

Creating a Labour Movement Film Service: The Co-operative Movement and the Workers' Film Association in the 1930s

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Films are a part of twentieth century life – Let us do our best to make them a part of our life in the Co-operative Movement, increasing our own Co-operative knowledge, and bringing Co-operation to the notice of other people. 'The Co-operative Film Service. Propaganda Through Pictures', Co-operative Youth, October 1937.

It is hardly surprising that of all the publicity media at the disposal of the modern business concern, the CWS should have chosen the screen as its most powerful means of propaganda: The advertising virtues of the talking film are peculiarly suited to the Co-operative Movement ... a democratic organisation like the CWS with its principles to propagate as well as commodities to sell needs the talking film.

'Advertising and Display Co-operative Screen Publicity', The Producer, January, 1938

The late 1920s and 1930s saw a considerable expansion in cinema work by the co-operative movement. A circumstance that paralleled the continued prosperity and vitality of co-operation in the commercial field and matched the general growth in the sponsored film sector wherein a wide variety of organisations - governmental, industrial, commercial, religious, military, and political - sought to bring their message to the screen. The movement's main centralised provision came through the Co-operative Wholesale Society (CWS), which had been a pioneer of the industrial film, tracing its involvement with cinema propaganda back to the late 1890s.¹ By the 1930s, the CWS was operating a popular film-lecture service on behalf of local distributive societies and had commissioned numerous publicity films illustrating its manufacturing activities and promoting its products.²

The issue of securing, supplying, and exhibiting suitable educational, as against publicity, films for co-operators exercised various constituencies within the movement, and, indeed, came to implicate trade unionists and political representatives in the wider labour movement. The gradual involvement of the Trade Union Congress (TUC) and Labour Party in cinema propaganda by the mid-1930s has been well-documented.³ Yet, while each of its historians has acknowledged the contribution of co-operators to the formation of the WFA, certain fundamental problems and tensions between different co-operative constituencies have remained unexamined, and which are

crucial for understanding the actual form the organisation eventually assumed, and how it developed as the labour movement's film service into the war years and beyond. This paper offers a detailed examination of that conflict between educational and promotional imperatives which lay behind the formation of the democratic labour movement's first film service.

First, it is necessary to account for the Co-operative Union's particular attitude to cinema work, and its responsibility to distributive societies with respect to film. As the national federal organisation responsible for education, the Union had periodically examined film as a potential educational medium. By the late 1920s, the movement's growing interest in film for education purposes paralleled a more general trend, wherein teachers, government and local authority officials were investigating film for use in the classroom.⁴

The Co-operative Union's concern with cinema and education was manifest in a scheme unveiled by the Central Education Committee (CEC) at Co-operative Congress in 1929. There:

The possibilities of utilising the cinema films for education purposes by means of a national scheme for co-operative societies was discussed, and it was revealed that the CEC had arranged, in association with British Film Services, for the organisation of cinema displays. Programmes would be largely compiled from existing educational film libraries and include science, travel and industrial films, although one Co-operative film would be made available for each display. Mr. George Kerr, speaking on behalf of British Film Services, hoped that within a year of its commencement at least a hundred halls throughout the country to be filled with 500 people enjoying the service. He informed his audience that "by means of the film and by means of the gramophone you can take the University to every village".⁵

In order to encourage support for the scheme, Mr. Kerr lectured and demonstrated at numerous co-operative educational meetings, and he was careful to point out that "instruction and entertainment (would] be pleasingly combined".⁶ The actual arrangements relating to the film service were announced in the summer of 1929 and displays would accommodate approximately seven films, and last 90-120 minutes.⁷ An important producer of educational films, British Instructional Films, were also incorporated into the scheme to ensure the essential supply of suitable titles.⁸ The crucial condition for the adoption of the service was that sufficient societies agree to arrange twenty displays each, guaranteeing an attendance of 500 at every show. At the various demonstrations held around the country,

committee members had proved weary of the potential cost of the service and there is little evidence that Education Committees were prepared to meet the rather stiff demands imposed by British Film Services.

The Co-operative Union continued in its relations with the firm and further plans were formed with respect to sound film displays. In what was billed as "the first demonstration in Europe of sound-films with a portable projector", co-operative educationalists were provided "an opportunity to judge of the importance of sound films in their application as one of the most modern methods of education".⁹ British Film Services were prepared to arrange individual sound film displays at twelve pounds and ten shillings and a series of regional demonstrations of the equipment were effected.¹⁰ Reports on the movement's further involvement with British Film Services dries up at that point, and it must be concluded that the willingness of local societies to subscribe to the scheme was lacking. After all, the CWS film-lecture service demanded far less onerous terms and a greater degree of flexibility. The Co-operative Union's attempt to promote a more specifically educational form of film exhibition had seemingly been lost to a financial stringency at the local level, and the episode offered a further lesson to the Union, after the similar failure to secure support for modest film production in the early 1920s¹¹, that cinema work for education and propaganda was an expensive enterprise and that the majority of retail societies were not prepared to directly meet the cost. It was evident to the Union that it was only with subsidised schemes, such as that operated by the CWS, that progress was possible.

It is within the context of such experiences that the movement's attitudes towards a proposed labour film service should be appreciated. The essential catalyst for what would become the Workers' Film Association was the adoption within the Co-operative Union's 'Ten Year Plan for Co-operative Education', reported in 1935, of the need to bring cinema to the task of educational work.¹² An important lobby for the promotion of co-operative education through film was the National Association of Co-operative Education Committees (NACEC), and that group announced its intention to raise debate on the matter by tabling a resolution on cinema and co-operative education at the Union's Annual Education Convention in 1936.¹³ The Association had emerged in the early 1930s when disgruntled representatives of Education Committees responded to a perceived lack of democratic process for educationalists within the Co-operative Union. To some extent the NACEC was denounced as a 'rebel' body, and, as the organisation's official history records, its relationship with the Union "fluctuated considerably" with many "conflicting incidents".¹⁴ The Association was quick to offer criticism

of the Union's 'Ten Year Plan for Co-operative Education' and amongst other things requested Joseph Reeves of the Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society (RAGS) to investigate the general state of educational cinema.⁵ While the Educational Executive of the Union rather lethargically undertook its responsibility to promote co-operative education through film (the sub-committee on film was not finally proposed until August 1936), the Association pushed on with its own plans and it secured adoption of a proposal at Education Convention, "that it is desirable in the interest of education by film for the Movement to go extensively into the production of films and the creation of a film library".¹⁶

At that moment the Association was acting merely to 'ginger' up the Union, and a series of schools and seminars were arranged, from which the film lobby began to secure more widespread support.¹⁷ The most important of these meetings was a national conference held at Swanwick in September, 1936.; "with the object of securing a national expression of the opinion of education committees regarding the future place which will be taken by films in the development of co-operative education".¹⁸ The Educational Executive of the Co-operative Union was represented at the conference.¹⁹ The centre-piece was a presentation by Joe Reeves, an executive member of the Association, who proposed a national scheme for Co-operative education by film. In a veiled criticism of the Union, he demanded proaction rather than inertia:

It is because the educationists of the Movement realise the important part which the film has to play in the days to come in vitalising the leisure hours of the workers that we are here this afternoon. We have to consider, and having considered, to act in the provision of the means whereby the Movement may use the film as an instrument of educational policy, as a medium for gaining new recruits, and as a popular means of arousing interest in the social possibilities of human co-operation. There is no more effective medium.²⁰

The conference passed a resolution "declaring that educational films were essential in the teaching methods of the movement", and an expanded version of Reeves' address was widely circulated as a pamphlet.²¹ The main proposal presented at Swanwick was the formation of a National Film Society to which local retail societies would pledge modest financial support (£10-£20) and agree to take programmes of educational films.²² Reeves' advocacy of the cinema for educational purposes clearly derived from his experience at the RAGS where he had been involved in film work for nearly two decades²³; while the actual spur to seek the wider utilisation of the

film for co-op education derived from the availability of sub-standard (16mm) sound film in the mid-1930s. He considered this an "heaven-sent opportunity", substantially enhancing the sensitivity of the medium for persuasion and for the first time, in terms of exhibition, offering an affordable proposition for national film propaganda.²⁴ Reeves warned the movement of the dangers of leaving the field free to its competitors, informing a conference that "The National Government and the Conservative Party had a call on 100 travelling cinemas. They used the 16mm sub-standard film, and were telling the story that co-operators had been trying to contradict for years", and stressing that "We have in our hands, in the 16mm sub-standard film, a mighty propaganda weapon, and I hope the co-operative movement will use it to the full".²⁵

As an experienced propagandist, Reeves immediately set about promoting the cause of the Association. He had accepted the nomination to act as secretary to a film committee set-up by the NACEC²⁶, and commencing in late 1936, began an extensive lecture programme bringing the details of the National Film Society to a wider audience.²⁷ Meanwhile, the Co-operative Union was slowly progressing through its own series of discussions involving the CWS and the NACEC regarding a suitable approach to film. In November 1936, the Educational Executive heard the advice of the CWS's publicity representative to the effect "that the formation of a proposed Co-operative Film Society ... was not required".²⁸ The report of the Union's film sub-committee was cautious in its proposals for film work: it essentially envisaged the Union's role to be advisory, while more substantial action would have to wait until "as and when conditions are favourable and warrant the step".²⁹ The NACEC gently pushed the Educational Executive to adapt the more dynamic proposals contained in its own National Film Society plan, but the Executive simply noted the details and declined to be represented on the films sub-committee of the Association.³⁰

In the face of such inactivity and lack of ambition the NACEC launched its proposals for a National Co-operative Film Society in the spring of 1937, an action it described as "probably the most vigorous move associated with Co-operative education" since the inception of the Association. The actual proposals were summarised as follows:

It is envisaged that the film society would, for the larger societies, act as an agency for supplying equipment and provide a weekly change of film programmes; for the medium societies, arrange for the supply of equipment on a hire-purchase basis with a weekly change of programme, and for

the smaller societies, provide a road service whereby the society could hire apparatus, operator, and films for single showing at an inclusive price.³¹

To begin with, societies were only asked to respond to the proposals with offers of support and pledge themselves to donating ten pounds when the Film Society was launched proper. Those societies which approached the Executive Committee were informed tartly that the Film Society had not been approved by the Co-operative Union.³² The 'films question' featured prominently at the Education Convention of the Co-operative Union held at Easter 1937. The NACEC organised cinema demonstrations giving delegates the "opportunity to judge for themselves the efficiency of the sound film".³³ In return, its critics complained that the premature and unilateral action of the Association was bound to lead to confrontation and a wasteful overlapping of responsibility and resources³⁴, and the educationalists at the Union publicly announced their intention only to work in alliance with the CWS on film matters.³⁵ Joe Reeves, on behalf of the NACEC, countered the criticisms directed at the National Co-operative Film Society proposals in a speech at Co-operative Congress in the summer of 1937. He defended the Association's actions in terms of the lack of progress in the provision of educational films by the delegated authorities. He denied the accusation of overlapping in that the intentions of the National Co-operative Film Society substantially differed from the cinema activities of the CWS, which merely circulated publicity films, but in any case, offered the significant concession that programmes offered by the Association would include one CWS trade film.³⁶

The response from the Co-operative Union made by Mr. Edwards, chairman of the Educational Executive, was revealing in its concern about cost and he felt unable to support any proposal that relied on financial contribution from local societies. The intention to collaborate with the CWS on film work was reiterated.³⁷ The Union's strategy was clearly derived from its two previous experiences with educational film in the early 1920s and early 1930s; it proposed to develop film work alongside the established and financially secure CWS film service, and seek to develop a recognisably educational dimension within that framework. The result was the establishment of the CWS National Film Service in 1938, and as the new scheme was in preparation, societies were informed "that there was no need for separate action on the part of retail societies such as had been proposed".³⁸

To both the surprise and consternation of the Union, the National

Co-operative Film Society began to progress with evident support from some societies. Following the appeal for financial commitment, promises totalling five hundred pounds were received, and several societies were liaising to share costs and forming local circuits on a district basis.³⁹ By the autumn of 1937, the film department of the Association had commenced supplying societies with film programmes, and more than a hundred exhibitions were arranged on a 'road-show' basis.⁴⁰ Despite the proclamations of the Union, Joe Reeves now warned co-operative educationalists that there would evolve competition in the movement's film work and bemoaned the lack of consultation accorded the Association.⁴¹

With the emergence of two rival film schemes, a more acrimonious relationship developed between the Union and the NACEC. The schism which had evolved over educational film provision attracted considerable commentary and angry exchanges unbecoming of the co-operative movement. The CWS's decision early in 1938 not to supply its publicity films for the National Co-operative Film Society scheme was declared 'dirty work' and the whole episode was now tagged a 'film dispute'.⁴² The CWS defended its action in terms of logistics: it simply could not meet the sudden request to supply films for an estimated 400 displays.⁴³ To supporters of the Association's position, that merely confirmed their suspicion that the CWS/Co-operative Union alliance was uncommitted to the ideal of educational film work and parsimonious to the degree of hinderance.⁴⁴

In its turn, the Association and its supporters criticised the provision of the new CWS National Film Service as entirely unsuited to the demands of co-operative education. The Educational Executive were accused of "lamentable ignorance" in their actions and the CWS an unsuitable body to be concerned with educational films. The attempts to promote the CWS National Film Service at conferences and educational meetings met with some hostility; for example, a Leicester co-operator complained that the sample films exhibited, "reveal a lack of appreciation of the real purpose of co-operative education"; and was shocked that "one of them was nothing more or less than a glorification of imperialism".⁴⁵ It was evident that CWS trade films struggled to appeal to the more progressively-minded co-operative educationalist and a Nottingham co-operator failed to appreciate the social education to be derived from a film which demonstrated "how to make a dinner entirely out of tins of 'Waveney' products!".⁴⁶ A representative to Co-operative Congress from the South Suburban Society, with reference to both the Union's proposed Congress film and the movement's conventional trade films, remonstrated that:

We want films that will capture the imagination of hundreds of thousands of our members up and down the country. Do you think that our members in the retail societies are interested in a film of Congress which will show us walking about this hall? ... And it is regrettable that the CWS cannot show us a film that is anything better than the advertising film.⁴⁷

To the supporters of the Association, the movement's publicity films were unsuitable for the purpose of co-operative education, while the Union's efforts to develop educational films were considered incompetent. Most definitely, too little, too late.

Film and the labour movement: the Workers' Film Association

The 'films dispute' laboured on throughout 1938, with the Union denouncing the National Co-operative Film Society as "unsound", whereas the film department of the Association countered with the accusation that the film plans of the Co-operative Union lacked "initiative and drive".⁴⁸ The film department of the NACEC remained conciliatory and suggested the formation of a national committee to consider film education, on which the Co-operative Union, the CWS and the NACEC would be represented. No such body emerged, and it must be concluded that the Union declined the offer. In view of such intransigence, Joe Reeves decided upon an alternative course of development. A cosmopolitan figure, he enjoyed a wide-range of contacts throughout the labour movement and was familiar with the emerging interest among trade union and political activists in the propaganda film. The drive and vision of Reeves would be instrumental in the formation of the Workers' Film Association late in 1938, and a 'united front' for labour film would proceed without the participation of 'official' co-operative organisations.⁴⁹

Upon his resignation from RACS in September 1938, Joe Reeves was honoured as "probably the most outstanding figure in the world of Co-operative education".⁵⁰ His energy and talents were now put to the establishment of a labour movement film service, which should be seen as no great departure in his actions in that he had consistently striven to promote the ideals of the wider workers' movement and to establish greater unison between the economic, industrial and political wings.⁵¹ Evidence of successful collaboration was apparent when the film department of the NACEC had enthusiastically supported the labour movement's 'Milk for Spain' campaign and 146 film shows were arranged, and a short film prepared in which the co-op sponsored front bench MP, A V Alexander, called for the wide support of Spanish democracy.⁵²

Reeves was no doubt convinced that the cinema initiatives being pursued at the TUC and Labour Party, the success of the combined action over the 'Milk for Spain' campaign, and the continued support of the National Co-operative Film Society by local co-operative societies - 700 film shows were supplied during the first six months of trading⁵³ - merited a workers' film organisation. Moreover, his involvement with the militant film organisation Kino had further demonstrated his commitment to a workers' cinema. Few officials of the established co-operative movement were prepared to associate themselves with that film organisation, which had been established in 1933 to distribute Left-political films, and which was clear sympathetic to the radical wing of the worker's movement. ⁴ Unusually, Reeves accepted the position of Council Member with Kino and arranged substantial bookings for its films with RAGS. For example, the society hired a 16mm print of Eisenstein's *The General Line* (1929) for a whole twelve month period in 1934, and the Soviet classic was shown to 40,000 co-operators in South London.⁵⁵ The launch of the NACEC National Film Society had also been predicated on Kino supplying films and operators, although as societies acquired their own projectors the contribution of Kino naturally diminished.⁵⁶

When the TUC and Labour Party began seriously to consider film propaganda in the mid-1930s, the achievements of the co-operative movement were clearly influential on their officers who conceded that "Effective educational and film propaganda organisation" had been established by co-operators.⁵⁷ Reeves was approached for his experience gained as secretary to the film department of the NACEC. He was invited on to the National Joint Film Committee (1937); and he and his organisation were clearly instrumental in the emergence of the Workers' Film Association in November 1938.⁵⁸ In explaining his actions to leave RACS, he declared:

I was convinced that the time had come for the workers' movements to work out ways and means whereby the film could be used to make known our social aims and for the purpose of countering the subtle propaganda for the existing order of society which comes to us from Hollywood and elsewhere.⁵⁹

Unfortunately, the "pettifogging jealousies" had refused to go away, and the WFA did not have the participation of either the Co-operative Union nor the CWS.⁶⁰ In effect, three film services involving co-operators existed to cater for the demands of the labour

movement: the CWS National Film Service, the film department of the NACEC and the WFA. In the view of one commentator, this history of co-operative film development was "reminiscent of Hollywood's internal squabbles".⁶¹ Discussion between the NACEC, representatives of the TUC and Labour Party, and the CWS/Co-operative Union continued after the formation of the WFA, and dragged on across 1939.⁶² A level of agreement was achieved in August when final recommendations for joint working were drawn up. Under the plan two representatives from each of the four organisations were to serve on a management committee of a national film body, "with the machinery for the distribution and the production of standard and sub-standard films, and the supply and insurance of all types of film equipment".⁶³ At the final moment the CWS pulled out, "preferring not to commit itself in the altered circumstances to be expected if war broke out."⁶⁴ Reeves was able to secure a limited involvement by the Co-operative Union when he successfully invited the Educational Executive to be represented on the Advisory Committee of the WFA.⁶⁵ Reeves would maintain discussions with the 'official' co-operative movement throughout the war years in an attempt to gain more active participation from the CWS/Co-operative Union. In the meantime, Reeves did what he could to promote and develop the film services of the Association. Building on the groundwork of the National Co-operative Film Society, the "rapid distribution of 16mm" was the initial prospect and achievement of the WFA.⁶⁶ The immediate problem to confront was the lack of suitable films and one supporter complained that:

We are limited to showing a very, very small proportion of propagandist films and 90 per cent of the films to be shown are of an entertainment character.⁶⁷

Reeves had appreciated early on that "the only solution of the problem was for the workers' movements to enter into the field of film production".⁶⁸ For the time-being the Association was reliant on the film collections of the commercial libraries, and Reeves was clearly a supporter of the best of the documentary film movement productions, especially those which dealt with social issues like *Housing Problems* (1936), *Enough to Eat* (1936) and *Children at School* (1937).⁶⁹ Experience indicated that Reeves was most likely to find support for expensive film production from within the co-operative movement, as neither the trade unions nor Labour Party had shown much Willingness to engage in film production. Those organisations could be convinced of the necessity to finance films only through successful example, and, therefore, Reeves approached a co-operative

body that had demonstrated a progressive attitude to workers' cultural activity, the London Co-operative Societies' Joint Education Committee (LCSJEC).⁷⁰

The sponsorship of films by the combined metropolitan societies initially supplied the needs of the National Co-operative Film Society for propaganda films to distribute to co-operative societies, and the committee's 'Five Year Plan of Film Production' conveniently realised product in time for the launch of the WFA in the autumn of 1938. The plan had first been presented in the summer of 1937 and involved the four big metropolitan societies - London, Royal Arsenal, South Suburban and Enfield Highway. The scheme proposed that "five documentary social films on co-operation be produced one per year at a cost of one thousand pounds each".⁷¹ The constituent management committees had agreed the financial appropriation by the New Year and arrangements were commenced for the inaugural film in the series.⁷² The broader concern of Reeves and the NACEC was acknowledged in the agreement that all the films would be of a general character making them suitable for screening in the provinces.⁷³

The premiere of the inaugural film, *Advance Democracy* (1938), occurred in October 1938 at the summer school of the London Co-operative Societies' Joint Education Committee held at Bexhill-on-Sea.⁷⁴ Joe Reeves had been technical secretary to the production committee and provided the original scenario. It is evident that Reeves was instrumental in motivating the LCSJEC to undertake film sponsorship and consequently controlled and directed the Five Year Plan of Film Production. He arranged for the films to be produced by the Realist Film Unit under the supervision of Film Centre. In that way the project was closely associated with the documentary film movement and correspondingly granted a certain credibility within intellectual film culture.⁵

Only one further film was realised in the Five Year Plan as war intervened into the production schedule, The Realist Film Unit was again commissioned to produce *The Voice of the People* (1939), a film "which expressed in pictorial form the struggles of the workers to obtain their present important place in the State".⁷⁶ The influence of the WFA was evident over this production, which was financed by co-operative societies but took the broader labour movement, its struggles and aspirations, as its theme.⁷⁷ With the backing of the wealthy Joint London Co-operative Societies, and distribution through the WFA/NACEC, Reeves had developed a system for labour film production and an embryonic workers' film service. Earlier in 1938, he had been disappointed that "the Co-operative Movement [had] not produced one disinterested social film"⁷⁸, but

within a very short space of time he had nurtured the limited opportunities for labour film and had stewarded "the first two films of a documentary character ever made by the Movement, and they represented a break away from the purely advertising films for which the Movement had hitherto been responsible through the Co-operative Wholesale Society".⁷⁹

The main problem confronted by Reeves and the WFA was to ensure a supply of relevant films for the democratic movements. Since its inception, the Association had envisaged the assumption of film production by its more wealthy constituent members, and the London Societies' 'Five Year Film Plan' was reflective of that intention. In introducing the ambitions of the WFA at a conference at Transport House, Reeves had declared that "The big Trade Unions would be approached with the idea of inducing them to provide an annual film appropriation for the purpose of producing documentary films on subjects of interest to their members".⁸⁰ It seems, then, that Reeves was out to encourage the unions to invest in a long-term film plan for propaganda, and he helpfully provided some ideas for film subjects:

I would like to see the Railway Unions providing a film on the life of a railway man, the Transport Workers Union one on the risks a motor driver takes from day to day providing transport for people and goods; indeed the life of the great army of the workers, builders, miners, seamen, printers, electricians and others should be dramatised because their lives and work are the stuff of which life is made.⁶¹

The possibility of film production by the workers' movement was seriously hindered by the outbreak of war in September 1939. However, Reeves had made some progress in stimulating labour and co-operative organisations to undertake modest commissions. In the summer of 1939, it was reported that:

The Association [had] commissions for the production of documentary films on behalf of Trade Unions and other organisations. It [was] particularly hoped to develop this last branch of activity and, through that, means to provide a supply of first class documentary films visually conveying the message which the Movement has to give to its members and to those who are not yet members.⁸²

The first such film available for distribution by the WFA was an account of the educational activities of Reeves' former society, RACS, produced for its Diamond Jubilee Celebrations, and released

as *People With A Purpose* (1939).⁸³ That film was followed by commissions for the Amalgamated Union of Building Trade Workers (*The Builders*, 1939); the National Society of Operative Printers and Assistants (*The Jubilee*, 1939); the Woodcraft Folk (*The Republic of Children*, 1939); and a municipal project for the London Borough of Camberwell demonstrating its ARP activities (*Camberwell is Prepared*, 1939).⁸⁴ A WFA newsreel was also commenced but appears to have run to only a single issue. Reeves had indicated at an early stage that he intended:

The Association should provide a service of news-reels on the sub-standard film. Cameramen would shoot 16mm silent pictures of events of interest to the Workers' Movement. Suitable commentaries would be added and the films would be issued each month during the winter season.⁸⁵

The WFA had to admit, eventually, that film production had largely failed to materialise given the circumstances of the war. In comparison to the Association's other activities, the sponsorship of production was considered "our weak section"⁸⁶, and unsurprisingly the bulk of commissions were taken by co-operative organisations. A number of films were produced during the war for retail co-operative societies, such as Peterborough, Liverpool, Coalville and Nottingham, and an important commission undertaken for the SCWS, in the *Two Good Fairies*, to mark the Beveridge Report of 1942.⁸⁷ More substantial progress was made in respect of film distribution and exhibition, and the promotion of Workers' film education. Eventually, a library of 900 sound films and 500 silent films was compiled and an impressive roster of film industry sympathisers and labour movement officials lectured to budding worker film makers at schools held across Britain.⁸⁸

In conclusion, the contribution of co-operative bodies proved crucial to the viability of the Workers' Film Association. It had always been the case that the co-operative movement had demonstrated greater willingness to engage in cinema work and claimed far greater experience and achievement than the other wings of the democratic labour movement. Joe Reeves had sensibly relied on the established and emerging structures of co-operative movement cinema practice and was aware that for future progress a successful labour film service needed the participation of wealthy and influential organisations such as the CWS and Co-operative Union. He, therefore, sought to dispel the distrust that had emerged during the formation of the WFA and strove to include as many co-operative groups as possible in the work of the Association.⁸⁹ Negotiations with the Co-operative Union continued on through the war with the

object of making the WFA truly representative of all three workers' movements. However, the Union dragged its feet on this matter and was clearly unwilling to take action independent of the CWS. Eventually, the two federal co-operative organisations were brought into a combined labour film service, the National Film Association (1946-1953). However, the long-standing tensions between the demands of educational and publicity film continued to hinder the effectiveness of labour's postwar cinema propaganda. That saga is still to be unravelled.

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NOTES

1. Burton, A, *Film and the Co-operative Movement, 1896-1970* (Unpublished PhD Thesis, De Montfort University, 2000): Ch4.
2. Details of the movement's films can be found in Burton, A, *The British Co-operative Movement Film Catalogue* (Trowbridge: Flicks books, 1997)
3. The details can be found in Hollins, T J, *The Place of Party Publicity, Broadcasting and Film in British Politics, 1918-1939* (Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Leeds, 1981): 193-213; Jones, S G, *The British Labour Movement and Film, 1918-1939* (London: RKP, 1987):153-157; Hogenkamp, B, *Deadly Parallels. Film and the Left in Britain 1929-39* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1986): 176-188.
4. For a preliminary discussion of the educational film in this period, see, Low, R, *Documentary and Educational Films of the 1930s*, (London: Allen and Unwin, 1979): 7-47. The specific application of the film to history teaching is examined in Harper, S, *Picturing the Past: The Rise and Fall of the British Costume Film* (London: BFI, 1994): 64-76.
5. 'Co-operative School at a Cinema', *The Co-operative News* (1 June 1929): 7; 'The Cinema and Education', *The Co-operative News* (25 May 1929): 13.
6. 'Co-operative School', op dt; 'Film-Lectures. Cinematograph as an Educational Aid', *The Co-operative News* (1 June 1929): 6; 'Utilising the Cinematograph', *The Co-operative News* (22 June 1929): 7.
7. It was revealed at those meetings that British Film Services had been advised by prominent figures such as Philip Snowden (Labour's new Chancellor of the Exchequer) to work with the co-operative movement to gain access to substantial audiences.
8. The specific conditions are laid out in 'Film Service for Societies', *The Co-operative News* (24 August 1929): 2. The Co-operative Union was also supporting the use of educational gramophones and proposals to secure discs of co-operative subjects was announced.
9. 'Cinema As Educational Aid', *The Co-operative News* (14 September 1929): 11.

- 10 'Sound-Film Display', *The Co-operative News* (15 March 1930): 7. The Western Electric Company were represented at the demonstration and its technical input would have been crucial.
- 11 Burton, A, *Film and the Co-operative Movement*, op cit: 145-146.
- 12 'Planning for the Next Ten Years', *The Co-operative News* (23 November 1935): 3.
- 13 'Educational Association'; *The Co-operative News* (4 April 1936): 1.
- 14 Clode, HG, *A Short History of the National Association of Co-operative Education Committees* (1949): 7. In 1936, the Association held 237 affiliations from retail societies.
- 15 'Educationists Differ on Ten Year Plan Proposals', *The Co-operative News* (4 April 1936): 13.
- 16 'The Film in Educational Work', *The Co-operative News* (18 April 1936): 4.
- 17 'Educational Methods Under Survey', *The Co-operative News* (1 August 1936): 3.
- 18 'Education From the Screen', *The Co-operative News* (29 August 1936): 9.
- 19 *Co-operative Union, Educational Executive Minutes* (22 August 1936): 3. Provocatively, the Executive decided to send a representative who was not a member of its films sub-committee.
- 20 'The Film as an Instrument of Educational Policy', *The Co-operative News* (12 September 1936): 7.; 'Co-op Talkies', *The Cinema* (17 September 1936): 7.
- 21 Reeves, J, *The Film and Education*, (NACEC, 1936). A summary of the pamphlet also appeared as 'The Cinema and the Co-operative Movement', *The Millgate* (March 1937): 334-338.
- 22 Ibid: 16-19. It was reckoned that a minimum of fifty societies accepting displays in twenty-six weeks of a year was required.
- 23 Reeves' approach to 'cinema must be appreciated within a wider concern regarding the promotion of co-op education. He had long appreciated the opportunity offered by mass communication and had written and lectured widely on the potential of 'scientific advertising' to the movement. To gauge the emergence and development of Reeves' thinking on these matters see his numerous editorials and articles collected in *Comradeship*, the educational journal of the RACS, which he edited between 1918 and 1938. For his contemporary educational philosophy, see, Reeves, J, *Education for Social Change* (Manchester: Co-operative Union, 1936).
- 24 'The Film as an Instrument of Educational Policy', op cit; 'The Film and Education', op cit: 8-10.
- 25 'To Keep Pace with The Times We Must Use Film Propaganda', *The Co-operative News* (22 July 1939): 6.
- 26 'The Film and Co-operative Education', *The Co-operative News* (26 December 1936): 3.
- 27 *Co-operative Educator* (January 1937): 13; *Co-operative Educator* (July 1937): 78; *Co-operative Educator* (January 1938): 14-15.
- 28 *Co-operative Union, Educational Executive Minutes* (21 November 1936): 3; *Co-operative Union, Educational Executive Minutes* (19 December 1936): 3; 'Educational Council Meets', *The Co-operative News* (January 1937): 9.

- 29 'Education Executive. Important Decisions on Films and Youth', *The Co-operative News* (28 November 1936): 5.
- 30 *Co-operative Union, Educational Executive Minutes* (20 February 1937): 3-4.
- 31 'Co-operative Film Society in the Making', *The Co-operative News* (6 March 1937): 9. The arrangements were sensitive to the differing resources available to societies and were clearly intended not to exclude smaller societies.
- 32 *Co-operative Union, Executive Committee Minutes* (20 March 1937): 23.
- 33 'A Peep into the Future. Sample Film Programme', *The Co-operative News* (3 April 1937): 15.
- 34 'Co-operators and Films', *The Co-operative News* (3 April 1937): 2; 'Co-operators and Films', *The Co-operative News* (10 April 1937): 10.
- 35 *The Co-operative News* (3 April 1937): 10. At the first meeting of the Educational Executive following Convention, it was announced that:
 It was desired to make the CWS film department the agency through which films required by the co-operative movement should be obtained. Films at present obtainable through the department deal mainly with the trading operations of the CWS, but other types of films may be dealt with.
- 'Revised Policy for Easter. CWS as Film Agents', *The Co-operative News* (24 April 1937): 12.
- 36 *Co-operative Union Annual Congress Report 1937*: 461.
- 37 *Ibid*: 456; 'New Educational Activities', *The Co-operative News* (25 September 1937): 7.
- 38 *Co-operative Union, Educational Executive Minutes* (17 July 1937): 6.
- 39 'Film and Education', *Comradeship and W heatsheaf* (May 1937): 1.; 'Co-operative Movement and Film Business', *The Co-operative News* (2 October 1937): 11; *Co-operative Educator* (July 1937): 80; *Co-operative Educator* (October 1937): 110-111.
- 40 'Movement's Educational Film Policy', *The Co-operative News* (30 October 1937): 5. The first film shows under the auspices of the Association were provided for the Eccles Society which arranged a number of displays for children's rallies, *Co-operative Educator* (October 1937): 111.
- 41 'Movement's Educational Film Policy', *op. cit.*
- 42 "'Dirty Work" Alleged in Film Dispute', *The Co-operative News* (26 February 1938): 3.
- 43 'Cost of Film Service', *The Co-operative News* (30 April 1938): 12.
- 44 The extra prints would have cost the CWS Publicity Department £350, which advocates of an educational film service considered a trifle in comparison to the £96m invested in gilt-edged securities by the CWS in 1937, *ibid*:
- 45 *Co-operative Union Annual Co-operative Congress Report 1938*: 533. It is interesting to note the reaction of an independent co-operative body, the Co-operative Productive Federation, representative of producer co-operation. It considered the CWS/Co-operative Union specimen exhibition of films as demonstrating:
 A lack of appreciation of the true purpose of a Co-operative Film

Service ... [N]one had the slightest bearing upon the permeation of Co-operative ideology. The 'star' film was nothing but a glorification of Imperialism and Jingoism.

'A Co-operative Film Service', *The Co-operative Productive Review* (June 1938): 258.

46 "'Acute Position" Over Co operative Films', *The Co-operative News* (7 May 1938): 12. The film in question was *Kitchen Capers* (1937)

47 *Co-operative Union Annual Co-operative Congress Report 1938*: 540.

48 The Union's position is presented in Hall, F, 'Why the Delay in Planning a Comprehensive Film Service for The Movement?', *The Co-operative News* (14 May 1938): 2; the Association's case is expounded in 'Solution to Film Dispute in Sight?', *The Co-operative News* (21 May 1938): 3.

49 An editorial in *The Co-operative News* had called for a reconciliation between opposing film factions within the movement and hoped: "that the movement will soon present a 'united front' in organising a really imaginative series of films to tell the story of co-operation". See, 'Co-operative Film Service', *The Co-operative News* (21 May 1938): 8.

50 'Resignation of Education Secretary to RACS', *The Co-operative News* (3 September 1938): 1, 7. He had served on twenty committees within the movement, see, 'Mr Reeves to organise Workers' Film Association', *The Producer* (October 1938): 276.

51 Reeves had stood as the Co-operative-Labour Parliamentary candidate for Greenwich since 1931.

52 'Sound films For Education and Propaganda', *Co-operative Youth* (May 1938): 119. The film programme consisted of *Spanish Earth*, *News From Spain*, *Madrid Today* and *The Basque Children* and would have derived from the Progressive Film Institute.

On the launch of the 'Milk for Spain' campaign, see, 'Starvation in Spain. Co-operation: Humanitarian Project', *The Co-operative News* (27 November 1937): 2, 9.

53 'Sound films ...', op cit.

54 The inter-connectedness of the various labour wings at this time, through film activity, is demonstrated in the sponsorship of the public premiere of the Independent Labour Party's anti-war film, *Blow Bugles, Blow*, by the Education Committee of the Port Talbot Co-operative Society and played to 3,000 children. See, '3,000 Children See Our New Anti-War Film', *The New Leader* (2 September 1938): 7.

55 On Kino, see, Hogenkamp, B, op cit: Ch5.

56 *Kino, First Annual Report* (April 1936). The film department of the NACEC also acquired from Kino for distribution, *Kameradschaft* (1931), *News from Spain* (1937) and *War is Hell* (1936). Reeves was also on the Directorial Board of the Progressive Film Institute, another leading distributor of Left-political films in Britain.

'Recruits For Film Publicity. Screen Gives Aid to Spain', *The Co-operative News* (8 January 1938): 10. It was reported here that twenty societies had purchased projectors since the formation of the National Film Society.

57 *Annual Report of the TUC 1937*: 196.

58 Hollins, T J, op cit: 202-205. Reeves' acquaintance with the wider

- workers' film movement goes back as far as 1929 when he made available the Tooting Hall of RACS for the first programme of the London Workers' Film Society, as a replacement for the original venue which had been withdrawn for political reasons.
- 59 'Resignation of Education Secretary', op cit: 7.
 - 60 'Trouble in the Camp Over Questions Concerning Films', *The Co-operative News* (23 April 1938): 9. The comment was made by Mr Tomlinson, manager of the CWS Publicity Dept
 - 61 'Co-operative Film Services', *The Co-operative News* (15 April 1939): 12.
 - 62 *Co-operative Union, Executive Committee Minutes* (21 January 1939): 2; *Co-operative Union, Educational Executive Minutes* (18 February 1939): 1-2; *Co-operative Union, National Council Minutes* (7 April 1939): 3; *Co-operative Union, Educational Executive Minutes* (20 May 1939): 3; *Co-operative Union, Educational Executive Minutes* (17 June 1939): 3; 'Progress Reported in Co-operative Film Service', *The Co-operative News* (15 April 1939): 6.
 - 63 *Co-operative Union, Executive Committee Minutes* (15 September 1939): 11.
 - 64 'Film Plans Frozen', *Co-operative Review* (November 1939): 391; *Co-operative Union, National Executive Council Minutes* (21 October 1939): 4.
 - 65 *Co-operative Union, Educational Executive Minutes* (18 November 1939): 7.
 - 66 'Film Plans Frozen', op cit; 'Propaganda by Films', *The Labour Organiser* (November 1938): 214
 - 67 'Progress Reported ...', op cit. The WFA immediately undertook a survey to determine the extent of possession of 16mm projectors by democratic organisations. For the views of a District Labour Party activist on the scheme, see, French, J W, 'Films', *The Labour Organiser* (May 1939): 86-87.
 - 68 'Resignation of Education Secretary', op cit: 7.
 - 69 Reeves, J, 'The Co-operative Movement and the Film' in *Co-operators' Yearbook* (Leicester: CPF, 1938): 68. He considered such films as "contributing to social well-being". During the war, Reeves contributed to the documentary film movement's journal, *Documentary Newsletter*.
 - 70 On the London Co-operative Societies Joint Education Committee, see, Attfield, J, *With Light of Knowledge. A Hundred Years of Education in the Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society, 1877-1977* (London & West Nyack: RAGS/Journeyman Press 1981): 47-49, 64-66, 115-117. Reeves had been a member of the Joint Committee since its inception in 1926.
 - 71 'London's Big Four. Proposal to Produce Films', *The Co-operative News* (27 November 1937): 2. The total cost of £5,000 would be met by the societies proportionally according to trade. Reeves had earlier made enquiries regarding a professional production giving an account of the history of the co-operative movement, but due to its high cost of £20,000, the project never commenced, 'The Film and Ideals', *The Co-operative News* (17 December 1938): 15.
 - 72 '£1,000 a Year on Films', *Comradeship and Wheatsheaf* (January 1938): xii.

- 73 'Big New Film Plan Launched', *The Co-operative News* (18 June 1938): 3.
- 74 *Co-operative Educator* (October 1938): 121
- 75 Reeves, J, 'Advance Democracy. A Film which illustrates the Struggle of the Workers to Obtain Economic Redress', *The Wheatsheaf* (October 1938): viii. The article also appears in *Comradeship and Wheatsheaf* (October 1938): vi. Reeves says here, "The documentary film is the product of the desire of those who wanted to use the visual medium for educational and propaganda purposes ... Artistically the documentary film is as effective as the Hollywood glamour film. The Realist Film Unit was a more politically progressive outfit than most, and Reeves was impressed by several of their films such as *Enough to Eat* (1936), *Plan for Living* (1938) and *The Londoners* (1939). See, 'Notes by the Education Secretary', *Comradeship and Wheatsheaf* (June 1939): 1.
- 76 Reeves, J, *A Century of Rochdale Co-operation* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1944): 98.
- 77 A brief review of the film appears in 'Films of Social Progress', *The Times* (26 September 1939): 6.
- 78 Reeves, J, 'The Co-operative Movement and Film', op cit.
- 79 Reeves, J, *A Century of Rochdale Co-operation*, op cit: 98. A fairly sympathetic review of *Advance Democracy* appears in *World Film News* (October 1938): 268, the journal of the documentary film movement.
- 80 "Reinforcements now Appearing". Film Propaganda for the Democratic Movements', *The Labour Organiser* (December 1938): 238. The actual advisory role the WFA assumed for film production is presented in the *Workers' Film Association Catalogue* (1939): 4.
- 81 Reeves, J, 'Films and Propaganda', *Co-operative Youth* (February 1939): 74. The article also appears in 'You can't ignore the taste for pictures. A Labour and Co-operative Scheme Explained', *The Labour Organiser* (February 1939): 34.
- 82 'TUC Report on Labour's Film Unit', *The Daily Film Renter* (21 August 1939): 5.
- 83 *Comradeship and Wheatsheaf* (June 1939): 1; *Comradeship and Wheatsheaf* (September 1939): xiii. For an account of an aspect of the film, see, 'Students as Film Extras', *The Observer* (August 1939), clipping in the CWS Library, Manchester. A brief review of the film appeared in *The Times*, op cit. The film was reputed to cost £1,200.
- 84 Hogenkamp, 8, op cit: 206-209; *WFA Catalogue* (1940). An advert for the Woodcraft Folk film appeared in *The Co-operative News* (23 March 1940): 5. A review of *The Builders* appeared in *Documentary News Letter* (June 1940): 8. Joe Reeves was an Alderman for the Camberwell Borough Council.
- 85 "Reinforcements now Appearing", op cit. The only issue was silent. In all, a total of nine films were completed in the initial period of trading, *Catalogue of the WFA* (1945): 1.
- 86 *WFA, Third Annual Report and Balance Sheet* (1943): 1.
- 87 *Ibid*. Some of the co-operative society films appear to have been little more than trailers for use in local cinemas. *Two Good Fairies* is reviewed in *Documentary News Letter* (January/February 1944): 5.

- 88 Further details on the WFA in wartime are contained in Burton, A, 'Projecting the New Jerusalem: The Workers' Film Association 1938-1946', in Kirkham, P, and Thoms, D, *War Culture: World War Two and Social Change* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1995).
- 89 For a brief period between Spring 1940 and Summer 1941, Reeves took an appointment at the MOI Films Division, but his views on labour's part in the war effort were not sympathetically received and he left. See, 'Ministry Appointment For Film Chief', *Co-operative Review* (December 1939): 419; 'Tributes To Film Pioneer', *The Co-operative News* (30 March 1940): 12; 'About the Silver Screen', *The Co-operative News* (28 June 1941): 8. It was noted that in his absence Reeves would maintain an oversight of the WFA, see, *TUC Annual Report 1940*: 214.