



George Orwell, the Movies, Wartime England and Me

Peter Davison, with an Introduction by John Rodden

John Rodden¹

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Abstract

In this biographical memoir, introduced by his colleague John Rodden, Peter Davison recalls his service in the film production agency of Great Britain during World War II, and offers thoughts on George Orwell.

Keywords Crown Film Unit · George Orwell · World War II · British cinema · Len Lye

Peter Davison (1927–) is best known as the editor of *The Complete Works of George Orwell*, a magnificent tribute in 22 volumes to the most influential British writer of the twentieth century.

The article below is a memoir chiefly of his teenage years as a member of the Crown Film Unit (CFU) during 1942–44, where he assisted in the production of documentary, dramatic, and propaganda films. (Earlier in the decade, Orwell, whom Davison had already come to admire, reviewed films for the newspaper *Time and Tide*.)

At the CFU he worked on a feature film, *Close Quarters* (1943), and a number of short films running under 10 minutes. He is especially proud of *The Eighty Days*, a movie about the German V-1 flying bomb; excerpts of this film often still appear on British television.

Davison had a distinguished academic career, first as a scholar of Shakespeare, serving as a fellow of the Shakespeare Institute in Birmingham and later as a chaired professor at the University of Kent. The second, even more distinguished phase of his academic career began when he became editor of Orwell's *Complete Works* in the 1970s; his edition was published from the mid-1980s through the late 1990s.

Peter Davison is the editor of *The Complete Works of George Orwell*. John Rodden is the author of *Becoming George Orwell: Life and Letters, Legend and Legacy* (Princeton University Press, 2020), among other books.

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Orphaned as a boy, Davison had a challenging and adventuresome youth, not only as a production assistant in British film, but also as a naval officer. He began work in the cutting room of CFU at the tender age of 15 years. There he met film stars such as Elizabeth Taylor, Robert Taylor and Spencer Tracy, among many others.

At the age of 17, Davison joined the Home Guard, a native defense unit on the island, and worked on the famous Z Battery, the short-range anti-aircraft weapon system of rocket launchers in Britain's wartime air defense. In 1944, he joined the navy, served as a radar mechanic, and was promoted to petty officer. Demobilized after war's end, he briefly returned to the CFU before joining MGM as a production assistant in 1949.

The commercial films on which he worked at MGM included *Edward, My Son* (1949) with Spencer Tracy and Deborah Kerr, and *Conspirator* with Robert and Elizabeth Taylor, "then about 17 and very beautiful – and charming," he recalls. Davison also still savors the memory of his "pleasure of sitting with her whilst we saw the previous day's film rushes."

Davison, who will soon turn 94, offers the following reflections on his long-ago days in World War II and British cinema, as well as his current views of George Orwell.

In the matter of film and cinema – and indeed of much else – I am thoroughly out of date. I am unfamiliar with contemporary film criticism. I have on my bookshelves a copy of V.I.

Pudovkin's *Film Technique and Film Acting*, dated 1935, translated by Ivor Montagu. Back in 1942, when I bought it, it seemed very much the "in book." And I did occasionally serve on an Association of Cine-Technicians committee with Montagu, standing in for Ken Cameron, Crown Film's chief sound recordist.

I had joined the Crown Film Unit in June or July 1942. I was fifteen years of age. We then worked five-and-a-half days a week and I was paid 25 shillings a week until I was 16, when my pay rose by five shillings. There was no question of several years' training at university level as nowadays. Indeed, my training lasted all of two weeks. I was instructed in simple tasks such as joining film, filing it away, and finding it again. My instructor, John Reeve, became a very good friend. Indeed, had he not been drafted unexpectedly he would have been best man at my wedding. We both joined the Home Guard,¹ and as there was no real call for two young men trained to fire a Spigot Mortar, we transferred to the aptly numbered 101st 'Z' Rocket Battery near Slough until he was called up to the army and I to the Navy.

I first worked with an editor called Gordon Hales on a 10-minute film, *Letter Home*, about an army recruit training in Northern Ireland. Later we started on a 90-minute feature film, *Close Quarters* (initially titled *Operation Primrose*), depicting the exploits of the submarine *HMS Tyrant*, a photograph of which hangs above my desk. Gordon became ill and a serving naval officer and film editor, First Lieutenant Russell Lloyd, took over. (He was married at that time to the film star Rosamund John.) In the final stages of production we were joined by Sid Stone, the supervising editor, and worked very long hours. One task I had was laying the sound tracks of depth charges attacking the submarine – some 90 explosions, if I recall correctly. The film had its premiere in the West End of London at the Regal Cinema and was quite well received. It was shown with *They Got Me Covered*, which starred Bob Hope and Dorothy Lamour. The double feature prompted the headline in the *Sunday Express*, "Should the Navy play second fiddle to Bob Hope?" (27 June 1943).

I worked on several films and stood in for colleagues now and then. I was entrusted with cutting down a Canadian documentary to half its length and was given the text of a commentary which would later be recorded. I was confident (cheeky?) enough to rewrite the commentary and was required to take the rough cut and both commentaries to Senate House, University of London, where the Crown Film Unit had its headquarters – so I was privileged to visit the Ministry of Truth a little before

George Orwell cast his baleful light upon it. Film and my commentary were examined by John Monk and he gave both his approval.

Of more significance was an 11-minute film on the V-1, or Flying Bomb, *The Eighty Days*. Much of it was made up of old library shots – I often see on television the scared man looking out of a window and the woman rushing her children to safety. It starts with "Revenge Weapon" uttered threateningly in German, spoken by a Belgian Air Force sergeant whom we thought would get the gutturalness of the original language more effectively than could we.

I was called up to the Navy in December 1944 and returned to Crown, then at Beaconsfield Studios, in 1948. I did not stay long – we were overstaffed – but did work for three short periods organizing a small unit on location making an educational film on the Rhondda and Wye Valleys. I was fortunate to be taken on by MGM at Borehamwood as First Assistant Editor at a higher pay rate. I worked on two films – *Edward, My Son*, starring Spencer Tracy, and *Conspirator*, starring Robert Taylor and the utterly charming Elizabeth Taylor. One of my duties was to sit with the stars when they were shown the previous day's rushes. Miss Taylor seemed glad to chat and would bring chocolates (then rationed of course) for my wife. Unfortunately, the start of the next film, the follow-up to *Mrs. Miniver*, was delayed and many of us were laid off. That was the end of my life in film production. I offer this introduction to show the severe limitations of my expertise on film, in its production or criticism, as compared to those who have graduated from university in recent years.

What strikes me most about Orwell and film is the limitations of his interest in film. His one lengthy film review – of Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* – is motivated more by his interest in Chaplin than in film as such. His reviews of *Eyes of the Navy*, *The Heart of Britain*, and *Unholy War* are devoted more to lambasting "that dreadful BBC voice" and praising American technical skill than analysis of the British documentaries. *The Heart of Britain* is not, I think, one of Humphrey Jennings's best films. But Elizabeth Sussex, in her less than sycophantic study *The Rise and Fall of British Documentary*, states that Jennings and editor Stewart McAllister brought "a new inspiration to British documentary." (I lived near Humphrey Jennings, and he would sometimes very kindly give me a lift back home in his car. At my most naïve, I once had the temerity to argue with him that *Listen to Britain* should conclude with Mozart, not the Royal Marine band. I was wrong, of course, but his patience and kindness were exemplary.)

This brings me to my first major issue regarding Orwell. Given his groundbreaking concern for the conditions in which so many people suffered in the 1930s, it surprises me that he

¹ The Home Guard was the native military defense organization in Great Britain during World War II.

never mentions *Housing Problems*, *Enough to Eat?*, *Coal Face*, or such notable documentaries as *Night Mail*, *The Silent Village*, and *Listen to Britain*.

My second problem that I think needs exploration is Orwell's very puzzling link with the innovative filmmaker Len Lye. One of the occupations that my colleagues and I would pursue when we had little work on our hands was running through a Moviola various outtakes and spares of films for which there was deemed no particular use. Of frequent interest were the many spares from *Morning, Noon and Night*, a film shot throughout the world but never assembled into a single film. The other was to run through Len Lye

outtakes. These were often hand-painted in a very early form of color film. Orwell wrote a fairly full note on Lye,² appended to an undated letter from Lye seeking Orwell's cooperation in making an advertising film for Shell. Otherwise, Orwell never mentions Lye – but can someone dig into the archives to explore that relationship? Was Orwell interested in Lye's unusual technique to such an extent that Lye sought his help?

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² Orwell, George. *Seeing Things as They Are*, p. 141. London: Harvill Secker, 2015.