

## 'I don't think he did anything after that': Paul Dickson and the British Non-Fiction Film, 1947-1985

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'This is now a standard thing. Documentary is a thing now which is used; it's now automatic. When we began, it was very unusual for a film projector to be anywhere near a school. Now in the schools, it's automatic that they show films and they have language laboratories and they have tape recorders.' – Basil Wright.<sup>1</sup>

The title of the book from which this quotation is taken, *The Rise and Fall of British Documentary: The Story of the Film Movement Founded by John Grierson*, articulates one of the defining narratives of British film culture. This essentially holds that Grierson became convinced of the potential uses of cinema for education, information and stimulating public debate in the late 1920s, similar in conception to John Reith's vision of the social function of broadcasting. During the 1930s a group of like-minded individuals coalesced around him, mainly British left-wing intelligentsia and European avant-garde filmmakers, and developed a form of primarily state-sponsored non-fiction cinema that sat somewhere between reportage and experimentation, which came to be inextricably associated with Grierson's quoted-to-death soundbite 'the creative treatment of actuality'. During the Second World War, the ideas and techniques this movement founded were adopted by mainstream feature film producers and developed into the documentary-realist tradition which has since been identified as a defining hallmark of British propaganda. But despite ending the war with a large production infrastructure and firmly embedded within the apparatus of government, in the five years following it the Documentary Movement disappeared almost as quickly as it arrived, the filmmaking careers of its leading individuals to all intents and purposes over.

Scholars of British cinema, propaganda and public information policy have for a long time tried to get to the bottom of the paradox of the Documentary Movement having been so short-lived in an empirical sense, but so enduring in a cultural one. The literature this debate has generated is prodigious, and a full review of it is beyond the scope and outside the purpose of this chapter. It is sufficient to note that writers on the subject have generally taken one of three stances for the Movement's rapid decline as a distinct and self-contained cultural entity. The first holds that without Grierson's unifying leadership after his move to Canada in 1939, it fragmented and collapsed under the pressure of internal division, chiefly between the modernisers who advocated concessions such as the 'story documentary' format in order to reach a mainstream audience such as Harry Watt and Pat Jackson, and the traditionalists who stuck to the discursive and educational approach favoured by Grierson (represented primarily by Basil Wright and Paul Rotha).<sup>2</sup> The second identifies the decline in state support for government film production, principally through the closure of the

<sup>1</sup> Interviewed in Elizabeth Sussex, *The Rise and Fall of British Documentary*, Berkeley, University of California Press (1975), p. 200.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Higson, *Waving the Flag: Constructing a National Cinema in Britain*, Oxford, Clarendon Press (1995), pp. 206-212.

Crown Film Unit in April 1951, as having dispersed the Movement's workforce and thus removing the focal point of its cultural identity.<sup>3</sup> The third suggests that the Documentary Movement's ideological prominence has always been overstated, that its cultural influence was minimal and that its importance has been exaggerated, primarily through the writing of its major figures and later celebrants such as Sussex and Ian Aitken.<sup>4</sup> In this context, the documentarists' decline and fall can be attributed largely to natural forces.

At first sight, the career of Paul Dickson (b. 1920) appears to be just another manifestation of this 'decline and fall' narrative. He received his initial training as a cameraman in the Army Kinematograph Corps and as a scriptwriter working for Basil Wright at the Crown Film Unit towards the end of the war, on a project that was eventually aborted.<sup>5</sup> He then worked briefly for Paul Rotha's company Films of Fact and subsequently joined World Wide Pictures,<sup>6</sup> a company that he would be intermittently associated with throughout the rest of his working life, in 1948. Shortly after being taken on at World Wide Dickson directed two Government-sponsored feature documentaries which established his professional reputation: *The Undefeated* (1950), promoting state support and welfare for soldiers who had been disabled in combat during the war, and *David* (1951), a biographical portrait of a school caretaker and amateur poet in South Wales, commissioned by the Welsh Committee for the Festival of Britain. Both were critically celebrated and *The Undefeated* won two awards. Thereafter, the bulk of Dickson's output consisted of commercially sponsored promotional shorts, advertisements and television drama, a body of work which has been almost entirely ignored by critics and historians. This chapter will argue that by identifying stylistic and ideological links between Dickson's output pre- and post-*David*, it is possible to observe stylistic and thematic similarities in his work during and after the Documentary Movement's period of cultural prominence, thereby illustrating some of the ways in which its legacy influenced film and television thereafter. *David* makes a useful transition point, as it and *Life in Her Hands* (UK, 1951, dir. Philip Leacock) were arguably the last ideologically motivated cinema feature documentaries commissioned by the British taxpayer to be made before the general election of October 1951, in which the Conservatives came to power and then drastically reduced the scale of official filmmaking. This included the closure of the Crown Film Unit in April 1952, the event which is widely cited as marking the end of the Documentary Movement as a coherent cultural force in British cinema.

The establishment of Dickson's career embodied all the elements that would eventually characterise the main period of his working life. Drawn to the cinema as a child, he was conscripted at the outbreak of the war, and toward the end of it applied successfully to transfer from the artillery to the Army Kinematograph Unit. Through family connections he also secured part-time work as a

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<sup>3</sup> A.V. Hogenkamp, *The British Documentary Movement and the 1945-51 Labour Governments*, unpublished PhD thesis, Westminster College, Oxford (degree awarded by CNA, 1981), pp. 161-5.

<sup>4</sup> Nicholas Pronay, 'John Grierson and the Documentary: 60 Years On', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, vol. 9, no. 3 (1989), pp. 227-246; Brian Winston, *Claiming the Real: The Documentary Film Revisited*, London, British Film Institute (1995), pp. 60-68.

<sup>5</sup> Dickson describes this period in his career in a biographical interview by Rodney Giesler, recorded for the BECTU Oral History Project on 25 August 2004 (hereafter 'BECTU interview'); side 1, 08'07" – 12'58". The tapes are available for research use in the BFI Library.

<sup>6</sup> A London-based production company that started trading in 1942; not to be confused with the US production and distribution company of the same name, founded by the evangelist Billy Graham in 1951 to make films promoting Christianity. Both companies were still operating at the time of writing.

scriptwriter with what he claims was the Pearl and Dean advertising agency,<sup>7</sup> before being taken on by Paul Rotha's company Films of Fact in 1945, where he progressed to his first directing assignment. In the four years or so between his first paid work in the film industry and his full scale directorial debut, therefore, Dickson was exposed to three genres and production contexts that would shape the remainder of his career: the state (as a military cameraman), the Documentary Movement (working for Rotha) and the sponsored film (advertising). This formative period would also embed the three principal characteristics which can be found to varying degrees in the bulk of his subsequent output, and to which he made extensive reference in later interviews: the use of carefully scripted and often fictional narratives to illustrate real-world issues and debates, an emphasis on the resolution of problems or disputes (a cause-and-effect approach that would prove particularly suited to episodes of television drama series), and the use of these techniques across both public sector and commercial projects.

Writing at about the time Dickson started working for Films of Fact, the commentator and director of religious and instructional films Andrew Buchanan opined that the documentary was already in decline:

In time, this paradox [between the perceived public enthusiasm for documentaries during World War II and the decline in production thereafter] created one of the most extraordinary situations in filmdom's history – documentary technique advanced rapidly, became increasingly popular, demand and supply were present – yet showings dwindled away.<sup>8</sup>

It is certainly the case that Dickson entered the sector at the peak of its ideological influence and institutional viability. The 'documentary-realist' tradition had been heavily promoted by commentators and press critics as an expression of indigenous cultural values in a propaganda context, both in the promotion of non-fiction films themselves and the incorporation of themes and styles deemed to be more 'real' than the alternative of Hollywood escapism. According to John Ellis, these writers were as influential as their subjects (or at least, they aspired to be), claiming that 'they hoped to change the nature of mass cinema in Britain' to encompass the discursive and public service ideals originally espoused by Grierson and his associates.<sup>9</sup> Dickson would only spend five years or so of a thirty-year career as an active filmmaker working directly within the organisations most synonymous with the Documentary Movement and its associated cultural apparatus, but it is

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<sup>7</sup> In the BECTU oral history interview, Dickson claims that he worked for Gavin Lambert, describing him as Pearl and Dean's 'literary editor' (side 1, 13'40"-15'10"). I am somewhat sceptical about this claim, for two reasons: firstly, Pearl and Dean was not founded until 1953, and secondly Lambert (1924-2005) would only have been aged 20-21 at the time Dickson describes, and therefore presumably conscripted himself. I don't dispute that Dickson worked in cinema advertising during his formative years, but it can't have been for Pearl and Dean and it's very unlikely that he reported to Lambert. Dickson's interviewer (Rodney Giesler) also found this claim surprising, commenting, 'I'd no idea that Gavin worked in advertising ... I only knew him when he was at *Sight and Sound*' at 14'50". At several other points during the interview Dickson struggles with lapses of memory and gives factual information that is contradicted by other primary sources. As with most oral history recorded many decades after the events being discussed, therefore, his factual recollections on this tape should not be considered reliable without additional verification.

<sup>8</sup> Andrew Buchanan, *Film and the Future*, London, George Allen & Unwin (1945), p. 29. Buchanan (1897-1952) was a minor figure in the Documentary Movement, who began his career writing commentary scripts for the Empire Marketing Board before working for Gaumont-British Instructional.

<sup>9</sup> John Ellis, 'Art, Culture, Quality', *Screen*, vol. 19, no. 3 (1978), p. 11.

clear both from his later work and his recollections in retirement that they were influentially formative ones.

His earliest work having been in screenwriting, Dickson's first pieces as director were items in Rotha's MOI-commissioned cinemagazine *Britain Can Make It*, on the manufacture of bricks<sup>10</sup> and drilling for oil in Nottinghamshire.<sup>11</sup> There then followed the film that bore his first on-screen credit as director, *Country Homes* (1947), produced by Films of Fact to a commission from the Ministry of Health. This eleven-minute film promotes the use of a prefabricated residential dwelling, the Airey house, as a solution to the acute shortage of rural housing stock that resulted from the post-war reconstruction effort having been concentrated in the heavily bombed cities. *Country Homes* represents the post war so-called 'age of austerity' from which it was inspired: the eleven minutes of footage is all mute, with a bare commentary script filling in information that cannot be conveyed in silent images alone. Emphasising that the components of the house can easily be transported over long distances by road and then assembled by two labourers in under a week, *Country Homes* provides offers a miniature, utilitarian take on the 'why we fought' agenda addressed more prominently in a series of feature documentaries promoting the town planning movement during and immediately after the war, notably Rotha's own *Land of Promise* (1945). His final film for Rotha, *Shipshape* (1947), was a three-minute fundraising short commissioned by the Royal National Lifeboat Institution. It was also his first to include scripted and rehearsed dialogue scenes, in this case with a non-professional cast of lifeboatmen playing themselves. Dickson would later claim that this was fundamental to his directing technique in both film and television ('Directing is essentially about asking two questions: where do you put the camera and what do you do with the actors?'<sup>12</sup>), though in his BECTU oral history interview he attributes the origins of this belief to his work as a rehearsal director and dialogue coach in feature films in the 1950s and '60s. Interestingly, he doesn't mention *Shipshape* at all, either in the BECTU interview or in an extensive videotaped interview carried out by the British Film Institute on 16 November 2007. Films of Fact went into voluntary liquidation in November 1947, primarily as the result of significant losses sustained on Rotha's last feature documentaries *The World is Rich* and *A City Speaks*, completed earlier that year, and had been wound down by the following spring. Dickson was then looking for work.

After a final project for the Army (a training film, *Personal Hygiene*, made in 1948 with Richard Massingham), Dickson made the decision that would arguably have the greatest impact on the remainder of his career: joining World Wide Pictures as a director, in the autumn of 1948. World Wide had been founded in 1942 by James 'Jimmy' Carr, formerly a producer at Verity Films. Verity had opened in March 1940 to service the increasing demands of government departments and the military for propaganda, information and training films.<sup>13</sup> Carr had left Verity to form his own company, partly in protest at what he saw as the politicisation of the Documentary Movement, its links to the Ministry of Information and their attempts to squeeze out independents from higher profile projects. In a letter to the editor of *Documentary News Letter* in February 1942, Carr complained of 'discrimination between those who are within a small, self-appointed coterie of 'leaders of documentary' and those who are not.'<sup>14</sup> In forming World Wide, Carr was initially trying

<sup>10</sup> *Britain Can Make It*, no. 11 (1946).

<sup>11</sup> *Britain Can Make It*, no. 14 (1946).

<sup>12</sup> BECTU interview, side 2, 37'55".

<sup>13</sup> <http://ftvdb.bfi.org.uk/sift/organisation/7373>, retrieved 19 June 2009.

<sup>14</sup> *Documentary News Letter*, vol. 3, no. 2 (February 1942), p. 29.

to open up a market for non-fiction film beyond those commissioned by the MOI. This path would eventually lead him into sponsored films, advertising and television drama: in short, the genres in which Dickson would spend the bulk of his working life. It is for this reason, therefore, that Dickson's career as a director would survive the disintegration of the Documentary Movement and witness the absorption of some of its ideas and practices into other areas of British film culture. World Wide's first major production was *Unity is Strength* (1945), a promotional film commissioned by the Amalgamated Engineering Union to mark its silver jubilee and directed by the socialist firebrand Ralph Bond. Predictably, given Carr's antagonistic relationship with the Documentary Movement's hierarchy (and especially Wright, Taylor and Rotha), it was condemned by *Documentary News Letter* as unimaginative and overly simplistic,<sup>15</sup> though it was generally well received within the trade union movement.<sup>16</sup>

After being taken on by World Wide, Dickson's first project was the first of the two feature documentaries on which his critical reputation largely rests today: *The Undefeated*. These two films can be regarded as transitional work between the state-commissioned, 'information with a purpose' approach celebrated by Grierson, and the commercially sponsored film that would become one of the mainstays of Dickson's work from the 1950s to the 1970s (advertisements, television drama and dialogue direction on features being the others). They were commissioned by government departments rather than by the private sector (the Ministry of Pensions and the Welsh Committee of the Festival of Britain respectively), but from an independent production company that was given more or less a free hand in the treatment of the subject matter and the approach to the propaganda objective.

The approach Dickson took was essentially that of a fictional treatment, developing a small-scale, self-contained drama in order to publicise the role of the Ministry of Pensions in rehabilitating ex-servicemen who had sustained serious and permanent disabilities during the war. The result is that *The Undefeated* is quite clearly a descendent of the wartime story documentary, built around a hypothetical case study narrative into to which certain fictitious aspects were inserted, either for dramatic effect or to convey information required by the film's commissioners. The principal character, Joe Anderson (played by an actual disabled ex-serviceman, Gerald Pearson), is a former RAF glider pilot who lost both his legs in action and lost his voice as the result of what would now be called post-traumatic stress disorder. The former reflects Pearson's actual experience, whereas the latter was invented for dramatic effect 'to make sure that the audience would be hooked on Joe's story.'<sup>17</sup> The film follows Anderson's progress from initial medical treatment, through fitting and training with artificial limbs, his reintegration into the home and workplace and eventually the restoration of his voice. The role of the Ministry of Pensions and their welfare officers in co-ordinating this is emphasised in strategic scenes along the way, most of which take the form of extended dialogue scenes detailing the interview process. This presumably was an attempt to fulfil the sponsoring department's (i.e. the Ministry of Pensions's stipulation that one of the objectives of the film was to demystify and destigmatise the process of seeking state support for dealing with the consequences of serious injuries.

<sup>15</sup> *Documentary News Letter*, vol. 5, no. 9 (1945), p. 102.

<sup>16</sup> See Hogenkamp, op. cit., pp. 80-81.

<sup>17</sup> Dickson, 2007 BFI video interview, 17'52"-18'25".

Unusually for a documentary with such a specialist objective, *The Undefeated* secured a commercial, theatrical release following test screenings undertaken by the Ministry of Information in order to gauge the likely audience reaction. It received limited press coverage, generally positive in the ways Ellis highlighted the critical celebration of the documentary-realist tradition during and immediately after the war. *The Times*'s anonymous reviewer, for example, praises Pearson's performance as 'admirably free from self-pity and exaggeration', which elevates the film to 'much more than just an advertisement for the Ministry of Pensions.'<sup>18</sup> The following year, a report from the Edinburgh Film Festival claimed that it was 'widely acknowledged as a work of considerable distinction.'<sup>19</sup> *The Undefeated* also received the award for best documentary both from the British Film Academy (subsequently BAFTA) and at the Berlin Film Festival in 1951.

Dickson's recollection of the production process suggests that he was consciously influenced by some aspects of the Documentary Movement's ideological motivation and production practices, but was either unaware of or rejected the others. In the two extensive recorded interviews Dickson made in 2004 and 2007, he repeatedly emphasised the importance of screenplay, performance, dialogue and story structure in producing an effective result, whether for a general or a specialist audience. Recalling the production of *The Undefeated* he justified the introduction of fictional elements with this in mind: 'There were still a lot of very interesting documentaries being made, but often for specialist audiences who were interested in the subject. But for the general audience I think they are interested in what they see on the screen, and so they will respond and give themselves to the stories, to the characters, providing the characters are worth being given to.'<sup>20</sup> This approach was not unique to Dickson, but rather one he inherited and adapted from a process of evolution that had taken place since a group of directors (principally Watt, Jackson and Holmes) had rejected the didactic, 'filmed debate' formula favoured by Grierson and Rotha in favour of the story documentary. As Pat Jackson had recalled in respect of an aborted project about the work of cable ships, 'I repeated what my master, John Grierson, had done years before [...] We had both produced several cans of unusable film, and for the same reason – no shape.'<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, and most significantly in the context of this discussion, the attempt to find that shape by using narrative, staging and performance to structure information and argument was not confined to the Documentary Movement's leading figures and prestige productions. The precedent they set was gradually adopted in a wider range of applications, and within a couple of decades would become a staple technique of the industrial and sponsored film. During Dickson's formative years, for example, Max Anderson (remembered more for his trade union activism than his documentaries, and aptly characterised by Patrick Russell as 'one of the most committed left-wingers in the film industry'<sup>22</sup>) deployed it to striking (though not in a trade unionist sense!) effect in *The Harvest Shall Come* (1942), a biographical story about a Suffolk farm labourer made to highlight the low standard of living of the rural working classes; and *Four Men in Prison* (1949), emphasising the rehabilitation of offenders by the penal system.

<sup>18</sup> *The Times*, 29 December 1950, p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> *The Times*, 9 August 1951, p. 51.

<sup>20</sup> Dickson, 2007 BFI Video Interview, 24'24"-25'10".

<sup>21</sup> Pat Jackson, *A Retake, Please! Night Mail to Western Approaches*, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press (1999), p. 64.

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/469778/>, retrieved 25 June 2009.

Within a generation of the flagship propaganda films that pioneered the genre and with which it is still principally associated, what was essentially the story documentary formula would have become a widespread technique in television drama, promotional, educational and industrial film. In stylistic terms, *The Undefeated* and *David* can usefully be seen as milestones along that road. Dickson did not, however, consciously regard the two films on which his reputation primarily rests as being a part of this process of evolution. He was not aware of the collection of London-based state and sponsored film 'units' being part of any collective movement, recalling that 'there were these little units in and around Soho, making films: I knew them, I was in touch with them, but I wasn't aware of any particular sort of movement. I don't think it really existed until afterwards, with people writing about it.'<sup>23</sup> He also claims not to have been aware of the phrase 'the creative treatment of actuality',<sup>24</sup> or to have seen *Housing Problems* (UK, 1935, dir. Edgar Anstey and Arthur Elton) or *Song of Ceylon* (UK, 1934, dir. Basil Wright).<sup>25</sup> Yet his first (but ultimately aborted) scriptwriting project was commissioned by Wright and his first full-time job in the industry was working for Rotha and Films of Fact. This would suggest that he must absorbed some of the movement's practices and objectives, even if he rejected many of its ideological positions, notably Grierson's and Rotha's almost Brechtian opposition to subjective characterisation and the idea of passive entertainment.

*David* was one of five productions (not including some of the 3-D experimental films commissioned for the Telekinema) directly commissioned for the 1951 Festival of Britain, in this case by the Central Office of Information, which asked World Wide to provide a film to 'show Wales to the world', on behalf of the Festival's Welsh Committee.<sup>26</sup> That two of the others were the final projects of Documentary Movement heavyweights (*Waters of Time* and *A Family Portrait*) underscores Dickson's role as a transitional figure from its period of cultural prominence to one in which the ideas and techniques it pioneered fragmented and diversified into other settings. The film is a 35-minute autobiographical drama about a school caretaker and former miner in the South Wales valleys, who comes to terms with the death of his son from tuberculosis by taking up poetry and entering an Eisteddfod. The main protagonist, D.R. Griffiths (brother of the politician Jim Griffiths, Secretary of State for Wales in Harold Wilson's first government, from 1964-6), plays himself, while the rest of the cast are professional actors. Griffiths's life is seen largely in flashback through the first person narration of one of the pupils at his school. Its release and critical reception effectively mirrored that of *The Undefeated*. Apart from theatrical screenings in conjunction with the festival itself, *David* secured a commercial release and was also distributed on 16mm 'to people in Government service and film societies.'<sup>27</sup> The film was almost universally praised for its integration of a political and ideological objective (in this case, the celebration of Welsh national identity within a UK context) with a sensitively handled human interest story, both by journalists at the time and in the comparatively little that has been written about it by film scholars since. The usual suspects identified by Ellis as the cheerleaders for the documentary-realist tradition during and immediately

<sup>23</sup> Dickson, 2007 BFI Video Interview, 25'24"-25'52".

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem, 10'05".

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem, 16'35".

<sup>26</sup> The others were *The Magic Box* (UK, 1952, dir. John Boulting), *Waters of Time* (UK, 1951, dir. Basil Wright), *A Family Portrait* (UK, 1951, dir. Humphrey Jennings) and a series of four experimental short films, *Painter and Poet* (UK, 1951, prod. John Halas & Joy Bachelor).

<sup>27</sup> *Film User*, July 1951, p. 368.

after the war came up with the obligatory superlatives.<sup>28</sup> Writing nearly half a century later, David Berry described it as 'one of the finest films ever made in Wales.'<sup>29</sup>

From these two films it is clear that Dickson had successfully integrated his belief in importance in script and performance as the principal vehicles through which his films would engage an audience with the need to address the political and informational agendas set by his sponsors. Both are built around the interaction between two principal characters, one of whom tells the story of the other in the first person. In *The Undefeated* they are in fact the same person, alternating between the perfect and present tense: *David* employs the same distinction between flashback and the present, only this time using two separate characters. The scripts are also structured around the idea of solving a problem: the rehabilitation process in *The Undefeated* and coming to terms with the loss of a child in *David*. In fictional feature films and television drama this is effectively the same thing as Robert McKee's 'three act structure',<sup>30</sup> in which an equilibrium is established, broken and then the audience is engaged through the process of resolving or re-establishing it. Given the prominence of this structure in television serial drama it is hardly surprising that it accounts for the bulk of Dickson's future directorial output, yet it is also a recurring device in a number of Dickson's later sponsored films.

The editor Margaret Thompson, who worked with Dickson at World Wide, recalls that shortly after *David*:

...I think he was lured away into making commercials, or involved with something in Hollywood. I can't remember now, but the thing was that it seemed to me that Paul was going away from a region in which he could really be supreme into something where he would be just another man, just another director. And this is what seemed to me to happen, because I don't think he ever did anything after that. And if he'd stayed in documentary he would have been remembered as Humphrey Jennings is remembered.<sup>31</sup>

This view is echoed by David Berry, who concludes that Dickson's career 'began to stutter badly' after *David*, and that the film remains his 'finest legacy'.<sup>32</sup> Dickson himself claims to be content that *The Undefeated* and *David* remain the two films on which his reputation rests.<sup>33</sup> I would argue that this reputation exists largely as a result of the critical canonisation of the Documentary Movement in the decade preceding them, and that the only reason many of his later sponsored films are not generally considered part of the mainstream of the British non-fiction cinema is that when the Documentary Movement itself fragmented, so did the cultural kudos its leading protagonists successfully sought for themselves. Although Dickson's claim that the movement itself was purely a critical construction that emerged decades after the event is obviously problematic – they clearly saw themselves as a politically and ideologically cohesive group, as evidenced through periodicals such as *World Film News* and *Documentary News Letter* – he has a point in that the first generation

<sup>28</sup> A selection of press quotations can be found in Sarah Easen, 'Film and the Festival of Britain' in Ian Mackillop and Neil Sinyard (eds.), *British Cinema of the 1950s: A Celebration*, Manchester, Manchester University Press (2003), pp. 58-59.

<sup>29</sup> David Berry, *Cinema and Wales: The First Hundred Years*, Cardiff, University of Wales Press (1993), p. 246.

<sup>30</sup> Robert McKee, *Story, Substance, Structure: Style and the Principles of Screenwriting*, London, Methuen (1999), passim.

<sup>31</sup> Margaret Thompson, BECTU oral history interview (need date).

<sup>32</sup> Berry, *opere citato*, p. 249.

<sup>33</sup> Dickson, 2007 BFI Video Interview, 09'50"-10'13".

of historical writing about the work of Grierson and his associates was written by Documentary Movement acolytes and supporters (e.g. H. Forsyth Hardy and Elizabeth Sussex) and tends to dismiss the period after the late 1940s as one of a decline and fall. This is exacerbated by the fact that there has been almost no substantive research into the sponsored film in Britain except in the context of its relationship to the Documentary Movement. The bulk of Dickson's contribution to non-fiction cinema after *David* is within this genre, and it is here that we have to look in order to identify some of the ways in which the documentary-realist tradition metamorphosed and was absorbed into other forms of filmmaking.

The American archivist and ephemeral film expert Rick Prelinger argues that 'the late 1940s and 1950s were the golden age of the sponsored film',<sup>34</sup> though in Britain at least, its origins go back significantly further. The sponsored film (as distinct from the documentary made directly by the state, e.g. the Crown or armed services film units) had been entwined with the Documentary Movement from the early 1930s, and promotional films go back almost as far as the cinema itself. In the period before the Documentary Movement began to exercise any cultural influence, the boundary between straightforward advertising films and the idea of a sponsored film as we now understand the phrase (in crude terms, a film that is intended to integrate a public service and/or entertainment function with the promotion of a sponsor's products and services) was fluid and changing. The cinema pioneer Charles Urban is described by his biographer as a 'keen advocate of sponsored filmmaking',<sup>35</sup> spending much of the period before World War I producing actuality shorts for such companies as the Harland and Wolff shipyard as early as 1897, and travelogues for various railway companies worldwide throughout the following decade.

A cursory survey of some indicative surviving examples of pre-Documentary Movement British sponsored films indicates the range of variations. *A Visit to Peak Frean & Co.'s Biscuit Works* (1906, Cricks and Martin) is essentially an advertisement, describing the production process purely in order to promote the end product; while *A Day in the Life of a Coal Miner* (1910, produced by Urban's company, Kineto) appears on the surface to promote the social and economic benefits of coal as an energy source. It was, however, sponsored by the London and North Western Railway, for whom transporting coal was a major source of business. *The Construction of the New Tyne Bridge*, produced by Dorman, Long and Co. in 1928, emphasises a detailed description of the engineering and construction processes involved, not so much as an educational document but rather as part of their bid for the contract to build the Sydney Harbour Bridge a few years later. *The Proof of the Pudding*, commissioned by the British Electrical Development Association in 1938, cloaked an advertisement for electric cookers in a supposedly educational demonstration of how the technology improves living conditions for housewives.

However, the Documentary Movement did attempt to exert a significant emphasis on the role, context and audience of the sponsored film, promoting it as more as philanthropy than straightforward advertising and encouraging overlap between its film makers and those employed directly in the public sector. Paul Rotha describes the emergence of public relations as a systematic marketing tool as being specific to the 1930s, in relation to film noting Shell, Imperial Airways and

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<sup>34</sup> Rick Prelinger, *The Field Guide to Sponsored Films*, San Francisco, National Film Preservation Foundation (2006), vii.

<sup>35</sup> Luke McKernan (ed.), *A Yank in Britain: The Lost Memoirs of Charles Urban*, Hastings, The Projection Box (1999), p. 77.

the coal and gas industries being at the vanguard. Writing of the difficulty in 'inspiring these public relations men and their organisations to bear the cost of making a documentary film that was not a straight publicity [i.e. advertising] film',<sup>36</sup> he goes on to argue that those they managed to persuade reaped the benefits in being able to portray themselves as the enlightened and benevolent face of multinational capitalism. In truth, many of the films that resulted from this interaction differ from their predecessors and those made at around the same time but without the involvement of people like Grierson and Rotha only in the emphasis in their social message: hence in *Port Sunlight*, the benevolent capitalism of Lever in providing a high standard of living for their employees is the message being sold; whereas in *Housing Problems* (1935, Gas, Light and Coke Company) it is the benevolent socialism of the local authority in tearing down slums, not the fact that their replacements will be heated by gas. As Brian Winston cynically but elegantly and accurately put it, the Documentary Movement hijacked sponsored filmmaking and tried to turn it into a mixture of 'left wing kudos, right wing money and films of dubious social worth in the middle.'<sup>37</sup>

It was a just over a decade after this interaction started that Dickson began his career as a director of sponsored films, with *The Undefeated* and *David*; the sponsor in these cases being the taxpayer. During that time the emphasis in production had shifted from the in-house units of major companies (e.g. Shell) to independent production companies (which, true to the Documentary Movement's socialist ideals, usually called themselves 'units') working to order, initially almost exclusively from the Ministry of Information; the head of whose film division, Jack Beddington, had previously worked for Shell. But as the post-war period wore on, these units increasingly made films to commission from the private sector. Verity, Realist, Greenpark, DATA and Films of Fact are probably the most frequently noted units. Most of the units formed during and immediately after the war and the filmmakers associated principally with them stuck exclusively to public sector, educational and sponsored filmmaking according to Documentary Movement ideals, and did not survive the 1950s. Dickson and World Wide are a notable and intuitive exception to that rule, offering an archetypal example of how sponsored documentary filmmaking gradually shifted from the public to the private sector, taking some of the Documentary Movement's beliefs and methodologies with it, but incorporating them with others as the 1950s and '60s progressed.

Two sources of primary evidence give us an especially useful insight into the world of the post-war commercial sponsored film, the agendas of those who made them and the ways in which they reached their intended audience. A 1959 manual, *Business Films: How to Make and Use Them*, sets out the rationale behind the sponsored film from the prospective sponsor's perspective. A common thread running throughout the text is that 'every industrial film should be made for a specific purpose and for a specific audience',<sup>38</sup> the argument being that what distinguishes a sponsored film from a straightforward advertisement is that it should be a more precise and technocratic form of communication, designed to convey detailed information and/or ideas to a carefully selected audience, rather than deliver a generally positive message to a mass audience. This overlaps significantly with one aspect of mainstream Documentary Movement thinking. In a trade press article written in 1946, Rotha had called for what was effectively a move away from Grierson's creative treatment of actuality, to repositioning the movement as 'a body of technicians, skilled in

<sup>36</sup> Paul Rotha, *Documentary Diary*, New York, Hill and Wang (1973), p. 143.

<sup>37</sup> Winston, *opere citato*, p. 67.

<sup>38</sup> Peter Spooner, *Business Films: How to Make and Use Them*, London, Business Publications Ltd. (1959), p. 27.

dramatising facts and information and argument.<sup>39</sup> *Country Homes* can perhaps be seen as an embodiment of this belief. The influence of the 'creative' types that Grierson employed and nurtured such as Auden, Britten, Lye, Milhaud etc. is nowhere to be seen: what we get is a straightforward, no frills exposition of why a rural house-building programme is needed and how the proposed solution will do the job.

Marsha Bryant argues that the 'creative' aspect of Grierson's original project was an inherent contradiction, one that 'became insurmountable by the end of the thirties'<sup>40</sup> (Jennings, presumably, being the exception to that rule). The context is her accusation that Grierson was promoting what she considers the social injustice of British imperialism through the use of cultural heavyweights on films celebrating the Empire, fingering *Song of Ceylon* (UK, 1934, dir. Basil Wright) as the prime culprit. But it can also be applied to the interaction between the Documentary Movement's treatment of domestic issues and their audience, and by doing so we can begin to understand why, after the Rotha/Wright/Taylor tendency had shorn the documentary of its overt ideological and cultural baggage, there was a lot of overlap in the methodology, ideology and technology of the final phase of the Documentary Movement (elegantly characterised by Patrick Russell as 'micro-managing change'<sup>41</sup>) and the commercial sponsored film in the second half of the twentieth century.

*Business Films* proposes four categories of audience and five methods of distribution for the sponsored film. The former are (i) VIPs, i.e. strategic decision makers; (ii) 'People who need to be instructed in the use of the sponsor's products or services', (iii) 'Sections of the public with a clearly identified interest in the sponsor's products or services' and (iv), 'General audiences in national or regional groups'. The latter are (i) Shows to specially invited audiences, (ii) 'Roadshows, on a contractual basis', (iii) 'the loan of prints to suitable organisations', (iv) 'small screen shows at trade exhibitions, etc.' and (v) theatrical or television distribution at commercial advertising rates.<sup>42</sup> As far as the author is concerned, the latter was such a small market for most sponsored film production as to be an effective irrelevance. The common characteristic of the four remaining categories of audience and distribution method is that none of them involved a straightforward commercial transaction in the way that mainstream cinema did. Put crudely, commercial cinema (and less directly but still in principle, television) audiences bought a product, whereas the audience for sponsored films were sold one. Ironically, the distribution infrastructure for the sponsored film that had developed by the 1950s was very similar in conception to the one Grierson imagined and campaigned for in the 1930s as a means of bypassing the mercenary capitalism (and American cultural imperialism) of the mainstream distribution and exhibition sectors, being based on 16mm projection and in venues other than cinemas. The irony comes in that this alternative infrastructure came to serve the private sector as much if not more than the public. In her discussion of sponsored cinemagazines, Emily Crosby quotes the President of the Federation of British Industry in 1954, claiming that 'some 23,000' 16mm projectors were in use in non-theatrical venues across the UK

<sup>39</sup> *Today's Cinema*, 2 January 1946, p. 39.

<sup>40</sup> Marsha Bryant, *Auden and Documentary in the 1930s*, Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia (1997), p. 170.

<sup>41</sup> See p. 50 of the booklet accompanying the British Film Institute's DVD *Land of Promise: The British Documentary Movement, 1930-1950* (2008).

<sup>42</sup> Spooner, *opere citato*, pp. 270-1.

including 'schools, social clubs, churches and unions'.<sup>43</sup> A film industry annual from a few years earlier lists the principal avenues for non-theatrical distribution as education, churches, the Central Office of Information, mobile cinemas, film societies and home users.<sup>44</sup>

The other primary source of information we have is a trade periodical that was initially produced for the sponsored film market, *16 Mil Film User*, which published its inaugural issue in November 1946. Its name was shortened to *Film User* the following year. The publication was renamed *Audio Visual* from 1972 to reflect its shift to encompass video and other multimedia technologies and the decline of 16mm as the principal means of non-theatrical distribution for commercially produced moving images, and relaunched once more as *AV Magazine* in 1995, under which title publication continues at the time of writing. During the period in which Dickson directed sponsored films for World Wide, *Film User* also intermittently published an annual yearbook. In relation to theatrically distributed fiction films, the trade press (represented mainly by *Today's Cinema* and *Kinematograph Weekly*) has been used extensively by historians as a primary source of industrial, institutional and economic context for their distribution and exhibition. Many who have done so were later criticised for relying too heavily on trade papers, accepting the viewpoints expressed therein uncritically and not always corroborating information through other sources. By the same token that celebrants of the Documentary Movement and the realist tradition in British Cinema have tended to validate their own arguments primarily through recourse to the writings of the filmmakers involved, so empirical cinema historians of the 1970s and '80s have tended to treat the trade press as a more complete and objective source than is really justified by research since. In particular, a widely acknowledged methodological flaw in Rachael Low's pioneering, seven-volume *History of the British Film* is the author's over-reliance on trade papers in determining the relative cultural significance of films, filmmakers, companies and institutions.<sup>45</sup> This historiographical health warning also applies to the use of trade periodicals as a source of primary evidence in researching the thus far largely ignored area of British industrial and sponsored films. *Film User* was first and foremost a forum for the companies that commissioned sponsored films, the units that made them and the vendors of products and services related thereto (primarily projector manufacturers) to advertise and promote their wares. As its title implies, the magazine's readership was essentially the organisers of non-theatrical film screenings, and therefore its editorial content is written very much with this audience in mind. Nevertheless, *Film User* does at least provide some indication of the extent of the sponsored film sector, the range of films that were made, the motivations of public and private sector sponsoring organisations and the ways in which these films reached their constituent audiences. What it doesn't do is to identify explicitly links between sponsored films and British film culture in a broader sense, which I argue is probably the most important aspect of Paul Dickson's career, especially in relation to the Documentary Movement and the realist tradition. But it does give us some of the raw material.

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<sup>43</sup> Emily Crosby, 'The Sponsored Cinemagazine' in Crosby and Linda Kaye (eds.), *Projecting Britain: The Guide to British Cinemagazines*, London, British Universities' Film and Video Council (2008), p. 48.

<sup>44</sup> Norman Wilson, 'The Non-Theatrical Cinema: Its Opportunities and Responsibilities', in *Informational Film Yearbook, 1947*, Edinburgh, Albyn Press (1947), pp. 9-12.

<sup>45</sup> Jon Burrows issues an even stronger health warning, claiming that 'Low's work can be a problematic and even misleading source of information.' – Higson (ed.), *Young and Innocent: The Cinema in Britain, 1896-1930* (Exeter, University of Exeter Press, 2002), p. 357.

The remainder of this chapter will discuss a representative selection of Dickson's sponsored industrial films from his post-war career. His work as a dialogue director on feature films, as a director of advertisements, television drama and, during the final decade of his career, as a teacher at the National Film and Television School, falls outside the scope of this book; though reference will be made to points in common between the techniques and approaches in these genres and his sponsored films. These are *A Story of Achievement / Opkomst van een industrie* (1952), *The Film That Never Was* (1957), *Enquiry into General Practice* (1959) and a series of promotional films made for British Steel: *Stone into Steel* (1960), *Character of Steel* (1978) and *Steel – The Secret* (1981).

Dickson's first commercially sponsored film, *A Story of Achievement / Opkomst van een Industrie*, was commissioned by the food and chemical conglomerate Unilever in 1951 and completed the following year. Unilever had been formed as a merger of the British soap manufacturer Lever Brothers and the Dutch company Margarine Unie in 1930 (the largest international corporate merger to take place before World War II), largely because palm oil is the primary base ingredient of both soap and margarine and therefore a merger made strategic sense.<sup>46</sup> Both branches of the business were keen from the outset to stretch their ethical credentials. Lever's publicity and advertising during the early part of the twentieth century emphasised the role of soap in improving the hygiene and health of the Victorian population, and the company's enlightened treatment of its workforce. Lever Brothers had made or sponsored promotional films and advertisements since at least 1910, and a snapshot survey of their output reveals clear precedents for the tone and approach of Dickson's film. The company's first major production was *Port Sunlight* (1919), a 48-minute travelogue promoting the model village built next to Lever's soap factory on the Wirral Peninsula as his attempt 'to socialise and Christianise business', and therefore burnish the ethical credentials of the company. The second part of the film describes the soap manufacture process, once again emphasising the product's role in improving public health. *Congo* (1923) seeks to convince viewers of the humane and enlightened treatment of the native workforce in Lever's palm oil operations in what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the town built to house them, Leverage (since renamed Lusanga). *Grime Doesn't Pay* (1935) stresses the public health advantages of regular washing, especially with Lever's soap products. By the mid-1950s, Unilever's Information Division were claiming that their documentary film-making programme existed to 'fill a social need', and that the majority of the audience were schoolchildren in classroom screenings.<sup>47</sup>

Margarine Unie also stressed its contribution both to the Dutch economy and British public health in its promotional activity, by exporting large quantities of the food to British factory workers at a time of industrial expansion and a shortage of dairy produce in the face of agricultural contraction.

*A Story of Achievement / Opkomst van een Industrie*, commissioned as Unilever's Dutch operations were recovering from the wartime occupation and being re-established as a major export industry, is a fictionalised account of the invention of margarine through the eyes of the rival industrialists Samuel van den Bergh and Antonius Jurgens (whose companies merged to form Margarine Unie in 1927) in the late nineteenth century. In a throwback to a practice that briefly flourished for a few

<sup>46</sup> Alfred D. Chandler, *Scale and Scope: Dynamics of Industrial Capitalism*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1994), pp. 382-383.

<sup>47</sup> 'How We Use Films – Unilever', *Film User*, December 1955, pp. 602-5.

years during the conversion to sound, the film was produced in multiple language versions (MLVs).<sup>48</sup> The mainly Dutch cast performed in successive takes with Dutch and English dialogue, resulting in two films that are substantively identical<sup>49</sup> apart from slight variations in the voiceover script to emphasise the Dutch and British contributions to Unilever's origins for their respective audiences. Given that Dickson claims never to have spoken a second language,<sup>50</sup> the continuity and dialogue direction in the Dutch version is remarkably fluent and assured; though an additional credit not present in the English version states that the 'production, commentary and editing were completely revised by' Johan Raab van Canstein,<sup>51</sup> a minor figure in Dutch cinema history remembered today mainly for his quasi-surrealist documentary *Als de halmen buigen* ('When the Corn Bends in the Wind', 1929), made with Jean Dréville.<sup>52</sup> *A Story of Achievement / Opkomst van een industrie* is instantly recognisable as the work of the director of *The Undefeated* and *David*. Once again it is structured around the premise of solving a problem: in the case, malnutrition caused by the shift from an agrarian to an industrial economy and the consequent need to synthesise and mass-produce foodstuffs as an industrial process. As with the government agency in *The Undefeated*, big business, in the form of Unilever, is portrayed as having retained the ethical values of the small family firms it was formed from, while using major industrial muscle as a progressive force for social improvement. The early scenes portray Jurgens and van den Burgh undertaking the initial research and development work, and then expanding the scope and scale of their manufacturing and distribution operations. Towards the end of the film Unilever research scientists are seen experimenting with ways to add vitamins to margarine in order to protect public health in wartime. As with Dickson's two previous feature documentaries the principal storytelling technique is that of dramatic reconstruction, this being his first film in which almost the entire cast were professional actors.

In essence *A Story of Achievement / Opkomst van een industrie* can be seen as an example of the sponsored film in transition, and of the legacy of Documentary Movement ideology starting to metamorphose into a more utilitarian genre. Interestingly, it is likely that the English language version of the film did have some sort of a theatrical release, even if only a limited one, as it was

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<sup>48</sup> For more on MLVs, see Ginette Vincendeau, 'Hollywood Babel: The Coming of Sound and the Multiple Language Version' in Andrew Higson and Richard Maltby (eds.), *Film Europe and Film America: Cinema, Commerce and Cultural Exchange, 1920-1939*, Exeter, University of Exeter Press (1999), pp. 207-224.

<sup>49</sup> Despite the different titles – the Dutch title translates literally as *The Growth of an Industry*.

<sup>50</sup> Dickson, BECTU interview, side 2, 20'05".

<sup>51</sup> Original credit text: 'Productie, Commentaar en Montage geheel herzien door Johan van Canstein'.

<sup>52</sup> Richard Abel, *French Film Theory and Criticism: A History/Anthology*, Princeton, Princeton University Press (1988), p. 45. See also <http://www.geheugenvannederland.nl/?/en/items/FILM01:30/>, retrieved 22 July 2009, and Karel Dibbets, 'Een landschap tussen hemel en hel' ('A Landscape Between Heaven and Hell'), <http://www.geheugenvannederland.nl/hgvn/webroot/files/File/PDF/Dibbets-Landschap.pdf>, retrieved 22 July 2009. Of the film, Dibbets writes: 'Tien jaar later was Nederland definitief ontsloten voor de filmische blik. Filmmakers hadden de verbeelding van het ideale Nederland volledig onder de knie gekregen. *Als de halmen buigen* (regie Johan Raab van Canstein, camera Jean Dréville, 1930) werd een loflied op het boerenleven, gezien door de ogen van een paar Parijse vakantiegangers. In dit paradijs wordt ook wel gewerkt, maar zonder moe te worden, en mooi om naar te kijken. Dergelijke films propageren niet alleen Nederland als vakantieoord, maar verheerlijken ook ons Arcadië als symbool van nationale identiteit. De 'nationale gedachte' is niet zomaar een ideologie, maar voornamelijk iets waar niemand zich een buil aan kan vallen. De nationale gedachte staat boven alle partijen en zuilen. Daar kan niemand tegen zijn: geen hokjesgeest, maar eenheid. Daarom is de nationale gedachte vooral een marketing-concept, de grootst gemene deler. Je bereikte hiermee het grootste publiek, niet slechts een deelpubliek van socialisten, katholieken of protestanten. In ons Arcadië heerst daarom de echte AVRO-geest. Verzuilde landschappen bestaan niet.'

examined by the British Board of Film Censors and given a 'U' certificate on 2 April 1952.<sup>53</sup> *Film User* pronounced it 'a most inspiring film for those inside the industry today, and for those outside it something of a revelation. Successful booking for any audience: of value in the schools for children of 14-plus.'<sup>54</sup>

In stark contrast to Rotha's eulogy as to the benevolent capitalism of sponsored documentary production quoted above, Spooner's *Business Films* manual expresses the transition as follows:

In the 'thirties, film sponsorship was often a form of art patronage. Big organisations like the Post Office and the Tea Marketing Board led the field, and their best efforts achieved recognition and fame (at least, they are still going the rounds of film appreciation societies). After the war the pendulum swung in the other direction: a good thing from the standpoint of this book, but regrettable to people whose interest in films is mostly aesthetic.<sup>55</sup>

Writing five years earlier, a columnist in *Film User* also agreed that the 'arty' sponsored film engendered by the Documentary Movement had become a cultural anachronism, one which was no longer compatible with the very specific public relations needs of industrial sponsors:

'How to sponsor a fiasco' ... what a glorious theme for a film! All the mistakes demonstrated, and ridiculed, in one lovely reel! The script should be written by the film critics and the sponsorship done by some of the documentary film producers. Such a film in 15 minutes could clear away those many misconceptions that so often require dozens of sponsor-producer conferences.<sup>56</sup>

At some point during the 1950s, Dickson claims to have worked briefly with Satyajit Ray on the research for a Unilever sponsored film in Pakistan, the company's motivation being 'to show the value of their contribution to the environment.'<sup>57</sup> The project was eventually aborted for reasons that Dickson doesn't entirely make clear,<sup>58</sup> but the latter's involvement would seem to imply that the sponsored film as art patronage hadn't totally died by that stage (as would the entry of *Achievement / Opkomst* for the Edinburgh and Venice Film Festivals<sup>59</sup>), even if the ideological messages required of them were more focused and direct than those of the experimentalists within the pre-war GPO Film Unit.

Dickson's career in for the remainder of the 1950s concentrated mainly on television drama, B-features, advertising and dialogue directing on the growing number of Hollywood features that were

<sup>53</sup> British Board of Film Censors (BBFC) reference no. AFF035878; <http://www.bbfc.co.uk/website/Classified.nsf/0/2BCE6D31173E93BF802566C80030E353?OpenDocument>, retrieved 21 July 2009. BBFC examination was only a requirement for theatrically distributed films: it was not necessary for films that were never intended to be shown in public cinemas, and as the examination fees were significant the majority of industrially sponsored films were never certificated by the BBFC.

<sup>54</sup> *Film User*, June 1952, p. 298.

<sup>55</sup> Spooner, *opere citato*, p. 39.

<sup>56</sup> *Film User*, August 1952, p. 386.

<sup>57</sup> Dickson, BECTU interview, side 2, 09'35"-09'46". Dickson does not recall accurately when this took place: it was probably in the late 1950s, as he tells the anecdote immediately before describing the production of *Stone Into Steel*. Unlike the recollection of Gavin Lambert earlier in the interview, Dickson cites Ray's name without hesitation or prompting, leading me to believe that this recollection is probably accurate.

<sup>58</sup> The unstated implication, listening to the BECTU tape, is that no subject or approach to the treatment of Unilever's operations in Pakistan could be identified that was compatible with the company's PR objectives.

<sup>59</sup> *Film User*, September 1953, p. 485.

being shot on location in European studios following the collapse of vertical integration in the American film industry. Following the Television Act 1954, which enabled the introduction of commercial broadcasting (the first advertisements were broadcast in Britain on 22 September 1955), World Wide diversified into television and Dickson recalls that 'I made some of the first commercials that went on the air.'<sup>60</sup>

His next major sponsored film, *The Film That Never Was* (1957), was commissioned from World Wide by the Central Office of Information on behalf of the Ministry of Labour and National Service, and financed through the Marshall Plan's Conditional Aid Scheme.<sup>61</sup> Its aim was to promote the use of works councils as a means of defusing industrial disputes. Industrial relations in the UK had steadily worsened throughout the early to mid-1950s: during the economic crisis that immediately followed World War II the nationalisation of major industries and that a popular consensus that an austerity economy was necessary to balance the books resulted in a steady decline in strike action between 1946 and 1953: but as the 1950s wore on there was an increasing expectation of higher living standards and a strong trade union movement that effectively become part of the apparatus of government while Attlee was in office. Between 1956 and 1957 alone the number of working days lost to strike action in the UK jumped from 2,083 to 8,412.<sup>62</sup> Strikes and trade union militancy became a deeply ingrained aspect of British popular culture in the 1950s, from the Boulting brothers' satirical feature film *I'm All Right, Jack!* (UK, 1959, dir. Roy Boulting), to which *The Film That Never Was* makes an intriguing counterpoint; to the BBC television sitcom *The Rag Trade* (1961-63) starring a militant factory shop steward who routinely calls all-out strikes at the slightest provocation. The economic damage being caused by worsening industrial relations was almost certainly the principal reason for commissioning *The Film That Never Was*.

In many ways the film is precisely what the 1952 *Film User* editorial called for: mistakes are demonstrated and ridiculed, and misunderstandings perpetuated at endless sponsor-producer conferences. The scene opens in a Ministry of Labour office, in which a mythical documentary director attends an initial meeting to discuss a film about works councils. A caricature employers' representative and trade unionist call for a film that involves equally two-dimensional caricatures, in order to represent their interests in the best possible light. They are not receptive to the idea that 'everyone is not perfect' and that the film should promote the idea of compromise. The filmmaker proposes a treatment set in a factory, in which the works council is portrayed as dysfunctional and ineffective because neither the autocratic manager (who believes in 'factory efficiency through practical means') nor the union leader believe in its ability to deliver real change. When the firm receives a lucrative contract, this proves the catalyst needed for the two sides to bury their differences. 'What are you writing – a fairy story?', responds the sceptical union boss. Neither side can accept the treatment on the grounds that it shows their perspective in a negative light. The union leader declares that he wants to see a 'typical worker'.

<sup>60</sup> Dickson, 2007 BFI Video Interview, 08'19".

<sup>61</sup> For more on the Conditional Aid Scheme for the use of counterpart funds derived from United States economic aid, see N.F.R. Crafts, 'You've Never Had it So Good: British Economic Policy and Performance, 1945-1960' in Barry Eichengreen (ed.), *Britain's Post-War Recovery*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press (1996), pp. 246-270. *Just an Idea* (UK, 1957, dir. Guy Blanchard), promoting the professionalisation of public relations in industry, was also financed under this scheme.

<sup>62</sup> Colin Crouch, *The Politics of Industrial Relations*, Manchester, Manchester University Press (1979), p.209.

We then cut to the filmmaker's office (clearly inspired by the cheap, rented accommodation used by the documentary units of Soho, with film cans on the desk and an award certificate on the wall), where he ponders what is meant by the term 'typical worker'. Another scenario is imagined, in which the mutual mistrust between the management and workforce escalates into an all-out strike. In a fantasy scene a lazy factory worker is contrasted with a Dickensian, top-hatted manager complete with a bullwhip and machine gun. Once again this scenario is rejected by the sponsors, who suggest an approach based on actuality footage and interviews. In what is possibly the clearest statement of Dickson's approach to documentary filmmaking, the producer replies that 'People aren't typical in themselves: they're typical in relation to each other. Live interviews would be useless.' Eventually the disagreements between the sponsors prove insuperable, the Ministry official stating that 'we don't want to spend Government money fomenting industrial strife', and the project is abandoned; hence the film's title.

The use of professionally acted, tightly scripted and carefully rehearsed and staged dramatic reconstruction was becoming a Dickson hallmark, doubtless honed by the experience he gained in television drama during the early part of the 1950s. Dickson summed up his motivation to become a filmmaker by recalling that 'I suppose, in a way, I was interested in storytelling',<sup>63</sup> but the environment in which he spent the early part of his career prevented that interest from manifesting itself as conventional, fiction films storytelling. But neither were *Achievement / Opkomst* and *The Film That Never Was* story documentaries in the World War II sense of the term, either: they used a professional cast and stories inspired by historical events (*Achievement / Opkomst*) or hypothetical ones (*Film That Never Was*) in order to achieve very specific promotional objectives.

*Enquiry Into General Practice* (1959) refined this approach. Sponsored by the medical equipment supplier Medical World and produced by World Wide, it sought to persuade an audience of doctors of the importance of the general practitioner as a gatekeeper to more specialist treatment in an increasingly technocratic National Health Service (NHS). As with *The Film that Never Was*, there is a political back story to the film's agenda. The establishment of the NHS in 1948 had met with intense opposition from the political right, and in particular doctors' representatives in the form of the British Medical Association (BMA). In broad terms, hospital specialists supported the establishment of the NHS, as they anticipated a more stable source of income as the result of being employed directly by the new state agency rather than working on a self-employed basis. General Practitioners, however, opposed it, as they feared that the effective end of private general practice would have an adverse effect on their income and working conditions.<sup>64</sup> The GPs' fears turned out to be largely justified: in the first decade of the NHS's existence, the bulk of the new investment was concentrated in hospitals and specialist treatment centres at the expense of general practice. Characterising the 1948-1960 period as one of stagnation in general practice, a medical historian writes:

The dominance of the hospital service added to the disadvantage already experienced within the field of general practice. Not only were general practitioners pushed out of hospitals by the new generation of salaried specialists and consultants, but increasingly the dominant hospital medical profession looked upon general practitioners as minor

<sup>63</sup> Dickson, BFI video interview, 07'55".

<sup>64</sup> Peter Jenkins, 'Bevan's Fight with the BMA' in Michael Sissons & Philip French (eds.), *Age of Austerity, 1945-51*, Oxford, Oxford University Press (1986), p. 228.

functionaries, suitable for little more than sorting out patients for referral. The positive strengths of the early NHS therefore exacerbated the already serious problems of low morale in general practice.<sup>65</sup>

By the late 1950s this approach was widely acknowledged to be highly problematic, with negative implications both for patient care and the overall efficiency of the service, largely because many patients who could be treated at local level were being unnecessarily referred for hospital treatment. A process began of attempting to enhance the role of the GP into a more autonomous decision maker who uses local knowledge that the hospital specialist cannot, one which is promoted by the 'discussion film' (as *Enquiry into General Practice* is subtitled) commissioned from Dickson. Opening with a declaration that modern medicine is an 'age of specialisation', the film argues that the development of medicine into specialist fields has inherently undermined the role of the GP, suggesting that 'the less the scientific knowledge, the stronger the doctor-patient relationship.' In the absence of such knowledge, the perceived wisdom of local doctors and the importance of the service they provided gave them significant political and cultural authority in their communities. But scientific developments 'reduced the priest and the doctor to the level of ordinary men.' The second part of the film, headlined 'The Desire for Action', argues for the GP to become a conduit through which specialist medical expertise is cascaded down to and applied at local surgery level; a purveyor of 'organised medicine for organised illness'. 'We're trying to make the GP into a sort of scout master, social worker or parish priest', the commentator explains, giving as example of how these functions can be effectively integrated the diagnosis of an unmarried mother who had been trying to conceal her pregnancy. As a final emphasis of the medical establishment recognising the importance of general practice, the film ends with a short speech delivered direct to camera by Sir Russell Brain, a prominent neurologist and government health advisor, stressing the importance of integrating the GPs' and hospital consultants' work. Unlike Dickson's previous documentaries for World Wide, *Enquiry into General Practice* is not built around a single structuring narrative, but instead on a series of tableau scenes. But as with his earlier work, professional actors and a crew offering significant feature film experience was used (including the later to become prominent cinematographer Walter Lassally), and the moral of the story is one of human reaction and interaction dictating the outcome of scientific, technological or political processes.

Dickson's other significant body of sponsored filmmaking was a series of productions for the steel industry. Between them they cover the period immediately before and after the industry's nationalisation in 1967. These were *Stone Into Steel* (1960), *Steel Bars for the '80s* (1976), *Character of Steel: An Autobiography* (1978), *The Man Who Finished With Steel* (1979), *Framed in Steel* (1980) and *Steel: The Secret* (1981). The iron and steel industry had embraced promotional and sponsored filmmaking since at least the 1920s: the largest steel manufacturer that would later be absorbed into the British Steel Corporation, Dorman, Long & Co. commissioned a 40-minute documentary, *Construction of the New Tyne Bridge* in 1928 and a similar film on the Sydney Harbour Bridge in 1932.<sup>66</sup> By the mid-1950s the steel industry had become a major sponsor of promotional films: nationalisation had been on the political agenda since 1945, and had partially taken place in 1951,

<sup>65</sup> Charles Webster, 'The Politics of General Practice' in Irvine Loudon, John Horder and Charles Webster (ed.), *General Practice Under the National Health Service, 1948-1997*, Oxford, Oxford University Press (1998), p. 22.

<sup>66</sup> These titles and other sponsored films commissioned by Dorman Long are preserved in the Northern Region Film and Television Archive at Teesside University. The feature film *Men of Steel* (UK, 1932, dir. George King) was filmed on location at Dorman Long's Acklam Iron and Steel Works with the company's co-operation.

with 80 of Britain's 107 steel manufacturers being nationalised by taking their shares into public ownership. The Conservatives, largely on ideological grounds, reprivatised the industry in stages during the mid-1950s, and the major companies fought a continuous PR battle to avert renationalisation between then and eventual creation of the British Steel Corporation by the first Wilson government in 1967.<sup>67</sup>

Dickson's first steel film, *Stone Into Steel*, was also his most controversial. It uses no dialogue or commentary, showing the production process from ironstone mining to slab rolling against a specially commissioned music score (written by Edward Williams<sup>68</sup>). Towards the end of the film, the steelmaking scenes are intercut with brief snapshots of the private lives of the factory workers: once again, the 'human face of industry' motif that can be found in most of Dickson's other sponsored films. In Dickson's words, he 'intercut the process with the human experience ... out of their heads they were coming up with ways of treating it [ironstone], until finally they ended up with steel.'<sup>69</sup> The film was marketed effectively as an artistic experiment, being described by its sponsor, United Steel, as 'a dramatic and colourful film which conveys the size and scope of a vast steelworks.'<sup>70</sup> *Stone Into Steel* was awarded the first prize in the documentary category in the following year's Venice Film Festival, but did not prove popular with its sponsor. Dickson recalled that at the outset of every subsequent project he worked on for the steel industry, he would be asked for a more conventional approach and told in no uncertain terms that 'we don't want another *Stone Into Steel*'.<sup>71</sup>

Nevertheless, some of Dickson's later steel films do exhibit an unorthodox streak which is seldom to be found in the majority of sponsored industrial films from the period. *Character of Steel* is narrated in the first person as a rolled steel joist being transported from a steelworks to a building site: the audience is encouraged to speculate as to its final destination and purpose. *Steel: The Secret* features an architect whose marriage is under pressure from overwork but is able to restore his work/life balance through the use of prefabricated steel sections in his buildings. As with his sponsored filmmaking from *The Undefeated* onwards, Dickson's approach is to portray a technology, process or political issue into a solution to a human problem.

The final decade of Dickson's career was spent as a tutor at the (what was then called) National Film School. He recalls having been head-hunted in the mid-1970s by Colin Young,<sup>72</sup> the school's inaugural director, who had formerly taught on one of the first formal training programmes to be established for filmmakers, at the University of California at Los Angeles. The first generation of film production degree programmes in American universities are generally credited with having nurtured the 'Movie Brats' – the group of directors such as Martin Scorsese and Steven Spielberg who emerged in the late 1960s and who are often credited with having reinvented the style and

<sup>67</sup> Colin Bodsworth, *British Iron and Steel: AD1800-2000 and Beyond*, London, Institute of Materials (1001), p. 394 et seq.

<sup>68</sup> Like Dickson, Williams had briefly worked in minor roles within the cultural mainstream of British cinema at the very start of his career (most notably as an assistant to the music director on *49<sup>th</sup> Parallel*) before specialising in promotional and training films for industry, accumulating over 120 credits during a career that lasted into the 1980s.

<sup>69</sup> Dickson, BECTU interview, side 2, 13'41".

<sup>70</sup> *Film User*, September 1961, p. 470.

<sup>71</sup> Dickson, BECTU interview, side 2, 14'50".

<sup>72</sup> *Ibidem*, 35'03". Dickson does not recall the precise year in which he began working at the NFS.

technique of mainstream cinema away from the conventions of the classical period. Dickson recalled that the emphasis of his teaching at the NFS was on dialogue direction and rehearsing actors. The School's website describes its early curriculum as 'a loosely structured affair; sporadic seminars and workshops were secondary to production, with students spending most of their time doing exactly what they had come to the School to do - making films.'<sup>73</sup> This would seem to be in keeping with the techniques that Dickson emphasised throughout his working career, most notably writing, dialogue and performance. Not that this was incompatible with non-fiction subjects, as Dickson explained: 'Documentary should try to engage audiences more by getting them interested in the problems and predicaments of their subjects.'<sup>74</sup>

In the same way that the advent of formal film education and production training marked the start of a shift away from the 'on the job' learning process through which the writers and directors of Dickson's generation began their careers, so Dickson's own career spanned a process of change, from 'documentary' being a term that carried a lot of cultural and ideological baggage (as Grierson, Rotha and their ilk always intended it to) to a routine tool in the box for filmmakers working in a diverse range of genres and contexts. From both an examination of his output and his recollections in the two oral history interviews, it is clear that Dickson did not perceive an ideological divide between an episode of *The Avengers*, a toothpaste commercial and a sponsored documentary about the production of steel bars: all were stories of human interaction and dynamics, to be portrayed through similar styles, techniques and emphases.

So why does the comparatively little that has been written about Dickson thus far praise him to the heavens for *The Undefeated* and *David* and then assume that he disappeared off the face of the planet? This question brings us back to that inevitable old chestnut: the Documentary Movement, whose unmatched powers of self-promotion and attractiveness to left-wing academics since set an agenda for what British non-fiction cinema should and shouldn't be that still retains a lot of its cultural influence, almost three quarters of a century after the peak of its activity. In an American context, one of the few serious historians to address the subject concludes that 'numerous questions need to be asked about the sponsored film.'<sup>75</sup> This is equally true of the genre in Britain. It existed as a significant sector of the film industry in its own right for decades before and after the Documentary Movement, and it was in that sector that the bulk of Dickson's contribution to non-fiction (in a very loose sense) cinema lies. From a brief discussion of Dickson's output alone, it is clear that sponsored filmmaking offers a wealth of primary source material relating to the post-war industrial recovery, the role of the public sector in the economy and society, social norms and attitudes, consumer behaviour and much else besides.

Dickson summed up his working life as 'not particularly creative in the sense of becoming an outstanding figure, but as a journeyman director.'<sup>76</sup> It is precisely this assessment that makes him such an illuminating figure for understanding the British film and television industries and cultures during the second half of the twentieth century, and why film historians must temper their natural

<sup>73</sup> <http://www.nftsfilm-tv.ac.uk/index.php?module=Content&template=history>, retrieved 27 July 2009.

<sup>74</sup> Dickson, BFI video interview, 06'28"-06'47".

<sup>75</sup> David J. Perkins, 'The Sponsored Film: A New Dimension in American Film Research?', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, vol. 2, no. 2 (1982), p. 138.

<sup>76</sup> Dickson, BECTU interview, side 2, 2'15".

desire to concentrate on exceptions that prove rules. You will not understand what cinema meant for the average American in the 1940s purely through the textual analysis of *Citizen Kane*, and neither will you understand how films dealing with real life subjects were made and communicated with their audiences through the textual analysis of *Night Mail* or *Land of Promise*. You might make more progress, however, by trying to understand how the ideas and innovations in these films were absorbed into the work of the numerous journeymen that came after them. Assumptions such as 'I don't think he did anything after that' make a useful starting point.

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