



Listen To Britain: And Other Films By Humphrey Jennings **By Dean W. Duncan**

The breadth and the depth of Jennings' films owe much to the rather roundabout course by which he became a filmmaker. He was born in 1907, in a village on England's eastern coast. His mother and father were guild socialists, sharing that movement's reverence for the past, its love for things communal, and its deep suspicion of industrialization and the machine age. Their son, who would come to know much of both arts and crafts, and who would eventually be uniquely successful in melding tradition and modernity, was well-educated and well-read, and his interests ranged very widely indeed. He received a scholarship to Cambridge University, where he studied English literature and where all of his youthful enthusiasms coalesced into a remarkable flurry of activity and accomplishment.

Jennings excelled in his chosen field, effecting an extraordinary immersion in the major movements, the signal works and authors, the main periods and issues in English literature. He also founded and wrote for a literary magazine. He oversaw an edition (from the quarto) of Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*, and his doctoral work – unfinished, as it turned out – on the 18th century poet Thomas Gray had, by all accounts, great merit and promise. The fact that he didn't finish his dissertation had something to do with all the other fields in which he also chose to work. All through his studies Jennings was, heavily, and eventually professionally, involved in theatrical production. He was an actor, and a designer of real ambition and genius. In connection, he had a passion for painting, gravitating toward modern idioms. Wishing not only to paint, but also to agitate on behalf of the new forms, Jennings founded and ran briefly an art gallery. Not incidentally, he also found time to get married.

Jennings' abilities, and his ambitions, were not matched by his means. He scrambled through the early 1930s, continuing to paint, publish occasional poetry and work in the theatre. In 1933 he and his wife Cicely had the first of two daughters. Finally in 1934 the weight of this increased domestic responsibility brought him to John Grierson's General Post Office (GPO) film office and to a degree of steady employment as a filmmaker.

John Grierson was the major figure in the British documentary film movement. Feeling that commercial cinema had little interest in anything but escapism, Grierson set forth what he felt to be the proper aims of a documentary alternative. Films were to consider the everyday realities of everyday people, treat them creatively and, in so doing, alert those people not only to their great value, but also to their great responsibilities. Just as importantly, Grierson also found a way to fund the production, distribution and exhibition of these same films out of the public purse. First at the Empire Marketing Board (EMB) and from 1934 through the auspices of the General Post Office, Grierson and his cohorts produced a great many documentaries which, at their best, informed the citizenry at the same time that they pushed the sponsoring governments toward reform.

For the next five years Jennings worked within this ferment. Unlike tailored job divisions of Hollywood production, filmmaking at the GPO was roundly collaborative, even communal. Jennings worked closely with many other colleagues, primarily as an editor, a designer, and slightly, a director. But he did not immediately attain the distinction that so typified his earlier work. The fact is that Jennings did not thrive under Grierson. To the schoolmasterly Scot, Jennings' previous eclectic involvements seemed so much dabbling. A



documentarian's task was to roll up his sleeves, to advocate and to educate, and to Grierson the aesthetical Jennings' seemed ill-equipped for the job at hand.

It is significant that in the subtlety and indirectness to which Grierson objected lay the key to Jennings' mature work. But this work was yet some years distant. For now, Jennings learned film production as a 'prentice hand at the GPO. And, as before, he sought outside engagements which, as it turned out, would nurture the poetic qualities within him and ultimately make of him the next link in the evolution of the documentary film.

In 1936 Jennings helped to organize London's first International Surrealists' Exhibition, in which his own painting also appeared. In addition he translated a collection of surrealist poetry by his friend Paul Eluard. Though he was not exactly one of the faithful — he had too much regard for the arts and objects of the past to fully qualify as a surrealist — Jennings found great resonance in the movement's incongruous juxtapositions, a grounding which added substantially to his scholar's knack for assimilation and his ability to find patterns and correspondences that were not obvious or even visible to the untrained eye.

In 1937 he helped organize Mass Observation, a monumental project which was to coincide with the coronation of King George VI and which was designed to take the principles of anthropological science and apply them not to far-flung cultures, but to the British populace itself. In contrast to the GPO's customary prescribing and proscribing, the task here was to observe, to gather, and to present data without compulsory means or excessive urging.

This methodology resonated strongly with Jennings' own sensibilities, and it informed his first major film as a director, *Spare Time* (1939). But a conviction of mass observing's validity in cinematic settings was not all that he took away from the experience. *Spare Time* was shot in England's industrial north, which Jennings had never before visited. The exposure was revelatory; presented for the first time with the real conditions of working class life, Jennings saw that the aesthetic, cerebral cast of his previous work had been inadequate, even inappropriate. Late events in Europe had already affected in him a substantial sensitization, and this glimpse of conditions at home confirmed to him that distance, aesthetic or anthropological, had now to give way to simple human engagement.

In 1954 the British film director Lindsay Anderson wrote a moving, loving tribute to Jennings entitled "Only Connect." The phrase, which was the epigram to E.M. Forster's 1910 novel *Howard's End*, was for Anderson the great invitation and opportunity extended to the viewers of Jennings' films. Connection, empathy, unity: here on the brink of war he had prepared himself for just such a communion.

On the first of September 1939, the Nazis invaded Poland. On September 3rd, Britain declared war on Germany. That same month the GPO film unit was taken over by the Ministry of Information. In 1940 it was renamed the Crown Film Unit, and it was here that Humphrey Jennings began to make his greatest films.

The first of these, which begins this collection, is *LONDON CAN TAKE IT!* This 1940 release is strongly reminiscent of the classic GPO productions, one key similarity being that it is not solely Jennings' film, but rather the result of a multi-levelled collaboration. Documentary pioneer Harry Watt was the co-director. (Watt illuminates Jennings' career at a number of important points. His *North Sea* [1938], a dramatic reenactment of an actual incident that featured the incident's actual participants, was a clear precursor to Jennings'



own FIRES WERE STARTED. And Watt's *Target for Tonight* [1941] represents a pugnacious alternative to Jennings' gentler war reports, which to some blitzed Brits were rather gentler than they needed to be.) GPO stalwart Henry "Chick" Fowle photographed the images, and Stewart McAllister, Jennings' steadiest and most important collaborator, edited them. The commentary was by *Collier's Weekly* war correspondent Quentin Reynolds.

As with many documentaries of the period, this commentary leads the way and dictates the use to which the pictures are put. This is another echo from the GPO period, and the narration's function further recalls the propagandistic core of the British documentary. Reynolds here tells us what is happening, what it means and suggests what we ought to do about it. And as is often the case with propaganda, what we get is only part of the picture.

The thing that Londoners were supposed to be taking was the bombing incident to the Battle of Britain, and it is, of course, true that they did exhibit extraordinary courage under extraordinary duress. But this is not simply an objective record of the blitz. The film's purpose was two-fold: to boost morale at home and, more especially, to appeal to the still-neutral Americans. As was obvious in the first instance, and as it was felt in the second, neither objective, would have been served by dwelling on the real terror of the bombing. So instead the production team gives us superb, selected images of modest perseverance and matter-of-fact courage. Life and leisure and commerce continue, and optimism is maintained in the midst of the rising rubble. The suggestion, it seems, is that these people could use your aid and even your intervention. But they're not begging, and either way it will all come right in the end.

Of course the actual situation was decidedly more grave, and the eventual outcome was by no means certain. And yet, though it may be selective about presenting the full facts, *LONDON CAN TAKE IT!* does not deceive. A mordant wit — "In the center of the city the shops are open as usual. Many of them are more open than usual" — acknowledges the dread that lurks beneath the film's affirmative surface. We both hear and see evidence that if these shadows remain unaltered by the future, the film's title will no longer be true. An image of a sleeping family in an underground shelter brings Reynolds to ask, "Do you see any signs of fear on these faces?" The real answer comes with his announcement of the returning Luftwaffe — "Here they come" — said with such sorrow that we come to appreciate not only the motivational intent of the film, but also the poignant depths lying beneath it.

Such depths start to reverberate even more widely with *WORDS FOR BATTLE* (1941), the second selection on this program. This is a compilation film, which is to say that all of the footage present was actually shot for, and had been used in, other productions. Film had been recycled and redistributed in this manner since the early days at the EMB, and reduced wartime means called for the practice to be continued. Such thrift did not always lead to fresh filmmaking, but in this case Jennings makes out of limitation a strength and in so doing takes a key stylistic and conceptual step forward.

In *WORDS FOR BATTLE*, Jennings reuses contemporary images of wartime Britain, and to accompany them he also gathers statements and sentiments that far predate the current crisis. With Laurence Olivier narrating, and G.F. Handel's majestic *A Water Music* resonating underneath, he quotes William Camden, John Milton, William Blake, Robert Browning, Rudyard Kipling, and, most strikingly, Winston Churchill and Abraham Lincoln. Their conversations alternate between the perilous moment and a history that has seen,



and abided, many such moments. In thus combining today with yesterday, Jennings conflates the epochs, and in the counterpoint of image and text erases divisions among times, peoples and places. And to all these things he brings perspective, hope, and assurance. This, too, will pass, he says, and we, too, will prevail.

What Jennings pioneered here would become a key strategy in wartime filmmaking, British and otherwise. (Much of Frank Capra's *Why We Fight* series, produced for the U.S. War Department, as well as Olivier's *Henry V* and the Archers' *A Canterbury Tale* [both 1944], derive their affects from similar juxtapositions. Historical excavation, and the careful arranging of the artifacts, are also at the heart of Jennings' massive textual project *Pandaemonium*, on the rise of industry and the death — or transfiguration — of the artisan). It is propaganda, pure and simple. A continuous solidarity between past and present was real and demonstrable, but the fact could be lost in the uncertainty of the moment. The links had to be forged and strengthened, and a degree of manufacture and even manipulation was inevitable.

Steeped as we are in the ambiguities and duplicities of modern life, propaganda may strike us today as a dirty word. But propaganda has been effective, even essential in raising spirits amid dire circumstances or marshalling appropriate action when a more reasoned and rounded (and time-consuming) debate might well lead to disaster. Moreover, British film propaganda in WWII, with Jennings' contributions standing at the zenith, could propagate a faith that was indeed deeply held and even life-sustaining. Not only was this faith the substance of things hoped for by the beleaguered British, but the part of the story that the best propaganda selected was also the truest part.

This is nowhere more evident than in the next three films on this DVD, which so refine and purify propagandistic usage as to practically require another name for it. The urging, even hectoring tone of traditionally narrated documentary can betray a lack of confidence in the validity of the message, or of the ability of the audience to apprehend it. It can also betray a coercive core. *LISTEN TO BRITAIN* (1942), *FIRES WERE STARTED* (1943) and *A DIARY FOR TIMOTHY* (1943) make electrifying breaks from these norms and reveal to us a kind of higher propaganda, of which we may not now be aware, and to which we may not now be accustomed. The message that Jennings wants to share in these films is more direct and important than any partisan position. It concerns the simple sanctity of human life and interaction, and as his convictions about that sanctity deepen, so too does his confidence in expressing them. Instead of protesting too much, Jennings quietly gives testimony of what he feels to be true and right.

This gentle confidence is what distinguishes *LONDON CAN TAKE IT!* from *LISTEN TO BRITAIN*. In most respects their subjects are identical, but the effects could not be more diverse. At one level *LISTEN TO BRITAIN* is Jennings' definitive mass observation film, made up of a series of exquisitely chosen vignettes which give a vivid picture — and soundtrack — of life during wartime. Documentary had always been interested in portraying the dignity of work, and it was never so successful in this aim as it was here, when the most pressing labor was simply to survive and to live decently in so doing. In a time when the possibility of death or loss was constant, Jennings and McAllister (whose contribution as editor is so central that he is credited on the same card as the director) discover the sufficiency of simply looking, which reveals how precious plain processes, and regular people, can be.

This is not to say that *LISTEN TO BRITAIN* does not have its own complex depths; for all the matter we find in it, there still remains a great deal of art. The film's commentary



is not found within a narrator's explicit and manipulative proclamations — it has no narrator at all — but in the much more subtle and open juxtapositions of intellectual montage. Here we find traces of Jennings' surrealist affinities. The film proceeds by constant comparison, linking by mere proximity that which would at first seem to be completely unrelated. But as a number of prospects — the ballroom dancers in Blackpool, the Canadian soldiers in the transport train, the children in the schoolyard, the whistling workers in the canteen and the concert-goers in the National Gallery — pass before us, we begin to see unsuspected correlations.

The assertion that emerges out of these correspondences constitutes one of the central tenets of the documentary idea: regardless of his role, each honest worker — including the public-minded artist — is worthy of his hire, and he is part of an interdependent community. *LISTEN TO BRITAIN* gives us, in effect, the body of Britain, where the head cannot say to the foot that it has no need of it. In fact we come to see that each member not only has its own utility, but its own beauty as well. The great Myra Hess, playing Mozart's 17th Piano Concerto (German music, mark you), is in some ways as skilled, and in every sense only as important as the factory girl who sings and smiles while she wraps a package of razors.

Whereas *LISTEN TO BRITAIN* illustrates these ideas across a broad canvas, Jennings' next film, *FIRES WERE STARTED*, applies them on a much more limited, more concentrated scale. (*FIRES WERE STARTED* is the film's most familiar title, but it should be noted that this collection features the original, uncut version of the film, which was first entitled *I WAS A FIREMAN*). *FIRES* keys on the dynamics of a single group of firefighters, working in a single city district, over a very brief period of time. This portrait as tribute is not strictly a documentary. By 1943 Nazi attention had largely 'turned to' other fronts — at home in England there were many fewer fires to put out. What we see in the film is a recreation of events and conditions that have already, in the main, passed, featuring the actual men and women who passed through them. As such, this is a fictional feature film, but it is so utterly informed by documentary detail and ideas that one is excused if he mistakes it for the real thing.

There is an exciting tale here, heroic protagonists with clear objectives; Jennings is concerned with more than just plot, and so he overlays his story with a wealth of wonderful detail, with the seemingly insignificant processes and interactions which make up the firefighters' day. These fulfill a number of functions. One is to present a remarkable picture of class differences reconciled amidst conflict. There is no speechifying or facile plot resolution in this regard. What we see is the slow, steady building of a community, bound by the common experience of mundane tasks as much as by tribulation and tragedy. The war brings out the deeper affinities: what these men and women do together, from receiving and rerouting information to fighting the fires themselves, through all of the myriad of moments in between, they do so skillfully and carefully and above all, modestly. For the moment, at least, social origin does not enter in. All of the service, in this recreating and contemplating of Britain's moment of refining, feels of the greatest importance, assuming a quiet beauty and even sacredness. This is who we were, and what we passed through together, and these are the sacrifices we made for each other.

The film's profusion of detail also crowds out the adversarial element that was so typical of this period. Lindsay Anderson has observed how unwarlike Jennings' war films are, finding in this the source of their continued freshness. These films do not vilify or even particularly criticize the Nazis. What they do suggest is that we should not allow a brutal



aberration to compromise our humanity. Jim Hillier points out that *FIRES WERE STARTED* does not even name those responsible for the bombings and that the fires themselves are portrayed as if they were natural disasters. It is as if it is not worth our trouble to identify those responsible or to entertain the hatred that such identification would generate.

For all the deep and generous feeling in his work, Jennings was not a sentimentalist, and he did not hesitate to take on difficult questions. *A DIARY FOR TIMOTHY*, his last masterpiece, is a complex and troubled film which counts the costs of the war and considers the uncertainty that lie at its end. Jennings and his collaborator, E.M. Forster, who wrote the superb commentary, frame these issues in the story of Timothy Jenkins, a child born five years to the day after the war's start. The narrator (Michael Redgrave) speaks to the child and tries to make sense of the world which he has just entered. But here is an explanation with a difference, and a decided change from the kind of certainty that had been typical of documentary narration.

What Redgrave explains is that conditions are confused; rather than solutions he sets forth possibilities and partialities. Certainty, however reassuring or even necessary it may have been, during more doubtful times, now becomes an inappropriate affectation, and is replaced by humble inquiry. The imposition of a single perspective gives way to a dialogue between various positions. These are represented by four individuals — a miner, a farmer, an engine driver, and a disabled RAF pilot — whose circumstances and circles both complement and contrast those in which Tim finds himself. As he has done all along, Jennings is portraying a community, but one that now finds itself at a crossroads, with victory assured and yet too painfully drawn out, with fear and hope poignantly intermingled.

If *DIARY* is uncertain about the future, then it is most assured in documenting a present in which British culture is utterly transformed, battered and yet full of new promise. Through the war Jennings has been bringing binaries together: farm and city, high culture and low, the present and the past. By this time, maybe just slightly because of his work and certainly because of the realities that his work reflected, things that have been poles apart begin to appear as if they belong together. This was nowhere more powerfully rendered than in Jennings' use of music. Dame Myra Hess appears again in this film, this time playing Beethoven's *Apassionata* Sonata. (Jennings assembled a separate record of this performance from the material shot for *A DIARY FOR TIMOTHY*. It appears as a bonus on this DVD, and shows that in addition to articulating complex ideas in virtuosic manner, Jennings could also step back quietly and subordinate himself to his subject. Beethoven's monumental Romanticism, and Dame Myra's magisterial interpretation of it appear in a simple, self-effacing frame, and the result is another feat of exquisite balance.)

With his customary counterpoint of image and sound, Jennings laces Beethoven, and all the other wartime sounds as well, through the diverse social fabric that he has been observing, and which he has indeed helped to weave. In this setting, classical music, that great separator and traditional emblem of high/low hierarchies, stands in for all of the miraculous reconciliations that the war has brought about. For a brief moment we find common aspiration, mutual accomplishment, and a depth of feeling that, however glancingly, binds up the wounds of the conflict.

If *A DIARY FOR TIMOTHY* is Jennings' most ambivalent statement, then surely it contains the deepest of these emotional expressions, and some of the most beautiful moments in British cinema. "Out of the fog dawn(s) loveliness, whiteness, Christmas Day." In a montage sequence the various protagonists, whose loved ones are at best far distant



and quite possibly endangered or worse, quietly raise their glasses to “absent friends,” a toast in which the viewer must feel hailed and embraced. In witnessing these scenes today that viewer may be struck by powerful realizations. If this is propaganda, then it is more valedictory than motivational. It looks back; one feels quite strongly that at the remove of more than half a century we cannot possibly understand how very much all this would have meant to the millions recently bereaved or relieved. And it peers forward into a future through which we have already passed. Now we know that although hopes were high at the end of the war, they were also frail and tenuous; ultimately the coalitions broke, the Empire ended, and the difficulties that the film anticipated came in rich and overpowering measure.

Documentary teaches us that old battles give way to new, that social responsibility and social action are ever urgent and never adequate. Jennings’ posts from the best and worst of times raise before us an ancient affirmation. “Man is born to trouble, as the sparks fly upwards.” But in addition to tribulation we can also depend on the consolations of such comprehensive, clear-eyed art, and more importantly, in the love that both informs and emerges out of it.

The common wisdom about Jennings is that the end of the war also signaled the end of his relevance as a filmmaker. Certainly he had some trouble finding his cinematic bearings at first, and he also returned to the eclectic interests (painting, Pandaemonium) that he had set aside for the duration of the war effort. But the greatness of his most celebrated films can blind us to the very real merit and interest of some of his so-called minor efforts. FAMILY PORTRAIT (1951), Jennings’ last film, and the final selection in this collection, fully belongs in the company of its more celebrated fellows. In some ways it is even more representative of its maker than the wartime pictures.

Here we find familiar things in place: the beautiful compositions, the carefully chosen musical material, the complex relationship between sound and image, the acute sense of history. It is in this latter respect that Jennings reveals something that we have not seen quite so clearly in the films before. He is both writer and director now, and the face that he exposes in these capacities is that of the scholar and the anthologist. FAMILY PORTRAIT contains the most dazzling examples of Jennings’ conceptual counterpoint, his exceedingly elaborate, yet wholly accessible interweaving of complex ideas and images, quotations and concepts. This presentation of the poetry and prose of English life, the relationship between vaulting vision and plain sense is perhaps the most representative of Jennings’ films, the one in which his sensibilities are most plainly, unadulteratedly revealed. As inflated as the use of the word may be, it is still, undeniably, the work of genius.

This was to be the last film. In 1950, while scouting locations in Greece for a film on public health, Jennings was killed in a fall from a cliff.

Since the cinema is in many ways a combination and a culmination of all of the arts, it is appropriate that a man of Jennings’ broad background should finally have found his calling in films. His versatility is manifest in the movies themselves. He was a modern painter able to see that there is more to an object, or a subject, than what presents itself to the naked eye. He was a surrealist poet who found that a direct line is not the only link between a cause and its apparent effect. He was an observer of the masses, and of the individual within, willing not only to tell, but also to hear.

His work provides powerful pictures of the times in which it was produced, and it also quite clearly prefigures many of the important innovations that would change the cinema in



the next decades. The observational documentary, the self-reflexive film, challenge for change, even neo-realism — all are quite strikingly suggested by and in his various productions. But ultimately it is not innovation, but the substance, even the goodness of these films that serve as their final recommendation.

Where documentaries before Jennings had for the most part directed and even manipulated the viewer to particular ends, his films began to openly invite the viewer into the process of comprehension and interpretation, not incidentally making him a more active agent in the subsequent action that documentary would often demand. And though not an activist in the Griersonian sense, Jennings' films were nevertheless calls to action, and they were calls that he himself answered. His ability, and willingness, to put his great talent in the service of the public good, his successful reconciliation of the desire for personal expression and the responsibilities of citizenship makes him a rare and exemplary figure in film history. In the best of Jennings' work, artistry and responsibility were perfectly balanced, the felicitous result being that in addressing with his gown voice the specific concerns of a specific moment, Jennings was able to transcend that moment and speak for all time. This collection of films affords us the opportunity to join that wonderful conversation.

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