Humphrey Jennings and British Documentary Film: A Re-Assessment

Philip C. Logan
HUMPHREY JENNINGS AND BRITISH DOCUMENTARY FILM: A RE-ASSESSMENT
For Wendy, Amy and Ellen
Humphrey Jennings and British Documentary Film: A Re-assessment

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Independent Scholar

ASHGATE
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Published by
Ashgate Publishing Limited
Wey Court East
Union Road
Farnham
Surrey, GU9 7PT
England
Ashgate Publishing Company
Suite 420
101 Cherry Street
Burlington
USA

www.ashgate.com

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Logan, Philip C.
Humphrey Jennings and British Documentary Film: A Re-assessment
I. Title
070.1'8'092-dc22

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Logan, Philip C.
Humphrey Jennings and British Documentary Film: A Re-assessment / Philip C. Logan.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
Includes filmography.
PN1998.3.J455L76 2011
791.4302'3092--dc22
2010047382

ISBN 9780754667261(hbk)
ISBN 9781409427391(ebk)

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Printed and bound in Great Britain by the
MPG Books Group, UK
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In his introductory essay to *The Humphrey Jennings Film Reader*, Kevin Jackson remarked:

Jennings is, in a few words, a man whose place in British culture and world cinema ought to be beyond dispute: ‘our greatest documentarist’ (Gilbert Adair), ‘the only real poet the British cinema has so far [sic] produced’ (Lindsay Anderson), and a ‘true war artist, in the way that Henry Moore’s drawings in the Underground and Evelyn Waugh’s *Sword of Honour* trilogy transcend war and reassert the primacy of the human imagination’ (David Thompson). Add to these the other accomplishments as painter, photographer, anthropologist, actor, poet, editor, scholar, critic, theorist, intellectual historian, and the sum is ... a man who has been more or less forgotten.¹

As an assessment of his films and their relation to his other accomplishments Jackson’s comments still have pertinence today. Jennings may, as Lindsay Anderson stated in 1954, be ‘the only real poet that the British cinema has yet produced’² but as Gilbert Adair opined ‘Why in heavens name ... should the poor man be destined for the chop? Virtually everyone in the film-critical community acknowledges his achievement. Attempts to bring his films to a wider, non-specialised public are still fairly frequent, but to no avail.’³ For Adair and other film critics Jennings’ reputation as a great documentary film maker is established in ‘a trio of minor but authentic (wartime) masterpieces – *Listen to Britain* (1942), *Fires Were Started* (1943) and *A Diary for Timothy* (1945), masterpieces of a quintessentially national character’⁴ These films, along with *Spare Time* (1939) and to a lesser extent *Heart of Britain* (1941), *Words for Battle* (1941) and *Family Portrait* (1950), have received most attention in an attempt

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to explain the distinctive character of a 'Jennings film'. In these films the notion of 'poetic realism' comes to the fore. Higson defines this form of representation as that which 'makes the ordinary strange, even beautiful but, above all, which has emotional depth and integrity'.

Anderson's article, 'Only Connect: Some Aspects of the Work of Humphrey Jennings' (1954), written four years after Jennings' death in 1950, has become something of a touchstone in the discussion about Jennings and his film work. But as he readily admitted, by concentrating on those films he felt to be his best, his aim was to 'stimulate' interest by 'offering some quite personal reactions, and by trying to explain why I think these pictures are so good'. As the title makes clear it is only 'some aspects' of Jennings' work upon which Anderson deliberates and he acknowledges that he lacks detailed knowledge about the man, his life and work. The only comprehensive text on Jennings was written by Anthony W. Hodgkinson and Rodney Sheratsky nearly 30 years ago. 

Humphrey Jennings: More Than a Maker of Films provides a general discussion of the influences which shaped his art and film work and gives brief descriptions and evaluations of the films. This text and The Humphrey Jennings Film Reader (compiled by Kevin Jackson), which includes a collection of Jennings' written correspondence, poetry, film scripts, critical articles and selected transcripts of radio presentations, and also Jackson's biography Humphrey Jennings, were the main publications in English which attempt to rescue the reputation of this distinctive artist, poet, intellectual and film maker from the unjust 'obscurity' and 'neglect' into which he has fallen. The lack of appreciation may in part arise from the past, superficial understanding of the connections between Jennings' life and film career. The standard delineation begins in 1907 with his family life in the village of Walberswick on the Suffolk coast. It then continues with his education at Perse School, Cambridge and progresses through his university studies and other activities at Cambridge to London. Here, between 1934 and mid 1938, alongside his paid film work in the documentary and colour film sectors, he engaged in a profusion of artistic activity. As Jackson implies with the list of his achievements, Jennings became: a 'poet', 'painter', 'surrealist' and

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7 Ibid., p. 181. The films referred to support his argument are Heart of Britain, Words for Battle, Listen to Britain and A Diary for Timothy.


mass observer’. The wide range of his pursuits are explained by reference to his artistic talents, fine intellect, strong personality and quixotic mind which would not or could not stay still; he dominated discussions, moving between ideas and enterprises which attracted him. He was, according to Adair, an intellectual with a ‘magpie sensibility’. Apart from his existing personal explorations in painting and poetry he now began to publish critical essays and revues, engage in a form of report writing and undertake historical research. He also became involved in a series of collaborative ventures which included support for surrealism, the instigation of mass observation, the running of an art gallery and the writing and presentation of a series of radio programmes broadcast on BBC national radio. In July 1938 he returned to the General Post Office Film Unit to make one of the most interesting of the pre-war documentaries, his ‘mass-observation’ film *Spare Time* (1939). Then out of the specifically intense experiences of wartime bombing his masterpieces of home front wartime propaganda were forged. However as the war became more distant from civilian life and finally drew to a close, the dramatic impetus of that time dissipated. The later wartime and post-war films he made between 1944 and 1950 are generally seen as lacking that earlier vitality, certainty and formal precision. These are seen as signifiers of an underlying disillusionment with life and a growing uncertainty about the direction of his professional career.

Although historically accurate in highlighting a series of convenient periods into which Jennings’ life falls, as a summary of his life and career it is partial; deficient in important details, nuance and understanding. It lacks an appreciation of the broader historical context within which his life was lived and the immediate conditions and concerns which helped shape his intellectual and artistic activity. It reveals little for example about his attitude to life, his intellectual and artistic development, his shifting political consciousness, the interrelated nature of his artistic activities and film output or his professional position within the documentary film movement. Recently two new scholarly texts have appeared which specifically focus on Jennings’ artistic life and film career. Both Elena V.K. Siambani’s *Humphrey Jennings: Le poète du cinéma britannique* and *Humphrey Jennings* by Keith Beattie build on previous information and discussions of his films while exploring and extending themes often related to the poetic or aesthetic dimensions of his work articulated by previous writers. An appreciation of those aspects identified by Beattie

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and Siambani are central to any understanding of Jennings’ documentary output. However, as Jackson’s list of Jennings’ accomplishments implies, little consideration has yet been given to the idea that his involvement with film constitutes one facet of a much wider and more coherent body of artistic investigation; an investigation that encompasses more than those intellectual, ideological, social and political notions referred to by Beattie and often with a lineage that stems into the nineteenth century and earlier. An objective of this study is to rescue Jennings’ reputation from the condition he referred to as the ‘sleep of selectivity’; in other words the failure of the imagination to make connections. This condition has resulted in his reputation being handicapped by the application of singular designations such as ‘painter’, ‘writer’, ‘surrealist’ or ‘documentary film maker’. Rather, what is required is the recognition that his poetic imagination links all these activities together.

Similarly, in relation to Jennings’ wartime and post-war output, there has been reference to but comparatively little systematic and detailed analysis of those institutional, bureaucratic and practical factors surrounding both the wider and more immediate context of production which often shaped the nature of propaganda messages found within his films. Such factors often influenced the quality of the finished film and sometimes, particularly in relation to *Fires Were Started* and *The Dim Little Island*, impinged directly on the subsequent form of the narrative and the associated readings that become available. In particular stress is laid upon how Jennings used his artistic ideas and techniques for political and propaganda purposes and how his ideas and techniques manifest and articulate themselves within the formal structure and content of his films. Through the application of a historical-biographical approach the overall aim of this book therefore is to revise the existing understanding of Jennings’ life, intellectual and artistic interests and films by locating then tracing his life and professional film career in a wider and more immediate historical context.

**Part I: Art and Politics 1907–38**

The years of Jennings’ life, 1907 to 1950, were some of the most troubled times in modern European history. The international and domestic concerns of Britain in the nineteenth century were overlain by distinctly twentieth-century focus of his discussion is the formal and aesthetic aspects of Jennings’ films and their narrative structure. Reference is made to a selected number of films that includes *Spare Time*, *Words for Battle*, *Listen to Britain*, *Heart of Britain*, *Fires Were Started*, *Diary for Timothy* and *Family Portrait* as well as less appreciated productions such as *Post Haste*, *Locomotives*, *English Harvest*, *The Silent Village* and *The Dim Little Island*. 
problems. From his birth until his premature death Jennings' life was framed by a series of long-term national changes and more immediate political and economic crises and cultural debates which became manifest up to the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939. With reference to a variety of sources (such as letters and articles written by him, the reminiscences of friends as well as historical information relating to the shifting intellectual and cultural milieu over the period), the first part of the book reflects on the changing nature of that intellectual, social and cultural environment within which Jennings was active. It highlights a series of ideas, events and experiences which helped shape his intellectual preoccupations and artistic interests between his birth and his return to the General Post Office (GPO) Film Unit in July 1938. Chapter 1 considers how, initially filtered through the ideas and activities of his parents and teachers, he gained a particular understanding of modern urban-industrial life, poetry and art. Later at university this understanding was influenced by a combination of distinct but reciprocal theoretical English and continental ideas about artistic and poetic practice. Specifically what became central to his worldview was the need for the artist/poet to ‘live the moment’ in order to catch the spirit of the times and then, through the application of artistic technique, communicate their findings to the people in an accessible form. These aims were intimately linked to forms of artistic and poetic technique which were then applied to articulate a particular critique about the impact, on past and contemporary society and culture, of an increasingly corporate, bureaucratic, industrially commercial market economy. Except for his work in the theatre and articles contributed to the university magazines *Experiment* and *The Cambridge Review*, his intellectual and artistic pursuits were at this time primarily for himself and he came to the conclusion that the appropriate medium for his own poetic expression was painting.

Chapter 2 traces the shift in Jennings’ political disposition from his time as a student at Cambridge until his involvement with the International Surrealist Exhibition held in London in June 1936. During this time, between leaving the university for London in late 1933, gaining employment at the GPO Film Unit (1934–5), then in the expanding colour film industry at Gaspacolor (1935–6), he found contemporary events increasingly melding with his concern over the direction of modern life and the role of the poet in society. He became involved in an array of personal and collective activities, which were increasingly infused with a growing political awareness. Arriving in London he made contact with past Cambridge associates and became part of a growing and vibrant artistic community swelled by artists fleeing fascist persecution in Europe. So in this artistic milieu, interrelated with and running parallel to his film work, he became involved in a series of collaborative artistic and poetic ventures which saw him
create ‘report style’ poems or statements built from a collage of contemporary and/or historical sources. Because of international events these would take on a significant political dimension.

Meanwhile Jennings found that his early involvement with film at the GPO and then Gaspacolour drew on and incorporated those enduring concerns he had about artistic technique and the broader condition and direction of the modern world. Chapter 3 considers his initial induction and relatively brief involvement with the GPO Film Unit. Mention British documentary and the name most likely to come to mind is John Grierson.\textsuperscript{12} Not only was Jennings to benefit from the standard induction and approach to making documentary films favoured by Grierson but initially, under the tutelage of the recently arrived Alberto Cavalcanti, he was implicated in the first experimental productions using the new GPO sound system. Chapter 3 considers Jennings’ involvement in these experiments and the ensuing debate between Grierson and Cavalcanti about documentary film practice. This debate signified a fundamental difference in approach which would later emerge and find expression in criticisms of Jennings’ own films by members of the documentary film movement after his return to the unit in 1938.

Chapter 4 attempts to provide a better understanding of Jennings’ involvement with the advances in colour film production during the second half of the 1930s. This allowed him to contribute to the technical and aesthetic debates surrounding the use of reliable and cost effective colour film stock and the implications of its application in the wider feature film industry. On a practical level his experiences enabled him when he eventually rejoined the GPO Film Unit in July 1938 to quickly assume the role of unit director. During this time he made a number of advertising and information films which were at the forefront of colour film development. In comparison to the striking colour animation of \textit{The Birth of the Robot} (1936), the subject matter of the other films appears ordinary. However, like those early films made with Cavalcanti, beneath the surface of \textit{Birth of the Robot}, \textit{English Harvest}, \textit{Farewell Topsails} and \textit{Making Fashion}, can be detected references to an implied socio-economic critique that

\textsuperscript{12} In 1990 Ian Aitken provided a particularly revealing analysis of the philosophical, aesthetic and ideological influences which shaped Grierson and his vision for the function of the documentary film expressed through appropriate techniques of practice. In 1998 he acknowledged that a focus upon Grierson detracted from other important figures within the movement; identifying both Jennings and Alberto Cavalcanti as worthy of further assessment. Aitken, I. (1990). \textit{Film and Reform: John Grierson and the Documentary Film Movement}, Routledge. Aitken, I., ed. (1998). \textit{The Documentary Film Movement: An Anthology}, Edinburgh University Press.
seems to reflect his other experiences outside the film industry between 1936 and 1938.

After the International Surrealist Exhibition in July 1936, the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War accentuated an already ominous international situation. The defence of the Spanish Republic against fascism mobilised many left-wing artists including Jennings. For Jennings and his friends the Government’s refusal to send aid to the beleaguered Spanish Government, while showing no apparent desire to constrain the actions of the British Union of Fascists, appeared disturbing. It became clear that art and politics had become so intertwined that choices had to be made and opposition to fascism at home and abroad demanded action as much as words. Chapter 5 considers Jennings’ activities after the outbreak of the civil war until his return to the GPO Unit in July 1938. In 1936, inspired by Charles Madge’s experiences working in Fleet Street, he and Madge began to create a collective form of poetry based on individual ‘day reports’. This experiment was quickly subsumed in early 1937 within a more ambitious national project known as Mass Observation. Today the Mass Observation is best remembered as a form of popular social anthropology promoted by the other founding member of the movement, Tom Harrison. For Madge and Jennings the project included a political aim: to reunite the socially detached intellectual (poet/artist) with ordinary people and through a pooling of skills and knowledge learn from each other and transform society for the better. After the publication May 12 1937 Jennings’ vision lost impetus and he withdrew from direct participation. However it was through Mass Observation that in the summer of 1937 Jennings visited Bolton and the surrounding area of Lancashire. It was the first time he had travelled to a centre of traditional northern industry and come into direct contact with the industrial working class. It was an experience which began his re-education and transformed his understanding of the social and political life of Britain. His previous interests were now not only infused by his new international and domestic political awareness, but also by an appreciation of a wider popular culture which had grown and adapted to a fundamental shift in human experience forged at the time of the first industrial revolution. He began to read widely about the social and economic history of England and started to collect information from many sources for a book, *Pandaemonium* which, unpublished in his lifetime, was to illuminate the impact of this immense transition on the human imagination.\(^\text{13}\)

Although Jennings’ participation in Mass Observation ceased in early 1938, he soon found other avenues through which to engage in a dialogue with the

general public. Around the turn of the year he was contracted by the BBC to present a series of radio talks and discussions about poetry and its relevance in contemporary society broadcast between December 1937 and the end of June 1938. At the same time he began to collaborate with E.L.T. Mesens, the Belgian art dealer and surrealist, on the promotion and organisation of modern art exhibitions at the London Gallery. His involvement culminated in the organisation of a major exhibition ‘The Impact of Machines’ (July 1938) with a theme that synthesised those elements which had been part of his life since childhood; namely art, industrial life and the imagination.

Part II: The Documentary Film: Art, Politics and Propaganda 1938–50

By the time of his return to the GPO Unit in July, the same month as ‘The Impact of Machines’ exhibition, Jennings’ worldview in social and political terms had undergone considerable refinement since his arrival in London in 1934. Now this, along with his distinctive intellectual and aesthetic considerations and poetic style, would begin to find expression in his films. Part II focuses in detail on each film Jennings produced and directed between mid 1938 and 1950. These films were frequently inspired or shaped by wider events as well as the conditions of production and the fortunes of Jennings’ own film career. The themes and content of his films and his professional status within the film industry mirror significant phases during the pre-war, wartime and post-war eras. Drawing on a range of primary evidence, including personal letters, film treatments and official correspondence from the wartime Film Division of the Ministry of Information, the conception and development of individual films and the progress of Jennings’ film career can be illuminated. When these sources are combined with secondary information from various academic studies of the GPO and Crown Film Units and correlated with histories recounting British wartime and post-war propaganda policy and general wartime or post-war events, the factors and processes which in turn influenced the form and quality of Jennings’ completed films, and the messages embodied within their narratives, can be better understood. Also included are examples of the critical responses to his films at the time of their release. These responses helped raise the professional status of Jennings within the documentary film community but are often in marked contrast to later academic assessments. When appropriate these later critical interpretations of his work are included. Together this evidence, combined with a detailed analysis of his films, which is related to the political dimensions of his thought, provides a more critical and nuanced appreciation of Jennings’ film career.
Chapter 6 discusses the four films Jennings made before the outbreak of war in September 1939; *Penny Journey*, *Speaking from America*, *Spare Time* and *SS Ionian*. Of these it is *Spare Time* which has attracted most attention from film and cultural historians. Apart from *Penny Journey*, each film includes some reference to increased international tension and the growing prospect of war. The declaration of war provides a convenient historical moment to demarcate Jennings’ peacetime films, from his much larger wartime output. The danger is that in emphasising this momentous watershed, the continuity of the themes and editorial style of Jennings’ films which can be detected over the period 1939–41, is obscured. Both *Spare Time* and *SS Ionian* represent the beginning of a distinctive technique of cinematic representation which Jennings, later in collaboration with his editor Stewart McAllister, was to make his own. It was a ‘reportage’ style of documentary which drew on the technique of collage he had previously utilised in his report style poems. The subsequent wartime films, *Heart of Britain*, *Words for Battle* and *Listen to Britain*, progress towards a remarkably high degree of sophistication.

When discussing Jennings’ wartime films the general descriptive phrase, the ‘Second World War’, lacks clarity. The home front experience was transformed as events unfolded through a series of wartime phases until final victory in May 1945. During the six years of conflict these experiences on the home front fed into existing pre-war debates and posed new questions about post-war domestic and international reconstruction. The military conflict which began in 1939 was primarily a European event before becoming a truly global one at the end of 1941. The involvement of Russia in June 1941, then Japan and the United States in December changed the whole tenor of the war. From 1943 onwards an allied victory became increasingly certain. By 1945 Britain’s domestic situation and standing in the wider world had been considerably altered. What is captured in Jennings’ wartime films, from the immediate threat of invasion, through the intense bombing raids to the long haul to triumph and a growing domestic debate over the nature of the post-war domestic and international world, is the shifting nature of these experiences and the concerns that were raised. Therefore as a body of work the films Jennings made between 1939 and 1945 articulate propaganda fit for the moment. Simultaneously the narratives which he creates adumbrate a mythology surrounding a just war; a war involving deprivation and sacrifice for all and which therefore warranted fair post-war rewards for all. Between the cessation of hostilities and Jennings’ accidental death in 1950 the

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14 *Spare Time*, a cinematic record which captures aspects of industrial working class leisure during the inter-war years in South Wales and the industrial north, has been mistakenly regarded as a form of domestic social anthropology related to Mass Observation. See Beattie, K. (2010). *Humphrey Jennings*, Manchester University Press. p. 33.
country had to address this new era. Similarly the films produced and directed in the aftermath of the conflict deliberate on immediate and long-term issues surrounding European and domestic post-war reconstruction. His last films turn to the future of a British nation faced with domestic challenges and a new polarised international order.

As well as shifts in the progress of the war and the challenges of the post-war era, his films also reflect changes in the fortunes of his film career. What has not been fully appreciated is how much Jennings relied on collaboration with his production team and producer. The combination of a sympathetic producer and a consistent and supportive editor and team of creative technicians were a significant influence on the quality of his films. They provided the opportunities, material and editorial expertise which enabled him to create striking visual images and aural impressions which have led to the application of the term poetic realism to his work. His success as a director was reflected in the critical response to his films at the time of their release. As a result his professional status within the film unit and film community rose. This brought not only further creative opportunities but also increased official responsibilities.

Apart from *A Diary for Timothy* (1945, but released in 1946) and *Family Portrait* (1950) his later wartime and post-war work has received less attention. This has been justified on the grounds that they exhibit a marked decline in quality and optimism because of his apparent loss of personal motivation. Particularly after 1943 the tension between official demands and a desire for creative freedom contributed to a growing ambivalence in his attitude towards his professional position within the Crown Film Unit and help explain his decision to eventually leave the unit and move to Wessex Films in 1947. Whether or not this represented a decline in his motivation and vision is debatable. At Wessex he completed his last two films the *Dim Little Island* (1949) and *Family Portrait* (1950) which together, it can be argued, reflect in terms of film making a return to technical form matched by a tempered realism about life.

As mentioned earlier to fully appreciate the messages embodied within his films it is necessary to be aware of the broader and more immediate conditions which contextualised the production of each film. Without this the films’ critiques and propaganda messages cannot be clearly delineated or understood. This is particularly relevant to the production, during the early part of the war, of *Spring Offensive, Welfare of the Workers, Heart of Britain* and *Listen to Britain*. It must also be remembered that the gestation, development and production of a film often overlapped with other considerations and priorities. This could easily influence when a film was ready for release, which in turn meant that the wartime situation under which they were originally conceived, developed and produced, had changed and the general remit governing home front propaganda
had shifted. If each film is considered in terms of the historical moment of production rather than the specific date of release, what becomes clear is that these films made between 1939 and 1950 record the evolution of home front preoccupations and the specific needs of Government propaganda. Following the historical sequence of production the following chapters are allocated to phases that relate to the progress of the war and then immediate post-war concerns.

Chapter 7 covers the period from just before the declaration of war on 3 September through the aerial ‘Battle of Britain’ to the beginning of the intensive German bombing campaign known as the Blitz. During this period Jennings was involved with a number of collaborative projects as well as his own films. With very little evidence of persistent and heavy bombing raids on the home front it was a time of tense preparation. Before analysing the two films he directed, *Spring Offensive* and *Welfare of the Workers*, consideration is given to the short uncredited film *A Midsummer Days Work*. Over the weeks following the declaration of war, the unit collaborated to record the response and preparation of Londoners to the threat of bombing raids on the capital. Comment on the first wartime propaganda film *The First Days* will focus, not only on Jennings’ contribution, but on the inflection given to events. The criticisms it received from the wider documentary film community provide a portent of what the unit and Jennings’ films would face in the future. In his own production, *Spring Offensive*, Jennings applies aspects of the ‘drama’ documentary promoted by Cavalcanti. He also introduces through the main character on which the story pivots, what would become a reoccurring motif in many of his future films: seemingly ordinary but in fact exceptional individuals who contribute to the success of the war effort. There follows a discussion of *Welfare of the Workers* with consideration given to the circumstances of its production and subject matter which may account for Jennings’ failure to create a satisfactory film.

Jennings’ films which correspond to this next phase of the war are discussed in the following three chapters. Chapters 8, 9 and 10 respectively focus on *The Heart of Britain*, *Words for Battle* and *Listen to Britain*. All three were produced with a relatively unchanged production team: Chick Fowle (photography), Ken Cameron (sound), Stewart McAllister (editor) and Joe Mendoza (assistant with music). Together they cover the period between 1940 and the Blitz, the German invasion of Russia in June 1941, the Japanese attack on the United States in December 1941 and the ensuing declaration of war by Germany which turned the war into a truly global conflict between the allied ‘United Nations’ and the Axis powers. *The Heart of Britain*, *Words for Battle* and *Listen to Britain* reflect not only changes in the propaganda remit at the time but also articulate three distinct yet simultaneous messages. These are: the idea and promotion
of national unity, the need for civil and military aid from the United States, and finally a call to the British civilian army and people to recognise that the experiences of war have unleashed a new strength and confidence with the potential to transform future social and political relations. To achieve the poetic expression and vision Jennings wanted, *Heart of Britain, Words for Battle* and *Listen to Britain* increasingly draw their emotional power, not from strident exhortation, but from increasingly refined use of cinematic technique. This culminated in *Listen to Britain* which is based throughout on the formal reversal of the standard documentary relationship between image and sound.

The main focus of Chapter 8, ‘The Blitz’ September 1940–January 1941, is the impact of the bombing and his collaboration with McAllister. Reference is made to managerial changes within the unit which were to be highly significant for Jennings and his film career. The film unit’s collaborative production at the start of the Blitz of *London Can Take It!* is referred to but attention centres on the production then editing of the film which was eventually released as *The Heart of Britain*. Its production and the impact on the outcome of the film of the dramatic raid on Coventry are described. In this film Jennings’ poetic vision, given impetus through the narrative drive of the film, markedly improves the overall impact of the propaganda message. Consideration is given to the influence of McAllister whose skill in the combining of music and image in certain set sequences of the film, provides an exemplar of editing technique which was to be extended in the following two films.

After the completion of *Heart of Britain* the country experienced a short lull in the intensive bombing raids until May 1941. Britain, in this uncertain period of desperate defence metaphorically ‘stood alone’. Chapter 9 considers *Words for Battle*. The film is an appeal both to the British people to sustain their efforts and to the United States to join the conflict. As the title implies this was an opportunity for Jennings to show the public the relevance of poetry to the contemporary situation. Analysis of the narrative structure will reveal how, through a collage of texts, two forms of expression – words and film – are married into a sophisticated montage of sound and image to build a multi-layered propaganda message. Again the influence of the partnership with McAllister is explored.

Chapter 10 focuses on one of the most celebrated of his films, *Listen to Britain*. Initially conceived in the period of British ‘isolation’, the film implicitly recognises the extension of the conflict and the forging of an ‘unholy’ alliance between the Soviet Union, Britain and the United States. This chapter traces the fragmented nature of its production then analyses the editing. The collaboration that had started with *Heart of Britain* now comes to fruition as Jennings and McAllister both share credit for direction and editing.
Subsequent chapters are contextualised within the beginning of the allied build up for counter-attack. The war on the home front was quieter and the volunteer civilian army was giving way to a conscripted workforce and increased regulation. A shift in the fortunes of war on the home front was not reflected in the balance of the overall global conflict. The necessity to maintain national morale was critical in order to improve and maintain high levels of war production to sustain what would be a long allied offensive. Changes on the home front atmosphere and organisation were mirrored in the relocation of Crown to Pinewood Studios and changes to Jennings’ professional position in the Crown Film Unit. Over this period Jennings made another two films in collaboration with Stewart McAllister. *Fires Were Started* and *The Silent Village* provided the opportunity to move from contemporary reportage to the production of documentary dramas about the recent past. Although radically different in subject matter these films offer two representations which would supplement the formation of myths about the war. Chapter 11 considers the circumstances surrounding Jennings’ career and the production of *Fires Were Started*. This film was to seal Jennings’ reputation as a major documentary film maker. Yet at the same time his experiences while making the film mixed pleasure with frustration and anger with unease. He was worried that official interference would affect the integrity of his next film and this created concerns about his professional situation.

Sandwiched between *Listen to Britain*, *Fires Were Started* and the later *Diary for Timothy*, *The Silent Village* has received little detailed consideration. Yet in terms of his intellectual and artistic aims he probably ranked *The Silent Village* as his greatest achievement. Chapter 12 maps out a remarkable production which further enhanced his standing as a film director. The story features a Welsh working class community of coalminers and their families who portray the ‘reconstruction’ of the Nazi massacre of a similar Czech mining village of Lidice. It was a radical departure in documentary film production which relied on a level of popular participation never before undertaken with any documentary film. At this critical time in the allied offensive the production and release of the film was framed by an ongoing dispute between the miners and Government over declining levels of coal production and the long-term political question of national rather than private ownership. The thorny issue of class politics at a time of national ‘unity’ had the potential to colour the narrative. Jennings negotiated this issue in an imaginative approach to the depiction of the Nazi atrocity.

His next two films *The True Story of Lili Marlene* and *A Diary for Timothy* also reiterate recent historical events and continue to add to the post-war image.

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