



THE CAMERA IS OURS

From Birth-Day to Something Nice to Eat: Restoration Programme 2

Introduced by BFI curator Ros Cranston.

Please note: Birth-Day includes dialogue that reflects harmful racist views.

There's some splendid 'mansplaining' in *Birth-Day*, a public information film by Brigid 'Budge' Cooper, about the mysteries of maternity. Kay Mander's powerful and radical *Homes for the People* uses the bold yet simple technique of allowing working-class women to describe their living conditions: 'I call it a muck-up'. In *Children of the Ruins* Jill Craigie highlights the ill effects of the chaotic conditions in the aftermath of WWII. Margaret Thomson's *The Troubled Mind* is a potent, dramatised documentary featuring Adrienne Corri, made primarily to recruit women for training as nurses in psychiatric hospitals. We round off with the only colour film in the restoration project, *Something Nice to Eat* directed by Sarah Erulkar ('cooking is a kind of loving'), featuring Jean Shrimpton.

Brigid 'Budge' Cooper

Principled, blunt-speaking and pragmatic, Brigid 'Budge' Cooper was temperamentally well qualified to negotiate the pitfalls, compromises and institutional barriers that the Brit film biz was never short of. Initially a 'continuity girl' (such was the term of the time), she assisted several famed Crown Film Unit productions, including *London Can Take It!* (1940) and *Target for Tonight* (1941). Moving to Paul Rotha Productions, followed by breakaway company DATA, Cooper soon made the director's chair. Her versatility encompassed several facets of the MOI, from the informative if unappetising *Rat Destruction* (1942) to the whimsically diverting *The Magician* (1942), which demonstrates the lo-fi experimentation possible when making the MOI's short 'fillers'.

Children of the City (1944) and *Birth-Day* (1945), by contrast, are substantial applications of the Documentary Movement's social-democratic commitment to film as an aid in building an improved post-war society. In 1945, Cooper married fellow filmmaker Donald Alexander, later head of film for the National Coal Board, whose *Mining Review* series Cooper co-produced for several years. Before that, as director of its first aid training films, she battled the board's ban on women working (in her case filming) underground. Budge took them to court – and won.

Patrick Russell, bfi.org.uk

Homes for the People

Homes for the People was the first commission for Kay Mander and her husband's new production company, Basic Films. Made for the 1945 Labour Party election campaign, the film was sponsored by the leftwing newspaper the *Daily Herald*. Aware of the importance of the women's vote after their

contribution to the war effort, the Labour Party wanted to present its postwar reconstruction policies from a women's perspective. The film shows how ordinary women lived during the 1940s; the interviewees are not glamourised, nor are their responses scripted. Mander sat beneath the camera and prompted them with questions, allowing the women to talk as they go about their domestic work rather than speaking directly to camera. This adds a feeling of intimacy to the film, as when one woman berates the designer of her kitchen, adding that he must have been a man to make such a mess of things.

Like Ruby Grierson, whose talent for putting women at ease was honed on the groundbreaking *Housing Problems* (1935), Mander built an empathy with her subjects that resulted in an extraordinarily honest portrayal of 'ordinary' woman. However, Mander's film is the more progressive and radical treatment of the problems of housing. Instead of focusing on city slums, Mander covers a broader spectrum, declaring that the living conditions of the majority of the population, both rural and urban, are sub-standard and that women should not accept this. Mander clearly advocates a forthright socialist solution to the postwar housing situation, in the form of government-subsidised housing, social consultation and nationalisation of the land. But *Homes for the People* is more than just a remarkable social document; it also illustrates an advance in the documentary technique, giving its subjects a more openly direct voice than had previously been seen in British non-fiction film.

Sarah Easen, BFI Screenonline, screenonline.org.uk

Children of the Ruins

Made for theatrical distribution, *Children of the Ruins* mostly comprises harrowing footage showing the deplorable conditions of starving and abandoned children in war-devastated areas. Such a directly emotional approach likens the film in style to charity appeal films, though in this case the succession of disturbing images conveys the urgency of the social problems facing post-WWII governments.

Possibly aware that post-war audiences might be somewhat immune to images of suffering and also sceptical of political initiatives to resolve problems on a global scale, director Jill Craigie employs a dual-commentary technique whereby a secondary female voice-over questions the main male commentator by interjecting comments like 'Not another committee! And what's it all going to cost?' By assuming the audience's point-of-view in this manner, she affords the main narrator the opportunity to quickly quell any scepticism and convince us that UNESCO is a sustainable solution – that something truly can be done if governments of the world unite 'to not just build classrooms in devastated areas but build peace in the minds of men'.

Katy McGahan, BFI Screenonline, screenonline.org.uk

Margaret Thomson

Inspired by an episode of Mary Field's *Secrets of Nature* series, Thomson contacted the production company, Gaumont-British Instructional, for work. She took a job in their film library and, due to her background in zoology, was later asked to make a series of six educational films about British ecosystems. She later did a variety of jobs in and out of the film industry, including editing at the Shell and Strand Film Units, making travelogues with Marion Grierson for the Trade and Industrial Development Association and teaching English in

Spain. In 1940, she began retraining as an electrician, but returned to filmmaking when offered a regular job at the documentary unit Realist in 1941. Thomson stayed with the Realist Film Unit until 1947. During the war she gained a reputation as an exceptional and prolific instructional filmmaker, making horticultural, agricultural and medical films for wartime audiences characterised by their visual simplicity and ability to relay complex information to the audience in a clear, unpatronising way. In 1948 she returned to New Zealand, where she directed several newsreels for the New Zealand Film Unit before coming back to Britain to work for the Crown Film Unit in 1950. Her only feature film, *Child's Play* (1954), was made for the government-backed feature unit Group 3, but Thomson did not enjoy the experience. After several years as a children's acting coach at Pinewood Studios, she returned to non-fiction filmmaking.

Sarah Easen, BFI Screenonline, screenonline.org.uk

Sarah Erulkar

As a freelancer, Sarah Erulkar navigated her way through most of the major players in postwar documentary. Snapped up by World Wide Pictures on leaving Shell to direct *District Nurse* (1952), charting a day in the life of two nurses in the rural Southeast of England, she then joined Donald Alexander and his colleagues at the National Coal Board Film Unit, where she honed her cutting skills. After leaving the NCB she worked almost exclusively as a director until she retired in the early 1980s, running the gauntlet of commissioning bodies, including the British Productivity Council, the Central Office of Information, the Gas Council and the General Post Office. Adaptability was key, and her work over the years extended across the spectrum of non-fiction genres, from classic documentary, travelogue and 'trigger' films to children's features, medical training films and public information films, as well as a swathe of promotional films for various commercial bodies.

Around a fifth of her films (more in the later phase of her career), engage with what might be termed 'women's themes' – notable examples including *Birthright* (1958) and *Something Nice to Eat* (1967), on birth control and cooking respectively – but between these she tackled any number of different assignments, including some highly technical or industrial subjects, as in *Spat System* (1960), promoting its sponsor's GKN Screws and Fasteners products. Erulkar's instinctive artistry, combined with a passion for life and people, brought universal appeal to specialist subject matter, and meant that she was always in demand. Her work brought her a plethora of awards, including two BAFTAs, for *Picture to Post* (1969) and the prescient environmentally-themed *The Air My Enemy* (1971).

Katy McGahan, BFI Screenonline, screenonline.org.uk

BIRTH-DAY

Director: Budge Cooper
Assistant: Mary Beales
Production Company: Data Film Productions
Sponsors: Ministry of Information, Department of Health for Scotland
Producer: Donald Alexander
Script: Budge Cooper
Photography: Wolfgang Suschitzky
Diagrams: Eric Fraser
Animator: Reginald Jeffries
Music: Christian Darnton
Sound Recording: Harry Reynolds
With:
Tom Macguire (*Gunner McBain*)
Mollie Weir (*Mrs McBain*)
James Smith Campbell (*medical officer*)
UK 1945, 22 mins

HOMES FOR THE PEOPLE

Directed by: Kay Mander
Production Company: Basic Films
Sponsor: Daily Herald
Sponsor: The Labour Party
Producer: Edgar Anstey
Photographed by: Patrick Gay
Music by: Francis Chagrin
Recorded by: George Burgess, Leo Wilkins
Sound System: RCA Sound System
UK 1945, 23 mins

CHILDREN OF THE RUINS

Director: Jill Craigie
Production Company: Crown Film Unit
Sponsors: Central Office of Information, Foreign Office
UK 1948, 11 mins

THE TROUBLED MIND

Director: Margaret Thomson
Production Company: Anglo-Scottish
Sponsor: North West Metropolitan
Regional Hospital Board
With:
Adrienne Corri
UK 1954, 20 mins

SOMETHING NICE TO EAT

Director: Sarah Erulkar
Production Company: Anthony Gilkison Associates
Sponsor: Gas Council
Photography: Wolfgang Suschitzky
Editor: Terence Twigg
Music: Johnny Hawksworth
With:
David De Keyser
Jean Shrimpton
John Addey
UK 1967, 21 mins

Restored by the BFI National Archive and The Film Foundation.
Restoration funding provided by the Hobson/Lucas Family Foundation.



THE CAMERA IS OURS:

BRITAIN'S WOMEN DOCUMENTARY MAKERS

From Beside the Seaside to the English Inn: Restoration

Programme 1 + intro by BFI curator Ros Cranston

Thu 3 Mar 18:15

For Sama + intro by director Waad Al-Kateab + Children of the Ruins

Thu 3 Mar 20:30

The Camera Is Ours: Study Day + Independent Miss Craigie

+ Q&A with director Lizzie Thynne and producer Hollie Price

Sat 5 Mar 12:00-17:00

From the Sea to the Land Beyond

Sat 5 Mar 18:15

Seniors Free Archive Matinee: White Riot + discussion

Mon 7 Mar 14:00

Cow

Tue 8 Mar 20:40

The Hermit of Treig + Q&A with director Lizzie MacKenzie

Fri 11 Mar 18:10

From Birth-Day to Something Nice to Eat: Restoration

Programme 2 + intro by BFI curator Ros Cranston

Mon 14 Mar 18:15

Hostile + director Sonita Gale in conversation with Nitin Sawhney

Tue 15 Mar 18:00

MEZZANINE GALLERY

Jill Craigie: Film Pioneer

In the 1940s Jill Craigie tackled subjects new to cinema in a unique blend of documentary, drama and, frequently, humour. One of the most photographed directors of her time, she was dubbed 'Britain's first woman filmmaker' by the press, while she herself championed community voices and performers. This exhibition draws on a variety of sources, including works by leading photographers Lee Miller and Fred Daniels, to explore what made Craigie and her working methods unique.

From Thu 3 Mar

Guest curator: Lizzie Thynne

Supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and The University of Sussex

The Camera Is Ours: Britain's Women Documentary Makers

(two-disc DVD) is released in March

A collection of shorts and features will soon be available on BFI Player

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Programme notes and credits compiled by the BFI Documentation Unit

Notes may be edited or abridged. Questions/comments? Email prognotes@bfi.org.uk

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