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## TAKING LONDON TO THE WORLD: ROBERT PAUL SHOWS HIS NATIVE CITY IN MOTION

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This year marks the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Robert Paul.<sup>1</sup> It's not an anniversary that most of Britain seems ready to celebrate, or even notice; so I've taken it upon myself to try to spread awareness of someone who I think should be appreciated alongside our familiar gallery of Victorian scientific and engineering heroes: Faraday, Maxwell, Brunel, Stephenson. My proposal is, in brief, that Robert Paul should be recognised as the moving-picture pioneer who first realised the potential of the new apparatus to, in his own words, produce 'BREATHLESS SENSATION, LAUGHTER AND TEARS', by means of telling tales 'with such clearness, brilliancy and telling effect that the attention of the beholders should be riveted'.<sup>2</sup>

This is not to say that Paul was the only significant moving-picture pioneer, even in Britain. There were a number who came before him, whose reputations have fluctuated over the course of time – Philippe De Louthembourg, Louis Le Prince, Wordsworth Donisthorpe, William Friese-Greene. But Paul owed nothing directly to any of these. He did, however, owe a great deal to Thomas Edison, to Edison's employee WKL Dickson, and to Birt Acres, and to the luck of being in the right place at the right time. But what he achieved, especially between 1896 and 1998, really was the beginning of cinema as we know it today... more so, I would argue, than the work of either Louis Lumière or Edison.

Having nailed my colours to the mast, I want to use this evening's lecture, which is part of a series on 'Screening London', to focus on one aspect of Paul's achievement. This is how he tackled the subject of his native city, bringing it to the screen and sending its images around the world. You might assume that this was far from a conscious decision – any more than, say, the Lumières intended to show their native Lyon in the first films demonstrating their Cinématographe. But I have a strong feeling that Paul did realise he was showing London in a new, dynamic way. And distinctively London subjects formed the larger part of his business until at least 1900.

Let me first sketch Paul's personal background, which made him a quintessential Londoner of a new era. He was born in October 1869, in a street off Holloway Road called at this time 'Albion Road'. His father would later be described as a 'ship-owner', and he did eventually co-own or manage a small fleet of merchant ships engaged in the Baltic trade. But when Robert was born he was still a 'merchant clerk' in the city, married to the daughter of a clergyman, who had been born while her father was living in France. There would be four more children, but none seem to have benefitted from the same educational opportunities as Robert, who studied first at the City of London School, and then at the City & Guilds' new Finsbury Technical College.

Both of these represented new opportunities, for the family and for Robert. The City of London School had just moved into handsome new premises, on the Embankment near Blackfriars Bridge, when Robert was part of the first intake of pupils. From here, he would go to the even newer Finsbury Technical College in Leonard Street, which had been created by the City & Guilds to address Britain's poor level of technical and scientific education. Here he would study electrical science and engineering in the late 1880s, under some of the leading names in this new field, such as William Ayrton, whose designs got him started as an instrument maker in Hatton garden in 1891.



It was while plying this trade that fate intervened in 1894. Two Greek-American entrepreneurs, Georgiades and Tragides, were directed to his premises by a young friend of Paul's, Henry Short (actually the son of a neighbouring Hatton Garden instrument maker), and they commissioned him to manufacture replicas of Edison's Kinetoscope. Illegal, you might think, as Paul did initially. But it transpired that Edison had not extended his US patent to cover other countries, so copying the machines was not infringing any patent, although passing these off as Edison devices was, which would lead to Georgiades and Tragides being prosecuted for 'passing off', although not Paul, who was merely supplying them. However, before long he was manufacturing and operating Kinetoscopes in his own right, which was how he got into moving pictures, as part of the first 1894 intake.

But his business depended on a continuing supply of Edison's subjects, or films, which was not forthcoming. So Paul was forced to find a collaborator, who could help him create a camera to make his own. Once again, Henry Short obliged, and introduced him to a Barnet-based photographer, Birt Acres, and together they created a workable camera, which was used to make Britain's first moving pictures – with Henry Short starring as the young man in cricket whites in their first demonstration.

I'm not going to describe here the difficult – and later contested – relationship between Acres and Paul, which produced Britain's first films. Suffice to say, they made about fifteen subjects for the kinetoscope, some of which both of them continued to show well into the first year of projected pictures, 1896. But what I want to evoke is the way that Paul was 'showing his native city to the world'. Not only had he been completely formed and educated by it, but it was – as Jonathan Schneer declared in 1999 – 'the imperial Metropolis'.<sup>3</sup> Lines of force and sentiment radiated out from it, and focused into it.

Now it's always a disappointment to film and media historians like myself that general historians pay so little attention to what we think has animated so much of the modern era. So Schneer, for instance, has one line about 'biographs – primitive projectors casting war photographs upon a screen' in 1900<sup>2</sup>. By 1900, there was a great deal more than 'primitive projectors' at work around the city. Paul alone had operated kinetoscopes in several locations as early as 1895, showing films that he and Acres had produced. And of the 15 we know about at least five showed typical Victorian street life – ARREST OF A PICKPOCKET, COMIC SHOE BLACK, PERFORMING BEARS, SKIRT DANCERS, LONDON STREET SCENE – with two more of great sporting events (Derby and Boat race), and a disputed scene of an affray in what is definitely a London street (FOOTPADS).

When Paul started making his own films in 1896, he shows BLACKFRIARS BRIDGE, with old school; HAMPSTEAD HEATH ON A BANK-HOLIDAY, COMIC COSTUME RACE (Music-hall sports day, Herne Hill); CHILDREN AT PLAY in Lambeth, WESTMINSTER STREET TRAFFIC, a royal wedding (PRINCESS MAUD), and NELSON DOCK. He also went to some trouble to show the most popular and distinctive entertainment in the city: the music halls, where he himself is showing films nightly. And it's thanks to encouragement from the manager of the Alhambra, Alfred Moul, to refresh his programme that Paul takes dancers from the theatre troupe onto the roof to shoot THE SOLDIER'S COURTSHIP in April.

This ground-breaking and very successful film – which I'm delighted to be able to show you as restored by the Cineteca Nazionale in Rome – took Paul to a new stage in his, and indeed in world filmmaking. Capitalising on the lively style of music-hall performance, it must have pointed him towards a new direction in acted film. The fact that one of its performers, Ellen Daws or Audas, would become his wife a year later probably reinforced this awareness, that 'animated photography' could not remain at the level of merely showing the city's streets in motion. Another film based on a stage performance appeared in the same year: 2AM OF THE HUSBAND'S RETURN, based on a popular play then running on the London stage.

In 1897, he would continue to show the sights of London: TRAFFIC ON TOWER BRIDGE, FOUNTAINS IN TRAFALGAR SQUARE, CARTING SNOW IN THE WEST END, PELICANS AT THE ZOO. But the climax of that year's filmmaking was undoubtedly Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in June. Unlike her earlier Golden Jubilee, which took the form of a banquet of fellow-monarchs rom around Europe, this was conceived by the Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain as a celebration of the empire itself, with troops, local nobility and premiers from all of Britain's overseas territories. And because it took the inspired form of a gigantic procession, snaking around the centre of London, it was eminently suited to the new medium.<sup>4</sup>



Film companies flocked to compete for access, booking vantage points around the route of the procession, with Paul deploying two cameras, one of which he operated himself. He would publish a set of twelve films covering all seventeen contingents that made up the procession, with the diminutive figure of Victoria – too infirm to mount the steps of St Pauls, but received at the bottom by the clergy – distantly visible in her carriage. The contrast between this image, made dynamic by its place as the focus of a vast moving cortege, and the static official Jubilee portrait speaks volumes about how images of royalty would be changed by the medium of film.

The year following the Jubilee, which Paul later admitted saw a downturn in public interest in film, brought an emphasis in his output on the River Thames, seen across a series of films from the Embankment to Greenwich. Being on the river also allowed him to be present when disaster followed the launch of HMS ALBION at Blackwall in June 1898, with spectators swept into the water by collapsing scaffolding. When he was attacked for releasing film of the disaster by his former partner Birt Acres, Paul defended himself by noting that he was able to help with the rescue, while his camera ran automatically on battery power. The press reported that a music-hall screening of this film was greeted with reverence, and helped raise money for victims' relatives, thus marking a key early moment in the continuing debate about the role of film in showing tragedy.

Two other imperial subjects from 1898, TROOPING THE COLOUR and THE SIRDAR ARRIVING AT GUILDHALL, which showed General Kitchener being feted after his victory in the Sudan, seem today almost to anticipate the war that erupted at the year's end in Transvaal – a war that would provide a sharp reminder of Britain's imperial vulnerability. Paul, however, had already decided that filming the sights of London was no longer enough. So he and his wife Ellen took the bold step of buying fields in New Southgate, then on the edge of London, and not yet formalised as Muswell Hill, to build what would become a prototype 'film studio'.

By October of that year, Paul had assembled 'a staff of Artists and Photographers' at this new studio, and was ready to announce in the showman's paper, *The Era*, 'a series of eighty animated Photographs, each of which tells a tale, whether Comic, Pathetic or Dramatic... with such clearness, brilliancy and telling effect that the attention of the beholders should be riveted'. Some of these, we know from catalogue descriptions (since few of the actual films survive), included the first multi-scene films made anywhere, with developed sequential narratives that would indeed launch a new phase of cinema. And what we see of London in their exterior scenes is now the growing suburb of Muswell Hill rather than the city centre.

We know that the familiar images of 'monumental' London would continue to have a special significance for distant audiences, especially around the empire. Paul's and others' Diamond Jubilee films were eagerly viewed in Australia, Canada, India – just as his film of the 1903 coronation Durbar in Delhi would be welcomed in Britain. Film, I want to claim, already played a greater part in strengthening, and *modernising*, Imperial connections than many historians have realised.<sup>5</sup> But we have relatively little actual evidence of this from letters of memoirs – which is no doubt why it has been neglected by conventional historians. For some insight into the personal, indeed psychic significance of film seen in remote places, it may be necessary to look at Kipling's enigmatic story *Mrs Bathurst* (1904), which captures the ultimately tragic pathos of viewing London from afar. Another potentially useful contemporary source might be Jules Romains' essay 'The Crowd at the Cinematograph' (1911), an extraordinary phenomenology of the 'group dream' that grips a cinema audience.<sup>6</sup>

However, when the Anglo-Boer war broke out, film would play a significant part in connecting the distant Cape with the mother country, and with the rest of the empire that had rallied to support Britain. Britain, certainly, was profoundly affected by this conflict; and so too was the emerging institution of cinema. But that's another story.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See blog: <https://wordpress.com/posts/paulsanimatographworks.wordpress.com>

<sup>2</sup> For more on celebrating the Paul anniversary, listen to BBC Radio Four *Film Programme* podcast: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b006r5jt/episodes/downloads> [Rosamund Pike episode at 27.45"]



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<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Schneer, *London 1900: The Imperial Metropolis* (Yale, 1999)

<sup>4</sup> See my chapter, "A very wonderful process": Queen Victoria, photography and film at the fin-de-siecle', in Mandy Merck, ed., *The British Monarchy on Screen* (Manchester University Press, 2016)

<sup>5</sup> See my article, "The Captains and the Kings Depart": Imperial Arrival and Departure in early film' in Colin MacCabe and Lee Grieveson, eds., *Empire and Film* (British Film Institute, 2011)

<sup>6</sup> Jules Romains, 'The Crowd at the Cinematograph', in Richard Abel, ed., *French Film Theory and Criticism: A History/ Anthology*, vol 1, 1907-29 (Princeton University Press, 1988)

<sup>7</sup> For more on Paul's diverse activities during the Boer war, see my forthcoming *Robert Paul and the Origins of British Cinema* (Chicago University Press, 2019)