

## The Lost World of Mitchell and Kenyon: Edwardian Britain on Film

**Review Number:**

432

**Publish date:**

Friday, 31 December, 2004

**Editor:**

Vanessa Toulmin

Simon Popple

Patrick Russell

**ISBN:**

1844570460

**Date of Publication:**

2005

**Price:**

£15.99

**Pages:**

210pp.

**Publisher:**

British Film Institute

**Place of Publication:**

London

**Reviewer:**

Simon Brown

Early and silent cinema is generally ghettoised in popular culture. Early film, British or otherwise, is mostly seen by the public on television as illustrations for documentaries and is rarely, if ever, the subject of them. Yet the study of early British cinema is the study of a still relevant, living entity. The early pioneers built an industry that still stands as an essential part of British and world culture. By 1914, filmmakers had produced feature films, made films in colour and films with sound, developed current systems of sales and distribution and more or less devised the techniques of editing which are still used today. Audiences could see these films in plush cinemas in their local areas, paying multiple ticket prices, and even buy chocolates or drinks to take in with them. The cinemas may be gone, but the buildings still remain, converted into shops, bingo halls, theatres and showrooms. Early filmmakers and audiences, and early film performers – be they actors or members of the public – are only one or two generations away. Although out of the spotlight, scholarship in the field of early British cinema has been vigorous since the important conference on early cinema put on by the British Film Institute (*bfi*) in Brighton in 1978. In the last decade, there has been an explosion in the subject, fuelled in part by the British Silent Cinema Weekend, held annually at the Broadway cinema in Nottingham

The study of early British cinema is therefore remarkably healthy, albeit fractured and fragmented. The history of British film which is being written is still appearing mostly in article form. Many of these articles are widely dispersed among obscure (some very obscure) journals. There have been a number of important

edited volumes, like the recent *Young and Innocent* (1), published by the University of Exeter Press, or the various invaluable editions arising from the Nottingham Weekend.(2) However, although these volumes contain some outstanding detailed pieces, they tend to be about disparate subjects linked around a theme and go in scope for the broad canvas rather than the sharp focus. In the recent upsurge of interest no single author has tackled the subject of early British filmmakers or the industry, and there are almost no book length studies of specific companies, apart from Richard Brown and Barry Anthony's groundbreaking study of the British Mutoscope and Biograph Company.(3) Rachael Low (4) and John Barnes (5), many years on from their initial writing, still remain the best available concentrated resources for the historian of the period. This is in part why the publication *The Lost World of Mitchell and Kenyon* has so much potential. For the first time, a book is published which is a collection of essays based around a single company, a limited time period, and a specific collection of films, offering a focussed entry point for the rigorous study and analysis of the period and one element within it.

The first line of the book makes it clear that 'the primary inspiration for this book...is the collection of films' (p. 3). The discovery of the Mitchell and Kenyon Collection (hereafter the Collection), 800 or so original camera negatives stored in three metal drums in the basement of a shop in Blackburn, is described on the back of the book as the film world's equivalent to the discovery of Tutankhamen's Tomb. In his article in the book, Tom Gunning, arguably the world's most celebrated early film historian, likens the discovery to both the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi codices, although noting that such a claim might just be an exaggeration (p. 57). Whether the Collection itself proves that important only time will tell. What is clear now is that it has, perhaps like the treasure of Tutankhamen, the power of diverse appeal and it is in this way that the Collection and the book make their most vital contribution.

In some respects using the films as the starting point could have been a retrograde step. The study of early cinema in Britain is evolving beyond its important initial phase, which was the study of the surviving films and their relation to film language and the development of storytelling techniques. The focus now is towards a more historical and analytical approach to the production, distribution and exhibition of films and the related development of cinema as an institution in the UK. Such a study opens up a whole new range of industrial, economic, sociological and cultural approaches to early cinema, exploring its relevance and importance to the changing face of British life in the Edwardian period, and the lasting influences of that change. In this scenario the style and content of the films become incidental. However, it is impossible to ignore the appearance of over 800 new films, and particularly 800 new non-fiction films. As Patrick Russell argues in his eloquent article, non-fiction has long been the poor relation within worldwide early film studies, receiving little of the focus of its seemingly more illustrious counterpart, story films. This reflects the obvious dominance of the fictional narrative film in cinema. If the telling of fictional stories is the main purpose of cinema, then the non-fiction film, particularly early examples like these with their unmoving cameras and lack of editing structure, is but a sidebar issue. The Mitchell and Kenyon films put non-fiction at the centre not just of the study of early cinema, but back at the heart of early film form.

On the one hand, therefore, they represent a wealth of new film material at a time when film studies is trying to move beyond the film text, drawing it back to a text which is new and challenging both in terms of style and content. On the other hand they link the film text squarely to the industry. The importance of this Collection to film studies at this moment in its arc is undeniable, and the *bfi*, in partnership with the National Fairground Archive and funded by a grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Board (AHRB) have made the intelligent decision to engage in a four year painstaking restoration project of the complete Collection. After some aggressive road-showing and mounting excitement, the *bfi*'s first publication on the Collection is a self-confessed 'first step on a long road to fully exploring the consequences of the discovery of this national treasure' (p. 4). As such it stands as a fascinating, thrilling, and yet at the same time frustrating read, both a vital and important addition to the canon of early film works, and a missed opportunity.

In part this is because the focus of the book is simultaneously narrow in some ways, yet general in others. The editors have two main aims which some, but not all, of the articles address. The more interesting aim, which I will come to, is an attempt to open the collection to wider social study. The first is more

constricting, which is to 'begin the process of uncovering details of the commissioning (the films), the key showmen involved in exhibiting the films and the network of venues in which they were exhibited' (p. 4). This focus of the book is therefore not just upon the films but equally upon the showmen who commissioned them. Such an emphasis, though important in terms of film history, narrows the scope considerably and sidelines both the men who made the films, and the industry that supported them. It may be useful to find out who commissioned a particular film to be made, but once the basic principal is established that showmen asked for the films to be made to be shown to local people, such information becomes predominantly a list of names, dates and places. We may learn the who, the when and the where, but the why and the how remain dancing out of reach.

Thus the weakest section of the book is the second, detailing the films as text and the films in context. Here many of the articles reflect most directly the film/commissioning showman approach. Not surprisingly the strongest articles here are by Richard Brown and Stephen Bottomore, both leading experts in the study of early cinema and both of whom attempt to relate the films and the showmen who commissioned them into a wider context. Brown proves himself as ever a master of detail, providing a superb analysis of public hall showman Sydney Carter's New Century Pictures. As Brown quite rightly says, of the three major types of exhibitors of early film in Britain – which were music hall, fairground and public hall showmen – the latter have received the least attention, representing a dead-end in exhibition as 'they did not foreshadow later practice' (p. 69). Like Brown, Bottomore is not shackled by Mitchell and Kenyon, the showmen or the Collection, and instead uses them as a springboard for a far-reaching international study of the institution of the local film. Janet McBain similarly uses the Collection only as background to a piece about the history of the local topical, and about two important early exhibitors in Scotland, George Green and George Kemp.

Given his reputation, it is not surprising that Tom Gunning is given the most difficult task of all, looking at the myriad of 'Factory Gate' films. By far the largest selection of films in the Collection can be defined as such; basically films of workers, mostly working-class, leaving their places of work, either for lunch or the end of the day. Such films were commonplace (although we would not perhaps have known that were it not for the Collection) as they were the simplest way to get large numbers of the local working-class population together in one place. The attraction of this was that these workers would then be encouraged to attend the showman's film presentations to see themselves and their friends on the screen. Instead of adopting a historical approach, Gunning's article verges on poetry, musing artfully on the 'sea of humanity' parading before the camera and what it represents for the cinema. Gunning's piece seems the most honest in the book. It is clear that he sees no logical way of analysing these almost abstract texts, so he makes observations and poses important theoretical questions, without drawing any conclusions save the fact that these films represent something exciting and important, being glimpses of a moment 'on some morning, evening or afternoon when the gates were flung open and a sea of humanity rushed out to meet, and be met, by [*sic*] the century's newest medium' (p. 57). In fact the book's second section highlights just how much the study of early non-fiction remains in its infancy. Gunning's is the sole attempt at a theory of early actuality, relying in part on his model of the cinema of attractions, which still remains remarkably durable. Yet his musings are embryonic, barely scratching the surface of the films themselves. To paraphrase Gunning, his ideas are a sea of theory continually breaking against the films. In an evocative phrase, he refers to the factory gates films as 'an unending sea of humanity continually breaking against the camera' (p. 55).

The second section therefore attempts three distinct approaches to the Collection. On a more basic level is the identification of data with the film/showman approach, then the broader industrial history as per Bottomore, Brown and McBain, and finally Gunning's poetic theory. From a film studies point of view, each approach has merits and yields useful results to varying degrees. Yet ultimately the book is most successful by moving away from film studies altogether and opening the Collection to an interdisciplinary analysis.

Thus the third section of the book looks at the films as historical evidence. The abundance of similar subject matter in the films, which again Russell perceptively recognises as giving immense *depth* to the Collection, has allowed various social historians to explore their own diverse subjects with considerably more visual evidence than they had before. There are pieces by historians of street and ceremonial processions, the seaside holiday, football and transport. Andrew Prescott's piece is a model example, using a film of a 1902

Lady Godiva procession in Coventry as a start and end point for a fascinating discussion of the class war which raged around the centuries old Godiva procession from the mid nineteenth century, and illustrating how, as a result, it became a ‘mish-mash of low-level historical pageantry...and trade exhibition’ (p. 132). Here the discovered film provides the visual evidence to draw a convincing conclusion from the wealth of printed sources which Prescott uses, and ably demonstrates the use of the Collection to social historians, whilst remaining an interest piece in its own right. Similarly John Widdowson’s fascinating account of calendar customs chronicles the problems with recycled, second hand and often judgemental secondary sources, before embracing the primary visual evidence of the Collection like a kid in a candy store. Unfortunately, unlike Prescott, Widdowson’s analysis says more about the content of the films than the context, detailing for example the content of a 1900 film of egg-rolling on Easter Monday, without fully explaining how the evidence demonstrates that ‘the celebrations in the early 1900s were somewhat different [than in recent times]’ (p. 140). John Walton’s analysis of the seaside films, on the other hand, teases remarkable details of the class and social make-ups of the groups on view in the films that he selects. His analysis of the class and age implications of facial hair and hats, though it sounds amusing put this way, is a model example of the kind of questions that the Collection can raise and help to answer.

Sections two and three therefore provide the main theoretical approaches to the films. The opening section is by contrast mostly background, and consists of three papers, one on Mitchell and Kenyon themselves, one on the discovery, archiving and restoration of the films, and one on the technology of the film business at the time that the films in the Collection were made. Already quoted, Patrick Russell presents a thoughtful and impassioned study not only of the process of archiving (which all too often is a source of conflict between academics and archivists as titles are unavailable through being badly deteriorated or worse, because of funding issues), but also of the potential value of the Collection and the project to the film community and to the world at large. Less successful is the first piece, which presents a regrettably brief overview of the two central figures in the book, Sagar Mitchell and James Kenyon. Indeed Mitchell and Kenyon themselves are the most significant absence from the entire endeavour. Admittedly the article, combined with that of Leo Enticknap’s which notes some of the cameras and lenses that they used, at least says more about them than was previously available. Before this they were little more than a footnote in film history. But the article is more of an introduction to their relationship with their commissioning showmen than a serious study of their business or their place in history. This is undoubtedly the book’s gravest error. There are a great many pioneer filmmakers and companies who to this day remain footnotes in history, and a great many more who would have remained so were it not for dedicated research by scholars. The Mitchell and Kenyon Collection may have taken the spotlight, but not the men themselves. We learn nothing of their business. Was it just the two of them, or did they have any employees? What kind of capital did they have? If they were travelling around, how did they print their films? Did they do any other business, for example printing for other filmmakers who were making films in the local area? Certainly other filmmakers were operating in the North East. One of the films clearly shows Cecil Hepworth, a London-based producer, setting up his camera to film Boer War hero Lord Robert’s visit to Manchester in 1901. What then was Mitchell and Kenyon’s place in the wider British industry and, indeed, the wider filming of local subjects? Such questions are not so much unanswered as unacknowledged.

This is clearly a significant omission, but not altogether catastrophic. More importantly the book opens up the value of a film collection to social historians, and explores the possibility of an interdisciplinary approach to this Collection. Perhaps this is the first step to considering an interdisciplinary approach to early British film studies in general. Perhaps from here we can consider not just social history but also urban history or economic history interacting with early film scholarship. To do that we need to go significantly beyond the films, almost to the point of abandoning them, and this is not what this book sets out to do. The introduction states clearly that the book marks the conclusion of the Mitchell and Kenyon project, which was a unique collaboration between an archive and the academic community (p. 5). As a conclusion, the book is frankly disappointing, as it was bound to be, since as an end result one cannot help but lament what is *not* considered here and not likely to be considered elsewhere unless some individual scholar takes it upon him or herself to do so. But as a *beginning* the book seems much more hopeful. It represents a collaboration between archivists, social historians, film historians and, in its wider context, television and popular culture

through the BBC's three part series on the Collection. So *The Lost World of Mitchell and Kenyon* perhaps offers a map for the road ahead, aligning the study of silent British cinema with other disciplines, drawing it into a wider sphere of public consciousness and academic debate, and perhaps finally allowing the rich study of the early growth of the single most important industry of the twentieth century out of its fractured ghetto and into the light. In the meantime, the book itself remains what one could only have expected it to be but rather hoped it would not be: a sometimes illuminating, sometimes irritating collection of essays, held together not by a concrete approach based on theoretical discourse, but *only* by the shared subject of a single company, a limited time period, and a specific collection of films.

## Notes

1. *Young and Innocent? The Cinema in Britain 1896–1930*, ed. Andrew Higson (Exeter, 2002).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. *Pimples, Pranks and Pratsfalls: British Film Comedy Before 1930*, ed. Alan Burton and Laraine Porter (Trowbridge, 2000); *The Showman, The Spectacle and the Two Minute Silence: Performing British Cinema Before 1930*, ed. Alan Burton and Laraine Porter (Trowbridge, 2001); *Crossing the Pond: Anglo-American Film Relations Before 1930*, ed. Alan Burton and Laraine Porter (Trowbridge, 2002); *Scene Stealing: Sources for British Cinema Before 1930*, ed. Alan Burton and Laraine Porter (Trowbridge, 2003).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. *A Victorian Film Enterprise: The British Mutoscope and Biograph Company* by Barry Anthony and Richard Brown (Trowbridge, 1999).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Rachael Low and Roger Manvell, *The History of the British Film 1896–1906* (1948); Rachael Low, *The History of the British Film 1906–1914* (1949); Rachael Low, *The History of the British Film 1914–1918* (1950); Rachael Low, *The History of the British Film 1918–1929* (1971); Rachael Low, *The History of the British Film 1929–1939: Filmmaking in 1930s Britain* (1985); Rachael Low, *Documentary and Educational Films of the 1930s* (1979); Rachael Low, *Film of Comment and Persuasion of the 1930s* (1979).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. John Barnes, *The Beginnings of the Cinema in England 1894–1901*: vol. i, *1894–1896* (revised edn., Exeter, 1998); vol. ii, *Jubilee Year 1897* (1983); vol. iii, *The Rise of the Photoplay 1898* (1983); vol. iv, *Filming the Boer War* (1992); vol. v, *1900* (Exeter, 1997).[Back to \(5\)](#)

---

**Source URL:** <https://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/432>

## Links

[1] <https://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/2398>