

THE PENGUIN FILM REVIEW

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ONE SHILLING AND SIXPENCE

THOSE WERE THE DAYS

REMINISCENCES BY A PIONEER OF THE EARLIEST DAYS
OF CINEMATOGRAPHY

CECIL HEPWORTH

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WHEN one wants to talk about the early days of film-making it is extremely difficult to know where to begin. You know so much already about present-day methods; about producers, directors, actors and actresses, camera-men, art directors, technicians, electricians, musicians, cutting-room experts and continuity girls, that it is practically impossible for you to visualise a time when not one of these people existed. And yet we made films – of a sort. Crude they were in the extreme, but we like to think that their halting steps led gradually to better things and pointed in the end to that near perfection which is your heritage to-day.

I think I must begin with the Royal Polytechnic Institution in London's Upper Regent Street. If that were in existence now, it would be about 120 years old, but I am thinking of some sixty-five years ago, when it was to me, and to thousands of other small boys, the place of our utter delight. For gathered under that one roof were examples of all the latest scientific achievements of the day. There was a model electric railway with trains that ran all by themselves, and alongside that railway were a couple of Wheels of Life, Zoetropes, which gave movement to drawings of living figures. There was a famous automaton which walked a tight rope along the whole length of the great hall – I never found out how that was done. There was a monster induction coil giving a spark which they said would kill a horse, and a huge frictional electricity machine from which, turning it

slowly, you could draw miniature lightning into your small and rather scared knuckles. And then for sixpence you could take your seat with a dozen other small boys in the big Diving Bell and be completely submerged, with your feet dangling just above the surface of the water which the contained air was pressing down. I have heard it said (with complete disregard of the truth) that the band played particularly loudly while the diving bell was going down, so as to smother the screams of the drowning people inside!

In the optical theatre, which was a notable part of the old Polytechnic, all that was known of magic-lantern projection was demonstrated to the full, and in its operating-room, which, I remember, ran the whole width of the theatre, some twelve or more lanterns were installed, many of them using hand-painted slides, not photographs, of various sizes up to ten inches in diameter. Beale's Choreutoscope was shown here frequently (an early form of very crude Living Pictures), and there were many other optical devices of great popular appeal. In this theatre there were daily lectures, mildly instructional but always entertaining, by such men as B. J. Malden, my own father T. C. Hepworth and Professor Pepper. Here the famous 'Pepper's Ghost' was born, also the very clever ghost illusion invented by J. J. Walker, the organ builder. Indeed, the very air about that spot is filled with ghosts for those whose memories will carry back so far. I am told that on the day the old Polytechnic was closed for ever, I was found, a very forlorn little boy, lying on the stone steps before the closed front door, weeping my heart out.

Who can doubt that if the old Polytechnic had lived it would have been the very place to have welcomed and honoured the new art-science which was destined, though no one knew it then, to be the greatest medium for education and entertainment the world has ever known? It seems almost like a sensate act of fate that when a clever Frenchman was searching London for a suitable hall in which to exhibit his new invention of Living Photo-

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graphs, he should have drifted to one built on that very spot and set up his apparatus there.

The name of that Frenchman was Louis Lumière: the date, 20 Feb., 1896.

That was the date of the first public showing of films in this country. Without counting some earlier, very brave, but not successful attempts; without counting many inventors' pipe-dreams which never came to birth, that was, so to speak, the official birthday of the cinematograph here.

I am not going to attempt to delve into the actual history of cinematography, partly because the history of an invention is, for most people, very dry and uninteresting; partly because I don't myself know much about it - it is so largely a matter of vague rumour and conflicting memories - and partly because the real interest starts with the showing upon a screen in a public assembly. But it is not to be supposed that Lumière is to have the whole credit, or anything like it. The courage of the early experimenters, even the pipe-dreamers who only conceived but went no further, all contributed something - and who knows that it wasn't important? - to that notable birthday.

Me? I had no share in it. There was nothing of courage in what I did. It was always just a lark for me. Even now, after fifty years of it, what little I do is still something of a lark! I was suckled on amy acetate and reared on celluloid.

Did I say the beginners were very crude? Here is an example of it. The stage was a back garden at Walton-on-Thames. The scenery was three flats painted by me. It represented the side wall of a little house with a practicable window. I (the only actor), as a burglar with a black beard, climbed in at the window (scene 1) and climbed out again with the swag (scene 3). Then the three flats were turned round, for the interior of the same house was painted thereon, and the burglar was seen inside (scene 2). It was, I think, the first time that a 'story' had been produced in separate scenes. The drawback was that in the middle scene the burglar was clean-shaven, for in the excitement of changing the

scenery I had entirely forgotten to put on my beard. We held a little inquest on it afterwards and decided that it wasn't sufficiently important to warrant a re-take, and though we sold many copies we never had a complaint!

There were only two or three of us in the little company at Walton, and we did everything ourselves. First we thought of a story; then we painted the scenery if it wasn't all open air, as it usually was. Then we acted and photographed it, the one who was not acting turning the handle. Then we developed and printed it, and took it out to our fair-ground customers - there were no 'Electric Palaces' in those days, not even converted shops. After that we reassembled and put our heads together to think of another story.

Story pictures were only part of our output. For instance, I photographed Queen Victoria's visit to Dublin, and that was No. 96 in our catalogue!

A very great deal of what would now be called News-Reel material was made by the little company from Walton and helped to swell our catalogue, and in among it we made trick pictures, comics, dramas (rather small ones at first), and almost every kind of film you could think of. And while we were gradually building up from the crudity of the first fifty-footers (showing-time, fifty seconds) to bigger, better, and more worth-while pictures, other people were feeling their way from the circus tent, through the village hall, the converted shop, and the glaring 'Electric Palace' towards the comfort and magnificence of the modern picture theatre. I had a tiny share in that movement too, for before I even dreamed of making pictures myself I bought a terrible mechanism for a guinea, fitted it on to a limelight lantern and, with half a dozen throw-out forty-foot films of R. W. Paul's and about a hundred lantern slides of my own, I toured the country and gave an hour and a half's entertainment in church rooms, mechanics' institutes, and the like. It took some little ingenuity to make those six miserable little films fill out the time. I showed them, repeated them, showed them backwards,

showed them again and argued with the people in them or stopped them in peculiarly awkward attitudes. Anyway, I got away with it and had many repeat engagements, building up the repertoire with the money I earned.

I thank the special providence who looks after amateurs and fools for the fact that I never had an accident, for my little machine was set up on a borrowed table in the middle of the audience, and there were no safety precautions of any kind.

Once, when I had progressed to the dignity of many more films, joined together and wound upon a spool, I was showing from the very front of the gallery in a chapel of some kind, turning the handle for the films and talking through my hat - well, lecturing, between whiles. About the middle of the show the take-up spool fell off its spindle and dived into the audience below, unwinding as it went. I had to haul the film in hand over hand talking all the time. Meanwhile, a terribly anxious man, the friend who had engaged me, kept calling in a loud whisper: 'Tell Cecil not to strike a match. Tell Cecil not to strike a match.' A boy from downstairs brought me my empty spool with a sad tale of an irate gentleman immediately beneath me who had two lovely tram-lines cut on his bald head by the edges of my spool.

My brief mention a moment ago of R. W. Paul and his basket of throw-out films will have suggested to you that there were other film-makers before I started. ... Indeed, I was by no means the first, although I was among the early ones. It is a strange coincidence, and one which must be carefully noted by historians, that Paul actually showed in London some films of his own make on the same day that Lumière gave his first exhibition at the Polytechnic. But Paul's show was a private one and, besides, as he freely admitted to me, his pictures were not as good or as steady as those of the Frenchman.

The question of steadiness is important. It is, of course, chiefly a matter of the accuracy of the perforations down the edges of the film by which it is drawn through the mechanism. Lumière used one pair of holes per frame. Moreover, he used the

same pair for taking, printing, and projecting, and it mattered very little, therefore, whether the holes were very really accurately spaced. Paul and the other Englishmen used the four-hole perforation inherited from Edison, and most of the early English films were dreadfully unsteady. It showed up alarmingly on 'scenics' – rivers and hills, and so on. It was said at the time that thus the Scriptures were fulfilled and the mountains skipped about like young rams.

One of my cherished possessions is an early film of Paul's of the Race for the Derby in 1896 – Persimmon's Derby. It is interesting rather than good. The last time I used it in public an old showman who had been in the audience came up to me afterwards and pointed out, what I hadn't noticed, that all the policemen in the picture were wearing beards. I asked him how it was that he seemed to know more about the picture than I did myself, though I had shown it so often. And then the old rascal unblushingly admitted that he had shown it not only for the Derby of 1896, which it really was, but for eight succeeding Derbys afterwards.

Many strange things happened in those early days, and sometimes one had to think pretty quickly to meet an unexpected situation. I was giving my lecture once in a large hall built underneath a chapel. My apparatus was set up as usual in the heart of the audience, and while I was waiting beside it for the hour to strike when I was to begin, the dear old parson came and sat down beside me. He said he was quite sure that my entertainment was everything that it ought to be, but he knew I would understand that, as shepherd of his little flock, it was his duty to make doubly certain and would I let him see my list of pictures. So I handed him the list and watched him mentally ticking off each item until he came to the pick of the whole bunch, a hand-coloured film of Loie Fuller in her famous serpentine dance. He said at once that he could not allow that – a vulgar music-hall actress. I said rather indignantly that there was nothing vulgar about it; that it was indeed a really beautiful and artistic pro-

objection, but he was adamant and insisted that it must be omitted. Then I had to begin. Apart from my reluctance to leave out my best picture, I was faced with the practical difficulty of how to do it. For this was the last picture but one on the spool. There was no earthly means of getting rid of it except by running it through in darkness, and I didn't think the little flock would stand for that. Then, just as I came to the danger-point, I had a sudden brainwave. I announced the film as 'Salome Dancing before Herod'. Everyone was delighted. Especially the parson. He said in his nice little speech afterwards that he thought it was a particularly happy idea to introduce a little touch of Bible history into an otherwise wholly secular entertainment.

And he added that he had no idea that the cheenimartograph had been invented so long!