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Arthur Melbourne-Cooper, Film Pioneer Wronged by Film History

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Arthur Melbourne-Cooper, Film Pioneer

Wronged by Film History

Introduction

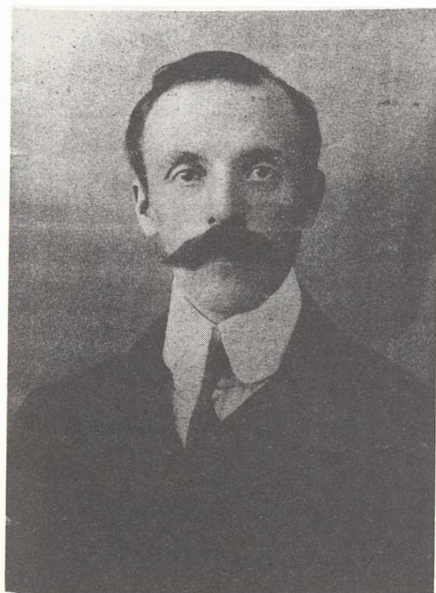
History, once put into print under the *nihil obstat* of official institutions, can bring much sorrow and pain for individual beings who were personally involved. The story of a little British film, *GRANDMA'S READING GLASS* (1900) cannot be told without telling the story of the maker's daughter.

Mrs. Audrey Wadowska (1909-1982), eldest daughter of the British film pioneer Arthur Melbourne-Cooper (1874-1961) of St. Albans, researched the life and cinematographic achievements of her father for 28 years. She was, however, not to reach her goal – to have her father recognised as a film pioneer in his own right, and have the credits of *GRANDMA'S READING GLASS* corrected to his name.

All her information and evidence on this little film is available today in the Arthur Melbourne-Cooper Archive in St. Albans, administered by her husband Jan Wadowski.¹ This material also offers a broad account of the significance of the British film pioneer Birt Acres (1854-1918), Arthur Melbourne-Cooper's original employer.

Acres' descendants too, his daughter-in-law, Mrs. Sydney Birt Acres (alive today) and her children, have been wronged by »official« film history. Acres alone invented the first practical working 35mm camera-cum-projector in England. But his Kineopticon is now mistakenly known as the »Paul-Acres camera«.² Birt Acres is mentioned here as Mrs. Audrey Wadowska would have wished. Without Acres, her father would not have made a career as an independent filmmaker and become one of the world's first true film authors.

There is nothing more humiliating than when official bodies deprive a person of something deeply perso-



nal. Such a personal matter can very well be an achievement of one's father, such as Acres' success with his Kineopticon. Acres succeeded where others before him, (Le Prince, Friese-Greene for example) had failed. It is a degrading³ affair when you see one's own father's true accomplishment taken away from him.

»Official« history can deprive one also of something which is private and emotional, something which belongs to your very individual being. As if officialdom, in a Kafka-esque sense, were depriving you of a part of yourself. This is what happened to Audrey Wadowska when the British Film Institute refused to look into her claims concerning *GRANDMA'S READING GLASS*. The correction of the credits in favour of her father was denied her, in spite of all her substantial (film and documentary) evidence.

It was Audrey Wadowska's own foster mother, who played the part of grandmother in *GRANDMA'S READING GLASS*, Bertha Melbourne-Cooper, her father's youngest sister. Audrey Wadowska was as attached to her as she was to her own mother. Mrs. Wadowska's deep concern in restoring her father's name became a quest for self-restoration: this was a double commitment, and it motivated her to do what she did as best she could. She died eleven years ago from sheer exhaustion.

Interviews with Arthur Melbourne-Cooper's children⁴ and Audrey Wadowska's interviews with her father, written or on tape recordings, leave no doubt that the girl in *GRANDMA'S READING GLASS* playing the grandmother is Bertha Melbourne-Cooper and that the eye in close-up belonged to Arthur's mother Mrs. Thomas Melbourne-Cooper, *née* Catherine Dalley.



left: Catherine Melbourne-Cooper, *née* Dalley, Arthur's mother.

above: Close-up from *GRANDMA'S READING GLASS*

The day the true authorship of GRANDMA'S READING GLASS is established, one of Britain's first and truly creative *film authors* will come to the front, with a career spanning the first two product life cycles of the moving picture industry: 1892 to 1915. Could this diminish the importance of Sadoul's concept of the Brighton School? Perhaps. But a body of work, of which at least 120 films from that period still exist, will be there for further study. The donkey-work for it has already been done, resulting in an enormous amount of documents, films, photographs and interviews.⁵

Arthur Melbourne-Cooper's GRANDMA'S READING GLASS can be seen as an exemplary product for the start of the second product life cycle of the film industry. In 1900, after the novelty »that pictures could move« had worn off, the industry began to cater to a cinema which was going to tell stories. And that is what made the cinema so great in the century to come.

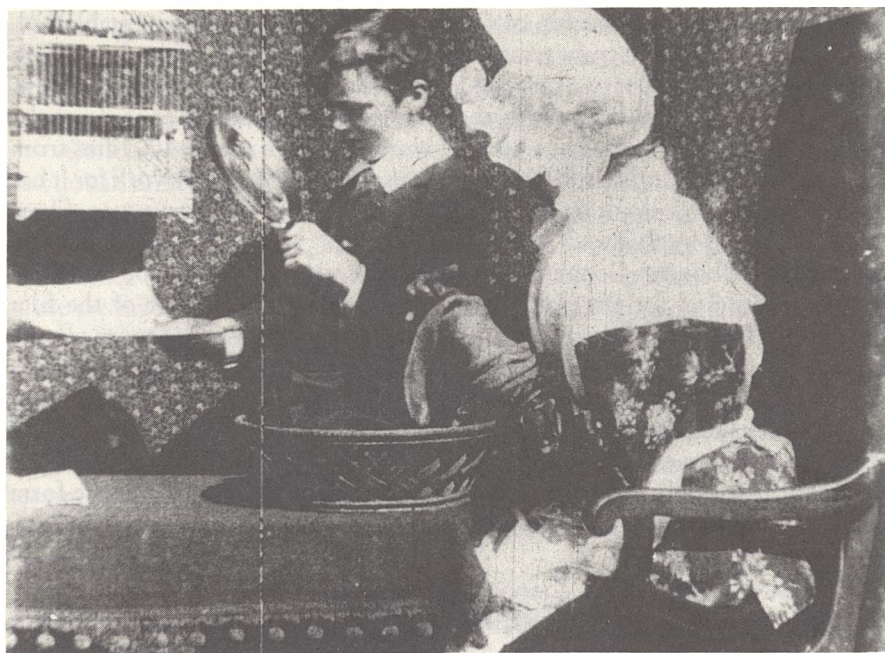
Concentrating on GRANDMA'S READING GLASS and what we know about the film, it becomes clear that there is still quite some basic research to do concerning the origin of the cinema as both an industry and as a creative form of a universal culture.

Being there yourself

GRANDMA'S READING GLASS is generally considered as the first instance in film history where close-up shots are alternately cut into one and the same sequence. It has a running time of little more than a minute, with a length of about 30 metres (100 feet in most of the catalogues). The film was listed for the first time in the Warwick Trading Company's film catalogue of 1901, along with a group of other remarkable films, some of which have the very same folding screen for a backdrop as used in GRANDMA'S READING GLASS.

In addition to GRANDMA'S READING GLASS, these films consist of THE OLD MAID'S VALENTINE (also released as THE VALENTINE), AS SEEN THROUGH THE TELESCOPE (Melbourne-Cooper's original title: WHAT THE FARMER SAW; also released as WHAT THE PROFESSOR SAW), THE HOUSE THAT JACK BUILT (original and more correct AMC title: THE CASTLE OF BRICKS), THE LITTLE DOCTOR (also released as THE KITTEN NURSERY; AMC title: THE SICK KITTEN, released with this title in an abridged version) and AT LAST! THAT AWFUL TOOTH.⁶

The existing print of GRANDMA'S READING GLASS⁷ begins with a close-up that moves over a page of a newspaper, followed by a medium shot, a *plan Américain*. Sitting at the right, a girl dressed as Grandmother, is knitting. From the left, a little boy comes into view on the screen. The acting is very natural and casual, and it does not remind one at all of the acting styles of exaggerated gestures that we usually associate today with silent movies. The boy picks up a magnifying glass. With this, he looks at several objects: a watch, a bird in a cage, Grandmother's eye and a cat's head.



Each time the boy places the reading glass over an object, the medium-shot becomes intercut with an extreme close-up, framed in a round, black mask. This circle represents the round reading glass. The effect is that we see what the boy sees – *at the same time!* GRANDMA'S READING GLASS becomes in this way an effective demonstration of the use of objective and of subjective shots, also known as point-of-view shots.

GRANDMA'S READING GLASS is not a complete story. It remains a Victorian genre piece, typical of that time. But it is well worth noting that the medium-shot of the playing children is taken from their level of vision and that the subjective close-ups deliberately place us in the viewpoint of the boy. Not only the intercutting of close-ups, but the camera angle as well, is very modern. The action prepares us each time for the close-up. This well-considered action and the repetition of the techniques in other films demonstrate that the technique employed in GRANDMA'S READING GLASS' is not incidental.⁸

One of the films grouped with GRANDMA'S READING GLASS, shot against a white sheet this time, is THE LITTLE DOCTOR. In a medium-shot, we see at the right a little girl with a Manx cat on her lap. From the left, a toddler dressed up as a »doctor« appears on the screen and takes from his bag a bottle labeled »FISIK« (i.e. medicine) for the supposedly sick cat. This genre scene is interpolated with an extreme close-up of the head of the kitten lapping milk from a spoon. After

the close-up, the boy turns towards the camera, doffs his top hat and makes a bow. This is possibly the first time in film history that such a change of shots (cut in, cut back) was employed, a method which was only to become common practice many years later.

AS SEEN THROUGH THE TELESCOPE has one close-up cut-into and cut-out of a long-shot. A young man ties the shoe lace of his female companion. The scene is observed by an older man with a telescope. He places the telescope over his eye. The scene is intercut with a masked close-up of the lady's ankle and the hands of the young man tying the lace.⁹

THE HOUSE THAT JACK BUILT has no close-ups. It is one of the popular reversal films of those days. A girl is building a castle of toy bricks, when a boy enters who, with a swing of his arm topples the castle. But, having noticed the distraught expression on the girl's face, he swings his arm back and the house magically rises up again. A barely recognized feat of this film is that when the actual reversing begins, half way through the 75 feet of film, there is not a noticeable jump in the scene. The scene remains exactly as it is.¹⁰ If the same piece of negative had been used in the printer for the second reversal shot, which is actually the same shot, a noticeable jump would have unavoidably occurred, caused by the margin in the sprocket holes on the printer's sprockets.

From Audrey Wadowska's interviews we learn how her father made perfect reversal shots.¹¹ It is a simple trick but it needs quite some practice. Melbourne-Cooper tied two cameras together, the second one upside down. The scenes were shot simultaneously, but the second camera needed to be cranked at exactly the same speed ... and the other way around. This is how he got two perfectly matching strips of negative.

THE OLD MAID'S VALENTINE is in the tradition of facial expressions, a genre known as 'facials', stemming from music-hall and variety shows which had been popular since Edison's Kinetoscope shows. The actor (playing in drag, as was the custom) was hired from a London agent. The backdrop is the same as in GRANDMA'S READING GLASS and THE HOUSE THAT JACK BUILT.

All these films were made in the same period. Through Audrey Wadowska's research we learn a lot about the GRANDMA'S READING GLASS group of films. We learn where these films were made and why they were made there. We learn who played in them. We learn when they were made, and why they were made.

On one of Audrey Wadowska's tape recordings made in April 1960, a year before Melbourne-Cooper saw his film again, he recalls (with a strong Hertfordshire accent) the story line of GRANDMA'S READING GLASS:

It was an early film and then you can give it a try and start something new. You start seeing Grandmother reading her newspaper and her grandson enters, anyhow, comes in. He pinches her glass and proceeds to examine various things. You see these on the screen. It causes laughter, it is something peculiar.¹²

The masked close-ups had a purpose: they were deliberately meant to thrill the audience with the closeness, the enlargements of the objects. The feeling that »you were there«, as Melbourne-Cooper put it to his daughter, was a well-considered experiment at this stage of his film-making career, which by then spanned eight years.

Not long before Arthur Melbourne-Cooper died, he was able to see a print of *GRANDMA'S READING GLASS* again. In early 1960 the film was rediscovered in Copenhagen, among the archives of the court photographer Peter Elfelt.

»My father always wanted to do something new, something different, and to do things in a different way,« explained Audrey Wadowska. Melbourne-Cooper skilfully experimented with objective and subjective shots. The feeling of »being there yourself« had already been exploited by him a year before with his documentary *TRAWLERS AHOY* (1899), a film that can still give the spectator a sensation of seasickness.

Closed period

The crediting of *GRANDMA'S READING GLASS* to G.A. Smith had been challenged by Mrs. Audrey Wadowska since 1955. In that year she and her husband Jan attended the film exhibition »60 Years of Cinema« in Trafalgar Square, organised by *The Observer* in association with the British Film Institute and the Cinémathèque Française. The Wadowski's were most curious about the sections dealing with the birth of the cinema and its early years.

Several photographs on a black panel dedicated to early British filmmakers caught their eye. One photograph depicted the eye of Audrey's grandmother, Catherine Melbourne-Cooper. This eye had a marked resemblance to Mrs. Wadowska's own eyes: large and like eggshells under a pronounced brow, a striking family likeness. The other photographs were of children playing. Naturally, Audrey Wadowska at once noticed her aunt Bertha, her father's youngest sister. Bertha Melbourne-Cooper had been her foster mother for several years, before the First World War, when her father's Alpha Film Studios had come into financial trouble.

To her astonishment, these photographs – film stills taken from *GRANDMA'S READING GLASS* – were credited to George Albert Smith of Brighton. Audrey Wadowska was already well familiar with this little film. Her father had told his children many times about it and also about his other cinematographic achievements, especially his animation pictures.

Audrey Wadowska went at once¹³ to the British Film Institute to ask that the credits be corrected. At the BFI she was not even requested to offer proof of her statements. She was told instead that, on the authority of the French film historian Georges Sadoul and of Mrs. Rachael Low and Roger Manvell,¹⁴ it had

been established that G.A. Smith was the maker of GRANDMA'S READING GLASS. She was told: »This period has been closed.«

Georges Sadoul, defying the claims that D.W. Griffith had made around 1913, discovered that English filmmakers already applied and practised back around 1900 many of the techniques the American director claimed to have invented. With his discovery, Sadoul de-mythologized the claims of D.W. Griffith¹⁵ who had in any case employed a fine creative use of all these techniques, effectively building further upon the groundwork of what is known today as the classical Hollywood cinema.

But Georges Sadoul in his turn created a new myth. The French film writer made a study of early British film catalogues. Without questioning the information he found, he attributed all the film titles in these catalogues to the distributors who in many cases were tradesmen primarily, such as the Williamsons. In other words, the film salesmen who published these catalogues were seen by Sadoul to be the makers of every published film title as well.

That is how GRANDMA'S READING GLASS accidentally became accredited to George Albert Smith of Brighton, whose name appeared in distribution catalogues issued from 1903 by Charles Urban. The British Film Institute and Rachael Low, commissioned by this Institute to write the history of the British film, followed this path. With Sadoul's *Histoire générale du cinéma* (1946/47) the legend of the Brighton School was born, and GRANDMA'S READING GLASS became inseparable from the name of Smith.

At the legendary 34th Congress of the FIAF in Brighton in 1978, Audrey Wadowska appeared with two cases full of photographs, papers and documents, in order to prove her father's authorship. No one even bothered to look at that material. As the daughter of a film pioneer, studying film history and researching her father's life since her first challenge in 1955, she was permitted to attend the FIAF's screenings, but she was excluded from the meetings and discussions held by the film historians.¹⁶

Alpha: »I was the first«

Arthur Melbourne-Cooper was the son of St. Alban's society photographer Thomas Melbourne-Cooper. Thomas became friends with the photographic pioneer Frederick Scott Archer. In 1854 he established himself in St. Albans, acquiring the sole rights to photograph the famous cathedral. It was the intention that Arthur, third child from Thomas' second marriage, should take over the photographic business in Osborne Terrace 1, New London Road. When Arthur was eighteen years old, he was already a fully trained, professional photographer, giving ample proof of his skills when applying for a job with Birt Acres, a painter and gentleman photographer in Barnet. Acres had become well-known in Britain

for his lectures on photography. Since 1890 he had been trying to develop a device with which he could capture the movement of clouds and waves.

In 1892 Acres, who during his years of study in Paris had acquainted himself with photography, needed an assistant. He had patented a camera that could take, in rapid succession, a series of photographs of a rolling wave or a moving cloud. His assistant would have the task of substrating, sensitising and, later, developing all these endless series of glass plates, and printing positives of them for Acres' multi-lantern lectures.

On January 1st, 1894 Acres filmed the opening of the Manchester Ship Canal with his Kinetic Camera on 70mm film and later that year he filmed the Henley Regatta. Arthur Melbourne-Cooper was Acres' cameraman on these occasions.

In 1895 Acres patented his Kineopticon, which used the Edison gauge of 35mm. In June he went to Germany and filmed KAISER WILHELM REVIEWING HIS TROOPS and OPENING OF THE KIEL CANAL.¹⁷ He gave his first public film show in August 1895 in the Public Lecture Hall in Barnet, with his assistant Melbourne-Cooper producing sound effects behind the screen. Acres travelled later that year to the United States to sell his films to Edison, several of which were shown in April the following year in Koster & Bial's Music Hall, where SEA WAVES (Acres' title: ROUGH SEA AT DOVER), A BOXING BOUT, SKIRT DANCE and KAISER WILHELM were included in the programme. With his invention of the Kineopticon,¹⁸ Acres has played a much more instrumental part in establishing the early British film industry than is generally assumed.¹⁹

Arthur Melbourne-Cooper gave his first film show two days before Christmas 1895 at the Welham Green Boys School, North Mymms. In 1896 in London, Acres more or less lost the »battle of the firsts«²⁰ to Lumière, though he had already given several successful film shows in Barnet, where he had built England's first proper film studio with an open air stage in the garden of a cottage in Salisbury Road. A BOXING BOUT and SKIRT DANCE were filmed there in 1895, with Melbourne-Cooper as camera operator. In this studio that year, Melbourne-Cooper produced the first of his own films, including THE TWINS TEAPARTY and FEEDING THE PUPPY.

Many of these early Melbourne-Cooper films can be found in R.W. Paul's first film catalogues.²¹ Paul was Melbourne-Cooper's first customer, or »agent« as he called him. Charles Urban, sent by Edison's agents, Maguire & Baucus, to London to stop the Kinetoscope cloning, became his second important agent.

Halfway between Barnet and St. Albans, on the south side of Ridge Hill, Melbourne-Cooper established, at the end of 1895, his own studio, the first of five studio's he was to use. It was an old wooden barn at Ridge Hill Farm, at the back of the Waggon and Horses, an old inn which, a couple of years ago, had to make way for the construction of the M25, the London orbital motorway. The barn is still there, including the concrete tanks, built by Melbourne-Cooper for developing his films.

In 1896 Melbourne-Cooper opened a sales office in Garrick Mansions, Charing Cross Road in London. In the cellar he built a studio with a miniature stage for filming his frame-by-frame animation films during the slack summer seasons.

In the spring of 1900 his father fell ill and Arthur was urged by the family to assume his responsibilities. From around May that year until August or September, he spent most of his time in the family house in Osborne Terrace. It was here that he used his father's photographic studio at the back of the large garden.

Arthur Melbourne-Cooper gave his daughter three specific reasons why he filmed the *GRANDMA'S READING GLASS* series in 1900. He was establishing a company named Alpha Trading Company. With this company he was to produce solely for the trade. Melbourne-Cooper then clearly saw the necessity of commercial specialisation. Jean Mitry places the beginnings of specializations in the film industry at around 1902.²² Melbourne-Cooper's Alpha Film Studio's was to produce the films for his London based Alpha Trading Company.²³ He named his company Alpha: »Because I was the first.« He was determined to remain independent and free for his experiments and innovations, because he loved making moving pictures very much.

In 1899 Melbourne-Cooper planned to take over the lease of a cottage and grounds in Bedford Park, St. Albans, conveniently situated near the city station, for film buyers and for actors and actresses from London. He had already made several films there.²⁴ He wanted to initiate his new company with a series of films that were completely innovative and surprising.²⁵

His second reason for looking into new methods of film-making was that the market was in an uncertain position. Supply exceeded demand. But Melbourne-Cooper was determined to stay in the moving picture business. A third reason was that he needed capital for equipment and expansion of film making.

During the summer of 1900, he used children of neighbouring families, Massey and Barnes, as well as his sister Bertha,²⁶ to act in a number of films which he took in his father's studio, – the *GRANDMA'S READING GLASS* group of films. Bertha was to recall the film fondly until a very old age. Indeed one can see some of the kittens, from the litter of the family's Manx cat (having made their film debut in *WON'T YOU COME HOME?* – 1896) appearing in *GRANDMA'S READING GLASS* as well as in *THE LITTLE DOCTOR*.

The date of *GRANDMA'S READING GLASS* can be established exactly. The existing print, whose first scene is missing in which Grandmother reads the paper, opens with a panning shot of a newspaper with an advertisement for Bovril.²⁷ It took Audrey Wadowska several months to go through all the newspapers in the British Library of the years 1899 to 1901 to find a copy with a Bovril advertisement that matched the one in the film: with small adds for houses to let beside the trademark of Bovril, such as »FULHAM – Half-houses to let, latest improvements, two bedrooms, kitchen, scullery, w.c. etc.; rent

8s. 6p per week.« It was the *Daily Express* of London, dated Wednesday, July 4, 1900.

In 1974 Audrey Wadowska was able to trace in St. Albans, Miss Beatrice (»Bee«) Massey, one of the children of the Massey family. The father had had a timber yard right behind the Osborne Terrace cottages. It was Beatrice Massey²⁸ who, after seeing *GRANDMA'S READING GLASS*, *THE LITTLE DOCTOR* and *THE HOUSE THAT JACK BUILT*, gave Audrey the correct names of the children appearing in these films. Miss Beatrice Massey supported this by giving Audrey several family photographs.²⁹

Playing opposite Bertha Melbourne-Cooper (then 23 old) in *GRANDMA'S READING GLASS* was Beatrice's brother Albert Francis (aged 10, called »Bert«). In *THE HOUSE THAT JACK BUILT* Beatrice's sister Mary (aged 8) plays opposite her brother Ralph (aged 9). In *THE LITTLE DOCTOR* it is Beatrice herself (aged 7, then called »Cissy«) who is visited by George Barnes (aged 6) as the »doctor«. Comparing the family photographs with the films, there can be little doubt that they are the same children.³⁰

Abundant details

When Rachael Low and Roger Manvell published their first volume on the history of the British film, these films, with the exception of *THE HOUSE THAT JACK BUILT*, had not yet been preserved by the National Film Archive.³¹ Audrey Wadowska wondered if Sadoul, Low or Manvell had ever seen *GRANDMA'S READING GLASS*.³² Sadoul³³ recalled that he, along with Rachael Low and Ernest Lindgren of the BFI, visited G.A. Smith in Brighton. He writes:

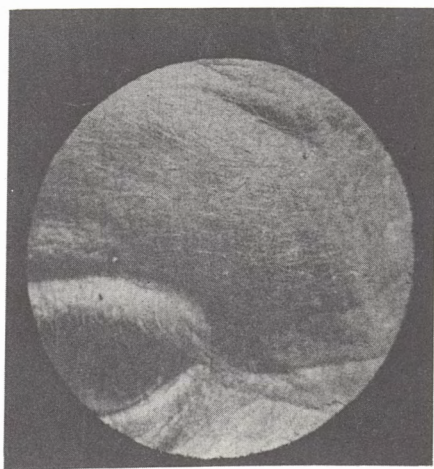
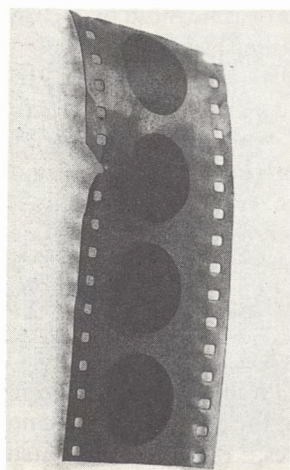
... we were able to meet G. A. Smith, who is at present living at Brighton, we failed to arouse his interest in our questions as to the reason why he thought of creating the first sequences known in the history of films in *GRANDMA'S READING GLASS* or in *THE LITTLE DOCTOR*. On the other hand, he had abundant details on his use of double exposure in *CORSICAN BROTHERS*, and his process – very interesting, be it said – of kinemacolor.

Sadoul suggests that inventors are not always aware of the importance of their inventions.

It is time to look at George Albert Smith. It struck Sadoul that Smith's interest could not be aroused in *GRANDMA'S READING GLASS* and *THE LITTLE DOCTOR*. Unfortunately, no one at the BFI was willing to listen to Audrey Wadowska's tape recordings, on which her father can be heard recollecting those films all too well – with abundant details.

At the FIAF Congress in Brighton in 1978, Barry Salt, in his lecture on Cinema in Great-Britain 1900-1906, defiantly expressed himself: » ... GRANDMA'S READING GLASS, which was made by G.A. Smith, as his cash and account books clearly prove ...«. Smith had left a small cash book and an account book to the BFI. With this remark, Barry Salt gave himself away: he had never looked into them. For GRANDMA'S READING GLASS is *not* mentioned in these little books that cover the period of 1897 to 1903. Nor is there *any* mention of the other films of the GRANDMA'S READING GLASS group. Smith had actually made very few films. When one studies these little books carefully, one can find only 23 titles. If Smith ever had anything to do with the films grouped with GRANDMA'S READING GLASS, there can be no doubt that traces of expenses for them would have been found in his cash book. For he meticulously kept account of his expenses, even down to half a penny for a cigar.

This does not mean that Smith did not try to make a film like GRANDMA'S READING GLASS. He actually did. During the FIAF Congress the late Graham Head, a Brighton film collector, told us that he was in possession of the actual negative of GRANDMA'S READING GLASS. Smith himself had given this to him some time before he died, along with several other strips and cuts of film. We were able to acquire from Mr. Head a strip of four frames from Smith's GRANDMA'S READING GLASS. The whole negative is approximately three feet long. All the images consist of circular close-ups of an eye. The eye in Smith's piece of negative does not resemble in any way the eye in the original GRANDMA'S READING GLASS, the eye of Melbourne-Cooper's mother. The eye is not steady in the centre of the circle and can be seen shifting from one point to another within the mask, even getting out of vision. The negative suggests³⁴ that Smith



Clip and frame from Smith's unfinished negative of his GRANDMA'S READING GLASS

tried to make a close-up of an eye within a circle, just as the one in the original *GRANDMA'S READING GLASS*, but that he had not fully succeeded. Evidently Smith had not known how to capture a close-up of an object, close to the camera and steady in the centre of the frame.

Melbourne-Cooper knew how to achieve this however. He had learned this from Birt Acres who employed glass prisms³⁵ at the back of the lens. The prism – a small mirror will do the job as well – is used inside the camera at the back of the lens, as an aid to get the object centred and in focus. Then the film is inserted and the camera is closed.

Smith was not the only one who tried to copy *GRANDMA'S READING GLASS*. Pathé in Paris »remade« it as *LA LOUPE DE GRAND'MAMAN*,³⁶ distributed in Spain as *LA LUPA DE LA ABUELA*. Edison »remade« it as *GRANDPA'S READING GLASS*. Even Biograph made its own version. All this is evidence that *GRANDMA'S READING GLASS* was a success. Melbourne-Cooper earned enough to take on the Bedford Park lease and expand his business.

It would be interesting to delve deeper into the life and career of G.A. Smith. Rachael Low and Roger Manvell³⁷ call him a portrait photographer in Brighton, and »a lifelong colleague« of Charles Urban. Both statements are inaccurate. Smith was not a photographer. In documents in the municipal archives of Brighton, Smith is mentioned as an »entrepreneur«. From Graham Head we learned that Smith and Urban, who lived their last years in Brighton, both as pensioners, and were cremated there, did not even exchange greetings when they passed each other in the street. Several documents in the Charles Urban Collection in the Science Museum Library confirm the animosity between the two men.³⁸

From 1897 on, Smith exploited a tea garden and fortuneteller's tent in the St. Anne's Well and Gardens in Hove, near Brighton. Here he built a laboratory. From his cash book one can deduce that the laboratory was financed by Urban, who later took it over³⁹ when Smith stopped making films here around 1900 to move to Southwick. There Smith built a series of five elegant cottages, the so-called Roman Villa's in the Roman Crescent, and he moved into the centre one of these, number 10, calling it Laboratory Lodge. At the back of the garden he built a workshop. Urban commissioned him to work on the development of Kinemacolor. However, as soon as the Kinemacolor system worked, Smith hastened to apply for a patent in his own name, much to Urban's embarrassment.⁴⁰ When Smith was forced to leave Southwick after a marital scandal⁴¹ he went back to work for Urban, but now as an employee, not on commission any more.

Barry Salt, in his FIAF lecture, asserted that the G.A.S. films in the Warwick and Urban catalogues carry the statement: »Arranged, Photographed and Copyrighted by G. Albert Smith, F.R.A.S.«⁴² Not only can the copyright notice not be found in the G.A.S. film lists in the Urban catalogues,⁴³ research at the Patent Office brought also to light that the early British film makers hardly ever entered their films here, with the exception of R.W. Paul in a specific case.⁴⁴

Arthur Melbourne-Cooper never sold his films to Smith. The films grouped with GRANDMA'S READING GLASS were sold to Charles Urban's Warwick Trading Company, to the London office of Pathé, to William Jury⁴⁵ and to other distributors, some of whom exported prints to the United States.⁴⁶

Before GRANDMA'S READING GLASS appears under the heading of G.A.S. Films, it can be found in the Warwick catalogues of 1901 and 1902, just below a general heading »Humorous Subjects«. It can be found in a special edition »Blue Book of »Warwick« and »Star« – Selected Film Subjects« of 1902.⁴⁷ GRANDMA'S READING GLASS appears at least four times in catalogues *not* under the G.A.S. Films heading or under Smith's name, *before* they appear as such in the Urban Trading Company catalogues, from 1903 on.

It has not been possible to find company papers in Smith's name or in the name of G.A.S. Films. As far as we know, Smith did not have his own film company. Arthur Melbourne-Cooper, however, established several companies, of which the Alpha Trading Company was the most important and the Alpha Film Studios the most prolific. He took great pride in his third enterprise of 1908, the Alpha Picture Palaces with interior designs by his friend Fred Karno. They became examples of the first real cinemas as we know them today, with sloping



Paris Conference of Film Producers 1909. Melbourne-Cooper stands at the far right, second row from the top; Messter stands left, second in second row from the bottom.

floors, cheap seats in the front, a fireproof projection booth and uniformed commissionaires and usherettes.

It is amazing that Arthur Melbourne-Cooper and his Alpha Film Studios are ignored today, and that his daughter encountered so much hostility.⁴⁸ For he had been there from the very beginning of the birth of the movies.⁴⁹ Arthur Melbourne-Cooper was one of the founder-members of the KMA (Kinema Manufacturers Association). He was one of the first to be interviewed by the new trade publication *The Bioscope*.⁵⁰ His signature and company name appear in film price controlling agreements with Urban, Warwick, Williamson, Hepworth, Clarendon and all the other important British film distributors. And last but not least, Arthur Melbourne-Cooper was in 1909 one of the participants at the Paris Conference of Film Producers, and he can be seen clearly on two different group photographs in the company of such renowned men as Charles Pathé, George Eastman, Léon Gaumont (with whom he had a very friendly relationship), Oskar Messter, Georges and Paul Méliès and Arturo Ambrosio. His signature is under the international agreement which formed the start of the international film rental practice.

What is the reason then that film historians have neglected this dapper, innovative, enthusiastic, creative, energetic and charming filmmaker from St. Albans?

Conclusion

Noël Burch⁵¹ says: »The British »primitive« cinema is an anomaly. Nearly all the figures of classical editing (cut to close-up, cross-cutting, continuity-cutting...) were introduced by one or another of the six or seven great British pioneers.«

If one accepts the fact that *GRANDMA'S READING GLASS* was not made by Smith, it becomes clear that Great Britain knew a truly creative film author in the person of Arthur Melbourne-Cooper, just as France had her Georges Méliès and the United States their Edwin S. Porter.

It were the productions from Arthur Melbourne-Cooper's Alpha studios in St. Albans which inspired such American filmmakers as Mack Sennett and D.W. Griffith. Melbourne-Cooper's *THE MOTOR PIRATE* (1906),⁵² for instance, was exported to the United States in dozens of prints. His *RESCUED IN MID-AIR* (1906) offers, besides good special effects and super-imposed printing techniques, an astonishing example of early action cross-cutting.⁵³

And there is so much more.

It is understandable that the British Film Institute, after placing G.A. Smith, who even received a knighthood, in the limelight as film pioneer, was reluctant to make corrections or amendments. But in fear of losing face, it created a new myth. The name of Smith can never be burned away from the hundreds of film books written since 1948.

But, apart from this, far more severe damage has been done, and that is the sorrow and consternation inflicted on the descendants of Arthur Melbourne-Cooper and Birt Acres. This cannot be easily repaired, even if the history of the British film were eventually to be corrected.

Still, two lessons can be learned. First, official bodies such as the BFI and other film archives will have to learn to cooperate with amateur collectors and researchers. The Nederlands Filmmuseum in Amsterdam, after its reorganisation on some years ago, realised that it was the film collectors who had carried out the »donkey work« of assembling through the years, important collections, on which the film archives are built. The museum has exercised great efforts in changing its attitude.

The second lesson is: not only are there many vulnerable nitrate films still in private hands, there are also collections of photographs, documents and data, harvested by cinema lovers and enthusiasts who plodded dutifully year after year through archives and private collections. These amateurs have done, and still do, a lot of tedious groundwork.

The enormous amount of data which Mrs. Audrey Wadowska was able to unearth in 28 years shows that there is still a lot of research to be done on those early years of film history.

Notes

1 In 1957, Audrey Wadowska and her husband Jan commissioned John Grisedale, teacher and free lance author, to write their father's biography. Grisedale's interviews with Melbourne-Cooper are a second rich source of information. However, his ms., *Portrait in Celluloid* (1958), has not been published, because Mrs. Wadowska had in the mean time discovered much new material.

2 John Barnes, *The Beginnings of the Cinema in England*, London 1976. Since this book, very informative Acres' invention has become unjustly known as the »Paul-Acres camera«. This adjudication is a hypothesis to enhance the importance of R.W. Paul at the cost of what Birt Acres alone, and patented in his name alone! had achieved.

See also: Luke Dixon, *Pioneers of the British Film: The Work of Birt Acres and Arthur Melbourne-Cooper*, Hertford 1980. Unpublished ms, commissioned by East Anglia Arts Council. (Copy in the AMC Archive, St. Albans.)

3 In 1965, Birt Acres' son, Mr. Sydney Acres of Southend, donated a copy of Talbot's *Moving Pictures* to the BFI. In 1912 Birt Acres had written in the margins 51 corrections concerning Paul's claims. These annotations make Barnes' hypothesis of the so-called »Paul-Acres camera« very questionable. However, in his book, John Barnes does not respond to Acres' remarks.

4 Recorded interviews with Mrs. Audrey Wadowska (London/St. Albans 1974-1982), Mrs. Ursula Messenger (Bognor Regis 1978-1993), Mr. Kenneth Melbourne-Cooper (London 1977-1981) and Mr. Jan Wadowski (1983-1993). Recorded interviews by Mrs. A. Wadowska with Arthur Melbourne-Cooper (London/Coton 1956-1961). Written notes and interviews by Mrs. A. Wadowska with her father (Coton 1955-1961) and with Miss B. Melbourne-Cooper (Southend 1957-1961), in the Arthur Melbourne-Cooper Archive, St. Albans.

5 The AMC Archive in St. Albans contains 35 mm and 16 mm prints of more than 120 films made by Arthur Melbourne-Cooper.

6 Melbourne-Cooper's children have told independently on several occasions, how their father obtained the horrifyingly big molar from the jaw-bone of an ox from a local butcher in Latimore Road, St. Albans. This 'tooth-aching' story, ending with a close-up, when the patient, relieved, looks through a magnifying glass at the molar that had plagued him, was one of the favourites in the Melbourne-Cooper family.

See: note 4.

7 Miss Claire Heseltine, great-granddaughter of Arthur Melbourne-Cooper, assumes that this was the first of Melbourne-Cooper's 'children and close-up' series.

Claire Heseltine, *The Forgotten Visionary, The Life And Works of Arthur Melbourne-Cooper, Film Pioneer From 1892 to 1914*. (Copy in the AMC Archive, St. Albans).

8 This in contrast with what Sadoul suggests. Georges Sadoul, *British Creators of Film Techniques British Scenario Writers, the creators of the language of D.W. Griffith, G.A. Smith, Alfred Collins and some others*, London 1948.

9 Again, stories about AS SEEN THROUGH THE TELESCOPE, independently told by Melbourne-Cooper's children as standard family anecdotes, are identical: when their father showed this film in the second half of 1900 in St. Albans to an audience of Sunday school children, a local church elder put his cap over the projector lens just before the close-up was projected. This scene was, according to the elder, unfit to be shown to children. See: note 4.

10 Barry Salt in an article, »Film Form 1900-1906« in: *Sight and Sound*, Summer 1978, Vol. 47 No. 3 gives a peculiar and intricate description of the technique of the reversing process: »The reversed second half (...) was produced by printing each frame of the original negative in reverse order, and the laborious manipulation this involved to make each separate print ensured that after one or two similar productions the idea was abandoned.«

Anyway, Melbourne-Cooper did not achieve it in this way. Also Salt does not realise that a professional film maker like Melbourne-Cooper already used internegatives, in order not to risk damage on costly camera originals. Internegatives were applied from the beginning: piracy was all too common.

11 Melbourne-Cooper did this for the first time, when a factory chimney was pulled down in Stockton-on-Tees, 1896 or 1897.

12 Recorded interviews by Audrey Wadowska, Coton 1956-1961.

Mrs. Elsie Hickleton-Stratton of Bury St. Edmunds remembered GRANDMA'S READING GLASS, and she came especially to Coton to see it again and to talk about it. Her father, a station-master, had been acquainted with Birt Acres.

13 Audrey and Jan Wadowski went there the day after the opening. They had co-operated with the exhibition, concerning Audrey's father's animation films, and were invited for the opening.

See: *Sixty Years of Cinema The Observer Film Exhibition*, London 1955, p. 18.

14 Rachael Low and Roger Manvell, *The History of the British Film 1896-1906*, London 1948.

15 *The New York Dramatic Mirror*, December 3, 1913, from: D.W. Griffith, *The Years at Biograph*, Robert M. Henderson, New York 1970.

Histoire du Cinéma, Georges Sadoul, Paris: Flammarion 1962.

16 Thanks to Dr. Jan de Vaal, then director of the Nederlands Filmmuseum, Amsterdam, the author was invited to attend this congress.

See also: Tjitte de Vries & Audrey Wadowska, »The Films of Arthur Melbourne-Cooper« in: *Cinema 1900-1906 An Analytical Study*, London: FIAF 1982, p. 351.

17 Sydney Birt Acres, »Cinematography and the Kiel Canal« in: *Cinema Studies*, Vol. I, No. 6, Dec. 1962.

Hauke Lange-Fuchs, *Birt Acres*, Kiel, 1987.

Unfortunately, Lange-Fuchs, in his informative book, follows Barnes' concept of the so-called Paul-Acres camera without any criticism.

18 Luke Dixon gives a very critical analysis of Barnes' hypothesis of the so-called »Paul-Acres camera«. See: note 2.

19 H. Tümmel, »Birt Acres. Ein englischer Filmpionier filmte in Deutschland«, in: *Kino-Technik*, Berlin, No. 12, 1962.

20 Henry V. Hopwood, *Living Pictures, Their History, Photo-Production and Practical Working*, London 1899 (reprint New York 1970).

In London Acres showed his films from 21 March 1896 at number 2 Piccadilly Mansions, Piccadilly Circus. Felicien Treway had started

projections with the Cinématographe Lumière on 20 February 1896 at Marlborough Hall, Regent Street.

21 Paul was cloning Edison's Kinetoscopes, but he had no films for them (see R. Brown, »England's First Cinema« in: *The British Journal of Photography*, 24 June 1977, 31 March 1978 and 7 April 1978). Paul bought his films from Acres. Acres stopped supplying Paul, when during Acres' stay in Germany, Paul attempted industrial espionage in Acres' workplace in Barnet. Acres' assistant Henry W. Short was sacked. Melbourne-Cooper got Acres' permission to sell his own films to Paul from then on.

See also: *British Journal of Photography*, 13 March 1986, 19 March 1986 and 10 April 1986.

22 Jean Mitry, *Histoire du cinéma*, Paris: Éditions universitaires 1967.

23 Rachael Low in *The History of the British Film 1906-1914*, London 1948, gives a somewhat undefined look about this period of the film industry: »... and in the process many strange and unsuccessful experiments were tried. Such an instance is the firm in 1908 [in a footnote: »Alpha« – Managing Director: A. Melbourne-Cooper; studios at St. Albans.] which advertised itself as »producers for the wholesale trade only, with equipment and staff of its own to make films to order.«

Audrey Wadowska learned from BFI staff that her father was considered by Miss Low and her fellow film historians as »an amateur film maker from St. Albans«. Yet, although she visited Smith in Brighton, Miss Low never took the trouble to meet Melbourne-Cooper.

24 The cottage used by AMC as laboratory and studio, and partly visible in several films, is still standing here.

25 When his daughter complained about the BFI's unwillingness to correct the credits of GRANDMA'S READING GLASS, Melbourne-Cooper once said: »When poor old Smith wants to have GRANDMA'S READING GLASS, let him have it«, in a tone which indicates that he, unlike his daughter, did not like to make a fight over it, because he had made enough other films. Recorded interview by Mrs. Wadowska, Coton, April 1960.

26 See: notes 4 and 28.

27 The Bovril advertisement is not a coincidence. Melbourne-Cooper made several ad-

vertising films before. In 1897 he made one for Bird's Custard. From Bryant & May he received a guinea for every time a film, advertising their matches, was shown to a paying audience. One of AMC's films for them still exists, MATCHES APPEAL, 1899, made in his studio in Garrick Mansions, Charing Cross Road, London. This is one of the earliest advertising films and the earliest frame-by-frame animation film still in existence.

Though Bovril confirmed that Melbourne-Cooper made films for their firm, they could not confirm any more that GRANDMA'S READING GLASS was accepted as an advertising film for their product.

28 Recorded interview Audrey Wadowska with Miss Beatrice Massey, St. Albans, Febr. 1974.

29 The population census of 1891 shows that the Barnes family lived at number 97, New London Road, next door to 1, Osborne Terrace; the Massey's at number 3 and 4, Osborne Terrace. (Albert Massey, father of Bert, Beatrice and Ralph, later lived with his family just behind Osborne Terrace, at the corner of Alma Road.)

30 In 1970, Mr. Gordon Fisher, secretary of the First World War Veterans »The Old Comrades«, identified the Massey children on the stills of the GRANDMA'S READING GLASS group of films. He presented Mrs. and Mr. Wadowski with two photographs of the St. Albans Territorials of 1907 with Albert Francis (»Bert«) Massey as a cadet, together with his friend Reginald Shirtcliffe on one photograph, and with himself on the other. Mr. Shirtcliffe, who also appeared in Alpha films (together with Bert Massey f.i. in SHAVING UNDER THE NEW PROCESS, 1904), identified in 1970 to the Wadowski's the Massey children too.

31 See: Low & Manvell, op. cit., p. 128, appendix 5.

32 The print, rediscovered in Denmark in April 1960, was the first copy in the collection of the National Film Archive.

33 See: Sadoul, op. cit., p. 4.

34 Recorded conversation with Graham Head, Aug. 6, 1979.

35 Acres experimented with a through-the-lens viewfinder. A collection of these prisms is still in the possession of Mrs. Sydney Birt Acres, Southend.

36 Even THE HOUSE THAT JACK BUILT was 'remade' by Pathé as COMMENT FABIEN DEVINT

ARCHITECTE (spelling as in the Pathé catalogue), Spain: COMO FABIAN FUÉ ARQUITECTO.

37 See: Low & Manvell, op. cit, p. 18

38 A number of these documents are in the AMC Archive on microfilm and as xerox copies.

39 Photographs of the laboratory in Urban's catalogues show it with a Warwick sign.

40 From the Charles Urban Collection in the Science Museum Library, London, one can deduce that Urban and Smith also had a conflict about quite a large sum of money. Money which Smith had used for building the Roman Villa's in Southwick? Urban's money spent on Kine-macolor?

41 Recorded interview 8 August 1983 with Mrs. C. Halfey, Southwick, who lived almost a life long in Smith's house after he moved out. Smith had acquired the land to build the houses on it. She assumes that the cost of it all amounted to £ 600.-. This amount is also mentioned in the Urban Collection in the Science Museum Library, London.

42 Fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society.

43 Only in the Warwick Trading Comp. catalogue of 1899 is there a double heading: »ENGLISH FILMS (G.A.S. SERIES) Protected under Patent Law in Great Britain and Abroad«. The 6 films under this heading can all be traced back in Smith's cash book. The Urban Trading Company catalogue of 1903 gives a triple heading: »G.A.S. FILM SUBJECTS. Arranged and Photographed by G. Albert Smith, F.R.A.S. Works, Laboratory and Studio: Southwick, Brighton.« In later Urban catalogues there is only the single heading left: »G.A.S. Films«.

44 Paul copyrighted the films of Henry Short, who was apparently commissioned by him to make these in Portugal.

45 *Jury's Imperial Bioscope Animated Photographs*, London 1904, p. 9; ibid. 1905, p. 9.

46 Letter of E.G. Turner (of Walturdaw) to Mrs. Wadowska, 17 November 1955.

47 Warwick was agent for the films of Méliès. The catalogues also show lists of films of Lumière, R.W. Paul and others.

48 In 1960 Melbourne-Cooper offered the NFA to assist with identification of early British films. This offer was ignored. Later he sent a list of his Alpha productions to the then-curator Ernest Lindgren. But this list is now »lost«. There are more examples of such conduct.

49 Gifford credits 70 film titles to »Arthur Cooper«.

Dennis Gifford, *The British Film Catalogue 1895-1985*, London 1986.

50 *The Bioscope*, September 18, 1908, p. 19: »The Alpha Trading Co. Open New Works at St. Albans. Special Interview with Mr. A. Melbourne-Cooper«: »... St. Albans in Hertfordshire, is the home of one of the most enterprising firms in the film-picture business, the Alpha Trading Co. (...) To begin with, the position of the Alpha Trading Company is unique. They are manufacturers and producers *for the trade only*, that is to say, they do no *retail* business.« [Italics as original.]

51 Noël Burch, *What Do Those Old Films Mean?* Channel Four, July, August 1987, Program booklet.

52 Distributed by Gaumont as THE MODERN PIRATES, and reissued as THE RAID OF ARMOURD MOTOR (CAR).

53 It is amazing that Barry Salt who, in his »Film Form«-article in *Sight & Sound* credits RESCUED IN MID-AIR to Melbourne-Cooper, later in his book *Film Style & Technology*, London: Starword, 1983, credits Percy Stow for it, although Mrs. Wadowska informed him at the 1978-FIAF Congress in Brighton, that the actors of the main parts were all employed by the Alpha studio's and that all the extras lived a stone-throw away from the studios. The names of all the actors are known, as well as the names of most of the extra's. All these names were recently re-checked by local Borehamwood historian, Mr. Christopher Wilkinson. Percy Stow started his career at Alpha, later went to work for Clarendon. There is no indication that he had anything to do with this film.