

“GO AWAY BACK TO BERWICK AND DIE!”

LEO ENTICKNAP

The Blackhill Campaign,

the Coal Industry,

and the British New Wave

Could anyone have imagined a situation, muses the narrator, in which miners were at war with their union and a Tory MP stood up for their rights?

PHILIP OAKES, *SUNDAY TELEGRAPH*, JANUARY 19, 1964

On February 20, 1959, a small coal mine in Northumberland, close to the border between England and Scotland, was closed with the loss of approximately 160 jobs.¹ Blackhill Colliery, near the village of Scremerston, four miles south of Berwick-upon-Tweed, was one of thirty-six pits that the United Kingdom's nationalized coal extraction agency, the National Coal Board (NCB), announced would cease production on December 3, 1958. In the face of intense opposition from the NCB and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), the Blackhill miners and their supporters in the area organized an intense and sustained campaign to prevent the mine's closure. When that failed, they attempted—again, in the teeth of substantial opposition from both management and unions—to reopen a nearby drift mine that had been abandoned in 1908 and subsequently operated it successfully until the late 1960s.²

The Blackhill campaign (both the event and the film it inspired) is significant in the history of both Britain's coal industry and its national cinema. It could be argued that Blackhill's closure, along with the other thirty-five mines that closed in 1959, signaled the start of the coal industry's rapid decline as the United Kingdom's principal energy source. The coal industry had held this position since coal had fueled the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth century, yet its decline into insignificance took a mere thirty years. The emergence of nuclear power in the 1950s, the discovery of North Sea oil in the 1970s, and the problematic industrial relations that had affected the coal industry throughout the twentieth century, and that culminated in the now infamous miners' strike of 1984–85, brought about massive change in the politics, culture, and economics of energy production in the United Kingdom.

The campaign was also the subject of a forty-eight-minute documentary film, *The Blackhill Campaign* (prod. 1959–63, rel. 1964), that was written, produced, directed, and edited by an academic and former NCB researcher, Jack Parsons (1920–2006).³ At the time of the closure announcement, Parsons was living in North London and had become acquainted with a number of left-wing intellectuals and filmmakers based in and around Hampstead, notably the producer and director Karel Reisz (1926–2002).⁴ As Parsons became involved with the Blackhill campaign, Reisz was a rising star of the Free Cinema documentary group, an alliance of filmmakers often characterized as a movement that Reisz founded with Lindsay Anderson, Tony Richardson, and Lorenza Mazzetti. Free Cinema is often cast as the cultural heir to John Grierson's documentary movement, specifically the more personal and impressionistic elements of it, as represented by Humphrey Jennings, rather than the discursive, public information approach of Paul Rotha. It involved, in Christophe Dupin's words, "films [that] were 'free' in the sense that they were made outside the framework of the film industry, and that their

statements were entirely personal.”⁵ Free Cinema was characterized by authentic locations, fast and grainy handheld 16mm shooting, controversial political statements, and a sense of protest against established cultural and ideological norms.

Free Cinema was closely associated with the British Film Institute (BFI), a publicly funded arts organization established in 1933 to “raise the standard of public appreciation of films, by criticism and advice addressed to the general public.”⁶ Its proponents wrote extensively in the BFI’s house journal, *Sight and Sound*; many of their films were financed by the BFI’s Experimental Production Fund (which would later provide completion money for *The Blackhill Campaign*); and their reputation was established through a series of screenings at the BFI-operated National Film Theatre (NFT), on London’s South Bank, between 1956 and 1959. Five years later, the NFT would also screen Parsons’s film. In the year Parsons met Reisz and began work on *The Blackhill Campaign*, the latter was at the peak of his career, having just completed the acclaimed documentary *We Are the Lambeth Boys* (1959) and started work on his first feature film, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960). Interviewed in June 2004, Parsons cited Reisz as a significant influence on the form and style of his own film and recalled that he had recommended *The Blackhill Campaign* for BFI funding.

Despite having strong connections to the Free Cinema movement, which are stylistically evident in a viewing of the completed film, *The Blackhill Campaign* is distinguished from this strand in British film culture by one remarkable fact: its director was an academic, an entirely self-taught, amateur filmmaker who had no previous experience before *The Blackhill Campaign* and made no other films afterward. His motivation in making the film was to produce a political statement, the medium simply being a means to that end. In this sense, its origins can be traced to the socialist film movements of the 1930s, represented by groups such as the Socialist Film Council and the Workers’ Film and Photo League, which were driven by a group of filmmakers who regarded themselves as activists first and filmmakers second. Rudolph Messel, who founded the former group, asserted in 1933 that “something must be done to counter the continual stream of anti-Socialist propaganda which goes into cinemas every week.”⁷

By the end of the war, the oppositional filmmakers of the 1930s had largely dissipated, and the documentary movement had become assimilated into the establishment, initially through government filmmaking agencies represented chiefly by the Central Office of Information, and later in sponsored films and television. When Parsons came to make *The Blackhill Campaign* at the end of the 1950s, therefore, he was very much a lone individual rather than a committed participant in any movement or organization: his links with Reisz and the BFI were short term and for the purposes of that project only.

Largely for this reason, the man and his film disappeared from sight shortly after the initial screenings in autumn 1963 and spring 1964. Despite the BFI's financial involvement, the film did not even make it into the organization's National Film and Television Archive, with the result that it was unavailable for viewing for nearly forty years, until it was rediscovered by the Northern Region Film and Television Archive (NRFTA) in 2004, following a two-year search.

This article will argue that *The Blackhill Campaign* is significant for three distinct reasons. First, it articulates a perspective on the culture and industrial relations of the United Kingdom's coal industry at a major turning point in its history, one which, for largely political reasons, cannot be found either in the NCB's own film output (of which more later) or in other mainstream British filmmaking from this period. Second, the film can be seen as an important expression of the transition in British nonfiction film culture: from the hierarchical, organized, politically polarized (and therefore politically regulated) landscape of the 1930s and 1940s, represented on one side by the Documentary Movement—the producer of “official publicity as a specialist task”⁸—and on the other by the output of oppositional, socialist, and communist organizations; to the smaller-scale, more independent, political nonfiction filmmakers of the 1950s and 1960s, freed from the political and logistical constraints of their predecessors by a new generation of film technology (i.e., 16mm and magnetic audio recording), the changing economics of the mainstream film industry, and the decline of political censorship. Third, the film's amateur provenance both emphasizes the importance of this transition and raises issues around the role of moving image archives and cultural organizations. Probably because Parsons never established any significant reputation as a filmmaker per se, *The Blackhill Campaign* was not systematically preserved and consequently is not mentioned in any of the standard histories or critical discussions of this period, despite the (admittedly very limited) involvement and endorsement of a major film director (Reisz) at the peak of his career. In fact, if the curator of a regional film archive had not found out about *The Blackhill Campaign* quite by accident, it is very likely that the film would eventually have been irrevocably lost, especially given the filmmaker's death a little over two years after *The Blackhill Campaign* was formally accessioned by an archive for the first time.

BLACKHILL, THE ECONOMY, AND INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS

Coal extraction near the village of Scremerston, Northumberland, dates back to the late eighteenth century in one form or another, as does the mineral's use as Britain's

principal energy source. In the second half of the twentieth century, coal was almost totally eclipsed by oil, natural gas, and nuclear energy production. The United Kingdom's coal production declined from 205.9 million tons in 1949⁹ to 147 million in 1970 and 26 million in 2004.¹⁰ It is therefore important to remember that between the late eighteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, it was effectively the sole industrial and domestic fuel. Coal was used to power rail and sea transport directly; it was burned to power steam turbine electricity generators; and before the discovery and exploitation of natural gas deposits and Middle Eastern oil, it was used to produce coal gas by pyrolysis and petrochemicals using the Fischer-Tropsch process.

The coal industry was, therefore, of enormous economic and strategic importance. It was also plagued by the labor exploitation, social divisions, and poor standards of living experienced by workers in the Victorian period, and then was badly affected by the industrial disputes that followed the emergence of the trade union movement in the latter part of the nineteenth century. The Miners' Federation of Great Britain, established in 1888, organized national strikes in 1912 and 1921 and took part in the General Strike of 1926 before being reconstituted as the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) in 1945. Largely because of the economic importance of coal, the NUM quickly established itself as a powerful political force at the national level, organized successful strikes over pay in 1972 and 1974, and remained an important player in British industrial relations until its "irreversible demolition" by Margaret Thatcher following the 1984–85 strike and the subsequent reprivatization of the industry, which accelerated its decline.¹¹ The coal industry had originally been nationalized in 1947, alongside steel, the railways, and electricity generation. The Labour government's manifesto at the 1945 general election, *Let Us Face the Future*, justified the nationalization of heavy industry on the grounds of creating the coordinated investment needed to reconstruct war-damaged infrastructure and undertaking to guarantee pay and conditions for its workers (who were represented by unions that had institutional links to the Labour Party). Defenders of the 1945–51 nationalization program argue that it increased standards of living and enabled the systematic reconstruction of a war-torn economy, whereas its detractors, represented chiefly by the right-wing historian Correlli Barnett, contend that it crippled economic growth until the emergence of Thatcherism in the 1980s—that it was "not so much a revolution, but the prolonging of the *ancien régime* by bureaucratic means."¹²

Coal production in the Berwick area always had an unusually local slant. Systematic records of mining activity exist from the 1820s, with pits at Scremerston, Felkington, Billy Law, Shoreswood, Berwick Hill, and Etal being operated throughout most of the nineteenth century under local ownership.¹³ Most of the output of these pits was

domestic-grade coal, sold for local consumption. By the late 1920s, the main pit's owner, the Scremerston Coal Co. Ltd., appears to have been in financial difficulty. In August 1930, the mine was nearly closed—and, according to a *Times* report, the village of Scremerston nearly demolished—before a new, economically viable coal seam was discovered and production was resumed.¹⁴ In October 1935, Scremerston Colliery did actually close for a short period, before the company was subject to a two-thousand-pound buyout by miners and investors from the Berwick business community,¹⁵ and production restarted under the newly formed Scremerston Main Collieries Ltd.¹⁶ The original Scremerston pit was eventually worked out and abandoned in September 1944. Two years earlier, the Blackhill shaft, one and a half miles southeast of Scremerston, was sunk and, from Scremerston's closure until 1959, was the last operating mine in the area.

When Blackhill was nationalized along with the rest of the coal industry, its operating practices and local sales base continued largely unaffected. Evidence for this can be found through another form of film production that, a few years later, the more subjective approach epitomized by Free Cinema would largely eclipse, on a cultural level at least: the NCB's own monthly ten-minute newsreel, *Mining Review*, which was started in 1947 to promote the benefits of nationalization. Until well into the 1960s—when production transferred to the NCB's in-house production unit, established in 1953—*Mining Review* was produced by the Documentary and Allied Technicians' Alliance (DATA), an independent production company established during the war to produce training and publicity films for the Ministry of Information.¹⁷ DATA's founder, Donald Alexander, would later head the NCB Film Unit. On October 26, 1951, a DATA film unit, headed by director Basil Somner, arrived at Blackhill to shoot a three-minute item for release the following spring.¹⁸ *Under the Border*, as the piece was eventually titled, paints a predictably upbeat picture of the operation at Blackhill.¹⁹ "They've got a proud record here . . ." notes the commentator, John Slater, "they've never lost a day's production through industrial disputes at Blackhill." *Mining Review's* characterization of Blackhill made a stark contrast against the five-week strike that had paralyzed the Yorkshire coalfields less than a year after nationalization, in August 1947, characterized by Barnett as "sullen throngs of pickets keeping watch below motionless winding gear," and that established the general rule for industrial relations throughout the forty-seven years of the NCB's existence.²⁰ The 1935 buyout is also cited as an example of the pit's unique links with the community in which it was situated, as was the direct sale of Blackhill coal to local households and businesses.

But the *Mining Review* piece also reveals a subtext, one that provides the context for the intense resistance to Blackhill's closure eight years later. Though in one

sense, Blackhill's harmonious industrial relations and its role in directly supporting the local economy are celebrated, the film also makes the implicit point that its scale and working methods are anomalous and increasingly anachronistic compared to the large-scale, progressively more mechanized pits to which the NCB looked to grow and maintain coal output. "It's not a big pit—only two hundred men work here. And it's not a deep pit—the shaft only goes down three hundred feet," announces Slater, against footage of miners pushing two small coal trucks by hand and then manhandling their contents into a silo. The local nature, small scale, and high cost of the Blackhill operation are again emphasized by the last two scenes in the film, which show a coal delivery truck visiting a nearby farm and state that the mine is situated in an inaccessible rural location, thereby requiring the NCB to provide transport for the workforce. The film ends with damnation by faint praise: "They may seem isolated, these Blackhill folk, but there's a lot going on here . . . much that would impress a visitor to a pit ten times the size."

However strong its links were with the Berwick community and economy, the Blackhill ethos was increasingly at odds with both the economic and political priorities of a national, monolithic, and state-run industry. On the economic front, the need for mechanization and large-scale infrastructural investment had been recognized since the end of the war and was one of the principal reasons for nationalization. That investment would generate the most effective return if it was directed at larger pits employing a thousand miners or more. To begin with, the NCB operated on the basis that the more profitable mines would subsidize those with higher production costs.²¹ The Labour Party was deeply and closely linked to the trade union movement in general and the miners in particular. Peter Jenkins notes that underinvestment and poor working conditions during the depression years of the 1930s had left "a store of bitterness and suspicion in the heart of the miner against the treatment he had received at the hands of the colliery owners."²² Another important motivation for the nationalization program was to address that culture of mutual mistrust, one that took precedence over economic necessity during the early years of the NCB.

THE CLOSURE AND CAMPAIGN

Friday, October 26, 1951—the day the *Mining Review* film crew visited Blackhill—was also the day after the general election in which Clement Attlee's Labour government was removed from office and the Conservatives returned to power until October 1964, five years after the pit had closed and a few months after the initial screenings of *The Blackhill Campaign*. The (second) Churchill, Eden, and Macmillan governments ushered

in the era of One Nation conservatism that, though it did not reprivatize the state-run heavy industries, emphasized productivity, economic competitiveness, and constraining inflation over the demands of trade unions. As the British economy continued to recover during the decade, Macmillan famously asserted in a speech on July 20, 1957, that “most of our people have never had it so good.” However, the restraints on wages and employment growth that resulted from Macmillan’s anti-inflationary policies also precipitated an upturn in industrial disputes.²³

These disputes dogged labor relations throughout the 1960s and 1970s, particularly in the nationalized industries, and would eventually become the principal justification for the wholesale trade union law reform of the Thatcher governments. Thatcher’s trade union law reform is credited with ending the Postwar Consensus and defining the Conservative Party as an advocate of neoliberal market economics. Strikes and industrial unrest became a defining subject of the popular culture of the period, too. The BBC sitcom *The Rag Trade*, broadcast from 1961 to 1963, featured a militant shop steward whose catchphrase was “Everybody out!” The South African émigré comedian Paddy Roberts’s 1960 song “We’ve Never Had It So Good” declared, “We never have any time for work, ’cause all our time is spent striking for another rise in pay.”²⁴ These examples of mainstream popular culture illustrate the power that, thanks to virtually full employment (“an unshootable sacred cow of the Post-War Consensus”²⁵), the trade union movement still exerted over British society, despite the economic upturn of the mid-1950s.

The Blackhill campaign is distinguished from most of the other industrial disputes of the Macmillan era in that the workforce was not only in conflict with its bosses but also with its own union. The principal weapon in the unions’ armory was collective bargaining, made all the more effective by the existence of a single employer managing a workforce of, literally, millions: for example, three million tons of production was lost through strikes in 1955 alone.²⁶ Meanwhile, the industry was becoming more efficient, and the demand for coal was falling. In a debate in the House of Commons on December 3, 1958, the day on which Blackhill’s closure was announced along with that of thirty-five other pits, Sir Ian Horobin, parliamentary secretary for the Ministry of Power, announced that stockpiles amounting to a month’s domestic coal consumption had been accumulated and that estimates for 1959 were for 200 million tons of consumption and 209 million tons of production. He asserted that the pits earmarked for closure “could not be made economic,” that they were producing mainly general-purpose coal (i.e., coal only suitable for domestic consumption and not for use in power stations), and that “the Coal Board had to take out some of these pits, which were making terrible

losses."²⁷ Furthermore, most of the slump in demand had been in the general-purpose, domestic-grade coal that accounted for the bulk of Blackhill's output—in particular, the Clean Air Act of 1956 had drastically cut domestic coal consumption in the southeast of England, where households were turning to electricity for heating.²⁸

That Blackhill was nowhere near the southeast of England and that its closure would bring especially severe local consequences was of no concern either to the centralized planning infrastructure of the NCB or to the NUM. Since nationalization nearly twelve years earlier, the two bodies had negotiated a detailed and labyrinthine series of agreements covering pay and working conditions across the entire industry. What happened next at Blackhill threatened—probably inadvertently—to undermine the vested interests of both sides.

Following the closure announcement, a protest meeting took place in Scremerston's village hall on December 7, 1958. A defense committee was formed, three of whose members became key players in the subsequent campaign and in securing it national publicity: Bob Chell, Scremerston's vicar, who had lived and worked in Scremerston since his appointment to the parish in May 1950;²⁹ Colonel Jim Smail, the New Zealand-born proprietor of the local newspaper, the *Berwick Advertiser*; and Tommy Gibson, Blackhill's senior overman and a self-taught mining engineer who had supervised the colliery's construction as its predecessor at Scremerston had been worked out in the early years of the war.

On December 22, the committee is reported to have asked Lord Lambton, Berwick's Conservative MP, to push its case with the NCB, to which Lambton agreed.³⁰ In the meantime, the committee's strategy took a double-pronged approach. First, Gibson devised a plan to scale down production at the mine and concentrate activity on its most profitable seam, thereby reducing production costs by 15 percent and enabling the mine to be operated at a profit. Though the Gibson Plan would only have reemployed around half of Blackhill's original workforce, it was seen within the community as being better than nothing. Through Smail's media contacts, national publicity was secured for the campaign to implement Gibson's plan: as Parsons put it just under a year later, "the Blackhill story hit the national headlines and stayed there."³¹

The media attention proved to be a double-edged sword. Mindful of the consequences of undermining any of the myriad of NCB-NUM collective bargaining agreements under which the coal industry operated, the defense committee had ensured that the Gibson Plan did not technically contravene any of them. But the campaigners later claimed that in coverage of a public protest meeting that took place in Berwick's town hall on January 28, the press misrepresented a crucial element of the plan. During the

redevelopment process before production was to be restarted, some miners agreed to work at a much-reduced salary, which would revert to the union-agreed minimum wage once production had restarted. Parsons recalled that “a crippling disservice was done to the campaign” by headlines such as “Blackhill Miners to Work for Nothing,” implying that the reopened mine would operate in contravention of national agreements.³² As the redevelopment work was not actually coal production work, the committee believed that the letter of the agreement was being observed (regardless of its spirit) and that therefore the Gibson Plan could not provoke an industrial dispute.

The NUM appears to have taken a different view. Only a day after the story broke in the press, its Northumberland Area Executive met in Newcastle-upon-Tyne (sixty miles away) and promptly issued a statement condemning the campaign, describing the Gibson Plan as “completely opposed to county and national trade union policy.”³³ Blackhill’s NUM shop steward, Gavin Drummond, described the meeting in somewhat more emotive terms: “The executive refused even to look at a copy. They condemned it without reading or hearing it. Their attitude is ‘go away back to Berwick and die.’ . . . Many of us are shocked by the union’s agreement with the NCB policy that the weak must perish.”³⁴ Given the absence of any statement or explanation from the NUM, the question arises whether their position really was the result of media misrepresentation of detail in the Gibson Plan or if the decision that Blackhill had to close had been made at a much higher level.

The following Monday, Lord Lambton—Berwick’s aristocratic, Conservative MP and prenationalization mine owner—lobbied the NCB with the Gibson Plan, to no avail. On Friday, February 6, he raised the issue in the House of Commons, strongly criticizing the centralized planning and control of the coal industry and citing Blackhill as an example of how this prevented local initiative and ignored the needs of mining communities.³⁵ The irony of a wealthy Conservative MP from a landowning family defending the jobs and living conditions of a group of workers who were considered by many to be the most militantly left wing in the country, and against their own union to boot, was not lost on the media, or on Jack Parsons.

The principal objective of the campaign failed, and Blackhill closed on February 20. The committee next explored the possibility of reprivatizing the mine with another local buyout. The mayor of Berwick even pledged twenty-nine thousand pounds to this enterprise, if it was found to be permissible under the Coal Nationalization Act. It was found not to be, as the act stipulated that all pits employing over thirty men could only be operated under national ownership, and the Gibson Plan required a significantly

larger workforce at Blackhill. The committee then explored the possibility of reopening the nearby Allerdean drift mine, which had been abandoned in 1908 because of flooding.³⁶ The mine was eventually reopened in September 1960, after having been bought by a small drift-mining company that had survived nationalization and operated several collieries in the area.³⁷ By 1964, the year in which the film was released, Allerdean had a workforce of thirty-three and, according to Parsons, continued operation for a few years afterward.³⁸

Although the campaign did not achieve its core objective, Parsons notes that 160 members of the workforce were eventually reemployed, including 100 workers who were offered jobs at other NCB pits, describing this as a "concrete gain."³⁹ An arguably more significant achievement of the campaign was to highlight the disadvantages of monolithic, nationalized industries in which decisions affecting the livelihoods of rural and isolated communities were made hundreds of miles away and with little regard to their local impact. In conclusion, Parsons argues:

From a wider standpoint, of course, the campaign was truly political. Here was an *ad hoc* pressure group set up to pursue specific and immediate local needs, and operated outside the framework of recognised social institutions, all of which proved totally inadequate to meet the crisis. The NUM acted as if it had done a package deal with the NCB and had nothing but mealy-mouthed regret or downright abuse for these village-Hampdens of Northumberland, who refused to submit meekly to their fate. A union official in Newcastle heatedly denied that the NUM had collaborated with the NCB to "murder" Blackhill, but the miners of Scremerston would take a lot of convincing.⁴⁰

This is essentially the message of Parsons's film, one that found an ideologically sympathetic forum in the changing British film culture of the late 1950s. Gone were the public sector newsreel units of *Mining Review*, descending on Blackhill from London, shooting a three-minute piece full of benevolent tolerance of an anomalous leftover from pre-nationalization days, and then disappearing again. Parsons was familiar with the political milieu from which the British New Wave emerged but not their profession; so without the ideological baggage of previous generations of nonfiction filmmakers, he set about recording the incident through the lens of the contemporary ideology, culture, and technology.

THE FILM

Interviewed on June 4, 2004, by the author, Jack Parsons recalls that he first heard about Blackhill as the result of national media coverage following the closure announcement (i.e., probably in December 1958). He was a sociologist, living in Hampstead and involved with the New Left movement, a group of academics, intellectuals, and cultural figures who rejected many of the ideas of top-down socialism as represented by the mainstream Labour Party's role in the Postwar Consensus, most notably in campaigning for unilateral nuclear disarmament and a belief in social activism over hierarchical authority structures.⁴¹ Parsons states that he was drawn to the Blackhill campaign because "it seemed to me like a real-life *Passport to Pimlico*," and he tried to interest a number of filmmakers who were also involved in New Leftism to make a documentary on the subject.⁴² The comparison is in many ways a flawed one (of which more in conclusion), but it indicates that Parsons was thinking in terms of an "underdogs against the establishment" approach, one that had also characterized many of the Free Cinema films of the late 1950s.

Having failed to interest any professional filmmakers, Parsons turned to a former university friend, Gilbert Ingram, who, according to Parsons, "knew how to operate a camera" but who again does not appear to have had any professional training and experience (he is not cited in the BFI's Film and Television Database, other than in the record for *The Blackhill Campaign*). They spent a weekend in Berwick while the mine was still open, meeting Smail, Chell, and the other main protagonists and shooting the first footage. This was to set a pattern for the remainder of the production: in Parsons's words, "it was more of the same."⁴³ The film was essentially made in Parsons's spare time over a four-year period, with occasional assistance from friends and associates. He recalls that it was largely self-financed, with occasional small donations from sponsors and contributions in kind (including from Lord Lambton, the millionaire, prenationalization mine owner whose motivation for supporting the film was presumably antipathy to the NUM).

Parsons cannot recall the exact circumstances under which he approached the BFI and applied to its Experimental Production Fund⁴⁴ but cites its then secretary Stanley Reed, John Huntley, and Reisz as having been involved in the decision to fund the film's completion. An article in the *Berwick Advertiser* states that the amount awarded to Parsons was two hundred pounds.⁴⁵ It seems reasonable to speculate that Reisz was instrumental in the BFI's involvement, given that two of his own films—*Momma Don't Allow* (1956) and *We Are the Lambeth Boys* (1959)—had also been funded that way. Parsons recalled that Reisz was not directly involved in the shooting or editing but that

he did offer ongoing advice and support during postproduction, notably over a reconstructed scene in which a former Blackhill miner is given notice that his employment is to be terminated. The BFI also allowed Parsons to use a cutting room that it had set up on London's Dean Street as a training facility for experimental filmmakers, where he worked sporadically on editing and mixing the film for almost two years, between the autumns of 1961 and 1963.⁴⁶

The Blackhill Campaign was first screened on October 3, 1963, at the Miners' Welfare Hall in Scremerston for an invited audience. A screening at the NFT took place on January 18, 1964, in the same program as *Gala Day* (1963, dir. John Irvin), one of the last major Free Cinema documentaries, which, coincidentally, also portrayed life in a mining community. This screening generated national press coverage for Parsons's film, as did an additional performance, on February 16, 1964, at the Cambridge Film Society. Reviews of *The Blackhill Campaign* ranged from acknowledgment of a remarkable degree of technical proficiency for a first-time filmmaker ("a much more powerful and real thing to give filmgoers than the numbing second features that are pumped out to satisfy their alleged appetite"⁴⁷) to the film's dismissal as "obviously well meant but desperately clumsy."⁴⁸

The Blackhill Campaign remained in the BFI's 16mm nontheatrical rental catalog for a few years afterward (Parsons had granted fixed-term distribution rights to the BFI in return for the completion funding), after which the film remained unpreserved and unavailable and received no further public screening until October 2004. Parsons resumed his career as sociology academic, moved to South Wales in the early 1970s, and had no further involvement with films or filmmaking.

I first heard of *The Blackhill Campaign* after being approached by the Berwick Record Office in my capacity as curator of the NRFTA in summer 2001. The Berwick archivist had a pirate VHS copy—one of a number that were circulating in the area, presumably made during the 1980s or 1990s—that was of very poor quality; she wanted to know if better-quality materials were available. The NRFTA did not hold any, and despite its involvement in the film's original production, neither did the BFI's National Film and Television Archive. Jack Parsons proved to be somewhat of an enigma, as attempts to find out anything about him through the usual film industry research sources drew a complete blank. My attempts to locate the source of the VHS copies in Berwick, including a public appeal through the *Berwick Advertiser*, proved equally fruitless.

Two years later, I decided to try a second Internet search, in case new content had appeared in the meantime. During this period, Parsons, living in retirement in South Wales, had founded a small publishing company, and its Web site contained a biography

of Parsons that identified him as the film's director. He had a 16mm release print of the film in his possession, which was deposited with the NRFTA and from which was made a preservation internegative and a new projection print. He could not remember for certain what might have become of the preprint elements, though he believed that material relating to the title had been deposited with what was then the National Film Archive. As this organization (now renamed the BFI National Archive) has no record of ever having held any elements related to this title, it seems plausible to speculate that they may have become lost or incorrectly labeled during the deposit process or that the master elements simply were not deposited in the first place. The BFI's production activities and the National Film Archive, though parts of the same umbrella organization, operated effectively as separate institutions within an institution at that time. The restoration was first screened at Berwick-upon-Tweed in October 2004. The film, and an edited version of the interview with Parsons, which was videotaped as part of the NRFTA's acquisition process, were published on DVD as a joint venture between the NRFTA and Mr. Parsons's company in May 2005. He died on October 3, 2006, and at the time of writing, the company he founded continues to offer the disc for sale.

The Blackhill Campaign has clear aesthetic links to Free Cinema (as one might expect, given Reisz's involvement) and ideological links to the oppositional cinema of the 1930s. In describing the production of *Momma Don't Allow* in 1956, Reisz stated that "it was made cheaply, on 16mm film; with single-track sound transferred from tape recordings; mainly with the camera held in the hand; and with lights strung up in fixed positions from the rafters."⁴⁹ This is also a fairly accurate description of the technology Parsons used. The 16mm gauge had been marketed since 1923 as an amateur medium but, since the war, had been used increasingly in the television industry and by experimental and low-budget filmmakers. Though the documentary movement of the 1930s and 1940s had promoted its use as an exhibition format, in venues such as schools and community centers, it was not until the 1950s, when a new generation of cameras and faster, finer-grained stocks became available (which emerged largely because of demand from television⁵⁰), that it began to be seen as a viable alternative for so-called serious filmmakers. Likewise, the emergence of consumer magnetic tape audio-recording technology reduced both the cost and the technical skill requirement involved with sound—to the point at which an entirely self-taught amateur filmmaker could postproduce a feature-length documentary, almost single-handedly.

In other aesthetic respects, there are some notable differences from the Free Cinema style. The film relies almost entirely on voice-over commentary (spoken by the

former Blackhill miner George "Joiner" Richardson) and dramatic reconstruction both for its narrative cohesiveness and, to a certain extent, its political significance. As most of the shooting took place after Blackhill had closed, the major events in the campaign—hearing the announcement of closure, the formation of the defense committee, the public meeting, and Lambton's speech to the Commons—all had to be reconstructed, using the actual protagonists wherever this was possible. These scenes are among very few in the film in which live, synchronous audio is used; the remainder of the sound track consists largely of music and voice-over.

Although Parsons claims not to have been conscious of its precedents, this use of reconstruction owes more to the World War II story documentary, in which specific events or battles are reenacted by the participants, than to Free Cinema. As Andrew Higson and others have argued, films such as *Target for Tonight* (1941, dir. Harry Watt) and *Fires Were Started* (1943, dir. Humphrey Jennings) "created an ideological climate" in keeping with official propaganda objectives of promoting a sense of national unity that transcended economic and political divides.⁵¹ Other films in this cycle, notably *Theirs Is the Glory* (1946, dir. Brian Desmond Hurst), did so not primarily to influence the outcome of current events but instead to serve as a conscious focal point for future memory.

The creation of a public record was not a priority of Free Cinema. In fact, quite the opposite was true: Reisz and Anderson wanted to develop a style that emphasized the personal perspective of the filmmaker, not one that would serve as a focal point for collective memory, hence the likely motivation for Reisz's advice to Parsons that he should not prolong a scene in which Richardson walks in front of a camera to reveal a recruitment poster for coal mining, his instinct being that human interest should take precedence over making a political statement.⁵² The tradition of activist, amateur filmmaking is important here. The anonymous peer reviewer who commented on the initial draft of this essay observes that "if you compare the camera work in *Blackhill* to Walter Lassally's work on *Momma Don't Allow*, there is one significant difference: Lassally's handheld camera doesn't show, while that in *Blackhill* does, and comes across as amateurish." This does not just reflect the relatively unskilled labor and very low budget with which *Blackhill* was made: Bert Hogenkamp argues that amateurism was an "ideological position" as well as an expedient among the oppositional filmmakers of the 1930s, used in an aesthetic sense to indicate and emphasize their independence both from the capitalist imperatives of the film industry and the enforced consensus politics of the sort of official filmmaking espoused by Grierson.⁵³

CONCLUSION

Ironically, the liveliest of the Free Cinema films were made by those with the greatest claim to be outsiders.

—Bryony Dixon and Christophe Dupin, “Soup Dreams,”

Sight and Sound 11 (2001)

A colliery in a little-known corner of northeast England, a London-based arts organization run by middle-class intellectuals, the history of industrial relations during the Postwar Consensus, and a movement of filmmaking associated with personal expression and (to a limited extent) oppositional politics makes for an unusual combination, to put it mildly. They all converged in the production of *The Blackhill Campaign* and the events that inspired the film. Though the film’s rediscovery will rewrite neither twentieth-century industrial history nor that of British postwar film culture, both the campaign and the film it inspired constitute interesting footnotes in both, ones that help to illustrate the profound changes that were taking place in British society at the time.

When he first read about the campaign, Parsons recalls that he was immediately reminded of the film *Passport to Pimlico* (1949, dir. Henry Cornelius). The superficial parallels are immediately apparent. In this Ealing comedy, inhabitants of a South London suburb discover that because of a legal technicality, their town is officially part of France, and then seek to exploit that fact to escape the food rationing and other economic hardships of life in postwar London. The authorities impose a blockade, in response to which the residents organize a media campaign to draw sympathy to their plight. Eventually, a compromise is reached, and everyone lives happily ever after. Charles Barr, with some justification, has accused *Passport to Pimlico* of being a hangover of war propaganda, in which meaningful debate is scarified on the altar of a superficial ideological consensus: “The sadness is that there should be so deep a compulsion to dream of consensus, to shy away from the conflicts that come up in an ‘open’ society rather than to follow them through clear-sightedly.”⁵⁴

The ideological conflicts at work in *The Blackhill Campaign*, however, are more profound. Possibly because, as an amateur filmmaker, he did not carry the cultural baggage of three decades of British mainstream film culture (even though in his reference to *Passport to Pimlico*, he attempted to appropriate it), Parsons does not shy away from stating the terms of reference of those conflicts more explicitly in the resulting film. In *The Blackhill Campaign*, the protagonists were not middle-class suburbanites; rather, they were campaigning against those who should have been their natural allies, with

support from those who should have been their natural opponents. There was no compromise, and the eventual outcome was ambiguous. In many ways, a more appropriate comparison would be with *I'm All Right Jack* (1959, dir. John Boulting), released during the Blackhill campaign in October 1959 and yet another example of an industrial dispute represented in the popular culture of the time. A black comedy, it depicts the corrupt owner of an armaments factory who conspires with a customer to provoke the naive union shop steward into calling an all-out strike to facilitate a deal in which they stand to profit. The fraud is eventually exposed by the owner's idealistic nephew, who is condemned as mentally ill before business carries on as usual. In *The Blackhill Campaign*, Parsons sets out to show that "the stimulus [for political action] does not have to be entirely self-interest, but acknowledges that such action is not always successful."⁵⁵

However much it exposed the shortcomings of Britain's energy policy, the campaign had little long-term effect. As oil and nuclear fuel accounted for an increasing proportion of the electricity generation market at coal's expense throughout the 1960s and 1970s, industrial strife continued to grow. The NUM seized on the 1973 oil crisis to demand a 31 percent pay increase for its members. When they did not get it, they went on strike the following spring. The union's leader, Mick McGahey, infamously told then prime minister Edward Heath to his face that the strike's actual object was "to see the end of your government."⁵⁶ In his infamous calling of McGahey's bluff, Heath unwittingly acknowledged the extent of the union's power by calling a general election with the slogan "Who governs Britain?" in response to which he received an almighty spanking from the electorate and was unceremoniously booted out of Downing Street.⁵⁷ The Wilson and Callaghan governments' reluctant and halfhearted attempts to restrain inflation (undertaken purely on the orders of the International Monetary Fund, such was the state of Britain's economy after three decades of the Postwar Consensus) inevitably poured fuel on the fire of industrial unrest, culminating in the notorious Winter of Discontent of 1978–79. In that context, it is hardly surprising that when Margaret Thatcher was elected the following spring, she was determined that one special interest group should never again be able to hold the country to ransom as McGahey's had done. To achieve this, she initiated a long-term shift in energy policy from coal to oil, gas, and nuclear power and was finally able to face down the miners successfully in the 1984–85 strike that marked the end of coal extraction as a significant industry in the United Kingdom.

In some ways, it could be argued that the Blackhill campaign resulted in definite achievements: the majority of the Blackhill miners were reemployed, and the campaign shined a spotlight on what many regarded as economically inefficient and morally unjust industrial relations practices. To a certain extent, Parsons's film cemented its legacy—

although the *Sunday Telegraph* reviewer's comment that "historians in a decade or so will be grateful to Mr. Parsons" takes on a somewhat ironic meaning when one considers the fate of *The Blackhill Campaign*, a film that was almost lost to history altogether. The film had dropped out of distribution and become an orphan film by the late 1960s, was not preserved by the BFI National Archive, and was rediscovered in 2004 by luck (this is especially fortunate given that the filmmaker, and owner of the last known surviving print, died only two years later).

The real significance of the film is threefold. First, it is significant in its connections both to the oppositional film movements of the 1930s and to the emerging film cultures of Free Cinema and the British New Wave (and specifically Karel Reisz), and because a new generation of filmmaking practice and technology allowed an amateur filmmaker with no previous experience to make a documentary on this scale, almost single-handedly. Second, the method of its production enabled a political perspective on the event it dramatized to be recorded that, for institutional and economic reasons, is not directly reflected in any other British mainstream cinema or popular culture piece from the period. And finally, *The Blackhill Campaign* represents an object lesson in how films come to be orphaned. It dropped off the cultural radar almost immediately after the initial screenings in spring 1964, primarily because Parsons returned to his former career and had nothing further to do with films or filmmaking. A related reason is that the late 1950s and 1960s are not generally regarded as an important moment for overt political activism in British cinema. Writing in 1980, Paul Marris refers to a "rebirth of agit-prop filmmaking" in the previous decade, presumably referring to the emergence of a new generation of 1970s oppositional film movements as represented by, for example, Amber Films, Cinema Action, and the Berwick Street Collective.⁵⁸ *The Blackhill Campaign* was a propaganda film from a tradition with its roots in the 1930s and that resurfaced in the 1970s, but the film was made at a time when such cinema was out of fashion and received comparatively little attention. It was the emergence of the regional film archive movement several decades later that enabled the film's rediscovery and reevaluation.

NOTES

This article is adapted from a presentation given by the author at the Northeast Historic Film annual symposium in Bucksport, Maine, in July 2006.

The Blackhill Campaign and the video interview of Jack Parsons recorded on June 4, 2004, are preserved by the Northern Region Film and Television Archive (<http://www.nrfta.org.uk/>), University of Teesside, Middlesbrough TS1 3BA, tel. +44 (0)1642 384022, fax +44 (0)1642 384099, and are available for research viewing there. They are available for purchase on DVD (PAL, region 0) from Population Policy Press (<http://www.popolpress.com/>), Llantrisant, Pontyclun CF72 8LQ, tel. and fax +44 (0)1443 222255.

Jack Parsons's notes, documentation, and correspondence relating to the campaign itself and the film's production are deposited with the Berwick-upon-Tweed Record Office, Wallace Green, Berwick-upon-Tweed, Northumberland TD15 1ED, tel. +44 (0)1289 301865, and are available to researchers there.

1. The Durham Mining Museum (<http://www.dmm.org.uk/ncb/b026.htm>) gives the total workforce at Blackhill as 202 in its final year of operation; "40 or 50 men" were kept on after production ceased for decommissioning work. Jack Parsons, "The Blackhill Campaign," *New Statesman*, September 5, 1959, 269.
2. *Mines Inspector's Annual Report for 1908* (Cd 4672), reproduced by the Durham Mining Museum at <http://www.dmm.org.uk/colliery/a008.htm>. A *drift mine* is one in which a gradually inclining shaft containing a road or railway line is driven from the surface of the ground to the face of the mineral being extracted, as distinct from a *deep mine*, or *pit*, in which miners descend and the extracted mineral is removed through a vertical shaft, usually by means of an elevator.
3. A summary autobiography can be found on Parsons's Web site at <http://www.popolpress.com/jackparsons.htm>.
4. In a videotaped interview with the author conducted on June 4, 2004, Parsons recalled that Reisz lived "about five minutes away" from his home in North London (13'09"). All references to this video are in minutes and seconds from the start in the edited version released on the DVD.
5. "Free Cinema," BFI Screenonline, <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/444789/index.html>.
6. Commission on Educational and Cultural Films, *The Film in National Life* (London: Commission on Educational and Cultural Films, 1932), 1.
7. *New Clarion*, March 1933; quoted in Bert Hogenkamp, *Deadly Parallels: Film and the Left in Britain, 1929–39* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1986), 94.
8. Paul Swann, "John Grierson and the GPO Film Unit, 1933–1939," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television* 3, no. 1 (1983): 21.
9. National Archives, London, CAB 134/645, PC (50) 2, Progress Report on the Long-term Programme of the UK, March 11, 1950, 4.

10. Department of Trade and Industry figures published on July 28, 2005, <http://reporting.dti.gov.uk/cgi-bin/rr.cgi/http://www.dti.gov.uk/files/file17455.xls>.
11. Michael Parker, *Thatcherism and the Fall of Coal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press/Oxford Institute for Energy Studies, 2000), 222.
12. Correlli Barnett, *The Lost Victory: British Dreams, British Realities, 1945–50* (London: Pan, 1995), 226.
13. Durham Mining Museum records, <http://www.dmm.org.uk/colliery/s049.htm>.
14. *The Times*, August 26, 1930, 9.
15. *The Times*, October 18, 1935, 7. The NCB's in-house newsreel, *Mining Review* 5, no. 5 (1952), later gave the figure as three thousand pounds.
16. Durham Mining Museum records, <http://www.dmm.org.uk/company/s024.htm>.
17. For a comprehensive history of DATA, see A. P. Hogenkamp, "The British Documentary Movement and the 1945–51 Labour Governments," PhD thesis, Westminster College/CNA, 1981.
18. Filmographic information from the BFI's Film and TV Database, <http://ftvdb.bfi.org.uk/sift/title/69043/>.
19. *Mining Review* 5, no. 5 (1952). Source: 16mm print held by the Northern Region Film and Television Archive.
20. Correlli Barnett, *The Verdict of Peace: Britain between Her Yesterday and Her Future* (London: Macmillan, 2001), 236.
21. Barnett, *Lost Victory*, 218–19.
22. Peter Jenkins, "Bevan's Fight with the BMA," in *Age of Austerity, 1945–51*, ed. Michael Sissons and Philip French (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 236.
23. Barnett, *Verdict of Peace*, 420–41.
24. From the album *Paddy Roberts Tries Again*, Decca Records, no. LK4358 (1960).
25. Barnett, *Verdict of Peace*, 420.
26. William Ashworth and Mark Pegg, *The History of the British Coal Industry*, vol. 5, 1946–1982 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 672.
27. Reported in *The Times*, December 4, 1958, 4–5.
28. *Ibid.* The impact of the Clean Air Act on domestic coal consumption is satirized in the NCB's sponsored information film *Arthur Clears the Air* (1961, dir. Gerard Bryant).
29. *The Times*, May 29, 1950, 8.
30. *The Times*, December 22, 1958, 4.
31. Parsons, "Blackhill Campaign," 269.
32. *Ibid.*, 270.
33. *The Times*, January 31, 1959, 10.
34. *The Times*, February 2, 1959, 5.
35. *The Times*, February 7, 1959, 10.
36. Official records (*Mines Inspector's Annual Report for 1908*) give the year in which Allerdean was abandoned as 1908; Parsons, "Blackhill Campaign," 270, gives the year as 1906.
37. Durham Mining Museum data, <http://www.dmm.org.uk/company/e006.htm>.

38. Durham Mining Museum figures, <http://www.dmm.org.uk/colliery/a008.htm>.
39. Parsons, "Blackhill Campaign," 270.
40. Jack Parsons, "The End of the Blackhill Campaign," *New Statesman*, October 8, 1960, 510.
41. For a lively overview of the New Left movement in Britain written by one of its principal adherents, see Tariq Ali, *Street Fighting Years: An Autobiography of the 1960s*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 2005).
42. Parsons, 2004 video interview, 01'48".
43. *Ibid.*, 10'36".
44. Parsons states twice in the video interview, at 12'19" and at 32'17", that he cannot remember precisely what prompted him to approach the BFI.
45. *Berwick Advertiser*, March 20, 1961 (press cutting from Parsons's production files, now deposited with the Berwick Record Office).
46. Parsons, 2004 video interview, 13'50"–14'35".
47. Penelope Gilliatt, *The Observer*, January 19, 1964, 21.
48. Boleslaw Sulik, *Tribune*, February 28, 1964, 13.
49. National Film Theatre program notes, February 5, 1956, reproduced at <http://www.bfi.org.uk/features/freecinema/images/programme/lg-page4-momma.jpg>.
50. Brian Winston, *Technologies of Seeing: Photography, Cinematography, and Television* (London: BFI, 1996), 75–80.
51. Andrew Higson, *Raising the Flag: Constructing a National Cinema in Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 213.
52. Parsons, 2004 video interview, 16'02"–16'50".
53. Hogenkamp, *Deadly Parallels*, 178.
54. Charles Barr, *Ealing Studios*, 2nd ed. (London: Studio Vista, 1993), 106.
55. Parsons, "Blackhill Campaign," 270.
56. For more on the Heath government's battles with trade union extremism, see Francis Wheen, *Strange Days Indeed* (London: Fourth Estate, 2009), 48ff.
57. Parker, *Thatcherism and the Fall of Coal*, 5–7.
58. Paul Marris, "Politics and 'Independent' Film in the Decade of Defeat," in *British Cinema: Traditions of Independence*, ed. Don Macpherson (London: BFI, 1980), 92.