, made the publicity value of the pictures – above all the sound-era features which drew in the crowds – harder to discount. The number of cinema tickets sold rose year by year: 903 million in 1934; 907 million in 1935; 917 million in 1936; 946 million in 1937; 987 million in 1938; and 990 million in 1939 – by which point an estimated 23 million people were going to the pictures each week.<sup>63</sup> Cinemas proliferated as Odeon and other chains opened dozens of new suburban 'dream palaces'. In 1935 there were 4448 cinemas in operation. By 1938 there were 4967.<sup>64</sup> Though still deplored by intellectuals, going to the pictures had unquestionably become the dominant social habit of the age.<sup>65</sup>

At the same time the anti-militarist sentiment of the late 1920s and early to mid 1930s made it clear that the services could no longer count on unquestioning public support. The Great War, in all its horror and apparent futility, had dealt a severe blow to traditional patriotic sentiment. In the first decade after the war people had tried to forget; now, as new conflicts began to loom, pacifistic sentiment replaced jingoism. These were the years in which plays such as *Journey's End* and books such as *Goodbye to All That* appeared, the Peace Pledge Union rose to prominence, and the National Peace Ballot – affirming support for international disarmament efforts – attracted over eleven million supporters. Meanwhile the major political parties competed with one another to demonstrate their anti-war monger credentials. The armed forces, in short, were no longer popular: a sign of the times being the sharp decline in the number of films with plots involving the services.<sup>66</sup>

The navy was the first to act in trying to boost its public image in the 1930s through the feature film. Though still in many ways tradition-bound and suspicious of popular representation, the Admiralty could not entirely ignore signs of declining public support. In 1928 a petty and very public dispute between senior officers aboard the battleship *Royal Oak* made the navy look 'extremely foolish'.<sup>67</sup> Then came the Invergordon Mutiny of 1931, sparked by pay cuts, which had a definite negative effect on both the

navy's image and its ability to attract quality recruits for the lower deck.<sup>68</sup> Hence, despite the standing policy against supporting 'romantic' films, the Board of the Admiralty in practice began – cautiously and on a case-by-case basis – to extend facilities to film companies that appeared to offer good propaganda value.

The first crack in the Admiralty edifice came in connection with *The Middle Watch*, a comedy made by British International Pictures at Elstree in 1930 based on a hit play written by Ian Hay and Stephen King-Hall. The plot ('Captain tries to hide accidental female passengers from Admiral') might not have appealed to the more sober-sided admirals;<sup>69</sup> but both the authors of the play, from a service point of view, possessed a good pedigree. Ian Hay (the pseudonym of John Beith) had won the MC and later been involved in wartime publicity, while Stephen King-Hall had served with distinction and risen to the rank of commander before leaving the navy to write. In any event, 'the only facilities given were for the photography of incidents in a ship's normal routine, and no film artists were allowed on board for filming purposes'.<sup>70</sup>

British International next asked the Admiralty if it would lend a hand in the making of *Men Like These*, a drama based on the story of HM submarine *Poseidon*, sunk in a collision with a Chinese merchant vessel in June 1931. P. C. Stapleton, the company's general manager, pointed out that the film would be good for the Royal Navy's image at a time when Hollywood was heavily promoting the United States Navy. 'We have detailed with some care', he wrote in connection with a request for permission to shoot British submarines diving, cruising, and surfacing, 'the facilities which would enable us to include in our picture a display of Naval power, and make the picture useful from the point of view of showing ... something of a Navy which is not American'.<sup>71</sup> In return for this, use of a test tank at Portsmouth for underwater shooting and the loan of parts from old L-class submarines to create a control room in the studio, BIP agreed to the Admiralty's decision that the story be made fictional and to its unconditional right to censor the finished product as it saw fit. Everything was covered in the contract. 'The Company shall be responsible', clause eight read in part, 'that if Naval uniform is worn by any of their employees in the production of this film, the uniforms when worn shall be complete and correct.'<sup>72</sup> There were no less than three naval advisors to make sure. (Captain K. Bruce, Lieutenant-Commander John L. F. Hunt and Lieutenant-Commander E. V. Hume-Spry.)<sup>73</sup> The film, detailing the escape efforts and general heroism of the crew of submarine 'L 56', appeared in November 1931.

Next came a request from British and Dominions Film Corporation to

use some of the naval scenes from the 1926 production in a 1932 remake of *The Flag Lieutenant*. A representative of the Directorate of Naval Intelligence noted that the silent version had been popular, 'and could be considered as good propaganda in keeping the Navy before the public'. The First Lord agreed. 'I observe that in favour of granting this request the argument is used of the value of good propaganda', minuted Sir Bolton Monsell. 'With that I am strongly in sympathy.'<sup>74</sup>

Not all within the navy were so well disposed. Contractual complications concerning the Admiralty's fee for the 1926 version of *The Flag Lieutenant* had by 1932 produced an embarrassingly public court case. The judge commented: 'There is something to me very sordid in that our great ships and our sailors should be used for purposes of this sort.'<sup>75</sup> Within the Fleet many officers also felt that 'the making of romantic films is not in keeping with the dignity of the Navy'; there was a definite fear that scenes of ships at sea would be mixed in with 'silly or sentimental situations'. Reviewing the situation in June 1932, the Board of the Admiralty 'confirmed the previous decision against the encouragement of romantic films'.<sup>76</sup>

Nevertheless it was recognized that in peacetime film companies could take as much footage as they liked of HM ships from the shore or hired boats,<sup>77</sup> and permission to use the existing film taken with Admiralty approval was granted. Thus *The Flag Lieutenant* (which the Admiralty kept an eye on through their naval adviser, Commander F. W. Gleed,<sup>78</sup> and vetted before its release) joined *Men Like These* and *The Middle Watch* as a showcase for the navy. *The Middle Watch*, released in December 1930, was a success. 'Adapted to the film,' the *Times* critic wrote, 'this farce is no less amusing than it was on the stage. Indeed, its fun has now been heightened by a veracious but unobtrusive naval background.'<sup>79</sup> *Men Like These*, which appeared the following year, was also praised. The *Daily Telegraph* film critic, G. A. Atkinson, found that RN cooperation had allowed for a film of breathtaking spectacle. P. L. Mannoock, writing in the *Daily Herald*, reported that the director had 'reconstructed with terrifying realism' what it must be like to be trapped in a submarine. *The Times* noted that 'every detail has a convincing air of accuracy'. Opinion on the acting was mixed; but even Ewart Hodgson of the *Daily Express* allowed that 'From a technical standpoint *Men Like These* is a superb piece of talkie making'.<sup>80</sup> Both the new version of *The Flag Lieutenant* and *The Middle Watch* were big enough hits with the public to be re-released some years later.<sup>81</sup>

The public, indeed, appeared much more willing to accept a fictitious 'romantic' plot than the kind of straightforward propaganda film with which some on the Board of Admiralty were more comfortable. When the promotional documentary *Our Fighting Navy* was released in September 1933,