

Ivor Montagu (critic, producer, writer)

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by [admin](#) — last modified Jul 28, 2008 06:09 PM

BIOGRAPHY: Ivor Montagu was educated at Cambridge and worked initially as a zoologist, but in the 1920s he began working in the cinema as a partner to director Adrian Brunel and as an editor and associate producer for Alfred Hitchcock. His credits with the latter include *The Lodger* (1926), *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934) and *The 39 Steps* (1935). During the 1930s He also worked on anti-Fascist films and pro-Spanish Republican propaganda films. After WWII he joined Ealing studios as an associate producer and also took a co-writing credit on *Scott of the Antarctic* (1948). Montagu's career in film production ran parallel to his work as and film promoter. He co-founded the Film Society in 1925, working particularly to make Soviet cinema available to British audiences, and contributed to the influential *Close Up* magazine.

SUMMARY: In this brief interview, which appears to pre-date the BECTU History Project, he talks (to Ralph Bond?) primarily about the production and reception of his documentary film *Free Thaelmann* (1935). He touches on various issues, including censorship, funding for radical film making, the newsreels and library footage, and a comparison with the political documentary of the 1930s with modern television documentaries.

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Interview Date: ???

Interviewer: ???

Interviewee: Ivor Montagu

NB: This is evidently the transcript of the soundtrack of a filmed interview with Ivor Montagu (details not given on tape)

Tape 1, Side 1

Interviewer : How would you evaluate the effectiveness of the independent films of the '30s in reaching an audience?

Ivor Montagu : The independent films of the 30s, independent, progressive, political films - whatever you call them - certainly had an effect. They contributed something to the general political climate, the general public opinion, which later had a decisive effect on government attitudes, and even forced Chamberlain's hand to the declaration of war. But to evaluate exactly how much would be mere speculation. Nobody could really say. What do I mean? Simply this. That people in Britain were sick at various things that had gone on continuously without remedy. On the home front, unemployment and poverty which was ignored. On the foreign front, the various humiliations effected by Nazi repeatedly breaking promises, and the Government always accepting every kind of insult or affront from Nazi government, and every kind of insincerity, dishonesty, etcetera. They felt this was a national humiliation. Now they got this from many, many sources other than films. I would assess the special contribution of the progressive film as being that it enabled people to visualise what was going on in a way that was not usually presented to them, in other than newspaper headlines, newspaper articles and so on. True, it did not reach the general public at all, because the commercial cinema didn't present such films on the screen. It did not, therefore, reach the unconverted, but the converted - the people who felt there was something wrong, for example, in Nazi Germany, Spain or elsewhere - they would come to see these films, and in considerable numbers, even when they were put on in small, uncomfortable private halls and so on. Because they wanted to see for themselves as much as they could of the facts. And then even if they were not particularly numerous, they would meet associates and be able to speak with the conviction of having seen with their own eyes - the things that beforehand they had inferred from newspaper reports and so on. And that must indeed have had its effect - the sincerity with which their conviction was reinforced - had its effect on the grand climate of the thing which eventually was formed, and became effective.

Interviewer : We ought to distinguish between the newsreels and the independent films on the issue of censorship, because you were presumably dependent upon the films actually reaching any audience at all. Could you say something about censorship affecting the newsreels?

Ivor Montagu : Well, the point is this. That in the licensing system, all inflammable films were subject to censorship. And the censorship by law was given to the local councils. And the local councils being too busy to perform the censorship had to give it to the Board of Censors set up by the Government. So every hall that showed inflammable films, and all commercial films in those days on nitrate base (?) were inflammable, that is to say... [pause in tape] ...so to be practical at all, for general commercial distribution, newsreels were excepted. But while you were generally free in the progressive films, if you didn't show them in licensed halls, and didn't show them on inflammable film - and then you could get a small audience, usually composed only of enthusiasts, because only enthusiasts are keen enough to sit on hard wooden seats for the duration of a film show - if you did that, you might come up against difficulties when you tried to show - if you were progressive people - newsreels in the cinema, because you would want to cut them in a different way. You would want to take out of the newsreels the things that didn't interest you like formal weddings, or races, or whatever it might be, but you wanted to have particular historical events in and things like that. When you re-cut them the censor argued that they were no longer news, they had ceased to be news because of the time you had taken re-

cutting them, and therefore there was a perpetual argument as to whether they should be free of him or not. And although there was never any legal cause to define what a newsreel was, it meant that if you tried to go as an independent distributor of that newsreel material to the ordinary cinemas, the ordinary cinema wouldn't book it because of the doubt the censor had created, and his fear that his licence would be taken away because it would be found a violation.

Interviewer : In that connection, did you have any problems with, say, 'Free Thaelmann' as far as the censor went?

Ivor Montagu : Certainly we did. 'Free Thaelmann' was a film practically 95 per cent consisting of newsreels, and one or two symbolical things - bound hands, things like that, one or two photomontage, cartoon kind of things - otherwise it was newsreels. Archive material mainly. But we could not get it past the censor, it was one of the re-cut things. And we took it to him, and he pointed to the clause in his rules that forbade the exploitation of the lives, personalities and acts of notorious criminals. We said it had nothing to do with criminals. So he said well, what about Thaelmann, he's in prison isn't he? Because there were scenes, a cartoon photograph, with composite bars on Thaelmann, and we said: yes, but he hasn't with any crime, let alone convicted. He hasn't even been charged. How is he in prison, then? Then censor seemed to have not the slightest idea, and probably typified the non-politically alive, non-left at that time, who had no idea what was going on in Germany.

Interviewer : We've noticed that, although there is a lot of material on Spain, 'Free Thaelmann' is one of the only examples in the body of film of the time of a film that's about the Nazi persecution. Why do you think that is?

Ivor Montagu : The question is raised why was 'Free Thaelmann' one of the only films, certainly there were others, of an anti-Nazi character. There were many films dealing with home economic, industrial problems and there were many films made about Spain. I would say that one shouldn't attach too much influence in that with the question of the interest either of the film-makers, or the public for whom they made their films. The public was very interested in, and very much exercised by, Nazis at that time. But it was a matter really of the facilities that were available for making films. You see, most films were made by people who were not professionally paid to do it, but even if they were paid something, they were doing it out of devotion. Some of them were content to have careers in that direction, even those who were working professionally on it. And they could make films about home events, because they could find sponsors. For example, home events were thought to be socially beneficial. People with liberal turns of mind - liberal with a small 'L' in a very wide sense, were interested in questions of rent and employment and so on, and you could get money, sponsorship, for them. Industrial films you could get trade union sponsorship. Spanish films - and the progressive film-makers were most of them enthusiastic for documentary film - they knew that they could give an authenticity, and it would commend itself to the public, so far as scenes were not staged. So they very rarely were staged, and when they were staged they would try to look as documentary as possible because they were... that that gave them an authenticity without the expenditure of a fortune on film stars who looked like ordinary people! And so on. So I think that it just was beyond the measure of people to think of.

Interviewer : Would you like to say something about the access to library footage?

Ivor Montagu : The question is raised, why were most of the progressive films of that period dealing either with home events or events in Spain, and why does 'Free Thaelmann' stand more or less alone? Was it that the interest among progressive film audiences wasn't sufficient to make films about Nazism, the Nazi danger? I don't think that's the reason at all. The reason has to be sought in much more practical ideas. First of all, the impulse of the film-makers of their day. They wanted to make films out of actualities, and they had easy access, technically, to actualities at home. And it was not difficult to get permission to go to Spain, the Republican side, the Government would give one permission and often facilities, so it was possible, with a bit of personal sacrifice, to make films there. But you couldn't, of course, get permission to make them in Germany. Then there is also the fact that you couldn't get archive material. You could never afford it. And in any case, there wasn't archive material of the real way the Nazis were going on available. The newsreels didn't take any stuff that dealt with real life, or real, dangerous political situations. I think people have a wrong idea through the fact of the kind of newsreel that they get on television. Television has broadened out enormously, partly because of its all-devouring sense of material that it has to get. Whereas you only put out, as it were, one weekly reel or monthly pictorial, short things on newsreels and film. But the all-absorbing thing has meant that a lot of truth gets onto the screen in television, even amateur-made films get on, but in those days commercial newsreels were much despised, because they consisted almost entirely of ceremonial events, royal weddings, Ascot, social events, sport and so on, and didn't deal with real life at all. And therefore there wouldn't have been the archive material if you had tried to get it. If you could have got it, it would probably have been beyond the purse of any of the progressive producers. But 'Free Thaelmann' was made on the basis of archive material, some of which would have probably never been shown on the screen otherwise, although much of it has since, in compilations, which was obtained by the help of the underground anti-Nazi movement. Such possibilities were not available by any means to everyone who wanted to make them. I think that is the main reason.

Interviewer : To get on to the subject of the newsreels: the newsreels look incredibly Tory and dignified in their coverage of political events. They seemed to believe that Chamberlain was always right. Why do you think that was?

Ivor Montagu : One would always say that they didn't, truthfully or not, - perhaps one was unduly unkind with them, - or so it seemed, that they would spend the profits made on things that had nothing to do with the film business. Investments in other businesses or Rolls Royces or houses in Brighton, or menages elsewhere than in their homes, and so on. And their only interest in the content was that it shouldn't disturb the powers that be. They were anodyne, and usually they were not the most popular of film material, and did not have at all the interest that television, newsreel films, often has for television audiences. I would say that it was that, rather than any particular orientation towards any reactionary or pro-fascist politics or anything of that kind, that prevented the criticism from reaching the screen. But it did, and sometimes it would be sheer ignorance, as for example when we tried to get censorship permission for 'Free Thaelmann'. But I should make the point, I think, that censorship by law in those days - and the laws are still based on this principle - censorship is imposed by law giving - unintentionally, but as the result of an act to protect audiences against fire - the right of showing films to the public.

It gives it only to those who get a licence from the local government authority. And the local government authority added to that requirement about the building and its safety, censorship requirements, and it was held by a court of law to be have been so carelessly worded that it gave them that right. But although they have that right, they obviously can't spend their lives looking at films, so although they have that right and sometimes exercise that right, in general most authorities accept the certificate given by the censor, who has no legal statutory position, and is appointed and paid by the trade. And this applies to all films on inflammable stock shown in commercial cinemas, or it did in those days. But the point is that it doesn't apply, the exception is made, for newsreels, for no other reason than the fact that newsreel couldn't be topical if it had to go through any kind of censorship process. But this would not prevent the censor from afterwards saying that the same kind of material, arranged in a different way, as anybody might if they wanted to draw special attention to any particular problems, or emphasise others, that then they had to be censored, even if it had been free under the fact that it was previously newsreel. It was never established in law what was a newsreel and what was not - when a thing ceased to be topical or otherwise. But the threat constituted by his attitude was sufficient to prevent such films going into the commercial cinemas, because they would be under threat of being prosecuted and losing their licence, if it turned out that the censor's action, if an action was brought on the fact that the thing wasn't certified, and his attitude and his threat was justified. So, for example, a film like 'Free Thaelmann' could never get a censor's certificate, and didn't even get a certificate from the local authority.

Interviewer : Did you ever try to get material which you had shot, that showed something powerful about the... did you ever try to get it onto the newsreels?

Ivor Montagu : We did. We took film of the bombing of a British ship that took food to the Basque country in the later stages of the Spanish war, when there were heavy food shortages in part of Republican Spain. German planes...

Interviewer : Could you say something about trying to get [evens?] in Spain onto newsreel?

Ivor Montagu : One of the films that we were very hopeful might get onto newsreel was the interviews that we filmed with prisoners. German officers and Italian officers and Italian rank and file, captured by the Republicans. We recorded a question and answer session of them being cross-examined on film. This was very important, because at the time the German and Italian government were both insisting that they had no official intervention, and that these people were all volunteers. They described how the ordinary rank and file troops had been mobilised, and sent to a destination they didn't even know, and the Germans and some of the Italians were serving officers, and in uniform. They were denying it, and the British government was accepting these denials. But no newsreel would touch it at all, they wouldn't even touch any crucial key sentences that could have been made in a very short time out of it, cut out of it and translated into English with the language in which they were answering as well as that. It would have been newsreel material. But we did, of course, show it in Geneva itself, during a session of the League of Nations general assembly, and a number of the delegates came and looked at it. But I'm afraid that in such assemblies people often vote according to what they think is the general interest, and not on the basis of whatever facts you were able to show them.

Interviewer : Would you like to say a word about the issues of raising money for progressive films?

Ivor Montagu : Well, this is another technical thing which has a great deal to do with the pictures which are chosen. Making films costs money. Even making them economically costs money. And all films that were made in that period were sponsored by somebody or other. The documentary films of the Grierson school were often sponsored, if not by the GPO as showing important things in British life, by big companies, as for example Shell, which deserved every credit, as people felt at the time, for financing something of social interest, which showed some social problem that might not even be connected directly with their own firm's interest, like the sponsors of the Middle Ages generally of religious art, or something that they thought worthwhile. Going to Spain didn't cost all that much. If you were devoted and terribly keen to make a picture, you could probably raise some money yourself to cover the fare, and out there you would get facilities and accommodation from the Republican side, which wanted as much as possible to be shown of their life and the popular support, and so on. But of course making a film about anti-Nazi Germany was a different matter. You couldn't find a commercial sponsor, you couldn't find a company sponsor, you couldn't find a government sponsor. There was one I also made about direct criticism of government policy, *Peace and Plenty*. The money for that had to be put up by interested donors, collections and so forth. You could do that. Industrial films, which were among the documentary films, sometimes you could get the money put up by trade unions. But wherever you see a film, you have to say to yourself: where is a sponsor? Who would be the sponsor? Because none of the documentary films were ever expected to make their costs from exhibition money alone. I will give you one example of a film that was very cheap to make, and that was a Spanish film. I think it was one of the first ones made, that Norman Maclaren and I made, called *'Defence of Madrid'*, in 1936. That didn't cost very much, and it raised many thousands of pounds for Spanish medical relief. But the point is this: if you charged for the seats a commercial price in these uncomfortable halls, with their wooden seats, people wouldn't come. If you didn't charge, and made a collection, nobody would put money in a hat to pay your debts, the cost of making the film. You could collect money because the hearts of people were touched by the film. You could collect money for medical aid. But there was no way you could make films like that commercial. So there has to be a sponsor, somebody keen behind the back...

Interviewer : Could you say something about your view of the way in which television works now, as opposed to the way you worked in the 30s? I'm interested in your views on the alleged muzzling in Ireland...

Ivor Montagu : Well I think muzzling occurs, where it is possible, probably in every country. And it doesn't seem to be completely possible, because a great deal is filmed that countries afterwards complain of. Sometimes it's done by regulation, and sometimes it's done by appealing, I would say misplaced appeals to the so-called patriotism of the people who are doing it. No government likes things to be shown which are discreditable to it. But what has made a great deal of difference are two things: one of them is political, and the other is purely objective. And to deal with the second one first, the purely objective thing is that television, compared with the cinema, is an all-absorbing, all-devouring giant. If you look at the quantity of material that it has to devour... When you think, for example, that if you see a humorous programme it can only

be revived at long intervals after the audience has changed a bit, because you can't show them the same jokes again and again, but in the old English music hall you could have the same item so polished and so perfect in timing that people would go and see it again and again and again, even if they'd seen it before, as you would see a ballet danced again and again and again - and therefore comedy is not, of course, of the same standard of timing and things, because you simply have to have so many comedy programmes every day. Now, with newsreels, it's the same thing. Instead of producing for cinema, as they did, each company would make one reel a week or every three days at the most, and perhaps another one a month in a different series, and they were none of them very good, and none of them very interesting, and usually just helped people to take their seats before another picture; but in television, news presentation is one of the most important things. And there is always a demand for it. And this means that the gates are opened to a much wider political spectrum, simply because the mouth has to get wider and more little fish can get in. The kind of people who made the political, the factual films of our day and couldn't get them on the screen, now get them on the screen to enormously wider audiences simply because of the enormously greater demand. And that is one thing. And the other is that the Vietnam war, with the tradition in America that news is something sacred, even in spite of all the efforts to be rigid - which apparently have been even more successful in Northern Ireland - have meant that it was very difficult to prevent their appearing on the screens of all the world, and particularly in America. What actually was happening there? This meant for the first time that people actually saw what was going on. What was being done in their name. Now that has opened the gates of convention to making it very, very difficult for any country to close the gates. It was a breakthrough, and although they are partly closed and the same degree of freedom isn't available for every item, they will never be so tightly closed as they were in the days when the only pictures you had were on the old cinema newsreels.

Interviewer : Would you say that there was some sort of deficiency in the coverage of Northern Ireland?

Ivor Montagu : Well, it's very hard to say from what ground it comes. One has no reason to disbelieve the complaints of some of those about the difficulties and obstacles they are meeting, the complaints of those who are making them. But there is no doubt there are often accusations about incidents...

Interviewer : Why do you think the progressive film-makers didn't stage incidents that they couldn't get on film?

Ivor Montagu : I think they had various reasons. One is that to do it well it costs a great deal more, and a great deal more than their sponsors were prepared to pay. But I think more important than that was their devotion to what they regarded as the documentary idea. The idea sprang from the first Soviet documentaries that they saw, and the method used openly - and defended by a number of Soviet film directors - of what was called 'non-acting material', real people in particular roles that carried great conviction. And the second, the thing that supported it, was Flaherty's teaching and example. Because he was looked up to by all the young film makers, they thought this was wonderful, the way he seemed to get acting out of people who seemed to be ordinary people. And so they wanted to do it that way, one, and secondly we'll put the point that it would have been too costly to do it any other way. Thirdly was the way that it was only that

way, they felt, that they could carry conviction. That it made much more conviction to ask a real person what they felt, and even if they were a bit embarrassed and not always as good as in some films using non-real material, it seemed more believable because it was the real people, and not acted. I think that was their reason.

Interviewer : Lastly, do you think that there is anything to regret, looking back with hindsight upon the overall non-fiction coverage...?

Ivor Montagu : Well, I don't think so at all. I think that what was done was all that was possible. I think that it's really sort of utopian to believe that people who hadn't an interest in doing it, who were running the industry at the time, would be prepared to make films that criticised such ideas - and they were not many that they might have had, - or that they couldn't be sure would appeal to their audiences. I think that it was less their fault any more than you can blame a wasp for stinging when you sit on it! Less their fault than it was that the industry was extraordinarily inflexible at that time. People had a habit of film going. They didn't pick and choose, so there was no opportunity to have minority cinemas. Then again, there was this deadly competition when the audiences were so enormous, and you had enormous theatres, so you had to have a picture that appealed to the vast majority, or your theatre wouldn't be filled. Now, a variety of films are able to be shown because you have smaller cinemas, and then a smaller cinema is viable and can pay for itself, even if it appeals only to a minority. Because it doesn't have to be full every time...

(end of interview)