

# Narratives of the People's War in British film, 1940 – 1958

Damian Thomson

A thesis submitted for the degree of *Master of Arts* at  
Monash University in 2015

Film, Media and Communications HDR Program

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A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large, stylized initial 'D' followed by a series of loops and a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Date: 19 May 2015

## Abstract

The cinematic narrative of a 'People's War' is often seen to represent either a groundswell of liberal sentiment in wartime Britain, or a pure exercise in propaganda employed by the governing classes, offering merely the *illusion* of radical change. I argue that neither of these interpretations adequately do justice to the multi-faceted nature of the People's War narrative, which was at the same time organic and cultivated; both liberal and conservative. The People's War was not a homogenous concept; rather it was the site of debates around the nature of postwar British society. It reflected a broad desire for postwar change, but also conflicting views about the nature of this change. Even where these tensions around the People's War have been acknowledged, I argue they have been misunderstood as class tensions when in fact they are chiefly ideological. They stemmed more from a clash between liberal and conservative postwar desires than they did from a conflict between classes. Indeed, issues of class tension are far less central to the People's War than is often assumed. Closer inspection of the wartime films considered by this thesis reveals the People's War to be in many respects a middle-class narrative that did not disappear altogether after 1945 as is often claimed. Instead, it continued to provide a vehicle for the middle classes to engage in debates around how the wartime experience should influence postwar society into the 1950s.

While many histories of British cinema interpret the war films of the 1950s as a middle-class denial of the People's War and its radical promise, I demonstrate that 1950s war films continued to engage with a number of key themes of the People's War. Far from being *written out* by the middle classes during the 1950s, the People's War narrative evolves to reflect the increasing conservatism of Britain's middle classes. I demonstrate that it is only in the wake of the Suez Crisis in 1956 that filmmakers begin to shift away from the People's War narrative, as Britain grapples with both the geopolitical fallout from Suez and the changing demands of a younger generation for whom the Second World War lacks immediacy and relevance.

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## Acknowledgements

In 1995 England were playing Australia in the Ashes and the English Batsman Mike Gatting scored a century after having endured a rather lean run of form. Shortly after this feat, one wag produced a banner which read 'Mike Gatting's century: Mary MacKillop's second miracle!' (Mary MacKillop was an Australian candidate for sainthood at that time). Now that Mary has pulled the appropriate strings at the Vatican, it may be gilding the lily somewhat to suggest this, but I am prepared, nonetheless, to offer up this thesis as her third.

This is not to suggest that completion of my thesis has been achieved through overcoming any particularly Vatican-worthy obstacles: I have not had to endure fire, flood or any other extreme weather event; I have not had to battle plague or any other form of epidemic; I have not been directly obstructed by religious – or, for that matter, any form of – extremism. In fact, I cannot even claim that at any point my thesis was eaten by a dog. Moreover, completion of this thesis involved no acts of water turning into wine (though I must admit such an occurrence would have been of immense value given the sharp spike in my wine consumption during the latter stages of writing). Neither did it involve any spontaneous multiplication of fishes, bread or any other wheat-based or aquatic item.

Notwithstanding this lack of Vatican-worthy events, I feel it is still appropriate to acknowledge some of the barriers I have faced throughout this process and the substances and mind-altering people who have helped me overcome them. The main barrier was fear. Fear and surprise... Amongst the barriers were such diverse elements as fear, surprise, a lack of ruthless efficiency, an interest in only the big picture rather than the fine detail, an initial plan to begin at 1968 until I realised I had to challenge some of my fundamental assumptions, and a general aversion to completing anything. An absence of fanatical devotion to the Pope probably did not aid my cause.

At risk of being serious for a moment, however, there are some people who have

been of invaluable support and assistance to me and deserve thanks for their efforts. Chief among them, in reverse alphabetical order, are my wife Meg, who has patiently counted down the days until the phrase 'once the thesis is in' no longer has relevance (not to mention her invaluable efforts in proofreading, editing and formatting) and my supervisor Kevin Foster, who has displayed a steely resilience in the face of my undisciplined approach to writing. Also deserving of mention are my laws and my in-laws (the Thomson Deakins and the 'third-degree' Byrnes), who have offered support at every step of the way.

Professor Adam Shoemaker (in person at Monash University and in spirit from Griffith University) has been a constant source of encouragement and assistance. I am extremely fortunate to count him as a mentor and a friend. Thanks are also due to Professor Darrell Evans at Monash, for ensuring a work environment so supportive of further study, and to all the colleagues at Monash over the past four years who have feigned interest in the finer points of the People's War.

## Introduction

The notion of the Second World War as a 'People's War' is well-established in Britain's memory of the conflict (Calder 1995, p. 56). Winston Churchill himself observed that in the new era of Total War, 'the whole of the warring nations are engaged, not only soldiers, but the entire population, men, women and children,' (cited in Calder 1969, p. 17). This was a fundamental building block of British wartime propaganda, which aimed to show 'that rich and poor, civilians and fighters were "all in it together"' (Calder 1995, p. 56). Wartime films would play a key role in promoting this (Aldgate & Richards 1986, p. 4; Higson 1995, p. 213).

Yet the 'People's War' embodied more than just a rousing depiction of national unity and civilian participation in the conflict in order to achieve a particular wartime propaganda objective. In his seminal analysis, *The People's War*, Angus Calder (1969, p. 17) offered a reminder that '[t]hose who made the "People's War" a slogan argued that the war could promote a revolution in British society'. Calder set out to challenge the overwhelming middle-class focus of Britain's dominant cultural memory of the war. He pointed to the ways in which the war had disrupted the established social structures and the opportunity this presented for Britain's postwar leadership to focus on – and address – many of the inequities that marked British society.

This thesis traces the development of the People's War narrative in British film throughout the 1940s and 1950s, looking at the ways in which this narrative provided a vehicle for filmmakers of all political persuasions to outline their vision for Britain's future. I argue that the People's War has often been misunderstood as a wholly liberal narrative and elements of conservatism within many wartime films have been overlooked. The wartime films make clear that there was widespread understanding of the unique opportunity offered by the war to re-examine the fabric of British society. But they also demonstrate that the desire to reinforce traditional social and political

structures remained strong, even amongst those who also desired some form of change.

At the same time, the emphasis placed upon the conservatism of 1950s war films has ignored their more liberal aspects. While it is true that the late 1940s and 1950s saw an overall trend towards conservatism in British war films, they continue to support some of the more progressive aspects of the People's War narrative. Many contain strong arguments in favour of meritocracy, for example, while some even display a willingness to question the values wartime Britain fought for. Therefore, I argue for understanding the People's War not as a liberal wartime narrative that disappears after 1945, but as a multi-faceted narrative which was the site of ongoing debate around the nature of postwar change.

For many years after the war, film historians emphasised the organic nature of wartime cinema's adoption of the People's War narrative. They focused on the realist tradition and the ways in which wartime filmmakers were influenced by the left-wing documentary movement that emerged in Britain during the 1930s (Chapman 1999, p. 33; Murphy 2000, p. 74). From the 1980s, studies such as those undertaken by Aldgate and Richards (1986) and Chapman (1998) brought renewed attention to feature films and the more complex ways in which propaganda aims intersected with broader public aspirations, without moving away from the premise of wartime consensus. They focused on the process by which consensus was achieved, de-emphasising the distinction between 'official' and 'popular' propaganda (Aldgate & Richards, 1986).

One of the first serious challenges to this premise of consensus was offered by Neil Rattigan (2001), who unpicks the ways in which the British built a veneer of unity through film, even though significant divisions remained beneath the surface. Rattigan challenges the notion that wartime films represented a chorus of growing demand for the shared experiences of wartime to result in a more equitable postwar society:



... it might have been expected that wartime films would give some indication of an anticipated, more democratic future. Yet, I have found little evidence that films held out any such promise. The few films that might be said to have addressed, directly or indirectly, this question of a “better future” thus stand out. (Rattigan 2001, p. 17)

Rattigan’s work is significant for his willingness to adopt a more critical approach to the notion that wartime film offered a wholehearted argument in favour of radical postwar change. His contention hinges on an assertion that increased visibility of the working classes was not representative in itself of a genuine concern for their welfare, without some form of accompanying message.

Where I diverge from Rattigan’s interpretation is around his view of wartime propaganda as a tool of the governing classes. As James Chapman shows in his study of the wartime propaganda context:

... it is clear that film propaganda in wartime Britain was not simply the expression of an official ideology or point of view, but rather that it involved a range of different ideologies, discourses and institutions which all had some influence on the cinematic representation of the British at war. (1998, p. 9)

While Rattigan’s argument is compelling when applied to a film such as *In Which We Serve* (dir. Noël Coward & David Lean, 1942), where the working classes are included within a framework that does not question the existing class structure, it does not satisfactorily explain the enthusiasm with which those such as Humphrey Jennings, or the filmmakers at Ealing Studios, threw themselves into the task of representing the People’s War. Part of an emerging professional middle class, they had a quite different perspective on the People’s War to that of an ‘establishment’ figure like Noël Coward. Rattigan is correct to point out the role of wartime cinema in attempting to smooth over clear tensions within British society, but this does not in itself deny the compelling evidence offered by Aldgate and Richards (1986) of a coexisting commitment to social reform amongst many filmmakers.

Nonetheless, Rattigan's approach to reading film offers a useful starting point for this thesis. He points to the multiple and often competing meanings present within a particular film, observing that '... fictional films are often the site of contradictions – what are sometimes noted as 'symptomatic' meanings, those the film did not actually intend to raise' (Rattigan 2001, p. 20). In this manner, Rattigan tries to avoid the trap of labelling a particular film as 'for' or 'against' the concept of a People's War, noting that the films 'often resist the clarity of the academic argument' (*ibid*, p. 20). This is fundamental to my own approach as I argue that inconsistencies and multiple, apparently competing narratives can often be found within the body of work one filmmaker or sometimes within a single film. Even within studios with as recognisable and consistent a tone as Ealing, there were often internal machinations at play determining which films would get made in the first place and affecting the particular focus of a film (Burton & O'Sullivan 2009, p. 7).

In an attempt to counteract this uncertainty about a filmmaker's intent, I have adopted a contextual approach to reading film (see Chapman 2013, pp. 94-96 for an excellent summary of contextual methodologies). Whilst I cannot claim to have undertaken a comprehensive scan of surrounding primary sources in every case, wherever necessary I have sought to confirm my reading of a filmmaker's intentions through consideration of surrounding materials. For example, I look to confirm an apparent hesitation by Humphrey Jennings to embrace industrial Britain, through examining his writings as well as his catalogue of films. In another case, looking to Peter Ustinov's autobiography helps clarify that a fleeting joke in *School for Secrets* at the expense of the trade unions reflects a frustration with the obstructionist tendencies seeming to pervade Austerity Britain.

It is rather surprising to find that although the term 'People's War' enjoys such widespread usage, it is often used without clear definition. Thus a key purpose of my first chapter is to establish just what constitutes the People's War as it was represented in film. I argue that the People's War cannot be understood as a homogenous narrative. Instead, it represents numerous competing sets of ideals put forward as a compromise

to satisfy the wartime objective of consensus. Nonetheless, it is possible to establish some consistent themes within the narrative of a People's War: themes which illuminate both the elements of change *and* continuity; of tension *and* cohesion.

Chapter One proposes three themes that are common across many wartime films: the unity of the British people, the importance of 'British' values and the civilian-as-soldier. Through this analysis, I outline the ways in which these common themes created a superficially homogenous narrative of a People's War, while demonstrating the more complex reality of competing desires for postwar change. I look at a range of feature films, but concentrate on a number of films made during the period 1942-43 which best represent the key themes under discussion. These particular films most clearly represent the tussle between contrasting desires for continuity and progress within the People's War narrative. I also consider the documentary films of Humphrey Jennings, notably his 1940 work *Listen to Britain*, and demonstrate that there were many commonalities in representing the People's War across both the feature and documentary fields.

These desires were often represented visually through competing images of Britain's agrarian, rural past and urban, industrial present. As Robert Murphy describes:

Early wartime films such as *The Lion Has Wings* tried to present Britain as a modern industrial country with new industries, model housing projects and growing prosperity, but rural Britain provided more resonant images. (2000, p. 4)

Documentary filmmakers such as Humphrey Jennings and feature films such as *Millions Like Us* (dir. Frank Launder & Sidney Gilliat, 1943), showed Britain's working classes contributing to the war effort in factories or in the mines. These representations of working class life were often accompanied by the suggestion that, having done their bit during the war, the working classes were entitled to a better standard of living once victory had been achieved. But even in films such as these, overt statements of support were often accompanied by images of the rural village, or 'Deep England', which was

'the preferred imaginative microcosm of Britain' (Rattigan 2001, p. 53). The effect of this attachment to Deep England was to posit the democratic vision of a People's War within a context that was inherently stratified according to class, 'a community in which all the members live and work in a symbiotic relation with one another but in which a definite pecking order exists...' (*ibid*, p. 53).

It is plausible to suggest that at least two primary conceptions of a People's War emerge in British wartime films. Both emphasise the war's function in bringing out the best in the British people, though they are divided as to whether the nation's 'best' has come through discovering a new, egalitarian social contract or re-discovering an old one in which each man or woman knows their place. Both recognise the contribution of the working classes, though they disagree over whether this effort should be rewarded with greater self-determination. Both agree that some order of postwar change is required to rid the country of a 'Blimpish' pre-war leadership class, but there was less agreement over just who should step in to fill this void. One advocated sweeping social change and a radical democratisation of postwar Britain; the other was less interested in changing the system – merely the people running it. It was not a clear case of one vision for Britain's future set against the other, however. The various compromises inherent in producing feature films that also served a propaganda purpose ensured that aspects of both visions would often intersect within a particular film.

Chapter One concludes by emphasising that while it is possible to pick apart the veneer of unity that characterised the People's War narrative, we should not underestimate the *feeling* of common purpose that was engendered by these films at the time of their release. There may have been differences of opinion over the nature of postwar change, but the desire for change was nonetheless real.

From this moment of broad commitment to change, my second chapter traces a growing disenchantment amongst filmmakers with the way this change was playing out in postwar Britain over the period 1945-49. The films released in the first year or so after the war's end confirm a desire to fulfil the agenda of the People's War through the

Welfare State. However, without the unifying purpose of war victory, the competing desires inherent in the narrative of a People's War quickly unravel. There is clear evidence that the war reinforced many of Britain's conservative political and social institutions (Calder 1969, p. 20; Harrison 2009, p. 471). Equally, as David Kynaston points out:

... the notion that a long, arduous, ultimately victorious 'people's war' did not have to result in welfare improvements for that people, at least in the short term, is essentially ahistorical – flying in the face of the inescapable political realities of that time. (2008, p. 144)

I argue that the way in which films of the late 1940s engaged with the narrative of the People's War reflected an ongoing tension between these contradictory, yet co-existent forces.

The academic literature on British war films remains largely unconcerned with exploring the war's representation during this period. Raymond Durnat (1970, p. 83) talks of a 'five-year moratorium of war films [...]', echoing Roger Manvell's assertion that '[c]omparatively few films were made in the immediate postwar years about a war that most people wanted to forget, at least on the sphere of entertainment' (cited in Pronay 1988, p. 39). For many years one of the few exceptions to this rule was Nicholas Pronay, who offered a reminder that 'the war was seldom absent for more than two or three months from British screens ...' (*ibid*, p. 39).

In recent years, a number of studies have emerged which cover the war films of the late 1940s in greater detail (see Butler 2004; Boyce, 2012; Havardi 2014). Jeremy Havardi offers a comprehensive scan of films that represent the war during this period, though, like Pronay, the scope of his work does not permit in-depth analysis of most of the films he covers. Michael Boyce examines a number of postwar films in some depth, though his primary interest is in understanding the effects of the war upon these films, rather than how these films represented the war itself. Margaret Butler's study is the

most valuable of the three for my own research, as it analyses the ways in which notions of community were expressed in British film. She writes that 'British cinema had one major function [during wartime]: to visualise "the people's war", at the heart of which was the notion of community' (Butler 2004, p. 14). Butler's focus on community not only covers some war films made in the late 1940s, it also leads her to identify crucial aspects of nostalgia for the wartime experience emerging in the late 1940s that may be overlooked by a strict focus on war films alone. Most notably, she identifies a connection between the work of Ealing Studios through this period and ongoing tensions over how the wartime legacy might inform British society.

The films of Ealing Studios provide a narrative backbone for my second chapter. They often display a canny ability to reflect the concerns and anxieties of British citizens. After the war ended Ealing Studios maintained much of the enthusiasm for representing a cohesive community that had marked its wartime output, as films such as *The Captive Heart* (dir. Basil Dearden, 1946) offered an optimistic vision of the future. Michael Balcon later commented:

In the immediate post-war years, there was as yet no mood of cynicism; the bloodless coup of 1945 had taken place, but I think our first desire was to get rid of as many wartime restrictions and get going. The country was tired of regulations and regimentation and there was a mild anarchy in the air. In a sense our comedies were a reflection of this mood ... a safety valve for our more anti-social impulses. (cited in White 2008, p. 73)

It would not be long before cynicism set in. Ealing comedies of the late 1940s such as *Passport to Pimlico* (dir. Henry Cornelius, 1949) and *Whisky Galore* (dir. Alexander Mackendrick, 1949) capture the mood of popular frustration with the bureaucracy of the Welfare State and its accompanying petty officialdom in much the same way that wartime films had railed against the complacency of appeasement.

This trajectory of Ealing films between 1946 and 1949 helps illustrate the intrinsic middle class basis of the People's War, undermining notions of the People's War as a working class narrative which is then written out by an insecure, conservative middle class in the 1950s. Thus we begin to see that one of the core tensions within the People's War narrative is not inter-class, but rather *intra*-class. The middle-class filmmakers at Ealing were still attached to the People's War, but were struggling to accept the postwar reality borne of it. They understood popular frustrations with postwar austerity – and clearly shared them to some extent – but the individualist desires of the aspirational middle classes were at odds with Ealing's 'cosy' representations of community (Butler 2004, p. 9).

My third chapter focuses on the war's representation in British cinema of the 1950s. I emphasise the continuing presence of a People's War narrative in films made around the turn of the decade, then trace cinema's gradual shift away from the People's War, which is accelerated by the Suez Crisis of 1956. In one sense, my arguments in this chapter are hardly new: the dominant image of the war in British cinema during the 1950s is one of victory achieved by the particular qualities of British middle-class elites, fighter pilots, army and navy officers and 'boffins'. However, an overwhelming focus on the conservatism of 1950s war films has obscured a more important story: the way the war provided a vehicle for British filmmakers to grapple with their uncertainties about the postwar world and Britain's place in it.

John Ramsden (1998, p. 55) suggests the 1950s films 'betray the "People's War" feel that can be detected in at least the majority of films made between 1939 and 1945'. Sarah Street (1997, p. 84) adds further weight to this argument, claiming that while the wartime films 'demanded the cooperation of all classes', those made in the 1950s 'did not demonstrate the process of achieving consensus; instead they simply privileged the middle class and all its values unproblematically'. Similarly, Christine Geraghty (cited in Chapman 2008, p. 200) argues that 1950s war films trade the 'socially egalitarian ideology of the "people's war" for a focus on "heroic individuals who are usually middle-class good chaps"'.

Neil Rattigan (1994, p. 150) takes this argument even further, labelling the 1950s war films 'a reflection of the last-ditch effort by the dominant class to maintain its hegemony by rewriting the history of the celluloid war in its own favour'. Rattigan maintains that this conscious effort to rework the wartime narrative is prompted by a fear of the working classes' increased political and economic stake in postwar Britain (*ibid*, p. 151). Rattigan is not alone in this respect. John Ramsden (1998) arrives at a similar conclusion about the 1950s films, seeing them as a 'refocusing' of the People's War from the working classes to the middle classes. Yet these arguments misrepresent the differences between wartime films and those of the 1950s by ignoring films made during the late 1940s, in which support for the agenda of change bound up in the People's War struggled with the underlying conservatism of Britain's middle classes. Ramsden makes a similar error – even though he observes the paucity of scholarship on war films made after 1945 – concentrating only on the 1950s with no consideration of films from the preceding five years.

There is no question that class is an important factor in the 1950s war films, or that they privilege middle class values. But an emphasis on revision, rather than transition, upsets the balance of the arguments offered by Rattigan and Murphy. Margaret Butler (2004, p. 4) points out that it was the middle classes who were responsible for filmmaking during wartime, including projections of the People's War, not the working classes. So we must view with caution any suggestion that the middle classes were 'reclaiming' a central position in the cinematic narrative of victory during the 1950s. The People's War was always a middle class narrative, often suspicious of the upper classes and paternalistic towards the lower classes; torn between a desire to see social progress within Britain and a fear that, left unchecked, this progress may undermine the institutions it held dear. Far from abandoning the concept of a People's War in the 1950s, filmmakers merely reaffirmed its middle class basis.

Chapter Three examines this idea in relation to films such as Ealing's *The Cruel Sea* (dir. Charles Frend, 1953), which celebrates working class characters (provided they adopted middle-class values) and champions meritocratic leadership in the form of



Jack Hawkins' character, Captain Ericson. At the same time, the film balances this message with a distaste for the aspirational nature of those who lacked the correct pedigree (educational, in this instance, rather than strictly class). The middle class take on the People's War was concerned as much with changing those running Britain's institutions as it was with changing the institutions themselves.

While acknowledging that class was an important aspect of the how the People's War narrative evolved through the 1950s, this thesis seeks to move beyond a paradigm of class conflict in understanding its demise. As Jeffrey Richards observes:

Class is now increasingly seen by historians as a one-dimensional way of analysing and defining individuals. It is only one, and maybe not the most important one, of the bundle of identities people carry around. (1997, p. 192)

I suggest that notions of national identity and political ideology are just as important in understanding how the People's War narrative is subsumed into the narrative of Britain's Finest Hour through the 1950s. The radicalised middle-class filmmakers responsible for projecting the People's War prior to 1945 gradually revert to a more natural conservatism and it is the manner in which this movement plays out that is far more significant than any tension across classes.

Throughout the decade, a fine line existed between the desire to celebrate Britain's wartime achievements and the *need* to restate Britain's achievements to offset underlying anxieties about Britain's role as a global power. This pivotal issue, centred upon notions of social and geopolitical decline in Britain, was to have a far greater impact in many ways upon representations of the People's War than issues of class, gender or region. Throughout the mid-1950s in particular, filmmakers debated the extent to which Britain should rekindle the wartime spirit through either a strong, paternalistic and individualistic leadership, or through the consensus-based approach of middle-class bureaucracy.

My third chapter concludes by looking briefly at the effects of the Suez Crisis upon the representation of a People's War. It is ironic (or perhaps fitting) that the last rites of the People's War are delivered by Ealing Studios' last major offering, *Dunkirk* (dir. Leslie Norman, 1958), which is the final film under consideration in Chapter Three. In its attempt to reengage with the very event that connects both the People's War and *Finest Hour* narratives, *Dunkirk* confirms the triumph of the latter. Thus what we see in the 1950s is that the middle-class debates over the nature of the People's War are usurped by a climate in which the war is no longer seen as an appropriate source of inspiration for contemporary society.

While outside the scope of this thesis, a fruitful avenue for future inquiry would be to examine the demise of the People's War narrative in greater detail around the end of the 1950s. There seems to be approximately a decade-long gap from 1958-1968 where the People's War narrative disappears almost completely from British screens, before a curious rebirth in British television at the end of the 1960s. The resurrection of the People's War in TV series such as *Dad's Army* and *A Family at War* seems incongruous in the context of the growing disdain of a younger generation for their parents' obsession with the war evident, for example, in *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. The aspects of generational change here are clearly not one-dimensional and to investigate this further may shed light on the causes of the demise of the People's War narrative in the late 1950s.

## Chapter One

The Second World War is often seen by film historians to mark the beginning of a golden age for British cinema. Mainstream British cinema in the 1930s is often characterised as lifeless and unimaginative, even though cinema held great popularity for the public (see Sedgwick 2000; Richards in Ashby & Higson 2008). It is widely held that a renewed sense of social purpose created by the war precipitated a revival in mainstream British cinema, which was stirred into life principally through the influences of the 1930s documentary movement (Murphy 2000, p. 2; Glancy 2011, p. 454; Chapman 2015, p. 90).

The ways in which the Ministry of Information (Moi) exercised control over the content of wartime films have been well-documented (see Landy 1991, p. 141; Chapman 1998). It was clear that the government would need to play a role in ensuring the British public remained steadfast in their support of the war effort, and the cinema was to be a significant factor in this endeavour (Havardi 2014, p. 41). Yet the relationship between Britain's wartime government and filmmakers was not one of straightforward subservience. While somewhat tense on occasion, it was more often one of compromise-based consensus (Coultass 1989, p. 127). It was not simply a case of the government dictating a message and filmmakers obediently enacting it; the filmmakers were willing partners (Murphy 2000, p. 72). They responded to the task with enthusiasm, using the propagandist imperative of wartime ('what we are fighting for') as an impetus for introspection. The result of this introspection was what we now understand as the cinematic narrative of the People's War. It was a carefully-crafted attempt to capture the 'essence' of Britain; a universal truth about the nation that would underpin the fight against Nazism for all Britons.

Many filmmakers harboured a very real expectation that although the war was being fought *against* the Nazis, it was being fought *for* a better postwar society that would benefit the British people (see Addison 1994; also Rose 2003). Just who were the 'people' though? It is a delightfully vague term. As such, the concept of a People's War

became a convenient vehicle for filmmakers to utilise: it offered the illusion of a unified, coherent narrative, but was actually a smokescreen which masked a variety of competing objectives and visions for postwar Britain. Many filmmakers used it to argue for a new start for Britain after the war, for a society that would offer greater reward to those who had been ‘forgotten’ through the depression years. The only question was just how far this change should go, and thus who would benefit most, if Britain’s structures of social, economic and political power were to be transformed. Others used it to mount a case for continuity rather than change. Britain’s wartime experience was portrayed as the latest in a long line of historical crises overcome by a set of national characteristics that remained consistent over time.

This vision of a People’s War was articulated through three key themes, which this chapter will explore in turn: *the unity of the British people* – emphasising the ways in which the war drew people together across boundaries of class, gender and region; *the importance of British values* – suggesting a common set of interests that bound the British together; and *the civilian-as-soldier* – showing ordinary people as active combatants in the war.

## The unity of the British people

One of the key aims of British propaganda during the war was to show the British people united. As Andrew Higson writes:

One of the functions of the propaganda machine during the war years was to create an ideological climate in which the public sphere could be represented as a sphere of national interest immediately and widely recognisable as over and above any antagonistic sectional interest. (1995, p. 213)

While the films do not, in themselves, reveal the extent of British unity, they do show that the desire to represent national unity was widely held. Yet in calling attention to people of all types burying their differences and coming together, these films sharpened the focus on what those differences were.

Neil Rattigan (2001, p. 15) describes wartime Britain as an intrinsically class-based society with 'the rigid division ... along class lines [being] its key defining structure, both socially and culturally'. Hence one of the key propaganda challenges for the wartime government was to promote national unity while acknowledging these divisions. As James Chapman observes:

...the idea of a people's war in which class differences had been erased was encouraged by the government which needed to mobilise popular support for and participation in the war effort. (1998, p. 161)

From the beginning of the conflict, British films depicted a sense of common purpose and shared experience. All classes were shown to share similar values and contribute (more or less) evenly to the war effort, but the need for authenticity mandated a certain level of difference in the depiction of class. As a result it was more often class *tension* rather than class *difference* which was erased.

Noël Coward and David Lean's *In Which We Serve* (1942) was one of the most obvious examples of this. It focuses on the crew of HMS *Torrin* who survive the bombing of their ship: Kinross, the ship's Captain, Chief Petty Officer Hardy and Ordinary Seaman Blake. This upper-middle-lower class narrative structure does not shy away from the differences between classes: Neil Rattigan (2001, p. 94) notes that the film, 'far more than any other of the period, is determined to pinpoint those very class divisions and to reproduce them with a degree of accuracy that is startling and ... not a little disturbing'. Nonetheless, the film attempts to draw parallels between the wartime experiences of each class. This is highlighted by a flashback sequence in which the men each recall their most recent Christmas as they float in the water after the *Torrin's* sinking. The traditions of Christmas have the same meaning for each family, regardless of their class, and each of the men is shown to share a common bond to their ship which transcends their differences. Robert Murphy writes:

[s]ocial divisions between lower-middle class Hardy and working class Blake are easily bridged, and the fact that they inhabit a different world from their Captain hardly seems to matter as they cling to the same life-raft. (1989, p. 67)

*In Which We Serve* has since become a classic of the war film genre and one of the best-known examples of the People's War represented on screen. It now seems incongruous that at the time of its production, the MoI was uncertain about the film's propaganda value. But it does show that even within the government there was some nervousness around the public's mood for change. In addition to their uncertainty about audiences seeing the pride of the Royal Navy sunk by the Germans, the MoI also had reservations about Coward's involvement, feeling he was 'a highly unsuitable person to portray a Captain in the Royal Navy', and it was only through the personal intervention of Lord Mountbatten that the film was made (Murphy 1989, p. 72). It is difficult to disentangle concerns about Coward himself from broader concerns about the film's subject matter, but it seems likely that Coward's reputation as a high society type weighed heavily against him. When Noël Coward was sent to America in 1940, the *Sunday Express* wrote:

'Mr Coward is not the man for the job. His flippant England – cocktails, countesses, caviar – has gone. A man of the people, more in tune with the new mood of Britain, would be a better proposition for America.' (cited in Aldgate & Richards 1986, p. 190)

It is clear that Coward's approach to national unity was underpinned by a desire to maintain traditional class roles and social structures (Summerfield 2011, p. 337). *In Which We Serve* shows Britain fighting to preserve a society where each class had a clearly defined role. Leadership is provided by the upper classes and the war provides the British with a bracing reminder of this natural order:

The classes, as seen through the different class characters, may well be united in their fight ... but throughout it is clear that no matter what the lower classes think they are fighting for ... it is the upper classes who determine what they are fighting

for as well as just how they are fighting it. (Rattigan 2001, p. 94)

It is interesting to note that despite this apparent whitewashing of class tension within the film, audiences had no difficulty engaging with the story. *In Which We Serve* was remarkably successful at the box office, being the highest grossing British film of 1943; the few negative critical reactions were drowned out by an overwhelming chorus of praise for the film (MacKenzie 2006, pp. 80-81). It is imperative to keep in mind the context of the film's production here, too. The fact that the working classes were shown to play a prominent role in the war effort may have outweighed any sensitivities about them being led by the upper classes, given the preceding absence of the working class from British screens through much of the 1930s (Richards 2010, p. 4). Moreover, to emphasise the problematic nature of officers/upper classes leading, as Rattigan does, seems to place too heavy a burden on the desire for postwar change. While Coward's vision of British unity used the vehicle of the People's War to effectively deny the case for broader postwar reform, it does not prohibit the working classes benefiting through benevolent upper-class leadership. We should be careful not to assume that the lower classes' desire for improvement in their own circumstances necessarily extended to having a seat at the decision-making table.

In any case, *In Which We Serve* offered a picture of national unity without making an express connection to postwar Britain. Many wartime films, however, were more explicit in suggesting this shared experience of war should bring about change for British society in peacetime. In his postscript to the 1941 film *Love on the Dole* (dir. John Baxter), Labour MP and First Lord of the Admiralty, A. V. Alexander, argued:

Our working men and women have responded magnificently to any and every call made upon them. Their reward must be a New Britain. Never again must the unemployed become the forgotten men of peace. (cited in Aldgate & Richards 1986, pp. 14-15)

One film that engaged with this very question was *Millions Like Us* (dir. Frank Launder & Sidney Gilliat, 1943), which tells the story of women from various

backgrounds who find themselves thrown together by the circumstances of war. Described by Nigel Herwin (2008, p. 50) as 'British cinema's most sublime piece of propaganda', *Millions Like Us* is one of the key wartime films to champion the contribution of the working classes. The film is set in an aircraft parts factory and portrays the heroism of ordinary people from a range of classes. Focusing on the wartime lives of three of the women who work there, it offers a particular image of national unity in which 'the people' are working determinedly together to achieve victory, rather than being *led* there by their social betters.

Although Nigel Herwin suggests that *Millions Like Us* primarily appealed to working class females, he notes also that the film is careful 'to incorporate as broad as possible a cross-section of society into its image of the nation at work and at war' (Herwin 2008, p. 54). The scenes showing the women beginning work at the factory serve to contrast their backgrounds: Gwen, the daughter of a Welsh miner, who grew up with 'lovely damp patches of fungus blossoming on the wallpaper'; Celia, a girl-next-door type; and Jennifer, an upper-class girl whose elaborate wardrobe and beauty regime amazes her roommate at the factory hostel. The representation of the upper-class Jennifer represents a clear point of difference from a film such as *In Which We Serve*. Jennifer expresses disdain for factory life and is put down by the factory foreman, Charlie, who suggests that the concept of 'honest' work such as that in the factory is rather foreign to someone more used to West End cafés. Far from the upper classes providing natural leadership, *Millions Like Us* shows them to be a natural liability to the war effort.

Jennifer is ultimately rehabilitated and the film shows that while the upper classes may not be accustomed to hard work, when put to it they can pull their weight. The air raid scene in *Millions Like Us* demonstrates this. As the warning sounds, the female workers collect their belongings and calmly file out of the workshop and in to the air raid shelter. Charlie soon realises that Jennifer has not joined the others in the shelter and is still at her machine. After making a brief stand against leaving her work, she is summarily picked up by Charlie, slung over his shoulder and carted off to join the others. The scene perfectly captures Jennifer's growing appreciation of the importance



of her contribution, as well as the significant role played by the no-nonsense Charlie in her renaissance.

The growing attachment between Jennifer and Charlie also emphasises how the wartime environment fosters connections across class boundaries, though the film casts doubt on whether these connections can outlast the particular circumstances of war. As they sit together on a hillside, Charlie and Jennifer discuss this issue. Charlie remarks 'the world is made up of two types of people. You're one sort and I'm the other ... what's going to happen once it's over? Shall we go on like this or are we going to slide back?' The effect of any intended swipe at the upper classes is tempered by Charlie's own stubbornness. Moreover, Jennifer's 'rehabilitation', from spoilt brat to enthusiastic contributor to the war effort, suggests a chance for greater understanding across classes. Thus, while it is surprisingly candid about the fragile nature of this national unity, the film is able to resolve these tensions in a manner that demonstrates a unity to the cause over all else.

Just as significant as the film's inclusive class focus is the prominent role played in the film by women. The premise of *Millions Like Us* was perhaps the greatest challenge to British masculinity at that time: the full-scale participation of women in the work force. James Chapman (1998, pp. 201-202) has observed that the representation of women in film posed an interesting challenge in propaganda terms for filmmakers and authorities. Authorities had a clear imperative to promote the concept of women in the services, and indeed, in the workforce, affording some women opportunities they would not otherwise have had. They were also conscious of placing appropriate constraints upon this message of female emancipation:

The MoI may have been urging women into masculine occupations, and encouraging co-operation, but they were doing so on a temporary basis, for the duration of the war only, rather than seeking to encourage the possibility of more permanent social changes. (Higson 1995, p. 221)

In contrast to films such as *Millions Like Us* and *The Gentle Sex* (dir. Leslie Howard, 1943), which portray women's work actively supporting the war effort, *In Which We Serve* exemplifies the more traditional feminine values of deference and dependability. The women remain faithful to the men serving on the *Torrin*, even as they understand that the ship is a clear rival for the affections of these men, and the film takes great pains to reinforce the message that the natural female sphere revolved around considerations of home and family.

Sue Harper (1996, p. 95) claims that 'during World War II, changes in women's experience were dealt with extremely selectively', with 'official anxieties about women's employment ... filtered through films such as *Millions Like Us* which laundered contemporary problems'. In *Millions Like Us* the propagandist aims of encouraging women to participate in the war effort (and recognising that participation) are fulfilled, without detailed exploration of the longer-term effects of such a fundamental change. We should not underestimate the impact of simply showing women contributing in such a prominent fashion – the film demonstrates that these women are entirely capable of moving into the workforce, but doesn't emphasise the significance of this as much as it might.

It is arguable that the failure to resolve this issue is a clear ideological statement in favour of traditional feminine roles, though I believe that this mistakes the key message of the film. In *Millions Like Us*, the differing class backgrounds of the women are more the focus than specific questions of femininity. Both *In Which We Serve* and *Millions Like Us* emphasise how the wartime environment fostered a sense of unity across class boundaries, even if they take different approaches. *In Which We Serve* has the upper class leading the way, while in *Millions Like Us* the upper classes are naturally averse to meaningful hard work (though not beyond recognising their shortcomings and contributing to the broader community). Both films cast doubt on whether these connections can (or should) outlast the particular circumstances of war. *In Which We Serve* depicts unity without promise of postwar reward for the working class contribution; *Millions Like Us* seems to mount a clearer argument for reform, but

displays a reservation about the possibility of it, hesitating to suggest what form it should take and who might benefit.

## The importance of 'British' values

During the war, the Ministry of Information and independent filmmakers both sought to portray the distinctive qualities of British nationhood and national identity in the cinema as part of a broader discourse around *why* the British were fighting and *what* they were fighting for (Richards 1997, pp. 100-101, 199-207, 321). This was first and foremost a positive reinforcement of British values, as representative of broader democratic ideals (Aldgate & Richards 1986, p. 12). But it was also part of a conscious narrative of British superiority which saw British values as an essential component of victory over Germany.

Angus Calder (1995, pp. 59-60) suggests that one of the primary points of recognition around these British attributes was that they clearly contrasted with a set of inherently 'German' values. He identifies the contrasts in a series of binary oppositions as follows:

Freedom v tyranny

Improvisation v calculation

Volunteer spirit v drilling

Friendliness v brutality

Tolerance v persecution

Timeless landscape v mechanisation

Patience v aggression

Calm v frenzy

'A thousand years of peace' v 'the thousand year Reich dedicated to war'

This oppositional structure is illustrated in two films starring Leslie Howard: *The 49th Parallel* (dir. Michael Powell & Emeric Pressburger, 1942); and *Pimpernel Smith* (dir. Leslie Howard, 1941), a film that 'hinges on the opposition between barbarism and

civilisation' (Landy 1991, p. 131). *Pimpernel Smith* is of particular note in attempting to capture an essential British identity, articulated here through the character of Smith as adventurer who is equally familiar with art and literature, inherently peace-loving, yet when stirred into action is more than capable of fierce defence.

Another film that illustrates the contrast between these national characteristics is Alberto Cavalcanti's *Went the Day Well?* (dir. 1942), which depicts the German invasion of a sleepy English village, and the transformation of the villagers into a motley yet effective fighting unit, pitted against their unwelcome visitors (discussed in greater depth in the third section of this chapter). In this film it is not necessarily unrestrained German barbarity that is on display. Indeed, in terms of sheer brutality, one could argue that the scene in which a middle-aged British housewife kills a German soldier is unsurpassed in the film. The message offered by the film was more subtle – it underlined the cold, unfeeling and mechanistic nature of the German race. The death of the local vicar – shot as he tries to ring the church bells – is described by one of the German soldiers as 'unfortunate'; 'babies on bayonets? What would be the point?' asks another. The vicar is disposed of simply because he got in the way. Similarly, if there was a 'point' to the Germans bayoneting babies, the film suggests it would not have been beyond them. This clinical nature is further illustrated by the Germans threatening to shoot five children in retaliation for the villagers attempting to break out of the church in which they were held captive.

There is some scholarly disagreement with Calder's emphasis on these binary oppositions. Neil Rattigan (2001, p. 18) claims that while 'films were clearly being particularly and carefully constructed around certain discourses of Britain and Britishness', most wartime films 'resolutely had little or nothing to say about Germany and the Germans'. Their primary focus was simply on portraying British identity and they avoided illustrating 'the essential goodness or morality of the British as distinct from the essential evil of the Germans'.

Aside from the clear comparison laid out in the aforementioned films, it is true that

Germans are a surprisingly infrequent feature in British wartime films. Perhaps this owed to a feeling that overt comparisons were simply preaching to the converted. A Gallup poll in September 1943 found many British citizens had little or no sympathy for the German people, with 45% of respondents expressing 'hatred, bitterness or anger' (MacKenzie 2003, p. 86). Neither was the wartime cinema consumed within a cultural vacuum. Audiences could turn to a number of different sources, such as J.B. Priestley's radio broadcasts, for crystal-clear depictions of German character flaws. Irrespective of whether films offered explicit comparison to German values, it is clear that the British were presented with a set of national characteristics which formed part of an inherently 'British' identity.

Antonia Lant claims:

War produced the need for images of national identity, both on the screen and in the audience's mind, but British national identity was not simply on tap, waiting to be imaged, somehow rooted in British geology ... Instead, the stuff of national identity had to be ... transplanted from literature, painting, and history, into the cinema. (1991, p. 31)

Yet this national identity was not a unique product of the war. It tied to an established narrative of British identity that was 'constantly shifting, constantly in the process of becoming' (Higson 1995, p. 4), but was grounded in a consistent set of fundamental principles. One of the strongest evocations this identity was, in fact, closely tied to the British landscape: the image of the English countryside, or 'Deep England'. This image had become a prominent feature of British culture during the interwar period and embodied a number of deeply ingrained notions about British identity that reached across society (Calder 1991, p. 181). The image of Deep England was used in wartime film as a means of communicating British values in a way that resonated across class boundaries, though it was not necessarily a symbol that *blurred* these boundaries, as most conceptions of Deep England involved a very fixed social structure (Rattigan 2001, p. 23).

A number of wartime feature films used the imagery of Deep England to lend weight to their portrayal of British values. *Went The Day Well?* sets a German invasion in a sleepy English village to accentuate the contrast between British and German values. *Millions Like Us* combines the depiction of day-to-day working life with images of Deep England, providing an association for the viewer between the image of mundane munitions factory work and the idyllic English countryside (Herwin 2008, p. 55).

*The First of the Few* (dir. Leslie Howard, 1942) is another example, using flashbacks to detail the design of the iconic Spitfire aircraft. Mitchell, the plane's designer at the Supermarine company, 'was portrayed as an oft-misunderstood artistic genius rather than a simple technological wizard, his designs as works of art instead of merely the products of cumulative aeronautical experience' (MacKenzie 2007, p. 34). Mitchell's original inspiration for the plane is shown to come from watching a bird in flight as he sits on a grassy seaside cliff top, while his rural cottage represents a retreat from the bureaucracy that fails to appreciate the genius of his designs. The film is essentially about a mechanical war weapon, but manages to send a strong message about 'the nature of the country and the best and brightest it could produce' (MacKenzie 2007, p. 34). In other words, it was British ingenuity – fostered in the environment of Deep England – winning the war, as much as soldiering.

The documentary films of Humphrey Jennings typify this use of the English landscape for their visual evocation of nationhood, which drew inspiration from Jennings' 'love of the English countryside' and is based on 'a sense of history and culture ... and on a deep-rooted admiration for the common man' (Chapman 1998, pp. 165-6). *Listen to Britain* (dir. Humphrey Jennings, 1942) exemplifies the combination of these three ingredients to engage with the key propaganda questions of *how* Britain was fighting (stoically, cheerfully, resiliently); and *what* they were fighting for (a peaceful, democratic way of life, evoked at its core by Deep England). Images of farm labourers are interposed with images of Britain's aerial defences, juxtaposing 'natural with mechanical images, civilians with military activities, work with war, and relaxation with vigilance' (Robson 1982, p. 45).

Given the film's title, the importance of the soundtrack is clear. Of particular note is the way in which the sounds of music and industry co-exist: sometimes sharply contrasting, at other times blending seamlessly. The combinations create a paradoxical impression of Britain as a peaceful, agrarian society and, at the same time a country founded on industrial strength. Above all the film proffers an image of an inherently creative society, where technological innovation is underpinned by artistry and where culture exists at all levels. The connection to Deep England is crucial in this regard: even in the face of an obvious trend towards urbanisation across the country, underscores notions of British technological and industrial progress being rooted in an inherently peaceful nature.

In *Listen to Britain*, Jennings combines images of a range of people from different social classes with abstract symbols of the nation – Spitfires, railways, the landscape – to transcend class divisions. One of the most notable moments of the film is the sequence in which a working class music hall performance gives way to a performance by Dame Myra Hess in the National Gallery. Ironically, though the juxtaposition might be expected to illustrate the difference between the boisterous music hall and the refined setting of Hess performing a piece by Mozart, Jennings' editing emphasises connection. The merging of these two settings signifies the ways that all people could connect to a common British identity.

The connection between sound and image is a vital feature of the film, with Jennings using the soundtrack in semi-autonomous fashion to complement and, at other times, contrast with the images. Malcolm Smith describes the way in which sound is used throughout the film to provide a deeper level of meaning beyond the images:

On the level of the micro-montage, the effect of the juxtapositions is almost surreal, but coherence is provided by the seamlessness with which the juxtapositions are coated in the soundtrack, constantly fusing together images which are, by themselves, contradictory. (1985, p. 151)

This is illustrated by a number of sequences in the film. One begins with a shot of the countryside at dawn; the only sound that of the birds quietly chirping. The image then transitions to a shot of a horse and cart entering the gates of a factory at the beginning of the day, as if it had just emerged from the mist of the previous shot. The soundtrack effortlessly shifts to the quiet patter of the horse's hooves on the stone surface while the workers file through the gates. An aerial pan across the industrial city from left to right then becomes a shot of a middle-aged man in a suit walking down the street as music begins to play. The camera tracks the man's progress from right to left down the street before stopping as he turns the corner. It lingers there a moment as he walks away before suddenly the rhythm of the sequence is interrupted by three brief shots of factory chimneys, accompanied by harsh industrial noise. Then, as quickly as this has come, it is gone, replaced by a shot of a tree with its leaves fluttering gently in the breeze.

This sequence from *Listen to Britain* exemplifies the successful forging of a visual and aural narrative of the British people at war in a way that truly cut across class boundaries. Its success also resided in the fact that it was able to evoke the working class experience in a way that audiences found authentic (Chapman 1998, pp. 169-170). Critics have argued that up until the outbreak of war, depictions of the working classes in the cinema 'were limited to the comic images of music hall performers like George Formby, Gracie Fields, and Arthur Lucan's "Old Mother Riley"' (Shafer 2001, p. 4). In *Listen to Britain*, when these images do appear, notably in the transition from the music hall to the Dame Myra Hess concert, the editing renders them on an equal footing with accepted 'high culture'.

Jennings' work has often been read as highly sympathetic to the working classes, though it has also been identified with extremely conservative approaches to the People's War (Grant & Sloniowski 1998, p. 151). In fact, it is the tension between these two viewpoints that shapes films such as *Listen to Britain*, which offers an insight into the contradictions that plagued Jennings' efforts to promote the People's War. Jennings maintained an interest in the working classes from an early stage, though there was an apparent hesitation regarding his commitment to their cause. In *Listen to Britain*



Jennings points out that the interests and pursuits of the working classes are just as valid as those of the rest of the nation, but he does not go on to speculate on the implications of this for British society. *Fires Were Started* (dir. 1943) showcases the lower classes and attempts to capture their essence, but Jennings 'does not offer ... even oblique criticism of the system that places men and women in a social order they are losing their lives to maintain and protect' (Rattigan 2001, p. 50).

Perhaps the most serious consideration in many wartime films – one that had clear implications for the nature of postwar society – was a debate around the values underpinning economic, social and political power in Britain. One of the common refrains of the People's War was that the British people had been let down by their pre-war leadership and that Britain needed a new generation of leaders, underpinned by a distinct set of values. *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (dir. Michael Powell & Emeric Pressburger, 1943) presents this argument through the topical microcosm of the British army. While Powell and Pressburger's film is guarded in its criticism of the established order (and by no means represented the most extreme version of this argument), *Blimp* nonetheless appears to offer strong support for this position.

The film compares youthful exuberance and innovation – represented by the regular army's Lieutenant 'Spud' Wilson – with the entrenched habits of the older generation, in particular the Home Guard commander Major-General Clive Wynne-Candy. As the film attempts to engage with the grim paradox of 'how to reconcile Total War with any sort of decent behaviour' (Richards 1997, p. 94), the character of Wynne-Candy as Colonel Blimp is used to emphasise out-dated British attitudes. The film contains a number of pointed references to the failure of Candy's generation to adequately prepare for, or realise, the seriousness of this war. This is demonstrated by Candy's shock when 'arrested' in the Turkish baths by Lieutenant Wilson. Candy's home guard were part of an exercise in which they were meant to hold out against an attack by Wilson's regular forces, but they are taken completely by surprise when the army attacks before the agreed start time. In another scene, the film also implicitly condemns the desire expressed by British officers to see Germany 'back on her feet'

after the First World War.

The film's central theme – the need for new attitudes if Britain was to win the war – is shared with many others and reflected a frustration with the 'old gang' mentality typified by Munich, and compounded by Dunkirk and Chamberlain's fall from grace (Addison 1994, pp. 107-110). *Blimp* presented a challenge for the authorities, however. Its central thrust obeyed the Mol's desire to avoid nostalgia 'for old ways and days' (Aldgate & Richards 1986, p. 12), yet the message that Britain needed to overcome its misgivings about 'not playing by the rules' contained an implicit challenge to establishment principles which was hard to stomach. Churchill's personal opposition to the film, and his view of it as tantamount to treason to attack the leadership of the British army in a time of war, has been well documented (see Chapman 1995). Having been portrayed as a 'Blimp' himself by David Low before the war probably did not help Churchill's disposition, neither did the fact that Low's character, 'instantly identifiable by his rotund figure and walrus moustache, and always wearing only a towel around his waist, was a symbol of political reaction and military incompetence' (Chapman 1995, p. 24).

Powell and Pressburger's apparent support for this narrative of change was, ironically, something of a change from their work earlier in the war. *The 49th Parallel* (dir. 1941) held fast to the notion that superior British character alone would win out against a German ruthlessness. That Leslie Howard's character finally overcame his aversion to violence under extreme provocation was hardly the embrace of a new moral paradigm. By 1943, *Blimp* was advocating the necessity of Britain learning a few lessons from the Germans. This was less an expression of admiration for Germany than an acknowledgement that the nature of the world had changed and British attitudes and society should reflect this.

The film's arguments in favour of professionalism share much common ground with the more liberal conception of the People's War, although the strength of these arguments is somewhat muted in the finished product. The character of Colonel Blimp

came across as much a loveable old fuddy-duddy as a dithering old fool, which weakened the contrast between Wynne-Candy and Wilson (Richards 1997, p. 94). Indeed, James Chapman (1998, p. 194) cites the review by A.J. Cummings in the *News Chronicle*, who wrote: 'For my part I fell in love with Blimp ... who would lose a war with dignity and might win it with a little luck'. So the end result is a film that attempts to argue the need for Britain's leadership to be refreshed but tempers this through an apparent affection for the status quo.

### The civilian-as-soldier

The British civilian was brought to the front line of the conflict during the Second World War more so than in any previous conflict in living memory. As Winston Churchill put it:

The fronts are everywhere. The trenches are dug in towns and streets. Every village is fortified. Every road is barred. The front lines run through the factories. The workmen are soldiers with different weapons but the same courage. (cited in Calder 1969, p. 17)

Moreover, aspects of home front life, such as rationing and conscription to various combatant and non-combatant uniformed services, ensured many people were exposed to the effects of the war in their day-to-day lives. Add to this concerns about spies and fifth columnists and all up the British civilians could feel they were contributing to the *fighting* of the war in a more active sense than ever before.

The fact that most people had a tangible connection to the war made the propaganda challenge of ensuring popular support for the war a little easier, but no less vital. Civilians were enduring significant hardship through separation from their loved ones and through the death of family members, not just in combat, but also in German bombing raids. It was imperative for British war aims that these sacrifices were seen to be justified and a key propaganda function in this regard was to reflect and reinforce the value of civilian involvement in the war (Chapman 1998, p. 161). Civilians were shown

to be directly contributing to the war through their work in the various services affiliated with Britain's armed forces. The links between factory work and the theatre of battle were explicitly drawn, for this new kind of war had to be won by technological superiority and manufacturing capacity as much as by sheer bloody-mindedness and brute force in battle. This was shown in a number of films which showed civilians participating in war-like activities outside the scope of the regular armed forces. *Merchant Seamen* (dir. J.B. Holmes, 1941) depicted the danger of the Atlantic crossing and showed the Merchant Navy actively engaging a U-boat; while *Britain at Bay* (dir. Harry Watt, 1940) featured the Home Guard (Coulthart 1989, pp. 45-46).

A number of documentary films also describe the civilian experience as akin to that of combatants. Documentary film in Britain had come of age in the 1930s as a new mode of cinematic representation that offered a different range of possibilities from commercial feature films, and the documentary realist aesthetic was to form a crucial part of connecting the worlds of soldier and civilian. One of the strongest individual contributions to wartime documentary film came from Humphrey Jennings, whose films maintained a strong focus on the British people's 'spirit of sacrifice' (Rose 2003, p. 5). Described by Martin Stollery (n.d.) as 'the most renowned cinematic representation of the resilient heroism of ordinary Londoners during the early days of the Blitz', *Britain Can Take It* (dir. Harry Watt & Humphrey Jennings, 1940) provides a narrative of civilians getting on with their lives as best they can in the face of the Blitz. The film took great care to show that acts of civilian stoicism and sacrifice were as much a part of winning the war as what happened in the actual theatres of battle. One of the most enduring images of civilian defiance in *Listen to Britain* (which, ironically, did not actually feature civilians at all), was a shot of St Paul's Cathedral during the Blitz, the dome of the cathedral appearing to rise out of the smoke, untouched in the midst of terrible bombing.

Jennings' films also provide *war-like* images of civilians, such as the evocative images of the Auxiliary Fire Service in *Fires Were Started* (dir. 1943). The firefighters in their tin helmets, silhouetted by fire against the night sky and grimly hanging on to their hoses, provide a visual parallel with images of British 'Tommies' manning their guns.

This type of image established a direct parallel between the experiences of civilians and those of the armed forces, thereby providing further legitimacy for the concept of a People's War. In *The Heart of Britain* (dir. 1941), Jennings achieves this through the juxtaposition of images of Huddersfield Choral Society with those of a Lancaster aircraft preparing for a bombing raid. The final scene of the film sees the aircraft take to the air, accompanied by the rousing strains of the choir singing 'hallelujah' in full voice – the impression is one of the civilians taking ownership of the bombing campaign against Germany as much as the aircrews themselves. The aircraft seems to be literally raised into the air by the spirit of these ordinary people.

The themes of stoicism and sacrifice are found in many wartime films. *In Which We Serve* demonstrates them through the female characters who willingly concede their role as secondary to the men's attachment to their ship. These themes are also a crucial element of *The First of the Few*, where Mitchell is shown to sacrifice his own health for the good of the country. But in linking civilian and soldier, the wartime films went beyond simply exhorting British civilians to work harder or endure a little more discomfort for the war effort. A crucial component of the People's War narrative is civilians themselves engaged in active combat – the transition of 'timid, ineffectual civilians into warriors and war workers, as if the war were a blessing which enabled people to reach their potential' (Murphy 1997, p. 68).

*Went The Day Well?* (dir. Alberto Cavalcanti, 1942) is one of the most evocative films in this regard. The film's juxtaposition of peaceful Deep England with the violent realities of war is summed up well by Penelope Houston, who writes:

Although the film is set in the most secure of English country landscapes, the very heart of Miss Marple country, it finds the plump postmistress and the scatter-brained landgirl capable of fighting ferociously in defence of their own. (Houston 1992, p. 9)

The intent of *Went The Day Well?* was to remind people about the perils of ignoring the danger of invasion, and the threat of fifth columnists and enemy activity

more generally (Aldgate & Richards 1986, p. 126). On a number of occasions the villagers inadvertently thwart attempts to raise the alarm or fail to see signs that something is amiss. For example, when the Home Guard are out on an exercise one of their number swears that he heard the church bells ring, but this suggestion is ridiculed by his comrades who remind him that a ringing of the church bells would signify 'the real thing'. This was, of course, 'the real thing', and the bells were rung by the village priest who was promptly shot for his pains. A similar act of ultimately futile bravery occurs when the postmistress Mrs Collins kills one of the German soldiers billeted at her house before trying to raise the alarm about the invasion by telephoning the next village. The girls at the exchange, however, are busy chatting, and by the time they take her call she has been bayoneted by another soldier.

While *Went the Day Well?* had an obvious propaganda purpose, it would be a mistake to assume that this precludes the film from engaging in a robust examination of British society. Once more, the classes are shown to come together, with even the local poacher playing his part in resistance to the Germans. The explicit agenda is to show the war bringing out the best in British people from all walks of life; the implicit question raised by the efforts of *all* classes is how should this contribution be rewarded after the war? Even more, if collaboration across class boundaries represents the British at their best, what will be the nature of this collaboration after the war? Will this mean a seat at the tables of power for previously disenfranchised elements of society?

The villagers' efforts to counter the German paratroopers are made all the more difficult by the presence of a fifth columnist, who turns out to be the village squire, Wilsford. This betrayal has often been interpreted as clear evidence of class tension within the film (see Richards 1988; Rattigan 2001, pp. 39-52; Nicholas 2007). This is probably overstating the case, for there is also another crucial scene which plays against any such reading. When the 'last stand' of the villagers takes place in the manor house, Mrs Fraser, the lady of the manor, collects a grenade that falls near children and sacrifices herself to shield them from the blast. Given the co-existence of upper-class treachery with this clear depiction of upper-class heroism, the class status of the villain

seems notable, but ultimately not defining (Aldgate & Richards 1986, p. 131). The film is more concerned with representing many ordinary heroes, rather than a passive population defended by a heroic 'few'. More significant than the relationships *between* the classes is how many wartime films treat the specific issue of leadership. The 'natural' leadership of the upper classes (or at least a minority of them) does appear to be called into question, which is consistent with popular suspicions in Britain 'that elements of the upper class were pro-fascist' (Richards 1988, p. 49).

A few wartime films take great care to articulate a version of the wartime experience which picks up on this suspicion. They suggest that the initial setbacks that characterised the early years of Britain's Second World War were brought on by bureaucratic complacency and the failure of the 'old guard' to prepare, at which juncture the 'ordinary' people rescued Britain from a position of perilous weakness. In this is a less affirmative vision of Britain's wartime experience; that the civilians are directly involved in the fighting only because of the incompetence of Britain's pre-war 'establishment'.

This critique is evident in the Ealing Studios film *The Foreman Went to France* (dir. Charles Frennd, 1942), which details the mission of a factory foreman, Fred, to retrieve some vital machinery that is in danger of falling into German hands in France early in the war. *The Foreman Went to France's* narrative observes many of the conventions of wartime film. The film is careful to focus on the inclusion of regional identity. Fred, a Welshman, stumbles across two British soldiers in France, Tommy (a Cockney) and Jock (a Scot), who have become separated from their unit. It also provides a central role for a female character who, though she is American, speaks with an almost British accent. Through its inclusiveness, *The Foreman Went to France* demonstrates the 'ordinary' nature of heroism, which is set against the complacency of Britain's pre-war elites. Fred's foresight is contrasted with a leadership crippled by inertia and his superiors in the company are shown to be pompous fools who lack common sense.

James Chapman (1998, p. 172) identifies *The Foreman Went to France* as an

example of a film that 'distances itself from the myth of the finest hour' because it shows tension between the factory foreman and his manager, as well as bureaucratic delays and bungling which threaten to derail the mission. Chapman's analysis is correct in one sense – these are elements missing from the simplified myth of Britain's Finest Hour. However, the 'myth' of a People's War under construction in 1942 was far more diverse; and the depiction of complacency in *The Foreman Went to France* is more than just an expression of antagonism towards a particular class. Far from being at odds with official propaganda policy, the critique of upper-class incompetence and bureaucratic negligence was in keeping with the desire of the Mol Films Division to avoid any association with the 'old gang' pre-war establishment figures who were tarnished by association with appeasement (Aldgate & Richards, 1986, p. 12). The involvement of the war office, which is advertised in the opening credits, is further evidence that the film was not seen as detrimental to either British war aims or broader government propaganda aims.

Pointed criticism of caricatured upper-class characters was not uncommon amongst other films of the same period, such as *The First of the Few* or *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*. Films such as *Thunder Rock* (dir. John Boulting & Roy Boulting, 1942) offered even more explicit condemnation of these 'guilty men' who had failed to adequately prepare for conflict (Aldgate & Richards 1986, p. 17). The criticism of British elites in *The Foreman Went to France* is tempered, in any case, by the fact that Fred himself almost jeopardises the mission a number of times. While he is attempting to rescue the machines in France he shows an inclination to trust figures of authority, most of who later turn out to be fifth columnists. The fact that these authority figures are French draws attention away from internal criticism. Moreover, Fred's misplaced confidence in the French speaks to notions of Britain 'standing alone' in 1940 and invokes a unifying narrative that is stronger than the message about the failures of Britain's leadership.

*The Foreman Went to France* shows how the representation of a People's War straddled both 'official' and 'popular' narratives to achieve a conclusion that prioritised



unity above all else. As Mark Connelly observes, ‘the people and government between them created an interpretation of the experience that both found acceptable’ (Connelly 2004, p. 8). The emphasis placed in *The Foreman Went to France* on popular heroism and the incompetence of leadership was revolutionary in a fashion, but it was an officially-sanctioned revolution. The ‘guilty men’ could be offered as sacrificial lambs, appeasing public concerns about the nation’s leadership without compromising the position of the wartime coalition government.

## Conclusion

In wartime films there was an acknowledgement – sometimes tacit, at other times more conscious – of the underlying tensions within British society, but the popularity of films such as *In Which We Serve*, and the clarity of its message, has prompted Raymond Durnat (1970, p. 18) to argue that ‘few movies could bring themselves to criticise the social structure in as wholehearted a way as the satisfied movies praised it’. Neil Rattigan makes a similar point, claiming:

British [wartime] propaganda promoted the notion of a people’s war by showing what looked like ‘old’, class-bound Victorian Britain as being, in fact, the ‘new’, democratic twentieth-century Britain. (1994, p. 144)

Rattigan suggests that the inclusion of the working class, of women, and of the Scots and Welsh provided merely the illusion of inclusiveness. He concludes:

Analysis of a number of films [show the dominant images] are upper-class images [which] are made to seem to be images equally shared by all right-minded British men and women ... (2001, p. 19)

Yet even if the sentiment was not universal, or always as strongly held as we might imagine, most wartime films do represent a Britain that was united against a common enemy and they acknowledge the contribution of ‘ordinary’ people to the war effort. In doing so, regardless of the filmmakers’ intentions, the issue of social reform in postwar Britain is brought into the spotlight. The integral question in 1945 was, once hostilities

were over and the propagandist imperative for the People's War gone, would this agenda carry over into peacetime and what role would the cinema play in continuing to promote it?

## Chapter Two

Only a few months after the end of the war in Europe, Labour was swept into power in a landslide election victory. Labour's victory has often been seen as the culmination of the 'real' People's War: the war being fought on the home front for recognition of the wartime efforts of the working classes and for a more equitable post-war Britain (Morgan 1999, p. 27). It stood to reason that if *all* the 'people' contributed equally to the war victory, they should *all* receive a share of the post-war spoils.

Even before the conflict had ended, the Labour Party was advocating for a peacetime society in which the spirit of collective sacrifice would underpin collective benefits for the nation (Kynaston 2008, pp. 21-22). For the Conservatives too, the concept of public ownership was central to their policy platform and there is general agreement that the party undertook a pragmatic shift leftwards around the end of the war (Harrison 2009, pp. 538-539). This consensus around economic policy has led some historians to see the years from 1945 to 1951 as a time when the British people were broadly supportive of socialism, which 'still held the promise and excitement of an untried experiment (Addison 1985, p. 203). The 1945 election, then, was partly framed around the goals of a People's War as articulated in wartime British cinema; and Labour's victory was associated with a desire to realise these goals (Rose 2010, p. 234).

Notwithstanding the genuine enthusiasm for Labour's postwar vision, there was another factor in Labour coming to power in 1945: the anti-conservative backlash. A telling anecdote is related by the actor David Niven about discussions among the soldiers during his wartime service:

One thing stuck out a mile in these debates – the vast majority of men who had been called up to fight for their country held the Conservative Party entirely responsible for the disruption to their lives and in no circumstances would they vote

for it next time there was an election – Churchill or no Churchill. (cited in Addison 1985, p. 14)

Despite similarities between the policy platforms of both major parties in 1945, this was borne out in the ‘exceptionally bitter’ election campaign, which showed that significant divisions still existed within the nation (Morgan 1999, p. 26; Crowcroft 2011, p. 217).

Neil Rattigan (1994, p. 143) challenges the automatic link between the People’s War and a liberal Welfare State, pointing out that backing for the Welfare State did not always translate into support for sweeping social reform. Indeed, while a Gallup poll in 1943 found sixteen per cent of respondents wanted ‘work for everybody’ in postwar Britain, only three per cent were actively in favour of ‘socialism’ (Kynaston 2008, p. 43). So the Britain that emerged from the Second World War was still in many respects ‘a deeply conservative society’ (*ibid*, p. 59), which coexisted rather uneasily with a ‘general mood’ of ‘welfare and the public ethic’ (Morgan 1999, pp. 33-41). There was a strong desire for full employment after the war, but this drew as much from individual desires for comfort and financial security as it did from a widespread desire for radical social change (Kynaston 2008, p. 44). As Paul Addison writes:

The British had given up most of their personal liberties during the war and it was only a matter of time before they demanded some or all of them back. (1985, pp. 73-74)

What we see in postwar Britain is therefore a tussle between competing postwar demands: between the collective austerity of the Welfare State and individual desires for material comfort; between the politics of socialism, liberalism and conservatism; and between the opposed forces of social change and continuity. The People’s War was an abstraction prior to 1945, even though steps such as the Beveridge Report or the Butler Education Act were being taken to realise elements of it. The People’s War was a plan for a future that did not yet exist and as such it did not require concrete decisions. In peacetime, the British had to make these firm decisions on what the People’s War would mean for the social, political and economic fabric of their society.

The films of Ealing Studios offer a useful lens through which to view these tensions playing out in the late 1940s due to their desire to capture and reflect the mood of British society at that time. They illuminate the shift taking place during the late 1940s from a somewhat bright-eyed embrace of a new postwar social order in 1946, to a more cynical view by the end of the decade. This transition reveals the inherent tensions within the People's War narrative and the contingent nature of wartime filmmakers' broad support for the concept.

### The 'Phoney Peace'

In the immediate postwar years British filmmakers recognised the unique moment that presented itself for social renewal. They maintained a desire to capture the spirit of the People's War and infuse it into postwar society. Films such as Humphrey Jennings' *A Diary for Timothy* (dir. 1945); *School for Secrets* (dir. Peter Ustinov, 1946); and Brian Desmond Hurst's dramatisation of the Allied landings at Arnhem in 1944, *Theirs is the Glory* (dir. 1946), were intimately concerned with the effects of the war on 'ordinary' people.

*Theirs is the Glory* is one of the first films to focus on the fighting itself, free from the constraints of wartime censorship. Although the propaganda imperative to do so was no longer active, the film still operated 'within the parameters of a People's War' (Murphy 1997, p. 226). Depicting Operation Market Garden, it takes the opportunity to focus on the theatre of battle with a level of grit and realism impossible during the war, resulting in it being described by the *Variety* reviewer as 'a war documentary to end all war films' (McIlroy 1994, p. 37). The film continues to present the wartime ideals of inclusiveness, not least through the Welsh-accented voice-over which begins the film. All manner of accents are on display in the film, signifying the coming together of men from all classes and regions, each 'doing their bit' in the People's War.

Hurst's decision to use actual veterans of the campaign in the film was consistent with the common wartime practice of avoiding the celebration of individual heroes,

instead focusing on the heroism of the collective (Richards 1997, pp. 14-15). Within the first few minutes of the film the audience is introduced to a group of soldiers in their barracks, and as the camera slowly pans around the room a voice-over provides each man's name, rank and previous occupation. We are informed that they are not 'supermen', just 'ordinary men', who come from all parts of England, Scotland, Wales and even Ireland. The scene drives home the film's point about the sacrifices of 'ordinary' men and highlights the link between civilian and soldier.

The Rank production *School for Secrets* was also sympathetic towards the spirit of the People's War. The film details the emergence of radar technology early in the war and focuses on a group of civilian 'boffins' who are tasked with its development. The opening credits state:

Although the film deals almost exclusively with the R.A.F. it is intended as a tribute to all scientists, to the men and women of all ranks in the three services, and the civilians who worked side by side with them on the development of radar.

In this manner, *School for Secrets* enacts a clear agenda of inclusiveness. Civilians are shown to be as integral to the war effort as those in the armed forces, women are given a prominent space in the film and the boffins are shown to represent a range of regions and backgrounds. Andrew Spicer writes that the boffins were depicted by Ustinov as:

... a varied collection of idiosyncratic ordinary men [who] exhibit what Robert Jones has identified as the key characteristics of the boffin hero: pedagogism, obsessiveness, unworldly innocence and a classless, ambivalent status, both insiders and outsiders. (2001, p. 55)

Despite their idiosyncrasies, the boffins in *School for Secrets* could identify as 'ordinary' precisely because they fit a particularly British identity drawn from a set of values that was seen to cut across boundaries of class.

*School for Secrets* demonstrates the lingering strength of the People's War

narrative around attendant arguments for postwar renewal of the country's leadership. The film's agenda in this regard is overt and in keeping with the mood for reform that had swept the Labour party into power in 1945. Director Peter Ustinov is scathing in his assessment of Britain's stratified, class-based society, showing that it had hampered Britain's war effort. As 'classless' outsiders, the boffins are able to point this out. At one stage, they become exasperated by the inability to access 'important' people, asking:

'Why on earth can't we see them all together as we did in the old days? Air Vice-Marshals, Pilot Officers, boffins, people from the radio industry ... let them forget the bowing and scraping for a change, there's a war to be won!'

Wartime suspicion of the upper-class contribution to the war effort was particularly strong among those on the political left (Harrison 2009, p. 539) and upper-class incompetence or even treachery or had been shown in a handful of films such as *The Foreman Went to France*, *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* and *Went the Day Well?* One sequence in *School for Secrets* intercuts scenes lampooning an upper-crust old chap with shots of the boffins and military men working on developing the radar technology. As the man is playing golf, about to hit ball out of bunker, he proclaims 'Hitler's definitely missed the bus. So Chamberlain says, and that's good enough for me'. The ridiculousness of this statement is then reinforced by a completely inept swing at the ball which only succeeds in spraying sand all over the place. While hunting, he claims the first thing about battle is to 'always keep a cool head and never snatch at the trigger'; he then proceeds to fire too early and in the wrong direction. While fishing, he espouses the virtues of the French general, Weygand, claiming that when Weygand counter-attacks the Germans 'the boot will be on the other foot'. The visual counterpoint to this assertion is the man drawing his line out of the stream, only to find an old boot attached to the hook.

The point about an ineffectual upper-class is reinforced through scenes of the same man leading a comical Home Guard training exercise, as well as his later admission that the extent of his meaningful contribution to the war is guarding a bridge

once a week. The film points out that, rather than *playing* at soldiers in the manner of the Home Guard, it is the boffins who are the active embodiment of the civilian-as-soldier. As in *Went the Day Well* or *The Foreman Went to France*, they quite literally become soldiers. They participate in a trial of radar-guided RAF sorties against Luftwaffe bombers, they parachute behind enemy lines to retrieve vital equipment from occupied France and one boffin is even killed in the line of duty.

By 1946 it was not uncommon for films to criticise the upper classes and *School for Secrets* does so with some enthusiasm. But this did not lead automatically to support for all hitherto underprivileged groups in British society. Female contribution to the war is recognised, but also subject to constant qualification. For example, as the boffins observe a group of ATS women drilling shortly before the outbreak of war, they are informed that 'if war comes, 70% of our work will be in these girls' hands'. Ensuing discussions reflect the tensions inherent in women's enhanced role in wartime society and the implications of this for Britain after the war. 'Women on the technical side? It won't work!' remarks one of the boffins. John Laurie's character, Dr McVitie, seems almost admiring when noting that the boffins' own work will in turn increase the workload of these women, but he quickly follows up with the comment 'you mark my words, they'll find a peaceful solution and then we can send the lassies home again', whereupon the scene ends, with a shadow hanging over the value of women contributing to the workforce.

There are conflicting readings of the film's attitude towards women. Taylor Downing (2013, p. 320) observes that the 'glamorous WAAFs bravely rise to the challenge of reading the radar screens even when being bombed by the Luftwaffe, showing how important was the role played by women in the war, despite the chauvinism of the men around them'. In contrast, John Ramsden (1998, p. 57) cites a contemporary review of the film that bemoans the depiction of the boffins' wives as 'useless'. *School for Secrets* does offer significant space in the narrative to female characters, but there is enough ambiguity to act against a clear sense of the film promoting a greater role for women in postwar Britain.



*School for Secrets* remains mute on matters of class relations. The boffins cannot easily be placed within a particular social class, while their landlady and her son, played by Richard Attenborough, are shown to be respectable working class or lower-middle class. Class is not the primary concern for Ustinov, although he cannot resist a passing dig at the obstructionism of the trade unions. As the boffins are carting around their suitcases, one complains that the lifting is 'extremely bad for the heart' and 'detrimental to the spine,' remarking that 'we're almost certainly infringing a host of trade union regulations'. To which his colleague replies, 'we do that every time we pick up a suitcase'. Ustinov's autobiography goes some way to explaining this. Ustinov recounts the difficulties he had with union intransigence during the making of *School for Secrets* and his feeling that this was representative of the unintended consequences of the Welfare State, writing that 'the careless dictatorship of privilege had been replaced by the careful dictatorship of regulations' (Ustinov 1977, p. 214). This is just one example of the precarious links between continuing support for the narrative of a People's War and Labour's Welfare State.

One of the notable documentary films released after the war, Humphrey Jennings' *A Diary for Timothy* takes the pulse of British society in the final months of the war – as the nation understands that victory is at hand – and reflects on what might lie ahead for a new generation too young to remember the conflict. As with Jennings' previous work, it is careful to weave together both the agricultural and industrial fabric of the nation in providing a snapshot of Britain at the end of the war; we see coal miners rubbing shoulders with farmers and fighter pilots. Myra Hess reprises her role from *Listen to Britain* – only this time playing Beethoven – as Michael Redgrave's voice-over points out the irony that such a beautiful piece of music could come from a country currently displaying such barbarism towards Britain. Jennings connects the circumstances of wartime society with the possibility of a more equitable postwar society. He draws parallels between the theatre of battle and the coal miner who, the narrator informs us 'carries his own weapons to his own battlefield, in scenery which isn't exactly pretty'. Towards the end of the film, the miner himself reflects on the aftermath of the First

World War, resulting in the depression of the 1930s. 'Has all this really got to happen again?' he wonders.

While Jennings' argument is heartfelt enough, there is also a hesitation apparent in the film about the nature of this postwar change:

What will become of the veterans and the workers who sacrificed so much to aid the war effort? What housing will replace the one-third lost during the war? ... [Jennings] anticipates, but does not wholeheartedly endorse, the mood of postwar Britain, when the desire for social reform and stability would sweep the Labour Party into power. (Robson 1982, p. 48)

Robson argues that Jennings' ambivalence towards the postwar settlement stems from his reservations about the industrial revolution itself – reservations that were greater than is apparent in his films. Jennings appears almost apologetic about having to include crude industrial images in his portrait of the nation – it is as if order must be restored through the immediate introduction of a lingering pastoral shot. His attachment to British heritage acts as a significant constraint on the message of starting anew, since it derives from the fabric of the social structure called into question by narratives of the People's War. Indeed, Jennings' later (unpublished) writing indicates a nostalgia for Britain's heritage, expressing a preference for the amateur over 'the anonymous specialists of the technological revolution' (Robson 1982, p. 49).

*A Diary for Timothy* is ostensibly in favour of Britain's future being informed by the People's War. However, one can also see hints of Jennings' unease at what a future informed *by* the People's War might hold. As Geoff Eley points out, Jennings' conscious avoidance of politicising the People's War leads him to omit aspects of his characters' lives that may well have a significant bearing on Britain's postwar future. For example, there is no mention in *A Diary for Timothy* that the miner Goronwy featured in the film was a 'lifelong communist' (Eley 2001, p. 835). The narration, set against a backdrop of housing construction, notes that postwar life will 'become more dangerous than before ... because now we have the power to choose and the right to criticise, and even to

grumble'. For all that Jennings had been one of the loudest champions of the 'ordinary' during the war, there seems to be an underlying ambivalence within *A Diary for Timothy* about the benefits of letting people choose their own path, rather than having it laid out by a benevolent ruling class.

Perhaps the most significant film to deal with the People's War during this period was Ealing's *The Captive Heart* (dir. Basil Dearden, 1946), which 'engages with the idea of a People's War at a time when the election of a Labour Government in 1945 seemed to confirm that the power of the myth would indeed transform British society' (Leach 2004, p. 18). *The Captive Heart* divides its attention between British prisoners of war in a German camp and the wife of a British soldier back in England. Her estranged husband, Mitchell, has been killed in action and his identity assumed by a Czech soldier, Hasek, who is trying to avoid capture by the Gestapo. To maintain his cover, Hasek begins to write to Mitchell's wife, Celia, and a bond grows between the pair, albeit complicated by the fact that Celia assumes it is her husband writing. The letters serve to promote Ealing's ideal vision of community, with Celia describing the Deep England idyll of 'children, gardens, homemade toffee, and cricket on the village green' and Hasek its re-creation within the POW camp which focused on 'communal life, on co-operation and making the best of things' (Murphy 1989, p. 84). It is telling that it is the foreigner, Hasek, who narrates his appreciation of this community – offering external validation of a national character, as defined by Ealing, that:

...seeks to combine the traditional and the new and that, while remaining essentially 'English', can encompass the rest of the nation, and even sympathetic foreigners.  
(Leach 2004, p. 22)

Gill Plain (2014, p. 275) notes that the film's 'debt to wartime cinema is immediately apparent', with 'the community in all its diversity representing in microcosm the wider communion of the nation'. The film depicts the contribution to the war effort made by a cross-section of British society. It prominently includes soldiers of other ranks, as well as officers, and there is an 'easy camaraderie between officers and men'

(Murphy 1989, p. 84). The sentiment is demonstrated in an early scene where the Germans attempt to separate the officers from the other ranks, only to be informed by the officers that they will not accept this state of affairs. Faced with this defiant show of British unity, the Germans accede to the British prisoners' wish to be kept together. The camp therefore represents an inclusive spectrum of British society in harmonious operation. In fact, Nicholas Pronay (1988, p. 46) argues that the film's interest in POW camp life overwhelms the romantic aspect of the plot, as it was here that Ealing's vision of community could be put on full display.

The film acknowledges the tensions inherent in drawing together people from different walks of life through the working class character Private Matthews, a burglar in civilian life, who initially causes trouble through his refusal to fit in with the co-operative nature of camp life. But it resolves these tensions with apparent ease: Matthews is soon brought to his senses through a bit of old-fashioned British discipline. Having come to accept the desirability of community, as well as its legitimate authority, Matthews ultimately gives up his place on the repatriation list to allow Michael Redgrave's Mitchell/Hasek character to escape the camp. In this way, *The Captive Heart* continued to promote the idealistic function of the war as a vehicle for drawing the British together and celebrating the common values that lay at the heart of British national identity, irrespective of class.

There is also a subtext at play here beneath the veneer of unity. Jeffrey Richards details in his study of British national identity the existence of broad consensus on its constituent features across the political spectrum. These qualities were often seen as inherently middle-class, but were also shared to a large degree by the 'respectable' working class. The key here is the internal distinction, outlined by Richards, between the 'rough' and 'respectable' working classes. The former were seen to live a lifestyle primarily centred on hedonistic indulgence and marked by a lack of self-control, whereas the latter acceded to 'civilised' social norms generally associated with the middle classes (Richards 1997, p. 14).

A number of wartime films had shown a willingness to confer 'respectability' on the working class in its entirety, such as *Listen to Britain* or *Millions Like Us*. After 1945 we begin to see an increasingly conspicuous exclusion of the 'rough' working classes from the realms of 'respectability'. There is a common perception of the late 1940s as a time when filmmakers took a keen interest in representing the working classes (Harrison 2009, p. 177), exemplified by a film such as *It Always Rains on Sunday* (dir. Robert Hamer, 1947) which represents working-class life unconditionally. Jeffrey Richards makes the point that while these films celebrated the 'people as hero', it was 'not so much the people as a proletariat, but the people as a nation, which is a very different thing'. As Richards points out, the postwar reform movement had a strong interest in what he terms 'political' change, while having much less enthusiasm for 'social' changes (Richards 1997, pp. 128-9). In other words, the system itself wasn't necessarily broken – the filmmakers at Ealing weren't after a wholesale change to the fabric of British society, merely a wholesale change to those who ran it.

In the case of *The Captive Heart*, the appearance of the 'rough' working class is validated only through their acceptance of 'civilised'/middle-class norms. And so those of the working class who do not aspire to these middle-class values are excised from the category of 'ordinary' people who can legitimately lay claim to ownership of the People's War. Jim Leach (2004, p. 22) finds that the film normalises the middle-class wartime experience as that of all classes of people and suggests that the film's 'core image of Englishness' – the country house – was somewhat out of touch with the postwar realities of rationing and reconstruction. Jeffrey Richards interprets the film almost in polar opposition to the aforementioned findings of Nicholas Pronay, in his charge that the romantic plot element in *The Captive Heart* betrays a preference for a middle class image of Deep England over the broader cross-section of society within the camp (Richards 1997, p. 20).

The question of whether the romance between Hasek and Celia or the POW scenes 'dominate' the film is entirely subjective, but it does effectively illustrate a common difficulty in trying to pin down the ideology of Ealing films. Where Pronay

favours the film's celebration of camp life as an illustration of class solidarity, Richards feels that the focus on Deep England is safer and more satisfying for the film. As an image of class unity that has clearer association with traditional class roles, it better caters to Ealing's cautious approach to postwar reform. The visual composition of Celia's country house and surrounding rural environment shows that there is still a strong postwar attachment within Ealing – just as there is for Humphrey Jennings – to romanticised notions of Britain as an agrarian society.

It is surprising, at least at face value, that such a deep attachment to these images of Deep England remains, when they bear a strong association to the stratified nature of British society. If the desire of the People's War to bring about a new basis for class relations was so strong, why is there not a clearer move away from what might be considered antiquated notions of British identity? A possible answer to this question is provided by Wendy Webster, who sees the portrayal of Celia's environment as less to do with issues of class and more as representing the growing strength of masculine conservatism. She argues that one area where *The Captive Heart* does signal a shift in direction for British war films is around women's participation in the war, through moving the theatre of non-combatant resistance from the home front to the POW camp. Webster notes that whereas the home front 'had been a place of danger and death' during wartime, it 'was now represented in opposition to the hardships of the prisoner-of-war-camp', with women 'shorn of most associations with war-work, and shown as passive figures who had spent the war at home, patiently waiting for their men to return' (Webster 2007, p. 89). So *The Captive Heart* offered a prominent space for women in the narrative, while undermining the value of their role at the same time. The strong message of the film was that 'the middle-class male virtues of duty and sacrifice associated with the war must continue in the postwar period in order to maintain some semblance of the British way of life' (Boyce 2012, p. 53).

These criticisms of the film relate to a broader issue that has been identified across much of the Ealing Studios body of work. Ealing films are seen, as a general rule, to outline a vision of British society where women are essential to a particular form

of community and yet at the same time peripheral to its fundamental workings. As Jeffrey Richards describes:

The role of women and of love in *The Captive Heart* is instructive and very characteristic of Ealing. Marriage is the basic building block of society, and the best kind of love is romantic and spiritual or affectionate respect, but never overtly sexual. (1997, p. 20)

This narrative about the appropriate nature of women's societal role (as it related to their wartime contribution) played out in a similar way in another Ealing film of the period, *Against The Wind* (dir. Charles Crichton, 1948), where women play a more active role. As the senior officer delivers a briefing to the team of British agents – some of them women – ahead of a mission, he warns against mixing duty and pleasure, claiming that this only leads to 'digging graves'. These words turn out to be prophetic as one of the team, Max, is shot and killed by a female agent, Michele, once she discovers that he has been selling information to the Germans. On this occasion Michele's actions would be understood as justified by a British audience. Nonetheless, Wendy Webster outlines the way in which her actions are presented in the context of a broader threat posed by Michele to masculinity:

Michele is given the emblems of the modern active woman – trousers and cigarettes. Her transgression of gender boundaries attracts explicit comment when she rebukes Johnnie (Gordon Jackson) – a Scottish explosives expert who has been recruited to train saboteurs on the Belgian mission – for talking to Max about his role. This prompts Johnnie to tell Max that: 'I don't like them (women) in slacks and uniform and authority. I like them where they belong'. (2003, p. 45)

None of this should diminish the earnestness with which these films attempt to show a cohesive and inclusive postwar society, nor their desire to translate the concept of a People's War into the basis of a revitalised sense of community. But even as the *desire* to continue the spirit of the People's War was very much alive in 1946, the multi-faceted nature of this narrative was becoming clearer. In their efforts to show wartime

Britain as a harmonious community, the films reveal the inherent limitations of the People's War narrative. They lay bare the almost impossible task of translating a set of abstract notions, which underpinned the fight *against* a common enemy, into a clear argument *for* a particular postwar direction for Britain. Moreover, there is an almost subconscious conservatism that manifests in the early postwar films, coexisting with their more liberal aspects. Filmmakers were keen to advocate for the new, but at the same time were attempting to reconcile this keenness with their continuing attachment to the old. So for all that they continue to focus on some of the key themes of the People's War, there is a reticence to offer a wholehearted argument that British society should be radically rebuilt.

### The rise of nostalgia

The Welfare State envisioned in 1945 brought the promise of 'never again' for those who had suffered during the depression; by the end of the decade, it represented rationing, restrictions and red tape (Addison 1985, p. 203). Public dissatisfaction with the Labour government was growing rapidly and the strength of Labour's initial promise only compounded the disappointment when they failed to deliver (Richards 1997, p. 15). While the knockout punch for Labour would not come until 1951, a critical blow to the postwar vision was dealt in early 1947 with the onset of severe weather which paralysed much of British industry and contributed to growing unemployment. The precursor to this episode had been the nationalisation of the coal industry as part of Labour's policy platform. Labour could not control the weather, of course, but the association was strong enough that Labour's Minister of Fuel and Power, Emanuel Shinwell, was the target of public ire for his apparent failure to ensure sufficient stockpiles of coal to avert the crisis (Kynaston 2008, p. 193). Kenneth Morgan observes that 'what the episode did was to confirm long-held feelings that Labour's planners had failed to plan' (Morgan 1999, p. 68).

Although only a small number of war films were produced between 1947 and 1950, there was still a desire among filmmakers to examine the fallout from the war and



how the wartime experience might inform harmonious relations between neighbours in peacetime. Most notable in this respect were the films of Ealing Studios. Many Ealing films of the late-1940s maintain an interest in how the war helped to build a sense of community in Britain. However, the optimism of the immediate postwar films begins to give way to a more cynical tone, reflecting a growing disenchantment with the direction British society was taking. Whilst they frame their concerns within an overarching context of support for Labour's Welfare State, they are wary about the effects of progress upon aspects of British heritage and tradition. Above all, they showed the strength of the individualist impulse within Britain that sat uncomfortably with the austerity and collectivism of the Welfare State.

This tension between the reality of the welfare state and the ideals of the People's War was captured perfectly in two notable Ealing films released in 1949: *Whisky Galore* (dir. Alexander Mackendrick) and *Passport to Pimlico* (dir. Henry Cornelius). *Whisky Galore* and *Passport to Pimlico* reflect disillusionment with the nature of contemporary Britain, while also yearning for the singular purpose, sense of unity and apparent social innocence of the war years – the very preconditions that gave rise to the Welfare State (Barr 1977, pp. 4-5; Kynaston 2008, p. 96; White 2008, p. 71).

*Whisky Galore* comes as close as any Ealing film to support for full-scale revolt against the conditions imposed by the Welfare State. Based on a book by Compton MacKenzie, which itself drew on an actual wartime event, the film revolves around a ship stranded off the coast of a Scottish island, whose inhabitants 'rescue' the cargo of whisky it is carrying. The islanders' determination to salvage the cargo is not entirely selfless, of course. Having recently run out of whisky they decide to keep the cargo for themselves, sparking a hunt by British customs and excise officers for the whisky and those who have salvaged it. Despite the islanders employing a range of measures to outwit the investigating English authorities, the contraband is eventually discovered after the intervention of the local publican whose business has been hurt by the ready supply of whisky.

The film succinctly captures community frustrations with endless regulation and restrictions. It is in this context that we see the islanders as underdogs, the small community standing up to the bureaucratic might of authority. This sympathetic representation of the islanders is in stark contrast to the film's outright hostility to Waggett, the English captain of the local home guard unit. Waggett is held up as a figure of ridicule: the epitome of bureaucratic intransigence. An outsider on the island, he is stuck in a world of playing at soldiers and following regulations unquestioningly. As Alistair Michie (1986, p. 260) writes, 'it is his total failure to understand the community, and his obsession with the letter of the law rather than the spirit, that leads to his exclusion from their world'. Even the one occasion when he is prepared to bend the rules fails to flatter him. When faced with a regulation prohibiting the carrying of ammunition on board the mail boat, Waggett insists that common sense must prevail. While this apparently presents him as a man prepared to cut through bureaucratic regulation when the occasion demands, the ultimate effect is to condemn Waggett's hypocrisy. He is only prepared to forego red tape when it suits his own needs.

Basil Radford was a logical choice to play the part of Waggett. Notwithstanding his postwar turns as a common-sense leader in *The Way to the Stars* and *The Captive Heart*, he was immediately recognisable to audiences as a stuffy, intransigent bureaucrat from *Passport to Pimlico* which had been released only months earlier (Barr 1977, p. 112). Audiences would likely remember Radford's recurring appearances with Naunton Wayne as the characters Charters and Caldicott in a number of British films throughout the 1940s, and as Tom Brass (2014, p. 297) observes, the persona of these characters was 'that of upper-class officialdom'. The primary appeal to audiences of *Whisky Galore* was therefore seeing the community get the better of the pompous Waggett (Landy 1991, p. 372; Williams 2000, p. 165).

Some critiques of *Whisky Galore* have read the portrayal of Waggett as signalling a framework of class or regional conflict, rather than disenchantment with the Welfare State, as the primary focus of the film. Colin McArthur (2002, p. 98) writes that while it is 'tempting to see *Whisky Galore* ... as a potent utopian fantasy, generated by the social

conditions of the time', ultimately he feels that longer-term social concerns such as class, gender and ethnicity had a greater impact on the film. Issues of class and region are present within the film, but McArthur overstates their significance. Like most Ealing films, *Whisky Galore* is grounded in middle-class values (Barr 1974, p. 130). But the film's Scottish setting steps outside traditional English class boundaries as a framework for interpretation, de-emphasising problematic class relations. If there are significant issues of class surrounding *Whisky Galore*, they relate more to what is not shown in the film – in other words, to the film's acquiescence to a homogenised depiction of class. The film also sidesteps any hint of regional tension. *Whisky Galore* makes clear that it is Waggett's personality, rather than his Englishness, which is at fault here. The film's only other representation of Englishness, Sergeant Odd, appears in complete contrast to Waggett as someone who can get things done in a collaborative manner. He brings common sense to bear on a problem and maintains a professionalism which allows him to bend the rules when it is in the community's interest to do so. The oppositional nature of the film is framed in terms of 'community against bureaucracy, as much as against the Englishman' (Richards 1997, p. 194).

Director Alexander Mackendrick's own relationship with the character of Waggett is of particular interest. In spite of the ruthlessness with which the film treats Waggett, Mackendrick found his own sympathy for the character growing throughout the filming process (Barr 1974, p. 140). This fact reveals the potent symbolism of the film, in terms of its place in the Ealing catalogue. Waggett stands in fundamental opposition to the interests of the community in *Whisky Galore*. To that extent, the finished product of the film is consistent with previous Ealing works by taking the side of the islanders. But Mackendrick is careful to tread a delicate path between support for the islanders and apparent condemnation of their desire for unrationed whisky.

While Ealing's sympathy for the islanders and their cause is clear, the studio had no desire for full-scale social revolt. As Michael Balcon put it:

By and large we were a group of liberal-minded, like-minded people... we were

middle-class people brought up with middle-class backgrounds and rather conventional educations ... We voted Labour for the first time after the war: this was our mild revolution. (cited in Barr 1977, p. 9)

The revolutionary impulse within *Whisky Galore* is more apparent than in other Ealing films, but is still limited in its scope. The customs and excise officers are shown to be professionals, not a monstrous embodiment of state-sanctioned power, and there are enough moments in the film for those who wish to condemn the islanders' backwardness and shameless hedonism.

Above all, the film's apparently anarchic message is tempered by an unresolved tension. The filmmakers are torn between the direction of audience sympathy towards the islanders' cause – for example, we see the 'redeeming' effects of the alcohol on the fiercely Calvinist mother of Gordon Jackson's character – and highlighting the negative effects of their actions. This dilemma comes to a head when the islanders are 'betrayed' by the publican. On the one hand, this action seems to undermine the community of the island, but it occurs without any contextual recourse for audiences to dislike the publican. He typifies the small businessman often painted by Ealing as an innocent victim of excessive red tape and self-important small-minded bureaucracy, so it is quite surprising that he fulfils the role of villain in this instance. He is condemned, albeit half-heartedly, because his motives are commercial, though had it been made by Ealing a few years later, the result might have been quite different again. Aldgate and Richards (1999, p. 157) point to the tendency for Ealing to remake their previous fare through the early 1950s, with an increasing ambivalence towards the very communities who were at the heart of the late 1940s comedies.

*Passport to Pimlico*, like *Whisky Galore*, focuses on a theme of bureaucratic constraint, proposing that the 'People' who had done their bit during the war were being denied their rightful rewards by stuffy bureaucrats and government red tape. The film presents numerous bumbling figures of petty authority, all concerned with their own sense of importance, and contrasts them with the 'ordinary' hero, Arthur Pemberton.

Pemberton, a local shopkeeper, embodies the community-mindedness of the People's War in his desire to turn a bomb site into a public park and swimming pool, rather than sell it off for private development. The local council reject his proposal and vote in favour of the development. Barely has Pemberton's proposal been defeated in the council meeting than a group of local boys playing on the site inadvertently set off an unexploded bomb. In the aftermath of the explosion, a crowd gathers round the crater and Pemberton, who steps too close to the edge, falls into the hole. The immediate response of the community to this moment of crisis is to pull together in the spirit of the People's War. Even the mayor, who had, only moments before, barely suppressed his satisfaction at the defeat of Pemberton's proposal, is at the forefront of the effort to haul him out of the crater.

There is a (literal) silver lining to Pemberton's accident as the explosion reveals an underground stash of valuable items belonging to the long-deceased Duke of Burgundy. One of the items reveals that, owing to an obscure legal oversight, an area of Pimlico was never officially incorporated into England and is still Burgundian territory. This discovery is initially a source of great excitement for the residents. Aside from the prospect of a share of the spoils uncovered by the bomb blast, they quickly realise that Pimlico's newfound independence frees them from the rationing restrictions imposed on 'the English' and they set out to profit from this situation. Yet the residents' reasonable desire for a few extra items of food or clothing soon transforms into endless lines of spivs catering to masses of people.

The figure of the spiv is treated as a modern-day Robin Hood in a number of postwar films, catering to the legitimate desires of a people overdue some material reward for their wartime sacrifice (Addison 2010, p. 54). *Passport to Pimlico* rejects this characterisation. Though the residents' initial renunciation of restraint is presented as an understandable reaction to oppressive government restriction, once the spivs move in *en masse* the audience quickly comes to see the objectionable nature of unbridled greed. The flood of black marketeers who rush into Pimlico in search of profit is presented as the dark underside of consumerism. Thus, the residents come to realise

that the undesirable side effects of freedom far outweigh its benefits and Pimlico returns to the fold, resigned to the realities of postwar austerity.

*Passport to Pimlico* is particularly significant in the context of the People's War. Mark Duguid writes:

Running through the film is a yearning nostalgia for the social unity of the war years (particularly the key events of 1940: Dunkirk; the Battle of Britain; the Blitz), remembered fondly as Britain's 'finest hour'. (Duguid n.d)

Duguid notes two sequences in particular which emphasise this point: a newsreel 'praising the fortitude of "plucky little Burgundy" in the face of adversity' and the images of people in London throwing food over the fence to the Burgundians after a border fence had been established, 'directly evoking the celebrated 'Dunkirk spirit'. When an English official informs the Burgundians that the border is to be closed, one lady yells from an upstairs window that if the Nazis failed to move her 'with all their bombs and rockets and doodlebugs', she is hardly going to move now. The throwaway line is a joke for the audience, in response to the idea that the Burgundian 'treasures' should be moved to the Bank of England, but the evocation of the wartime spirit is quite deliberate (Aldgate & Richards 1999, p. 155).

The references to 1940 underline the delicate balancing act at play in Ealing's postwar films which is particularly apparent in *Passport to Pimlico*. What Ealing sought to recapture of 1940 was the spirit of ordinary people united in defiance and pulling together in times of difficulty – the parallels between Pimlico standing alone against the might of British bureaucracy and Britain's own position in 1940 were only too apparent. Moreover, in calling for a *return* to this spirit of community, the film is implicitly conceding that it had already been lost (Butler 2004, p. 123). By 1949 this is the inherent tension around Ealing's evocation of a People's War: the legacy of shared sacrifice, of pulling together, of making do with simple pleasures – in short, the community spirit of wartime – is being lived out by the British people in the form of

rationing, restrictions and austerity. If *Passport to Pimlico* reflected a broad agreement that the Welfare State, as it existed in 1949, had failed to deliver on its promise of material abundance and individual liberties, then the filmmakers at Ealing were throwing stones from within the very glass house they themselves helped build during the war.

Margaret Butler (2004, p. 9) notes the ways in which postwar representations of community in British film revealed a society far more complex than we might imagine and 'often at odds with the cosy depictions of the Ealing comedies'. Nevertheless, films such as *Passport to Pimlico* dealt cannily with this situation through their ability to play simultaneously to a number of political and social agendas, while never steering too close to concrete political or social statements. In fact, the studio completely understood the postwar desires of its audience for improved living standards, even if it was conflicted about supporting materialism in its films. The Ealing films came from a very particular point of view which shared much with a general audience in terms of what it stood *against*: the stuffy bureaucrats, pompous authority figures and needless regulations that held back 'ordinary' people just trying to get along in life (Barr 1977, p. 50). The films offered 'conventionally moral resolutions... imposed in a tongue-in-cheek way, right at the end, without challenging our commitment to their central characters' single-minded projects or even our belief that they really got away with it successfully' (*ibid*, pp. 96-97). Further, Ealing's heroes, Arthur Pemberton among them, were true 'everymen' whose deepest commitments were to abstract notions such as 'community' and 'common sense', rather than any particular political ideology. Thus audiences could immerse themselves for a short while in the landscapes of abundance offered up by Ealing, without having to subscribe to the underlying politics of middle-class restraint espoused by Ealing.

Jeffrey Richards (1997, p. 155) describes *Passport to Pimlico* as 'perhaps the arch-Labour film, pointing to the evils of a blanket removal of restrictions and seeking to reconcile the public to its lot'. A similar argument is put forward by Tim Palleine (1997, p. 117), who emphasises that *Passport to Pimlico* ends with the authority and legitimacy of the state restored. Both Richards and Palleine identify the film's ability to present

itself as superficially opposed to state interference in people's lives, while in effect working to undermine that very message. As David Kynaston (2008, p. 337) writes, 'in fact, complete freedom from rationing and controls is shown to be frightening, not something to be desired. The film therefore 'turns ... on a kind of double bluff: a supposed celebration of the jettisoning of wartime restrictions becomes a nostalgic evocation of the wartime spirit of solidarity' (Pulleine 1997, p. 118).

Yet such a close ideological alignment of the filmmakers at Ealing with Labour ideals cannot be taken for granted, for these were men who were 'liberal rather than radical, progressive rather than revolutionary' (Ellis 1975, p. 105). Thus, what we see in *Passport to Pimlico* is a novel compromise: the film condones material desire within the context of burdensome government restriction, but condemns the ultimate application of that desire – the unrestrained free market. Although the film appears to celebrate the prospect of Pimlico returning to English sovereignty, the onset of pouring rain immediately after Pimlico's return seems to be an implicit warning for Labour. It invites audiences to make a 'real-life' association between the film's ending and their own return from the cinematic land of plenty to a drab and dreary Austerity Britain.

Both *Whisky Galore* and *Passport to Pimlico* acknowledged a widespread frustration, particularly amongst the middle class, with a perceived drop in living standards (Kynaston 2008, p. 339). The desire to improve social and economic conditions for the population was not in doubt, but there was growing conflict over whether government regulation was the means to a more equitable distribution of wealth, or an impediment to people improving their circumstances. The Ealing films of the late 1940s should be seen as a direct response to this situation. They were still clinging on to the hope that the Welfare State could deliver improvements within a framework of the wartime values of community, rather than individualism. But the understanding that the 'ordinary' people who had sacrificed so much in the war were entitled to reap the rewards, and that they were eager to see tangible improvements in their living standards, was growing ever stronger in Ealing films.



These films also provided some of the strongest hints at what might lie ahead in the next decade, in terms of the individualist arguments that were creeping into narratives of community in British cinema. Advocating for others on the basis of community improvement was all well and good, but the entire premise of collective benefit for the British people was their own individual gains as part of that collective. People wanted housing, but they wanted *their own* housing; people wanted 'jobs for everyone', on the basis that 'everyone' meant themselves first and foremost (Kynaston 2008, pp. 43-51).

## Conclusion

There can be no doubt that the sense of collective purpose in Britain fostered during the war was evident for some time afterwards, underpinning a broad desire for social renewal. The 1940s could be seen, in that sense, as a People's War which led to a 'People's Peace' (Shaw 2001, p. 144). The real question was just how enduring this popular support for social reform would prove. For, as Paul Addison (2010, p. 130) remarks, 'the People, for the most part, had been moral and cultural conservatives'. The late 1940s had begun to test the limits of the extent to which those who supported the People's War would throw their weight behind radical postwar reforms. The same was true of those who felt the postwar reforms were not radical enough. As Paul Addison observes:

The railwaymen and the miners had campaigned long and hard for public ownership but when it arrived, with the same managers in charge and working conditions initially much the same, it proved to be something of an anti-climax. (2010, pp. 24-25)

So by the end of the decade we see the emergence of a growing disillusionment with Britain's postwar direction, with Labour's Welfare State under attack from all sides. Although the Welfare State would survive into the 1950s, the middle ground of cautious reform occupied by Ealing Studios was increasingly anachronistic. Labour's mandate to produce for the British public the spoils of war was wearing thin. So was the appetite of

British filmmakers to invoke the collective notion of a People's War in support of Labour's vision. At the dawn of the new decade, the British were determined to ensure that the visions of plenty offered up by *Whisky Galore* and *Passport to Pimlico* were more than a mirage. The wartime legacy was still a powerful and pervasive force in British society, but films of the 1940s had largely presented the war as a time of hardship; of stoic endurance in the face of immense suffering. This did not fit comfortably with the desires for material gain. The war – and its representation on film – had played a key role in underpinning political and social capital within Britain during the 1940s. For this to continue into the new decade, Britain's wartime experience would have to be reimagined.

## Chapter Three

British war films of the 1950s are often credited with providing much of the impetus for national myths about the Second World War (see Hurd 1984; Ramsden 1998; Eley 2001; Summerfield 2007). As Mark Connelly writes:

Derided for their stiff-upper-lip values, for their relegation of women, for their cardboard portrayals of the working class and foreigners, the British war film is now regarded as the most appalling reflection of our hidebound, intolerant, old-fashioned character. (2004, p. 199)

Many readings of 1950s war films emphasise a concerted shift away from a People's War narrative over the course of the decade. It is a position summed up most vehemently by Neil Rattigan, who sees these films as a consolidation of political power by the British middle class. He argues that the 1950s war films represent a conscious denial of the revolutionary vision of a People's War – a move by the middle classes to reclaim Britain's victory as one of their own making through a revision of the wartime narrative (Rattigan 1994, p. 151). Rattigan concludes that these films 'revised [the wartime narrative] by subtracting from it the very thing that had formed the basis of the myth-creating war films of the 1940s: the notion of a people's war' (*ibid*, p. 150).

There is no doubt that, as a collective body of work, the war films of the 1950s shifted the representation of the war. The home front was often neglected in favour of theatres of battle; the Blitz, which was perhaps the most tangible involvement in the war for many British civilians, was barely mentioned (Murphy 2000, p. 194); the working classes are more conspicuous in their absence; regional identity recedes from focus; and women are more often rooted within the nuclear family (Connelly 2004, p. 200). But elements of continuity from wartime cinema also remain on a number of fronts, notably regarding the contribution of 'ordinary' people (often set against the ineptitude of British bureaucracy) and the importance of 'British' values. Rattigan (1994, p. 144) identifies

this continuity, though he is quick to dismiss its significance. In doing so, Rattigan emphasises the oppositional nature of class conflict in Britain through the 1950s, while underplaying the temporary and contingent nature of popular support for the Welfare State.

When viewed in the context of Britain's broader postwar retreat into conservatism, these films reveal the limits of support for the more revolutionary aspects of the People's War narrative. In fact, the 50s films continue a process of negotiation about the meaning of the war which began even before 1945. They shift the narrative of Britain's wartime experience to reflect a victory of individualism over collectivism, and conservatism over socialism more than a victory of the middle classes.

As British society itself was evolving through the 1950s, the war also began to act as a vehicle for Britain to grapple with uncertainties about its place in the postwar world (Rattigan 1994, p. 145). After five years of continuing shortages and restrictions, Britain hardly seemed to have profited from its position as a victor nation. The consequence of this was a growing public nostalgia for the 'Great' Britain of 1940. Most significant in this respect was Britain's relationship with America. American influence in wartime Britain brought with it the promise of material comfort and democratic ideals, but was also strongly associated with notions of social and cultural decline in Britain (Swann 1987, pp. 151-2; Bernstein 2004, p. 14; Sandbrook 2005, p. 224). Many 1950s war films thus act as a reminder to the rest of the world (as well as to the British themselves) about Britain's wartime contribution to securing victory.

During the 1950s, the narrative of a People's War seen in the 1940s war films is gradually consolidated into a celebration of Britain's 'Finest Hour', before a clear move away from an inward-looking view of the war towards the end of the decade. The nature of this trajectory, and of the films themselves, shows that the 1950s war films cannot be written off as a conservative attempt to whitewash the meanings of Britain's wartime experience. They signal something far more complex: a nation struggling to come to terms with the realities of the postwar world, torn between the social inequities but clear,

insular national identity of Imperial Britain, and a new postwar order that promised modern comforts for an emerging middle class, along with some harsh truths about Britain's waning global power.

### Choosing a path: 1950-1953

The early 1950s saw a revival of British war films, many of which retain a spirit of egalitarianism and demonstrate the heroism of 'the people'. Yet these films also indicate that the narrative of a People's War was losing its relevance to British society. There is more attention paid to the international dimension of the war than to internal questions of the war's dislocating effects upon British society. The films focus more on officers and less on lower ranks; more on men and less on the active contribution of women. This apparent contradiction is reflective of a broader debate within British society over whether Labour's Welfare State had failed to live up to the promises of the People's War. And if it had, should Britain return to the communal wartime spirit or was it to jettison a focus on collective responsibility in favour of individual entitlement?

Charles Barr sees 1951 as a pivotal year which marked a shift in British societal values, with 'community spirit giving way to individualism' (cited in Rattigan 1994, p. 146). It was the year of the Festival of Britain, which celebrated Britain's past achievements and looked forward to a future filled with modern comforts:

For some, looking backwards, it marked the reward for six attritional years of gradually edging towards some sort of peacetime normality; for others, looking forward, it was the welcome harbinger not only of Britain's long-awaited revival as a major force after her early post-war difficulties but of a whole way of more contemporary living. (Kynaston 2010, p. 7)

For the backward-looking 'Herbivores', as they are described by Michael Frayn, the Festival offered an illusory comfort about what the next decade might bring. The festival had barely closed when it became clear that the forward-looking 'Carnivores', 'typified in the *Daily Express* as against the *News Chronicle*', were now in the ascendancy.

Moreover, as evidenced by the 1951 election of the Conservatives, they were supported by the general population (Frayn, cited in Barr 1977, p. 8). However, the about-turn was not a complete one, as the Conservatives left much of the Welfare State intact (Kynaston 2010, p. 72). In a similar fashion, war films of the early 1950s began to adopt a more conservative interpretation of the war, but still left elements of the People's War narrative intact.

*Morning Departure* (dir. Roy Ward Baker, 1950) is an example of a film featuring 'ordinary' heroes, this time primarily in the form of John Mills. Mills, himself a representative of the working classes during the 1940s, is now joined by another working-class typecast, Richard Attenborough. The film focuses on the crew of a stricken British submarine in the immediate aftermath of the war. After a mine has destroyed part of the submarine and killed a number of crew, only twelve men remain. The men plan to escape the submarine using diving suits, but soon realise that not all of them can escape and four will need to remain behind. These last men need to wait in the slim hope that the submarine can be salvaged. As the twelve survivors consider their options, an equality of experience is stressed. The captain, played by Mills, insists on a completely unbiased process of selecting the last four crew members to remain behind, while also insisting that he himself will not be a candidate to leave. This egalitarian deference to community, rather than class, was a key feature of many postwar naval films (Chapman 2008, pp. 196-7).

John Mills' career in films of the war and postwar period is illustrative of the ways in which meritocracy remained a strong theme through the 1950s. Having established himself primarily as a representative of the lower ranks during the war – particularly through his role as Shorty Blake in *In Which We Serve* – he is 'promoted' to officer roles in the 1950s. Starting off as an able seaman, by 1950 he had become a submarine captain, finally switching services and attaining a General's rank in 1965 in *Operation Crossbow* (dir. Michael Anderson), with a variety of middle-ranking officer roles in between. The one notable exception to this trend was his turn as the reluctant NCO 'Tubby' Binns in *Dunkirk* (dir. Leslie Norman, 1958), demonstrating his 'everyman'

qualities. This brought legitimacy to his portrayals of officers, in that audiences of all backgrounds had seen him 'rise through the ranks' cinematically.

In *Morning Departure*, Mills character is set against that of Snipe, played by Richard Attenborough, reprising his turn in *In Which We Serve* as the seaman who cracks under pressure. The film emphasises that the other men, quietly resigned to their fate – whatever that may be – 'represent the best qualities of their community' (Mayer 2011, p. 106), whereas Snipe is initially uncooperative when it is revealed that not all the men can escape the stricken sub. He only begins to act in the interests of the community after a blow from the captain (Mills) in a scene bearing a strong resemblance to a similar moment in *The Captive Heart*. Although Christine Geraghty (2000, p. 181) emphasises the elements of class conflict in this scene, Jonathan Rayner (2007, p. 56) claims that 'under the pressure of adversity, distinctions of class and rank are broken down'. It is perhaps not a resounding vote of confidence in the capability of the lower classes, but *Morning Departure* maintains a belief in the unifying power of the wartime spirit.

Another film of 1950 that evidenced the war film's resurgence in British cinema was *Odette* (dir. Herbert Wilcox, 1950), which told the story of a female SOE agent in occupied France. *Odette* is a strong, independent woman who proves herself capable in the field, overcoming the initial reservations of her fellow team members. However, as Wendy Webster observes, the film is careful not to push the boundaries of acceptable femininity too far. In contrast with her fellow agent, Peter Churchill, the audience sees *Odette* engaged in passive resistance far more than actively engaging the enemy (Webster 2003, p. 45). In this manner the film pays tribute to feminine sacrifice, in keeping with the People's War narrative, but avoids any implicit suggestion that women should be offered a more central role in postwar society. Moreover, *Odette* shies away from a fine-grained exploration of British society in its tendency towards a broader celebration of British power and influence – seen here in the reliance of European resistance forces on Britain's leadership and assistance.

*They Were Not Divided* (dir. Terence Young, 1950) similarly pays homage to the 'we all did our bit' message, while hinting at the approaching winds of change. The film, which focuses on three recruits – an Englishman, an Irishman and an American – who join the Welsh Guards, follows a tank unit through a number of operations after the D-Day landings. The film's jovial representation of the training and combat experience is out of keeping with the unnatural sentiment of its ending which features the British and American flags, side-by-side, marking the snow-covered graves of two of the main characters. *They Were Not Divided* illustrates how the narrative of a People's War was increasingly sidelined in war films at the turn of the decade, even as superficial elements of it remained. The film appears to celebrate inclusiveness, with the opening titles stressing that the three protagonists represent the ordinary many, rather than the extraordinary few. In keeping with earlier films from the People's War tradition, it retains a documentary realist aesthetic and a focus on the other ranks and their diverse regional identities. If the film relies on simplistic stereotypes of the Welsh (their apparent love of singing), it is hardly unique in that regard. Its treatment of the ordinary soldiers displayed a clear intent to honour the contribution of all ranks and to make explicit the connection between 'ordinary' civilian and soldier.

Yet despite its focus on the other ranks, *They Were Not Divided* is more concerned with expressing anxiety about Britain's place in the postwar world than exploring how the war impacted upon British society. During one scene, in a briefing about the Allied advance into occupied Europe, one British soldier asks why the Americans and Russians are making far greater inroads than the British. He is immediately rebuked by his officer, who emphatically denies this, informing the soldier that, with significantly less manpower, the British are tying down just the same number of German troops as their allies. Most British war films up to this point had never thought to question the centrality of Britain's contribution to victory. Other nations were shown to provide useful assistance, but always with Britain taking on the lion's share of the fight. The manner in which the point is driven home about Britain's contribution being merely *equal* to the Americans suggests underlying doubts about the standing of the nation in the postwar world.



Amid lingering sympathy for the concept of a People's War, *The Wooden Horse* (dir. Jack Lee, 1950) is often marked out as the film that signalled a new approach to depicting the war in British cinema (Geraghty 2000, p. 183; Butler 2004, p. 9; Webster 2007, p. 89). The film established the POW genre's norms, reinforced in a number of later films such as *The Colditz Story* and *The Great Escape* (Beaumont 2007, p. 539). *The Captive Heart*, made four years earlier, had featured the 'we're all in it together' message in a very literal sense when the officers refused to be separated from the other ranks by their captors. The camp itself thus featured men from a range of class and regional backgrounds. *The Wooden Horse*, on the other hand, was an entirely English, officers-only affair, without even John Laurie or Gordon Jackson as the token Scot. Women and the domestic sphere were also absent, which may have been historically accurate, but the resulting environment of masculine derring-do made the parallels between POW films such as *The Wooden Horse* and the middle or upper-class English boarding school experience hard to miss (Cull 2002, p. 283). The absence of the home front in *The Wooden Horse* served to further reinforce the exclusion of women from the post-1950 narrative of the war (Street 1997, p. 85). It meant Britain or 'Britishness' was represented wholly by activities within the camp, rather than through visual parallels between life inside the camp and images of home, as had been the case in *The Captive Heart* (Murphy 2000, p. 212). The prison camp is presented as a microcosm of the British community, where cooperation among the POWs is essential to the 'defeat' of the Germans (in the form of escape from the camp).

The prisoners themselves appropriate one of the key civilian aspects of the People's War narrative: the Blitz mentality of 'taking it'. Through the 1940s, simply surviving the Blitz was documented and celebrated by filmmakers as a victory of sorts, won by British pluck and ingenuity. The survival – and ultimate escape – of the POWs was now shown to be a victory of those same British qualities of resourcefulness, physical resilience and emotional restraint, rather than a victory won on military terms (Cull 2002, pp. 287-8). So effectively does the prisoner-of-war camp replicate the (English) domestic setting that Marcia Landy claims these films offered 'no space for fantasies of home' (cited in Webster 2007, p. 89), while Martin Francis (2007, p. 176)

claims that in *The Wooden Horse* even the notion of escape itself is 'completely dissociated from home'. This charge is only partly proven in a literal sense. While the primary appeal of escape for one of the men is the ability to do 'ordinary' things such as use a telephone or walk on grass, another is offered a place in the escape trio with the promise of getting home by Christmas to see his wife. Nonetheless, there is an underlying truth to this assertion, in that the *Wooden Horse* continues to shift the focus of the war narrative away from domestic concerns.

One film that did continue to show the domestic effects of the war was *Appointment in London* (dir. Philip Leacock, 1952). The film focuses on Bomber Command and features Dirk Bogarde as Wing Commander Mason, a man who has flown more than his share of operations. We do not discover much about his background (though his accent suggests he is middle class), but the film stresses the merit upon which his leadership is based. Mason is also shown to be democratic in approach: he is just as capable of relating to the working-class ground crews as he is comfortable with his peers and superiors. He is also fallible as a leader, demonstrating a vulnerability – as he struggles to come to terms with the death of one of his pilots – that is a far cry from the stiff upper lip characterising the genre. Women are not excluded from the film either. Mason's love interest, Eve Canyon, is shown to be a capable naval intelligence officer in her own right. Her first appearance in the film is as an apparent damsel in distress, rescued by Mason and two other officers when her car breaks down. The next day the men are surprised when Canyon turns out to be the very officer tasked with providing an intelligence briefing for the pilots. The film plays on this subversion of the men's expectations by having her joke with them that her presence implies the Navy couldn't find anyone suitably qualified, though her professionalism and suitability for the job are made quite clear to the audience.

Yet the broader narrative thrust of *Appointment in London* counteracts these more progressive elements. The film is dismissive of the other female characters. Much is made of how women distract the bomber crews from carrying out their work and Mason is careful to avoid taking on married pilots for this reason. The one married pilot, who

has concealed his status from Mason, compromises security through contact with his wife, before he is killed during a raid. The film also helps establish a constant of the 1950s war films (at least those featuring the RAF): the boarding school high-jinks in the barracks. Irrespective of its historical accuracy, this element of the wartime experience emphasises the exclusion of women, civilians and other ranks. The overall consequence is less an explicit denial of the People's War than a stronger focus on Britain's best and brightest doing their bit to secure victory.

In 1951, after six years of waiting for Labour to deliver a New Jerusalem, the 'People' ran out of patience and the Conservative Party claimed government in the election of that year. For all that Socialism and the Welfare State 'held the promise and excitement of an untried experiment' in 1945 (Addison 1985, p. 203), the political landscape was now blurred by conflicted aspirations. More than ever, desires for an improvement in individual circumstances sat uncomfortably against notions of community. Even ardent socialists such as J.B. Priestley were now 'disgruntled' by the apparent failure of the Welfare State to improve living conditions for most Britons (*ibid*, p. 203). 'We are revolutionaries who have not swept anything away' he remarked (cited in Butler 2004, p. 123). It was this sense of individual entitlement that Winston Churchill appealed to in a 1951 pre-election broadcast. He characterised Labour's approach to reconstruction as timid, saying 'We are for the ladder [...] they are for the queue. Let each wait in his place till his time comes' (Kynaston 2010, p. 33). It was a canny pitch, for there was more to the desires of the middle-classes than Labour perhaps realised:

The generation which won the war wanted houses, jobs and the welfare state, but they also wanted fun and spending money. The Conservatives remained in office by maintaining the welfare state but dismantling restrictions, ending rationing and promoting affluence... (Richards 1997, p. 15)

Although the defeat of Labour might be seen to end popular support for the People's War, the perceived winding back of centralised control over people's lives by the Conservatives fulfilled one significant aspect of this narrative. Through the 1940s, Ealing Studios had been at the forefront of the charge against unnecessary or

excessive government restrictions, although their films still expressed some hesitation about the alternative course of granting people full control over their lives. In the 1950s, Ealing seemed to hit upon the solution to this dilemma, anointing the professional class as the natural custodians of power in postwar Britain. Ealing's 1953 film *The Cruel Sea* (dir. Charles Frend) invokes the legacy of the war to champion this argument showing these figures elevated to positions of leadership.

*The Cruel Sea* focuses on a number of relationships on board the ship *Compass Rose*, which functions as a microcosm of British society. The dramatic tension centres on the relationship between Ericson and Lockhart, who becomes Ericson's First Lieutenant. The film typifies 'an assertion of a more meritocratic social order' where 'leadership resides with the middle classes' (Chapman 2008, p. 196). Ericson is shown to be a natural leader, but not by virtue of class or any exceptional aspect of his nature. Instead, he is celebrated as a hero on the basis of his ability and, indeed, his 'ordinariness'. His 'authoritative' accent suggests he is not working-class (Summerfield 2011, p. 344), yet nor is he upper-class; as he says in the introductory voiceover, he came to the *Compass Rose* from the Merchant Navy, where he 'belonged'. As James Chapman writes, 'the emphasis is on leadership by ability rather than by class' (Chapman 2008, p. 196). In this regard it is instructive to compare *The Cruel Sea* with the wartime naval film *In Which We Serve*, where the social order remains unquestioned as leaders lead benevolently and followers follow without question.

Not only is Ericson's status as a leader earned by virtue of ability, the film takes pains to show an emotional fallibility that marks him out from his cinematic predecessors (Summerfield 2011, p. 344). This is typified by perhaps the most well-known scene from the film. When his lieutenant identifies a German submarine, right underneath where some stranded British sailors are floating in the water, Ericson orders the firing of depth charges to destroy the sub, killing the British sailors in the process. Though the film goes to considerable lengths to point out that he had little alternative, Ericson is visibly upset by the fact that he has killed the sailors and drowns his sorrows with alcohol. This reaction shows the difficulty in making generalised claims about the

1950s war film. Ericson's response is a far cry from the 'stiff upper lip' often associated with war films of this period (a generalisation that also ignores instances in other 1950s films such as *Appointment in London*). Moreover, he displays a level of emotion rarely shown in the wartime films themselves, which emphasised stoicism.

Also worthy of mention is the reaction of one crew member who yells at Ericson 'bloody murderer!' There is a deep ambiguity to this moment which could support a range of different interpretations. Is it that the lower classes cannot grasp the ethically fraught nature of war? Could only a professional middle-class leader have the ability to make such an impossible decision and yet still appreciate the inherently conflicted morality? The film does not provide a clear answer to these questions. Like previous Ealing films, it emphasises middle-class values but attempts to avoid suggestions of class conflict (Sjolyst-Jackson 2004, p. 173).

*The Cruel Sea* is less concerned with broader issues of class than it is with the nature of the middle-class world itself:

The Cruel Sea expresses the anxieties of the middle class about both the quality of its wartime contribution and its post-war social and political position, in the context of government restriction at home, international competition abroad, and the loss of empire. (Summerfield 2011, p. 346)

One might add that it is *masculine* middle-class anxieties around the postwar settlement that are playing out here. Sue Harper (1997, p. 173) suggests that the film evokes 'a male (and possibly pre-war) utopia in which interfering females have been consigned to the invisible kitchen quarters'. Harper's analysis may overstate the case, but the film does establish the parameters of its focus early on, with a voiceover proclaiming that 'the men are the heroes; the heroines are the ships'.

There are three significant female characters in *The Cruel Sea*: Lieutenant Morell's wife, Elaine; Julie Hallam, a Wren officer who becomes the love interest of Lieutenant

Lockhart; and Glad, the sister of Chief Petty Officer Tallow, who also becomes the love interest of the Chief Engineer, Watts. These figures are the key representatives of the home front during the war and connect the men to the domestic sphere. They also, in their differences, outline competing ideals about the place of women in 1950s Britain.

The film's treatment of Julie Hallam is admiring. She is 'committed to war work and, at the same time, feminine and sensitive to the demands of war on naval men' (Summerfield 2011, p. 347). She has largely accepted her lot as a secondary companion for Lockhart, behind both the ship and also Ericson, though not without a certain degree of difficulty. It is apparent that she is more than competent at her wartime work and her primary instinct is not to give it up when a new posting means she will not be able to see as much of Lockhart. Nonetheless, Penny Summerfield (*ibid*, p. 347) notes that the relationship between Lockhart and Hallam 'conforms to the official narrative of post-war reconstruction', 'with its implications of a future rooted in marriage and family'. The role of Hallam therefore pays homage to feminine deference, while nonetheless leaving some room for negotiation around its limits.

Elaine Morell presents a more intriguing representation of femininity, described by Summerfield (2011, p. 347) as 'a scapegoat for the difficulties middle-class men faced in the post-war world'. The film initially suggests she is unfaithful to Morell while he is at sea, and this is later confirmed when Ericson goes to inform her of Morell's death and finds her in bed with another man. Summerfield marks Elaine Morell as emblematic of the forcible eviction of women from the narrative of Second World War heroism in many 1950s films. She is judged for undermining masculine performance by not loving her husband enough, just as Douglas Bader's wife in *Reach for the Sky* is shown to achieve the same outcome by loving her husband too much (Summerfield 2009, p. 939).

The negative portrayal of Elaine is deepened through its juxtaposition with the unquestioning devotion of Glad. Glad is typical of Ealing's characterisation of respectable working-class femininity. She conforms to Michael Balcon's vision of prioritising love over sex (Ellis 1975, p. 124) and maintains an unquestioning servitude

to her brother, while avoiding feminine ‘weaknesses’ such as a lack of emotional control. In one sequence Tallow and Watts arrive home on shore leave, only to receive news of Glad’s death in a bombing raid. Emphasising the sadness of this moment, the camera follows the two men walking through the rubble of a bombed-out street, before the very next shot places the audience in the Morells’ bedroom. Despite the short amount of time her husband will be home on leave, Elaine Morell neglects him and heads out for a fancy dinner.

The key issue here is not whether films such as *The Cruel Sea* come down as either for, or against, portraying women as having played an important role in wartime Britain – it is how the tension between these two positions plays out within these films (Summerfield 2011, p. 348). *The Cruel Sea* demonstrate the sacrifices made by women during wartime and the difficulties faced by women such as Hallam, whose eminent professional capabilities must be balanced against the expectations inherent in maintaining a romantic relationship. The film suggests such dependable and capable women may be entitled to expect a greater stake in postwar British society. At the same time, the character of Elaine Morell casts doubt over this claim. All the while, the key plot drivers within the film are exclusively masculine – the men’s key relationships are with the ship and each other, especially Ericson and Lockhart.

Where *The Cruel Sea* does make a stand is around notions of community. The Ship’s initial First Lieutenant, Bennett, does not quite ‘fit’ into the world of Ealing. A used car salesman, he has not adopted the cultured middle-class values that would grant him ‘respectable’ working-class status. He is characterised as a sneering, arrogant bully who is unwilling to contribute to the ‘community’ of the ship and the film suggests he is guilty of shirking his responsibility to that community (Inglis 2003, p. 44). Many Ealing films throughout the 1940s had focused on community in arguing for ordinary people to have a greater say in their own affairs and an improved standard of living. They had contributed to the People’s War and should stand to benefit from the postwar settlement. By the 1950s, a common concern in Ealing films was that these people may not be the most trustworthy custodians of the hard-won benefits brought about by the

war. *The Cruel Sea* portrays women as suspect, even if this is in the context of other redeeming aspects. And while class is not the primary reason for Bennett's exclusion, the fact that his replacement is from the ranks of the professional middle-class is telling.

The more that Ealing began to express doubts about the capacity of the people they had helped idealise in the 1940s, the more one can see elements of conservatism creeping into their films in the 1950s. *The Cruel Sea* exemplifies this. For all that it espouses meritocracy, the curious thing about *The Cruel Sea* is that, upon closer inspection, one finds that Ericson is the only professional sailor out of the officers and his experience was in the Merchant rather than the Royal Navy. The rest of the officers are drawn from all walks of life. Those of them who prove to be successful aboard the *Compass Rose* are 'professional' in the sense of being from 'the professions' in civilian life, rather than professional sailors. In short, *The Cruel Sea* leaves the impression that perhaps one ruling class has merely been replaced with another, and that the new ruling class is beginning to question the wisdom of many of the reforms for which they had earlier fought.

### The retreat to conservatism: 1954-1956

The mid-1950s was a golden time for Britain, 'the fleeting having-it-so-good patch between the coronation and Suez' (Hennessy 2007, p. 276). Jeffrey Richards describes it as 'an era of peace, prosperity and order':

The crime rate was falling. There was full employment and rising productivity. The greater availability of consumer goods blunted class antagonisms. The coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953 was seen as ushering in a 'new Elizabethan age', as the Empire was transmuted into the Commonwealth, a worldwide brotherhood of nations, and as Britain continued to notch up memorable achievements ... (Aldgate & Richards 1999, p. 153)

Having overcome housing shortages and an increase in the severity of rationing, by the mid-1950s the economic recovery was such that the nation was 'scarcely



recognizable as the country which had been suffering from the effects of the war, exhaustion and bankruptcy a decade earlier' (Swann 1987, pp. 151-2).

The war was a happy subject for British filmmakers during this period, with a significant number of high-profile war films released: *The Sea Shall Not Have Them* (dir. Lewis Gilbert, 1954), followed in 1955 by *Above Us the Waves* (dir. Ralph Thomas), *The Colditz Story* (dir. Guy Hamilton), *The Dam Busters* (dir. Michael Anderson) and then in 1956 by *The Battle of the River Plate* (dir. Michael Powell & Emeric Pressburger) and *Reach for the Sky* (dir. Lewis Gilbert). These films mark a noticeable shift in tone from their predecessors. Even earlier in the 1950s, audiences preferred to see Britain as the underdog, fighting back from a position of weakness to overcome an enemy superior in numbers and technological capacity. Now many of these films were showing Britain 'not simply fighting back but winning on its own terms' (Rattigan 1994, p. 149).

One film that took to this task with enthusiasm was *The Dam Busters*, which depicts the bombing raid carried out on three dams in the Ruhr valley. *The Dam Busters* follows the story of the 'bouncing bomb', from its design by Barnes Wallis through to Wing Commander Guy Gibson's hand-picked squadron carrying out the raid. Many assessments of the film focus on its role in cementing the conservative myth of Britain's Finest Hour by pushing women and the 'other ranks' to the periphery of the narrative. David Kynaston (2010, p. 515) argues *The Dam Busters* is 'not a film that even for a nanosecond questioned the existing class structure', while Sarah Street writes of the film's lasting impact:

It is a key film in the perpetuation of certain images of the Second World War which have become entrenched in the popular imagination: the ingenuity of British boffins, the romance and superiority of British aircraft; the camaraderie of male groups who fight the enemy in a spirit of sacrifice and professionalism. (1997, p. 84)

There can be little argument that *The Dam Busters* contains strong elements of middle-class, masculine conservatism. The film emphasises the intervention of brilliant

and far-sighted individuals such as Churchill and Arthur Harris, the head of Bomber Command, to cut through the red tape holding back Wallis' design (*ibid*, p. 85). *The Dam Busters* also dedicates a significant amount of screen time to the process of training and preparation for the raid by Gibson and his aircrews – thus allowing a more detailed exploration of the all-male domain of the barracks. Military life was projected as an extension of the British male public school experience, complete with play fights and masculine derring-do.

The middle-class conservatism displayed in *The Dam Busters* is not altogether surprising. Nor is it as pronounced a shift as is often claimed. As the previous chapters make clear, there were elements of middle-class conservatism within the People's War narrative throughout the 1940s. Far more interesting is the manner in which a film such as *The Dam Busters* appropriates elements of the People's War narrative and considers them through a contemporary lens. In doing so, the film weaves these different strands into a coherent sub-plot within a broader narrative of Britain's Finest Hour. It is instructive in this regard to compare *The Dam Busters* with the 1942 film, *The First of the Few*, which details the design of the Spitfire by R.J. Mitchell. Both tell the story of a brilliant (civilian) individual frustrated by the bureaucracy, in the form of the Supermarine company (*The First of the Few*) or the Air Ministry (*The Dam Busters*). After eventually winning through, in each film the boffin now relies on the flying prowess of an ace pilot (Guy Gibson being substituted for Geoffrey Crisp) to see the ultimate realisation of his dream. As in *The First of the Few*, *The Dam Busters* stresses inherent British ingenuity. The moment of inspiration for Mitchell is watching a bird in flight; for Barnes Wallis it is skipping a marble across a water tank. Like Mitchell, Barnes Wallis is no amateur. Though he tinkers in the backyard with the initial idea for his bouncing bomb, he has already made a valuable contribution to the war effort through his design of the Lancaster bomber. For both Mitchell and Barnes Wallis, their efforts are ultimately successful, though the work is shown to take a severe toll on their health.

In this manner, *The Dam Busters* remains connected to wartime notions of self-sacrifice and placing the community's interests above one's own. The film stresses the

professionalism of the aircrews chosen for the bombing raid, emphasising the fact they are a group of men who have already proven their capabilities (Geraghty 2000, p. 186). In fact, Robert Niemi (2006, p. 89) finds a conflict between the film's portrayal of Gibson's support of this strict meritocracy and the recollection by his peers of a man who was 'arrogantly class-conscious'. The film's arguments in favour of meritocracy indicate how this emerged as one of the key aspects of change in postwar Britain. It is sometimes a clearer element in the 1950s war films than even in wartime films themselves.

The delineation of Gibson offers a clear demonstration of how the *Dam Busters* narrative has evolved in this respect from the earlier representation of a People's War. Where Crisp is depicted as a carefree, devil-may-care risk-taker and serial womaniser, Gibson is portrayed as a serious man, undisturbed by the potential distractions of women, who takes only calculated risks where his exceptional skill allows. *The First of the Few* illustrates Crisp's romantic nature in his constant desire to smooth-talk women. While competing in the air race in Italy, Crisp regularly tries his hand with the local ladies despite the lack of a shared language. In *The Dam Busters*, Gibson chooses the companionship of his dog, Nigger, over devotion to women.

Even when he is out at a show, his attention is captured not by the chorus girls but by a spotlight trained on the stage, which gets him thinking about the potential use of spotlights to help accurately release the bomb. His apparent disinterest in women was of questionable historical accuracy as the real Guy Gibson was not only married, but also engaged in numerous affairs (Murphy 2000, p. 220; Williams 2009, pp. 96-7). Given this promiscuity, avoiding any reference to Gibson's relationships with women may be an 'honourable' compromise to avoid interference with the clear support the film offers for the nuclear family.

At the same time, this depiction of Gibson speaks to the ways in which *The Dam Busters* consolidates an individualistic interpretation of the People's War. Gibson embodies the individual nature of heroism and its particular trials. While he enjoys the

respect of his men he cannot be one of them. Instead he is marked out as an extraordinary hero. Christine Geraghty describes the way in which the film achieves this:

Gibson is continually shown apart from the other men, studying the maps while they socialise, thoughtful in the theatre while they enjoy the show, joining in for a brief moment of horseplay but moving on to meet the group captain to get orders for the raid. (2000, p. 189)

One of the film's strongest messages is around the importance of family. It is symbolic of the manner in which war films of the 1950s are often presented within 'a narrow and fixed framework, [with] the family as a representative symbol of the nation' (Gough-Yates 2005, p. 178). The nuclear family in *The Dam Busters* is represented by Barnes Wallis, his wife and children. His wife demonstrates a deferential femininity and her strongest attribute is her self-effacement, offering unquestioning support for her husband's work even when it is detrimental to his health. She also has the good sense to understand the limitations of her technical comprehension, promptly excusing herself from the room when Wallis discusses the finer points of bombing dams with the family doctor (Ramsden 2003, p. 54).

In concentrating on the nature of the British contribution to victory – particularly that made by individuals or small, elite groups – these films represented a concerted attempt to put Britain 'back on the map'. Britain could not compete with America's industrial might, so war films tended to focus on a particular set of values that they saw as having underpinned victory – and the individuals who best embodied them. In doing so, they shifted away from the focus on community that marked the People's War narrative, in favour of an individualist narrative. Rather than wartime characters whose leadership qualities reflected the common-sense approach of 'ordinary' people, characters such as Gibson are shown to be *extraordinary*.

*Reach for the Sky* represents the pinnacle of this endeavour, telling the story of

Douglas Bader, who overcame the loss of both of his legs in a car crash to prove himself as a particularly skilful fighter pilot. Without any significant civilian characters, *Reach for the Sky* represents perhaps the most complete shift away from the People's War narrative of any 1950s film. The bombing of civilian targets in Britain, previously (through the Blitz) a key signifier of popular resistance, is now merely the background to the efforts of a select few individuals. A telling moment in the film shows the aircrews gathered around the wireless, listening to Winston Churchill talking about 'the few'. This scene then cuts to a sequence showing German bombers carrying out a raid on Britain. The following day, as the crews sit around outside waiting for orders, Bader hears about this raid on the news and immediately telephones his superiors to ask why his aircrew have been lounging about on ground instead of being sent up to combat the German bombers. He is informed that his crews cannot be sent up until enemy aircraft actually enter into their designated area. Once again, we see here the heroic individual constrained by hidebound, bureaucratic approaches. But the heroic individual is now the 'superman', as Bader is described in the scenes that follow, rather than the ordinary 'everyman' of the 1940s and early 1950s (Geraghty 1984, p. 65).

In *The Dam Busters*, even the crews themselves cannot be considered 'ordinary', with the film emphasising the unique characteristics of these men during the process of their selection by Gibson. Christine Geraghty (2000, p. 185) notes '... it is clear that the group is being chosen as members of an elite rather than to be a representative cross-section of the nation'. The makeup of the crews within the squadron reflected a broader trend towards ignoring or downplaying British regional identity in favour of English essentialism and a renewed interest in colonial involvement (*ibid*, p. 185). This is a common factor in films of the 1950s as they seek to reassert Britain's global standing through showing Britain winning the war in partnership with America (*They Were Not Divided*) and playing a leadership role amongst her former colonies (*Appointment in London*).

The question of Britain's global prestige cannot be underestimated here. Through the late 1940s, the growth of nostalgia for the time when Britain stood 'alone' against

the might of Nazi Germany had exposed a growing concern about Britain's stake in the postwar settlement. There was a dawning realisation (brought to a head during the Suez Crisis) of Britain's increasing reliance on the United States and the subordinate role they occupied in this relationship (Ramsden 1998, p. 59), though acceptance of this as fact was by no means universal. As early as 1950, Peter Laslett wrote about the need for 'an Englishman ... to reconcile himself to a continuous diminution in the consequence of his country' (cited in Hennessy 2007, p. 2). Not everybody concurred with Laslett's contention. David Kynaston (2010, p. 267) notes that even in the early 1960s 'Britain ... was not yet a country in perceived – let alone self-perceived – decline'. In fact, there was a general view that Britain had emerged from the war still a significant player on the global stage (Morgan 1999, p. 59; Harrison 2009, p. 540). Dominic Sandbrook (2005, p. 219) writes that since Britain had avoided invasion and occupation and come through the postwar decade of colonial wrangling relatively unscathed (compared to countries such as France), 'many Britons from ministers to miners were understandably reluctant to accept that the age of international supremacy had long since passed'.

Nonetheless, there was broad concern about the growth and pervasiveness of America's influence in Britain. This was true of the political left, who were fearful of the destabilising effects of individualistic American free market capitalism, and the right, who feared an erosion of 'traditional' British values (Rosen 2003, pp. 147-8). Added to this was a conviction that growing juvenile delinquency was the result of over-exposure to American culture (Hennessy 2007, p. 85). Although Britain's youth were associated with a more progressive classlessness, they were also seen 'as eroding the traditional landmarks and undermining the sacred order and institutions of traditional society' (Hill 1986, p. 11). John Hill claims that the younger generation in the 1950s 'came to serve as a metaphor for the "underside" of the "affluent society": its slavish devotion to consumerism, allegiance to superficialities and absence of authentic values' (*ibid*, p. 11). Thus, for many of the wartime generation, the fight against Germany to protect Britain's existence had been replaced by a peacetime fight against America to protect the nation's social values and cultural independence (Hennessy 2007, p. 85).

Unease about Britain's global standing is discernible in the background of war films such as *They Were Not Divided* at the beginning of the decade. By the mid-1950s, as Dominic Sandbrook describes, it was a driving force behind the war film genre:

Clearly the vogue for war films was partly intended to alleviate anxieties about declining British power and prestige abroad, as well as trying to recapture the old community spirit of the Blitz. One successful war film director, Lewis Gilbert, admitted that they were 'a kind of ego trip, a nostalgia for a time when Britain was great'. (2005, p. 203)

Sandbrook's analysis is rare in that it identifies the multi-faceted nature of the nostalgia underpinning the 1950s war films. Allusions to the 'community spirit of the Blitz' were stronger during the earlier part of the decade, whereas by the mid-1950s, films showed a more explicit concern with issues of British prestige. The war films of the mid-1950s thus occupied a curious space combining 'nostalgia for a time period when Britain was unarguably a power on the global stage' (Ramsden 1998, p. 59) with a reluctance to accept that this had ever ceased to be the case.

### The 'last gasp' of the People's War: 1957-1960

If 1951 had been a watershed year for the British then 1956 must also fall into the same category. The Suez Crisis of that year saw Britain pressured into a humiliating backdown after contriving an invasion of Egypt and the resumption of control over the Suez Canal. David Kynaston writes of Suez:

It was a crisis that had shown many things: Britain's inability to act independently of her American ally; the futility of clinging on to illusions of empire ... and an undeniable waning of deference. (2010, pp. 693-4)

Yet the full effects of Suez on upon representations of the Second World War were not immediate, nor were they readily identifiable in isolation. Between 1957 and 1959 at

least another 20 films were made focusing explicitly on the British WWII experience, including *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (dir. David Lean, 1957); *Carve Her Name With Pride* (dir. Lewis Gilbert, 1958); *Dunkirk* (dir. Leslie Norman, 1958); and *Ice Cold in Alex* (dir. J. Lee Thompson, 1958). A number of these films continued to celebrate Britain's finest wartime achievements and at first glance look much the same as those made prior to 1956. So it is clear that Suez did not dampen British appetites for the war as cinematic subject matter. Neither did Suez in its own right bring about an immediate and categorical change in British society (Kynaston 2010, p. 694). What was significant about Suez was its symbolic function, marking a moment that would have profound implications for the nation in the years to come. As Dominic Sandbrook (2005, p. 30) describes, 'Suez didn't change anything on the surface, but it seemed to plant the seed of an internal realisation that Britain's glory days were over'.

The chief effect of Suez on the British war film was to accelerate and consolidate two trends that had been gathering pace in the background up to this point. The first of these trends was a desire to couch Britain's Second World War experience in more outward-looking terms, as opposed to concentrating on the war's effects upon British society. The international focus was not a new feature for British war films, but the strength and consistency with which post-Suez films were imbued with this focus marked them out as distinct from most of their predecessors. Suez had made less credible the notion, espoused in film through much of the 1940s and 50s, that Britain had won the war almost single-handedly. As Martin Woollacott (2006, p. 132) writes, Suez 'made plain that the victory Britain had won in 1945 was far less complete and far less her own than had been assumed'.

Rather than being incidental characters, representatives of Britain's wartime allies (and, in some cases, enemies) now commanded a greater presence in the spotlight. The 1958 film *The Silent Enemy* (dir. William Fairchild) took pains to humanise the enemy and illustrate the many similarities between British divers and their Italian counterparts, while *Ice Cold in Alex* took this a step further and showed an enemy (in this case a fifth columnist) more competent than the British themselves. Raymond



Durgnat suggests that the capabilities of the three male characters in *Ice Cold in Alex* ran 'Germans or colonial top; loyal NCO next; English officer last,' (cited in Williams 2009, p. 96), while James Park observes that Mills' character 'seems hysterical and incompetent by comparison with the Dutch South African who accompanies them but is working for the Germans' (Park 1990, p. 94). This uncertainty around Britain's wartime role, according to Melanie Williams (2009, p. 96), reflected 'dents to British military self-confidence occasioned by the Suez crisis'.

The second trend was a reaction against the celebratory nature with which Britain had reflected on its wartime achievements throughout the 1940s and 50s. With only a few exceptions, films made in the wake of Suez tempered their enthusiasm for depicting British victory with a clear acknowledgement of the moral and psychological costs of this victory (Spicer 2007, p. 185). Robert Murphy (2000, p. 7) describes them as having a 'more cynical, less gentlemanly ethos'. Rather than an unproblematic focus on British heroism, these films were more likely to show an 'ambivalent scepticism', with the supermen of the mid-1950s replaced by 'men-on-the-edge' (Spicer 2001, p. 45). In the wake of Suez, these two themes coalesced with greater frequency. War films increasingly concerned themselves with questions of ideology, morality and global political hegemony far larger than the internal machinations of British society. This was not a reaction against the concept of a People's War *per se*, but the People's War was collateral damage in the aftermath of Suez, when it became increasingly difficult to argue Britain had a 'good' Second World War.

Whereas, up until 1956 it is difficult to identify a single film that questions the morality of Britain's fight against Nazism in the Second World War (Pronay 1988, p. 46), in the wake of Suez 'the moral dilemmas are more confusing and the answers less clear-cut' (Murphy 2000, p. 199). Senior officers in films such as *Orders to Kill* (dir. Anthony Asquith, 1958) and *Circle of Deception* (dir. Jack Lee, 1960) are portrayed as 'cynical and devious, sending men on undercover operations that are deliberately flawed and which break them emotionally and psychologically' (Spicer 2007, p. 185). During the war, films such as *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* had suggested that

Britain's war effort was being constrained by an out-of-touch officer class. Although *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* was controversial, it was in keeping with 'the ascendant demonology of the war period', where 'the upper classes were usually to blame because they were rich, because they were obsolete in their ideas, or because they were both' (Addison 1994, p. 150). A number of films made after Suez seemed to mount a more serious attack on the fabric of Britain's wartime experience by undermining the simplicity of the good-versus-evil construction so prevalent in popular memory.

One of the most notable post-Suez films to offer a significant challenge to the cosy memory of Britain's wartime experience was *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, which suggested that perhaps the values the British had fought for were not that far removed from those they were fighting against. Set in a Japanese-run POW camp, the British prisoners are forced to build a railway bridge by the Japanese and initially take steps to delay and sabotage the construction. However, the senior British officer, Colonel Nicholson (played by Alec Guinness), decides that the men should complete their forced labour on a bridge to the best of their ability, despite the fact that it will assist the Japanese in the war. While it cannot be seen as a direct response to the Suez Crisis, having been in planning well beforehand (Santas 2012, p. 3), certain elements of the film tied in well with the post-Suez mood of the nation.

*The Bridge on the River Kwai* appears to offer a critique of the British war film and of the masculine values that underpinned it. Nicholson exhibits many of the British characteristics common in war films of the previous 15 years: 'a traditional British martial masculinity' and 'devotion to imperial service' (Webster 2007, p. 197). Indeed, an explicit connection is made between Nicholson and imperialist British attitudes and values. He remarks to another British officer at one point 'we can teach these barbarians a lesson in Western methods and efficiency that will put them to shame. We'll show them what the British soldier is capable of doing'. At one stage the Japanese Commandant, Colonel Saito, tells Nicholson 'I hate the British. You are defeated, but you have no shame. You are stubborn, but have no pride. You endure, but you have no courage'. Saito means it as a rebuke, but Nicholson takes it as a compliment and

appears pleased with the assessment. There is enough ambiguity in the film's depiction of Nicholson to cloud the issue of whether or not his final act – in which he falls on the detonator to blow up the bridge – should be seen as a symbol of salvation (Spicer 2007, p. 185; Scholz 2013, pp. 65-67). Nonetheless, when viewed in the post-Suez context, it is possible to interpret Nicholson's character as a condemnation of the masculine values displayed in earlier British war films.

Some commentaries on the film have suggested that *The Bridge on the River Kwai* plays a role in the continuing shift away from the concept of a People's War. Neil Rattigan compares it with *In Which We Serve* to argue that films such as *Kwai* shifted the focus of the People's War to the middle classes:

Unlike *In Which We Serve*, there is no need in *The Bridge on the River Kwai* to 'humanize' the men beyond that of ordinary British 'Tommies'. They are what they are. Is it their war? Hardly so. (1994, p. 148)

It is easy to concur with Rattigan's conclusion that *The Bridge on the River Kwai* assists in the sidelining of the People's War narrative, though perhaps not for the reasons he outlines. The film continues a trend apparent in the 1950s films of writing the working classes out of Britain's wartime experience, but Rattigan's argument is weakened by his choice of material for comparison. The concept of class was central to *In Which We Serve*, though it attempted to show a shared experience *across* classes, as much as equality *between* classes. Class was less relevant as a framework for exploring the war's legacy by the late 1950s as many in the lower-middle classes (those who had been at the forefront of the People's War narrative through the 1940s) had begun to notice 'tangible increases in living standards and the availability of consumer goods' (Hennessy 2007, p. 17). This did not transform Britain overnight into a classless society, or remove economic inequality, but it did at least disguise some of the more visible effects of class division that filmmakers of the 1940s had campaigned against (Hill 1986, pp. 8-9). So when the concept of a People's War starts to disappear altogether from war films such as *Kwai*, it has less to do with class and more to do with the

changing context of global politics. The insular concept of a People's War had limited currency at a time when Britain's prestige was on the wane.

Another significant factor affecting war films in the aftermath of Suez was an emerging generation of British youth whose identification with the values of the war – People's War or otherwise – was tenuous at best. The seeds of a British cultural renewal were being sown in the second half of the 1950s, through works such as John Osborne's 1956 play *Look Back in Anger*, as well as contributions to British literature by the 'Angry Young Men' (Brook 2003, p. 19). In British cinema, a younger generation – typified by the vocal criticism of those such as Lindsay Anderson – 'saw 1950s war films as epitomising the middle-class conformity which appeared to smother all creativity from British film production...' (Murphy 2000, p. 5). Their reviews targeted the war films of the 1950s for their conservatism, for being 'old-fashioned', for 'highlighting a regrettable event [...] in a way no longer appropriate,' and for encouraging 'irresponsible attitudes to future warfare' (Ramsden 1998, p. 40).

This reaction against British war films also played out through the emergence of service comedies during the latter part of the 1950s. Films such as *Private's Progress* (dir. John Boulting, 1956) and *Square Peg* (dir. John Paddy Carstairs, 1958) offered an alternative view of Britain's wartime experience, characterised by shirkers and crooks, 'showing British officials as anachronistic buffoons struggling to cope with the modern post-colonial world' (Sandbrook 2005, p. 301). Drawing upon the common experience of National Service for young men during the 1950s, they poked fun at the 'stuffy' attitudes of army officers and petty figures of bureaucratic authority that characterised army life (*ibid* pp. 432-33; MacKenzie 2006, p. 133). Just as films of the 1940s had decried the rigidity of Britain's pre-war structures of power, these films took aim at the same institutions which had somehow emerged from the war unscathed or strengthened (Spicer 2004, p. 176). The service comedies did not kill off the war film genre altogether, but they cast a shadow over those serious films celebrating the role of British values in the defeat of Fascism.

Amidst this shift away from a celebratory, Anglo-centric view of the war, Ealing Studios' *Dunkirk* seems rather anachronistic. The film depicts the evacuation of British troops from Dunkirk and the events leading up to this point, from both the perspective of the home front and that of a group of British soldiers in France. The film culminates with the evacuation itself and pays particular attention to the civilian contribution, including that of one man who initially seeks to justify his attitude of profiting from the war – while leaving other people to fight it – but eventually decides to add his own boat to the 'little ships' at Dunkirk.

The British Army's defeat and evacuation at Dunkirk was one of the key reference points for the development of the People's War narrative during the 1940s. Contemporary accounts of the Dunkirk evacuation, most notably from J.B. Priestley, emphasised the contribution of British civilians who went across to Dunkirk in all manner of private boats to assist (Rose 2003, p. 3). It was an enduring image, as Mark Connelly observes:

The vast majority of soldiers were actually carried away by the Royal Navy in Royal Navy vessels [but] that fact has never mattered. At the time most people were impressed by the idea of ordinary people doing their bit for their boys. (2004, p. 72)

Connelly's assessment is sound, though it overstates the case a little. Priestley's version of events at Dunkirk had become a site of contestation even in its immediate aftermath. Penny Summerfield (2010, p. 792) demonstrates that Priestley's egalitarian ('voice of the people') narrative of Dunkirk, emphasising the role of the 'little ships', was set against Churchill's imperialist ('voice of the nation') narrative, which emphasised the Navy's role. Summerfield therefore suggests that the contestation within Ealing's film is not over issues of British heroism or the moral righteousness of the war, but rather around 'whether Dunkirk was to be remembered as an expression of the "people's war"' (*ibid*, p. 790). In choosing to focus on the popular contribution to the evacuation, *Dunkirk* represented an attempt by Ealing to put the People's War firmly back on the map (MacKenzie 2003, p. 243).

*Dunkirk* is notable for its attempt to provide a more inclusive focus than previous war films of the decade. On the military side, the film looks beyond the officer ranks, with Director Leslie Norman keen to move away from ‘the fifties concentration on well-bred commissioned heroes’ (MacKenzie 2003, p. 251). In this respect, John Mills’ character, Corporal ‘Tubby’ Binns, represents the pragmatic leadership qualities of the common soldier. *Dunkirk* also balances its interest in the military aspects of the campaign with its focus on two central civilian characters, the journalist Charles Foreman and the garage owner John Holden, played by Richard Attenborough. The two are stereotypes of the People’s War as Ealing conceived it in the 1940s: Foreman is the common-sense man who sees through the incompetence of out-of-touch leaders, evoking films such as *The Foreman Went to France*, while Holden is the shirker who finds redemption, alluding to a film such as *The Captive Heart* as well as Richard Attenborough’s own previous roles in *Morning Departure* and *In Which We Serve*.

*Dunkirk* adheres to the common narrative elements of the People’s War as outlined during the 1940s. The events leading up to the evacuation are portrayed as a monumental failure of planning by the nation’s leaders, much in the vein of the 1940 pamphlet *Guilty Men*, ‘which noted on the disaster in France that the BEF was “doomed before they took the field”’ (Connelly 2004, p. 85). The film follows a similar trajectory to that of *The Foreman Went to France*. The army leadership are in denial about the seriousness of the situation in France during 1940 and the film condemns their failure to grasp what was apparent to any ‘ordinary’ man: that the whole exercise was heading for disaster.

Yet for all that *Dunkirk* may have set out to challenge the ascendant version of the war contained in other 1950s war films, the finished product fails to live up to this promise. Charles Barr observes:

I don’t think that *Dunkirk* constitutes a radical new reading of the war experience, or the debunking of the notion, so dear to Ealing and England, of a unity and

inspiration discovered in the course of it. (1977, p. 179)

The film's criticism of Britain's pre-war leadership was clear, but was carefully managed so as not to alienate the War Office, whose cooperation was vital for production (MacKenzie 2003, p. 243; Summerfield 2008, p. 19). Hence, when Binns comments on what a mess the whole affair has turned out to be, Michael Balcon ensured that the scene explicitly absolved the army itself, as distinct from its wartime leadership, from any blame (MacKenzie 2003, pp. 246-7). The sanitised final version of the film ensured that, irrespective of Balcon's initial intentions, there was no explicit condemnation of the sort that would undermine the nation's institutions in the 1950s.

So, while *Dunkirk* goes through the motions of representing a People's War narrative, the attempt is a hollow one. Despite its apparent advocacy of a return to wartime values, it is silent on how those values might influence Britain at the end of the 1950s. It celebrates ordinary heroes whose primary loyalty was to community without making a concerted attempt to define that community. Rather than a revisionist narrative, the film represents 'a recognition that Ealing cannot recreate that spirit and that united community any longer' (Barr 1977, p. 179). Gill Plain (2012, pp. 179-180) argues that while *Dunkirk* was ostensibly about the 'people' it was more concerned with 'putting the "people" back in their place'. Plain may be overemphasising the intent of *Dunkirk*, but the broad point remains that the film does not offer a wholehearted argument against the dominant interpretation of the war in the 1950s. The film offers no clear argument in favour of the working classes, no argument in favour of a more liberal society and offers no suggestion as to how the lessons learnt apply to the nation 18 years later.

James Park (1990, p. 94) questions why Ealing chose to make *Dunkirk*, suggesting that perhaps they 'saw it as a last call for help to come to a failing Britain'. Ealing's film revisits the moment of genesis of the People's War, in the aftermath of the Dunkirk evacuation (Rose 2003, p. 29). Yet Ealing can no longer summon up the urgency which had imbued their earlier films, which serves to reinforce the irrelevance of Ealing's

vision of community to the Britain of 1958. The seaborne evacuation is presented less as a symbol of wartime populism and more as a case of individual initiative compensating for the systemic failures of authority. *Dunkirk* is too constrained by the fence-sitting approach – so typical of Ealing – to put forward anything other than a vague argument in favour of middle-class values of duty to community. It is weighed down by the cosy glow of nostalgia and provides further impetus to the reductionist narrative of Britain's Finest Hour, which included some elements of the People's War narrative, but played down the relationship between Britain's wartime experience and the progressive post-war agenda.

## Conclusion

The narrative of a People's War did not disappear altogether from British screens after 1950. Although not as prominent as it had been in the previous decade, it continued to inform the 1950s war film to a degree not often recognised in academic literature on the genre. What we see through the 1950s is a clearer resolution of the tensions around *how* the legacy of the People's War should inform postwar British society and more precise judgements about just who the 'people' were. While 'ordinary' people – civilians or lower-ranked soldiers – had been at the forefront of many war films of the 1940s, in the 1950s the central role of the officer class in achieving victory was emphasised. Rather than being shown as a popular struggle, the war was increasingly refracted through the heroism of a particular class.

A similar resolution was achieved around issues of gender in the 1950s. Although women are not absent altogether, their significant presence is confined to a small number of films and contrasts with key films such as *The Cruel Sea* and *The Dam Busters* that emphasise traditional female roles. A number of films in the 1950s continue to depict 'community', but it is largely or exclusively masculine communities, such as that of a ship, RAF squadron or POW camp, that embody this ideal of community. This underlined the message that it was specifically the British *male* character which had been instrumental in achieving victory when faced with such overwhelming odds (Smith



2000, p. 122). The ultimate *effect* of the 1950s war film, therefore, was the further normalisation of a conservative, masculine, middle-class framework for understanding Britain's wartime experience.

Although the war films of the 1950s overall represented a move away from the more radical implications of a People's War narrative, this was not due to a sudden realisation by the middle classes that their stake in society was under threat. Class, while a significant factor, is only one part of the explanation behind this shift. The Suez Crisis accentuated a generational divide opening up in Britain which cut across political and social boundaries. Suez also undermined the concept of Britain as an unambiguous force for good, standing up for freedom on behalf of oppressed nations, further challenging the fundamental notion of the Second World War as a 'good' war for Britain. The People's War had previously been a site of contestation between liberals and conservatives around the nature of British society, but in the wake of Suez the war was a less attractive vehicle for either side in this debate.

Suez could not rob the British altogether of their attachment to cosy memories of the Second World War, but it precipitated a cautious approach by filmmakers to representing the subject. Younger, more progressive filmmakers avoided the war as subject matter for the most part, preferring to concentrate on more contemporary issues facing British society. After a period immediately following Suez, where a handful of films offered a more cynical interpretation of Britain's wartime experience (albeit ambiguously so in most cases), British war films limited themselves in scope. They concentrated on a what Mark Connelly (2004, p. 6) terms the 'big facts': 'that Britain won, the British people fought for the right reasons and showed great heroism, and that the war was won by a collective act of fortitude and self-sacrifice'. The narrative of a People's War was thus reduced to a mere footnote in that of Britain's Finest Hour.

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## Filmography

### Key

pc: production company

p: producer

dir: director

sc: script/screenplay

*The 49<sup>th</sup> Parallel* (1941) pc: Ortus Films, p: Michael Powell and John Sutro, dir: Michael Powell, sc: Emeric Pressburger.

*Above Us the Waves* (1955) pc: London Independent Producers, p: William MacQuitty and Sydney Box, dir: Ralph Thomas, sc: Robin Estridge.

*A Diary for Timothy* (1945) pc: Crown Film Unit, p: Basil Wright, dir: Humphrey Jennings, sc: Humphrey Jennings and E.M. Forster.

*Against the Wind* (1947) pc: Ealing Studios, p: Sidney Cole, dir: Charles Crichton, sc: T.E.B. Clarke.

*Appointment in London* (1952) pc: Mayflower Pictures Corporation, p: Aubrey Baring and Maxwell Setton, dir: Philip Leacock, sc: John Wooldridge and Robert Westerby.

*The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957) pc: Horizon Pictures and Columbia Pictures, p: Sam Spiegel, dir: David Lean, sc: Carl Foreman and Michael Wilson.

*Britain at Bay* (1940) pc: GPO Film Unit, dir: Harry Watt, sc: J.B. Priestley.

*Britain Can Take It* (1940) pc: GPO Film Unit, dir/sc: Harry Watt and Humphrey Jennings.

*The Captive Heart* (1946) pc: Ealing Studios, p: Michael Relph, dir: Basil Dearden, sc: Angus MacPhail and Guy Morgan.

*Carve Her Name With Pride* (1958) pc: Keyboard/Daniel M. Angel and Lewis Gilbert Productions, p: Daniel M. Angel, dir: Lewis Gilbert, sc: Vernon Harris and Lewis Gilbert.

*Circle of Deception* (1960) pc: Twentieth Century Fox, p: Tom Morahan, dir: Jack Lee, sc: Nigel Balchin and Robert Musil.

*The Colditz Story* (1955) pc/p: Ivan Foxell, dir: Guy Hamilton, sc: P.R. Reid, Ivan Foxwell, William Douglas Home, Guy Hamilton.

*Cosh Boy* (1953) pc: Romulus, p: Daniel M. Angel, dir: Lewis Gilbert, sc: Lewis Gilbert and Vernon Harris.

*The Cruel Sea* (1953) pc: Ealing Studios, p: Leslie Norman, dir: Charles Frend, sc: Eric Ambler.

- The Dam Busters* (1955) pc: Associated British Picture Corporation, p: Robert Clark and W.A. Whittaker, dir: Michael Anderson, sc: R.C. Sherriff.
- Dunkirk* (1958) pc: Ealing Studios, p: Michael Balcon, dir: Leslie Norman, sc: David Divine and W.P. Lipscomb.
- Fires Were Started* (1943) pc: Crown Film Unit, p: Ian Dalrymple, dir/sc: Humphrey Jennings.
- The First of the Few* (1942) pc: British Aviation Pictures, p/dir: Leslie Howard, sc: Miles Malleon, Anatole de Grunwald.
- The Foreman went to France* (1942) pc: Ealing Studios, p: Michael Balcon, dir: Charles Friend, sc: John Dighton, Angus MacPhail and Leslie Arliss.
- Frieda* (1947) pc: Ealing Studios, dir: Basil Dearden, sc: Angus MacPhail and Ronald Millar.
- The Gentle Sex* (1943) pc: Two Cities/Concanen, p: Derrick de Marney, dir: Leslie Howard, sc: Moie Charles, Aimee Stuart and Roland Pertwee.
- The Heart of Britain* (1941) pc: Crown Film Unit, p: Ian Dalrymple, dir/sc: Humphrey Jennings.
- Ice Cold in Alex* (1958) pc: Associated British Pictures, p: W.A. Whittaker, dir: J. Lee Thompson, sc: Christopher Landon.
- In Which We Serve* Coward (1942) pc: Two Cities, p: Noël Coward, dir: Noël Coward and David Lean, sc: Noël Coward.
- It Always Rains on Sunday* (1947) pc: Ealing Studios, p: Michael Balcon, dir: Robert Hamer, sc: Angus MacPhail, Robert Hamer and Henry Cornelius.
- The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (1943), pc: The Rank Organisation / The Archers / Independent Producers, p/dir/sc: Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger.
- Listen to Britain* (1940) pc: Crown Film Unit, dir: Humphrey Jennings.
- Love on the Dole* (1941) pc: British National Films, p/dir: John Baxter, sc: Walter Greenwood, Ronald Gow, Barbara K. Emary and Rollo Gamble.
- Merchant Seamen* (1941) pc: Crown Film Unit, dir: J.B. Holmes.
- Millions Like Us* (1943) pc: Gainsborough Pictures, p: Edward Black, dir/sc: Frank Launder and Sidney Gilliat.
- Morning Departure* (1950) pc/p: Jay Lewis, dir: Roy Ward Baker, sc: William Fairchild.
- Odette* (1950) pc: Imperadio, p/dir: Herbert Wilcox, sc: Warren Chetham Strode.
- Operation Crossbow* (1965) pc: MGM-British Studios, p: Carlo Ponti, dir: Michael Anderson, sc: Emeric Pressburger, Derry Quinn and Ray Rigby.
- Orders to Kill* (1958) pc: Lynx Films Ltd, p: Anthony Havelock-Allan, dir: Anthony Asquith, sc: Paul Dehn, George St. George and Donald C. Downes.
- Passport to Pimlico* (1949) pc: Ealing Studios, p: E.V.H. Emmet, dir: Henry Cornelius, sc: T.E.B. Clarke and Henry Cornelius.
- Pimpernel Smith* (1941) pc: British National, p/dir: Leslie Howard, sc: Anatole de Grunwald and Roland Pertwee.

- Private's Progress* (1956) pc: Charter Film Productions, p: Roy Boulting, dir: John Boulting, sc: John Boulting and Frank Harvey.
- Reach for the Sky* (1956) pc: The Rank Organisation/ Angel Productions, p: Daniel M. Angel, dir: Lewis Gilbert, sc: Lewis Gilbert and Vernon Harris.
- School for Secrets* (1946) pc: Two Cities, p: Peter Ustinov and George H. Brown, dir/sc: Peter Ustinov.
- The Sea Shall Not Have Them* (1954) pc: Angel Productions, p: Daniel M. Angel, dir: Lewis Gilbert, sc: Lewis Gilbert and Vernon Harris.
- The Silent Enemy* (1958) pc: Romulus Films, p: Bertram Ostrer and Raymond Anzarut, dir/sc: William Fairchild.
- The Square Peg* (1958) pc: The Rank Organisation, p: Hugh Stewart, dir: John Paddy Carstairs, sc: John Davies, Henry Blyth, Norman Wisdom and Eddie Leslie.
- Theirs is the Glory* (1946) pc: General Film Distributors, p: Castleton Knight, dir: Brian Desmond Hurst.
- They Were Not Divided* (1950) pc: Two Cities, p: Herbert Smith, dir/sc: Terence Young.
- Thunder Rock* (1942) pc: Charter films, p: John Boulting, dir: Roy Boulting, sc: Jeffrey Dell and Bernard Miles.
- Went the Day Well?* (1942) pc: Ealing Studios, p: Michael Balcon, dir: Alberto Cavalcanti, sc: John Dighton, Diana Morgan and Angus MacPhail.
- Whisky Galore* (1949) pc: Ealing Studios, p: Monja Danischewsky, dir: Alexander Mackendrick, sc: Compton Mackenzie and Angus Macphail.
- The Wooden Horse* (1950) pc: Wessex, p: Ian Dalrymple, dir: Jack Lee, sc: Eric Williams.