

A FILM FROM WALES:
WELSH IDENTITY AND THE CHILDREN'S FILM FOUNDATION

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Abstract: This article examines the work of the Children's Film Foundation (CFF) in Wales. The CFF was founded in 1951 to make films for children and supported a network of Saturday morning cinema clubs which were popular until the 1970s. While considering the role of these clubs in Wales, the article focuses on CFF films with a specific Welsh dimension, particularly *A Letter from Wales* (1953), which was released in English- and Welsh-language versions. Made by the independent producer Brunner Lloyd, the film illustrates prevailing stereotypes of Wales and the Welsh. The article makes the case for its significance in establishing a lyrical image of rural Welsh life.

This article examines the work of the Children's Film Foundation (CFF) in Wales. The CFF was a unique body that provided films made specifically for children from its inception in 1951 to its withdrawal from production in the late 1980s. These films, which covered a broad range of formats, provided the basis for a network of Saturday morning cinema clubs for children that covered the whole of the UK and beyond. The clubs were particularly popular in Wales, where they continued for some years after their disappearance from most other parts of the UK. Evidence of the continuing public interest in the CFF can be found in the current series of DVD reissues of the Foundation's films released by the British Film Institute (BFI),

which has care of the CFF back-catalogue. There has also been a good deal of recent coverage in the wider media.¹ While the CFF's output was notable for making London and the Home Counties its main locations, it did sometimes stray outside of this narrow geographical reach. While this article looks briefly at the popularity of the Saturday clubs in Wales, its central focus is on the films which the CFF made in Wales. The output is small but the most significant of these, *A Letter from Wales* (1953), is an important film with a legitimate claim to be considered the first professional documentary film shot in Wales to achieve any level of real authenticity; it will provide the principal case study for this article. The film is a fascinating example of prevalent cinematic and cultural stereotypes of rural Wales and Welsh family life which are common in British (for British, read English) cinema. However, its production on location in north-west Wales and its use of local talent gives a more convincing dimension to its content, which makes it a rare and distinctive contribution to the emergent cinema of Wales.

Surprisingly, *A Letter from Wales*, and the CFF more generally, have been given little attention in the existing scholarly work on the history of Welsh cinema. In David Berry's exhaustive *Wales and Cinema: the First Hundred Years*, the Foundation merits two brief mentions, one of which is in relation to *A Letter to Wales*. Berry provides no real analysis of the film but does recognize its role in developing an 'intimate narrative' style which was to become characteristic of Welsh documentaries and which had its origins in *Y Chwarelwr/The Quarryman* (1935).² There is no mention of the CFF or *A Letter from Wales* in Steve Blandford's *Wales on Screen*, where the focus is more contemporary, or in Peter Miskell's *A Social History of the Cinema in Wales 1918–1951*, which ends its coverage before the film's

¹ At the time of writing, the BFI has issued six compilations of CFF feature films on DVD; press coverage includes articles in *The Guardian*, 9 September 2010, and *The Daily Telegraph*, 22 July 2012.

² David Berry, *Cinema and Wales: the First Hundred Years* (Cardiff, 1996), p. 284.

release, although the latter does give some coverage to the success in Wales of the Saturday cinema clubs.³ Gwenno Ffrancon's study *Cyfaredd y Cysgodion: Delweddu Cymru a'i Phobl ar Ffilm, 1935-1951* also ends prior to the release of the film and makes no mention of it or of the CFF, although it does consider an earlier film made by the same production company.⁴ This article sets out to end this neglect and to reinstate the film in the canon of Welsh cinema, both for its intrinsic qualities, which are not inconsiderable, and for the role that it played in establishing a lyrical image of rural Wales both in the documentary form and for the cinema more widely. In this respect it proved to be remarkably prescient.

FOUNDING THE FOUNDATION

The Children's Film Foundation was formally established at the beginning of 1951 as a response to widespread public criticism of the material shown in the plethora of children's film screenings which had grown up all over the UK. As Terry Staples has shown, these film clubs had come into existence from almost the very beginning of commercial cinema-going in Britain during the early 1900s.⁵ Their organisation was largely ad hoc and the films that were screened were frequently chosen with little regard for their intended audience. This led to the mounting of several state sanctioned public enquiries into the suitability of the films screened and their possibly harmful influence on children, a debate fuelled by over-heated coverage in the popular tabloid press.⁶ Many cinema managers clearly did view these screenings as nothing more than a cheap means to fill cinemas during a time slot when the auditorium was otherwise empty and consequently when very little money or time was spent

³ Steve Blandford (ed.), *Wales on Screen* (Bridgend, 2000); Peter Miskell, *A Social History of the Cinema in Wales, 1918-1951* (Cardiff, 2006).

⁴ Gwenno Ffrancon, *Cyfaredd y Cysgodion: Delweddu Cymru a'i Phobl ar Ffilm, 1935-1951* (Cardiff, 2003).

⁵ Terry Staples, *All Pals Together: the Story of Children's Cinema* (Edinburgh, 1997), pp. 1-6.

⁶ Staples, *All Pals Together*, pp. 29-41.

considering the product to be shown. The Rank Organisation, with its Methodist leanings, was the first group to attempt an organized response to the situation by providing work which catered specifically for their own chain of Saturday morning clubs during the 1940s.⁷ Out of this came the basis for what eventually became the CFF, as Rank realized that the costs involved would require a more rigorously structured form of central support than they could afford.

The Foundation was funded by money from the Eady Levy (a small tax on cinema tickets) and was given the support of the major guilds and unions representing cast and crew members in the UK, as well as organisations representing producers, distributors and exhibitors; their members agreed to work at minimum union rates on CFF projects.⁸ The decision was not entirely altruistic as there was a clear commercial remit in trying to encourage a lasting pattern of cinema attendance in the young. The funding was modest but for the next forty years the CFF and its successor, the Children's Film and Television Foundation (CFTF), produced a regular mix of sixty-minute features, shorts, documentaries, cliff-hanger serials and comedy series for the Saturday clubs. At their height in the 1960s and early 1970s, there were more than 800 cinemas in the UK taking part in the scheme and attendance often touched half a million each week.⁹ The films were lauded internationally, with the awarding of many prizes, particularly from festivals specialising in children's cinema. They provided a fertile training ground for young technicians and actors; many of the latter, like Michael Crawford, Francesca Annis and Judy Geeson, 'rose to fame and fortune',

⁷ Geoffrey Macnab, *J. Arthur Rank and the British Film Industry* (London and New York, 1994), pp. 153-7.

⁸ Historical coverage of the Children's Film Foundation is drawn directly from archival materials held by the British Film Institute; see also Robert Shail, *The Children's Film Foundation: History and Legacy* (London, 2016).

⁹ *Saturday Morning Cinema: A Report of the CFF in the Sixties with a Full Catalogue of CFF Films* (London, 1967).

as *The Observer* newspaper recently acknowledged in its coverage of the BFI reissues.¹⁰ The films even managed to secure the services of distinguished British film-makers such as Alberto Cavalcanti, Lewis Gilbert, and Powell and Pressburger. By the 1980s, with the withdrawal of the Eady Levy and the gradual decline of the clubs under fierce competition from Saturday morning children's television, the CFTF ceased to produce films and the network of clubs themselves gradually closed down. Nonetheless, the Foundation had in its short history achieved a unique position in British film culture with work that reached millions of children and which supported a network of cinemas clubs which introduced succeeding generations to the habit of regular cinema-going. Beyond this, its output also holds considerable interest in relation to its ethical dimensions, in that the Foundation always sought to combine entertainment with a strong moral tone that was designed to have a positive influence over its young audience's social development.

THE CINEMA CLUBS AND WALES

Saturday morning children's cinema clubs proved to be particularly popular in Wales, which experienced some of the highest levels of attendance. As part of an ongoing Leverhulme Trust research project into the CFF, I carried out a series of surveys to collect memories of attendance at the clubs. Two of these were specifically carried out in Wales and produced a large number of responses. The network of clubs was widespread. It included major cinemas in areas where there were substantial urban populations, such as Newport, Cardiff, Swansea, Llanelli and Port Talbot. This covered the national chains, such as ABC, Odeon and Gaumont, as well as independent cinemas. Wales had a comparatively large proportion of

¹⁰ Vanessa Thorpe, 'Cache of children's films that gave stars their big break is set for new release', *The Observer*, 16 June 2012.

small, family-owned cinemas where the film clubs proved especially successful. This extended to rural areas and the south Wales valleys, although this was less in evidence in the north-west; this may have been affected by the difficulties of travelling, the scarcity of suitable venues and by a more scattered population. The popularity of the clubs in urban areas was hardly unique to Wales, but the success of relatively small, sometimes semi-improvized venues in rural locations appears to have been a strong characteristic of the country. One respondent had vivid memories of this: ‘we travelled in on our own on the bus from one village to the next feeling very grown up to the Palace cinema at Hirwaun, near Aberdare in south Wales. It was a flea pit really but we loved it and were devastated when it closed down.’¹¹ It is difficult to speculate on the reasons for the particular popularity of the clubs, especially in south Wales, although the relatively slow take-up of television ownership¹² and the strong traditions of communal forms of entertainment and social gatherings may have contributed.

The proliferation of small independent cinemas played its part in that these venues were often dependent on the energy and dedication of owner-managers who knew their local audiences well. The Saturday cinema clubs were frequently reliant for their success on exactly this kind of dedication and knowledge. This was also a factor in the continuation of the clubs in Wales through the late 1970s and into the 1980s at a time when most of the circuit in England had ceased to operate. A typical case study is the Scala in Port Talbot, run by Alex Jones. Alex recalled the campaign of publicity stunts he organized to attract and keep a regular audience of over 500, which included hiring an artist to produce unique posters that parodied recent

¹¹ Research carried out as part of a Leverhulme Research Fellowship on the CFF by the author, 2012-13.

¹² See: Jamie Medhurst, *A History of Independent Television in Wales* (Cardiff, 2010).

major releases.¹³ At the time of the release of *Jaws* (1975), he arranged to have a cut-out of a shark fin moving back and forth across the balcony during the Saturday show. Screenings were typically punctuated by competitions and raffles, prize-giving and even custard pie fights: 'Everything was designed to make the programme as much fun as possible. The children loved it. They also made an incredible mess. The noise was so loud it made clouds of dust fall from the ceiling.' By the 1990s the clubs finally expired but not without considerable resistance from the remaining audience and the stalwart managers.

THE CFF PRODUCTIONS IN WALES: *ONE HOUR TO ZERO*

If the Saturday film clubs were an undoubted success in Welsh communities, the appearance of Wales and the Welsh in the CFF's own work was rather less in evidence. This is all the more disappointing in the light of the avowed aims of the CFF, which included a commitment to depict children on screen in stories and settings with which they could easily identify. This was a mantra much repeated during the 1960s and 1970s by their head of production, Henry Geddes.¹⁴ However, the fact that there was such a large audience in Wales doesn't seem to have compelled the CFF strongly to reflect this in its films. Its headquarters were in central London for most of its existence, moving in its final years to Elstree Studios. Productions were commissioned in the main from small independent production companies who were also London-based and were shot at studios facilities in and around London. Location work was usually completed in the Home Counties or on the streets of the capital for convenience and to help keep costs in the exceedingly tight limitations imposed by the CFF. The films themselves became rather synonymous with leafy Berkshire lanes or London backstreet

¹³ Interview with Alex Jones by the author, 2 March 2013.

¹⁴ See: the CFF publication *Five Years of Children's Films* (1969) and Henry Geddes, 'The present and the future', *Journal of the Society of Film and Television Arts*, 18 (Winter 1964-5), pp. 18-21.

scenes. When the British Film Institute began its DVD reissues in 2012, the first compilation was unsurprisingly called 'London Tales'. A careful review of the Foundation's catalogue shows that they did sometimes venture further afield, with two geographical areas appearing quite frequently. The first is Scotland, which was often chosen for stories involving animals or where the depiction of a more agrarian way of life is central to the plot. When a picturesque rural setting, a stretch of coastline or even mining locations were needed, the west of England, specifically Devon and Cornwall, tended to be chosen. Beyond this, there are also a small number of films made overseas, mainly in Eastern European countries (where subsidies for children's films were often available), in Australia and New Zealand, and in Africa. Wales was given noticeably short shrift, a situation not untypical of the UK industry as a whole.

There are just two CFF films of any weight to feature Wales. The first is the fifty-five minute feature film *One Hour to Zero* (1976).¹⁵ The plot focuses on Steve (Toby Bridge), a typical CFF child runaway who, following an argument with his parents, takes refuge in a deserted slate quarry. Steve's sister, Maureen (Jayne Collins), enlists the help of his friend, Paul (Andrew Ashby) who brings him back to their village only to discover that it has been abandoned due to an accident at the nearby nuclear power plant. While the two boys try to make their escape to safety, Steve's father, who is employed at the plant, heads back to work in an attempt to prevent the impending explosion. He is successful and later all the main characters are reunited. The film is set in a fictional village in north Wales named in the film as Llynfawr but was actually shot in and around the village of Trawsfynydd in Gwynedd. The real village is close to Llyn Trawsfynydd, a man-made reservoir supplying water to the

¹⁵ All production information on *One Hour to Zero* is drawn from the Foundation's archive papers at the BFI.

Trawsfynydd nuclear power station (formerly the Maentwrog hydro-electric power station).

The village was the home of the bard Hedd Wyn, who was killed in the First World War, and the award-winning film *Hedd Wyn* (1992) was shot partly in the area.

Despite the potentially fascinating location, the film makes little use of its Welsh dimension, being a quite typical CFF production in focusing instead on the exciting race to avert possible disaster, while conveying one of its usual moral messages; Paul realizes the error he has made in vandalising the village phone box for money when he later wants to use it to call for help. The film was produced by the London-based company Charles Barker Films, which made a number of projects for the CFF. It was directed by the reliable Jeremy Summers, a regular in British television, and written by John Tully, both of whom worked on other CFF films. No one behind or in front of the camera was Welsh or had any strong connection with the location area, with the exception of two actors playing minor roles as police officers. In a manner typical of the CFF, the story hadn't been written with Wales specifically in mind; it just happened that the location fitted the requirements of the story and when the location was chosen the cast and crew were transported from London to the shoot, a pattern which was again prevalent in the mainstream UK industry.¹⁶ The location itself isn't especially significant to the action, other than providing a rural setting for the action with a small village, a quarry and the all-important adjacent power station. Welsh accents are not strongly in evidence either and those that are heard are not always convincing. The Welsh setting adds a little local colour but sadly not much more.

¹⁶ Interview with John Tully by the author, 21 June 2013.

MAKING A LETTER FROM WALES

Much more significant is *A Letter from Wales*. This was produced by another London-based company but this time one with distinct Welsh connections. Brunner Lloyd & Co. had offices, including cutting rooms, at 23 Denmark Street in central London and had been founded by George Mark Lloyd and Patrick Brunner shortly after the end of the Second World War. Brunner seems to have only been involved during the first few years of the company's existence and then largely in an administrative or managerial role; it is probable that he had helped to find the money to set up the company and then became a sleeping partner. It is also possible that he was related to the Brunner Mond mining company, which owned four mines in Wales. Lloyd, however, had family links with north Wales. He had studied at Cambridge and served in the RAF, where it is likely that he met Patrick Brunner.¹⁷ Prior to founding Brunner Lloyd, the two had worked together on a documentary for the Royal Navy called *Patrols* (1945), which was shot in Devon.¹⁸ The company had a small team of three or four and then hired additional staff for each film, but it was Lloyd who led the company; he usually directed their films, initially under the name George Lloyd and later as Mark Lloyd.¹⁹ The company made five films between 1947 and 1958. They were all documentary shorts or dramatized documentaries, often made for public bodies such as the Central Office of Information.

¹⁷ Based on notes made by the film historian David Berry of an interview with Dora Thomas, 13 July 2000. Dora Thomas worked as a general administrator, cutting room assistant and 'continuity girl' for Brunner Lloyd between 1949 and 1951; the notes are held in the National Screen and Sound Archive of Wales (NSSAW), National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth, nos. 69/4466009 and 388/4480154.

¹⁸ Details provided in a letter to David Berry by J. Norman Johnson, 31 July 2000; Johnson worked as a cameraman for George Mark Lloyd and certainly photographed at least some sections of *Noson Lawen* (1950).

¹⁹ These variations of George Mark Lloyd's name caused some confusion to David Berry, as evidenced by his personal notes held by the NSSAW and his commentaries on *Noson Lawen* and *A Letter from Wales* in Berry, *Cinema and Wales*, pp. 283-4.

Prior to *A Letter from Wales* they had produced another Welsh subject, *Noson Lawen/The Fruitful Year* (1950). This twenty-seven minute film was commissioned by the National Savings Committee and its theme, a celebration of the rewards brought about over time by hard work and forward planning, is certainly appropriate for the sponsor. The story is narrated by the central figure, Ifan (Meredydd Evans), who thinks back to his graduation from the University College of North Wales, Bangor, and the support he received from his family who are farmers. We see scenes from the graduation intercut with picturesque shots of the family farm and then from a church service which the family attend. The film ends with the 'noson lawen', or evening of song and entertainment. Actuality footage is interspersed with dramatized scenes performed by actors and there is a strong sense of narrative progression.

The film was based on an earlier radio play by Sam Jones, then Head of the BBC unit in Bangor, with an adapted script by the dramatist John Gwilym Jones who was a lecturer at the University College of North Wales, Bangor. John Gwilym Jones also seems to have assisted with finding locations and casting. George Mark Lloyd directed under the name Mark Lloyd. It was filmed in Parc, near Bala, and released in both English- and Welsh-language versions. Perhaps due to the influence of its sponsors, the shoot was conducted in English with overdubbing used for the dialogue in the Welsh-language version. The film has been discussed in considerable detail by Gwenno Ffrancon in her book *Cyfaredd y Cysgodion*, where she groups it with two other early drama-documentaries about Wales – *Y Chwarelwr* (1935) and *Yr Etifeddiaeth* (1949).²⁰ She suggests that these films responded to a perceived external threat to traditional aspects of Welsh life, such as agriculture and quarrying, by

²⁰ Ffrancon, *Cyfaredd y Cysgodion*, pp. 6, 33-42.

presenting a somewhat idealized or romantic representation, albeit one which also succeeded in recording these traditions for posterity. The review in the *Monthly Film Bulletin* described *Noson Lawen* as depicting ‘its people and its atmosphere with real sympathy and refreshing informality’.²¹ These qualities are also to be found in *A Letter from Wales*.

Many of the same team were reassembled for *A Letter from Wales*, with George Mark Lloyd directing, this time under the name George Lloyd, and John Gwilym Jones writing the original script and choosing the cast.²² Sam Jones seems to have acted as a general ‘fixer’ for the production, as well as taking on the role of Mr Williams, the village school teacher. John Gwilym Jones had spent a good part of his own childhood in Cae Doctor, Llandwrog, and the film was set in the same area using the village of Cae Ffridd as the main location. He cast people he knew from the area, including a family from Cefn yr Hengwrt farm. Mrs Katie Wyn Jones played the mother and four of her children also appear in the film including her son, Evie Wyn Jones, who plays the central character, Rhys. The one remaining role was played by another local boy, Eurddolen Jones, from the village of Bodafon. The film was photographed by Donald Long and the music was written and performed by the harpist Osian Ellis, who had also worked on *Noson Lawen*. With such a strong use of local people and locations, the premiere was unsurprisingly given at the Plaza cinema in Bangor with many of the children in attendance. Sam Wood also arranged for the film to be shown in other local cinemas and schools.²³ Such close engagement with a local community was a relatively rare feature for a film from the Children’s Film Foundation and had a considerable effect on the finished result.

²¹ Anonymous review of *The Fruitful Year* in the *Monthly Film Bulletin*, 18, 212 (September 1951), 334.

²² Production details on *A Letter from Wales* are drawn from the CFF archive materials held by the BFI and those held at the NSSAW.

²³ See: letter from Sam Jones to the Children’s Film Foundation asking for 16mm prints to be made available, 15 December 1953, held at the NSSAW, Aberystwyth.

Letters held at the National Screen and Sound Archive of Wales seem to indicate that the initial ideas for the film were as a second possible project for National Savings. A letter from George Mark Lloyd to Sam Jones states that ‘the Secretary of National Savings appears to have been so pleased with *Noson Lawen* that he has been talking of making another Welsh film’.²⁴ He goes on to describe a possible ‘commentary picture’, that is a film with a voiceover and no dialogue (which would make the film cheaper and easier to produce) centring on a fishing village. He continues: ‘I was very impressed by John Gwilym’s commentary and dialogue and I was wondering whether you or John might be able to think of ideas for a story on these lines.’ Although this initial project came to nothing, as indicated by a number of other letters to Sam Jones during 1952, the idea of another film set in north Wales seems to have stayed in George Mark Lloyd’s mind.

A further letter to Sam Jones written early in 1953 indicates that the idea had then been taken up by the CFF:

The proposed film is to be about ten minutes in length (one reel). It is what Mary Field²⁵ calls a ‘Pen Picture’, that is, a small boy or girl about eleven is writing to his friend or relation abroad telling about his life as a farmer’s child. It should introduce other children of wide age range (perhaps three or four) so that the child audiences may identify themselves. Perhaps there is a young one who is the naughty one. There should be no dialogue as story will be told by child voice commentary. There should be no studio set. Interiors as necessary could be covered on location. Children are, of course,

²⁴ Letter from Mark Lloyd to Sam Jones, date unknown, but certainly 1952, held at the NSSAW.

²⁵ Mary Field was head of production at the CFF from its inception until the end of the 1950s.

very interested in things that go on at school. Perhaps an animal might be brought in (wild or otherwise). The protagonist might ride a farm horse, etc. Singing and music does not seem to have much place.

Much of this material does end up in the completed film. The film formed part of a short series commissioned by the CFF with the central conceit described above, which is that the audience sees a child writing a letter to a distant relative in which they describe their day-to-day lives. The intention was to choose locations that offered scenes of rural life where the apparent lack of obvious excitements was revealed, through the detail of the letter, to be a false impression; everyday events would be shown to contain a myriad of small-scale adventures and pleasure. There would also be the opportunity to acknowledge the particular way of life in areas little seen on British screens, an admirable concept largely left unfulfilled by the Foundation. The four films in the sequence were *A Letter from East Anglia* (1953), *A Letter from Wales* (1953), *A Letter from the Isle of Wight* (1953) and *A Letter from Ayrshire* (1954). Although released during 1953-4, some of the titles seem to have been shot as early as 1951.²⁶ The Foundation made a number of educational shorts and dramatized documentaries which often focused on the natural world, animal subjects or rural settings, such as *Fern, the Red Deer* (1976) and *Seal Island* (1977), although they tended to prefer Scotland or the south-west of England for locations, as previously noted. These films frequently adopted a visual repertoire which owes much to the British documentary movement where film-makers like Humphrey Jennings and John Grierson had established a pattern of visually poetic representations of rural life with a high value placed on celebrating

²⁶ The precise dates for CFF productions are not always easy to verify but the Foundation's own records seem to indicate that these films were shot in a sequence over two years and then released in quick succession when they were all available.

what was deemed as traditional in the British way of life. This approach has been described by film historian Ian Aitken as ‘idealist’.²⁷

The draft script written by John Gwilym Jones proved rather too complex for the fourteen-minute running time allowed by the CFF and so a number of incidents, including a scene at Sunday School, the protagonist performing several tasks around the farm and his going swimming in the sea with his friends, were all cut. The chronology was also made simpler.²⁸ The film was initially completed with an English-language commentary only, although the diegetic sound, including overheard background conversation, was in Welsh. Sam Jones seems to have campaigned to have a second soundtrack made with a Welsh-language commentary. George Mark Lloyd’s letter to him later that year referred to the Foundation agreeing to him ‘at last’ and mentions the ‘assistance of a Reverend Parry’, perhaps in providing the translation.²⁹ Sam Jones replied to say that he was ‘delighted to hear that a Welsh speaking version is being made and this is information I can pass on to cinema owners in north Wales in the Welsh areas’.³⁰ However, it was too late to change the title credits, which remained in English only.

A LETTER FROM WALES: ANALYSIS

A Letter from Wales (original English-language version) opens with an idyllic shot of a rural landscape. Rhys Evans introduces himself in a voiceover as living in north Wales on a farm with his family. He sits at the kitchen table writing a letter to his cousin in Australia. The first

²⁷ I. Aitken, ‘John Grierson and the documentary film movement’ in B. Winston (ed.), *The Documentary Film Book* (London, 2013), pp. 130-1.

²⁸ Draft script for *A Letter from Wales*, NSSAW, Aberystwyth.

²⁹ Letter from Mark Lloyd to Sam Jones, 9 December 1953, NSSAW.

³⁰ Letter from Sam Jones to Mark Lloyd, 15 December 1953, NSSAW.

thing that is immediately striking is that he speaks with a highly pronounced English accent. It was a common feature of the CFF films at this early stage in their history to use child actors from professional acting schools in London, all of whom tended to have been taught to use the style of 'received pronunciation' favoured by institutions like the BBC. This was certainly the position of CFF Head, Mary Field. The accent, and the fact that the boy wears a tie, are grating, particularly when his mother is heard to speak to him in Welsh. Rhys thinks back over the week and we see various scenes as he describes them. There is breakfast with his brother and two sisters, followed by mother sending them off to school. Walking to school, nature is in abundance. There is a bird's nest full of eggs and a trout in a stream tempting Rhys to stop. Natural sound effects recorded diegetically seem to have then been added post-production. Evocative music plays, which appears to have been culled from the recordings made earlier for *Noson Lawen*.

Rhys is now late for school. He misses the roll call and prayers. As he arrives, a neatly framed point-of-view shot shows that the maths lesson has already started. He sneaks into class while the teacher is writing on the board (in English) and shows off the trout he has caught to a girl. However, he is caught in the act. The fish is confiscated and he is not allowed any lunch. In a neat punch line, the fish is then brought in on a plate having been cooked for him. Unfortunately, the charming content is considerably offset by the impossibly adult vocabulary of the voiceover by Rhys. After school, he takes his dog out across the fields and comes across a stray lamb caught in a hedge. He takes it home and feeds it milk in the kitchen, having spoken to his mother in Welsh. The disjuncture between the diegetic dialogue and the voiceover is disconcerting here. His sister is seen shooing her father's prize rams into the shed. This sequence is shot with a handheld camera. Young Vera Jones, who plays Mai,

remembered having protested to the director about the scene, as the rams would never have been driven into a shed on a hot summer's day, but she was obliged to carry on.³¹

For the film's final sequences, Rhys makes a Saturday trip to a nearby harbour with his friends. He spies seagulls circling and informs the sleeping fishermen who immediately set off to make a catch. The children are rewarded for their help with a trip out on the lifeboat.³² Rhys is then seen finishing his letter before going to bed. He reflects that 'life can be quite exciting in a simple way'. This sentiment was very much the theme of all of *A Letter from ...* films produced by the CFF. The final shot is of the exterior of the farmhouse as night falls. The framing, editing and lighting style are naturalistic and unobtrusive throughout, with the feeling of an observational documentary, although a degree of staging is obvious.

The frequently romantic and picturesque images of rural Wales offered throughout the film might easily come under the heading of 'the armchair countryside', as coined by Paul Cloke.³³ As with *Noson Lawen*, and the other educational documentaries produced by the CFF, *A Letter from Wales* taps in to key aspects of the British documentary film movement and particularly the poetic style most associated with Humphrey Jennings. Although Jennings' settings were more often urban, he brought a sensibility to the British documentary film in which settings, whether urban or rural, were strongly associated with a form of national mythology that celebrated tradition, a sense of shared community and an idealized notion of British values. This was particularly poignant in his wartime films such as *Listen to*

³¹ An account of this was given by Vera Jones to Iola Baines, Film Development Officer at the NSSAW, at a screening of the film for the Fflics film festival in October 2007; notes held at the NSSAW.

³² Letters from Sue Denny of the RNLI from 2000 state that the lifeboat station used is at Porthdinllaen, NSSAW.

³³ Paul Cloke, *Country Visions* (Harlow, 2003), pp. 20-3.

Britain (1942), when such values were seen to be directly under threat. In *A Letter to Wales* these themes are applied specifically to a Welsh rural setting and are embodied in similarly iconic imagery of the hearth and home, the farm and the fields, with the activities of local people being seen to follow a well-established pattern that is in harmony with nature. Hence, the idea of catching a fish on the way to school and having it cooked for lunch is representative rather than exceptional. The threat to the continuation of such a way of life now comes from the modern industrialized world rather than from war. Such themes are evident later in the documentary work of Jack Howells and John Ormond and found their way into the sensibility and imagery of fiction feature films from Wales such as *Hedd Wyn* (1992) or even the English-made *The Englishman Who Went Up a Hill But Came Down a Mountain* (1995), as well as in the work of directors like Marc Evans and Endaf Emlyn. As such, *A Letter from Wales*, in its quiet way, played an early role in establishing this approach in films set in and/or made in Wales. The previous lack of scholarly attention paid to the film has tended to obscure its significance.

CONCLUSIONS

When seen now, the film has unquestionably dated in certain respects. Its limitations are largely attributable to the way that the London-based British film industry of the time portrayed Wales. The viewpoint is necessarily distanced by such factors as the clipped voiceover and the choice of vocabulary. These elements are further compounded by some of the editorial decisions made by the CFF which include the now outmoded received pronunciation of the child actor providing the narration and the unconvincing adult sentiments that he often enunciates. These are trademarks of the Foundation in the 1950s and can be traced back to the position adopted by its CEO, Mary Field. The CFF under Field's

stewardship frequently assumed a middle-class English identity as the default for its predicted audience, even when the reality was often far from this, with many of its Saturday clubs drawing on working-class urban or rural communities scattered throughout the regions and nations of the UK. However, the use of stereotypes of class, gender and national identity were hardly confined to the CFF and can be found in much British cinema before the advent of the cultural revolution of the 1960s. The stereotypes reiterated by *A Letter from Wales* are in part reliant on the sense of distance in its production context from the way of life depicted.

Despite these difficulties, the film offers considerable pleasures of its own and is worthy of greater recognition than has previously been the case. It certainly compares favourably with earlier English-made documentary shorts about Wales such as *West of the Border* (1945) or another 1940s actuality subject *The Road to Yesterday*, which David Berry describes as ‘relentlessly patronising’.³⁴ The input of John Gwilym Jones and Sam Jones, along with the use of real locations and local non-professionals in the cast, provides a sense of reality and naturalism that might otherwise be lacking. In addition, the film often moves towards a lyricism that evokes the more celebrated wartime documentary work of Humphrey Jennings; Jennings himself included Welsh elements in his film *A Diary for Timothy* (1946), where one of the ‘characters’ depicted is a Welsh miner. *A Letter from Wales* has some of the same qualities often cited for Jennings, including a strong feeling for landscape and the place of people in it, a celebration of working life and the value of the everyday, and an optimistic view of children. In doing so, the film played its part in the creation of a key cinematic and cultural Welsh myth, that of the closeness of Welsh people to a landscape which nurtures and maintains them. Whether this myth fully reflects the reality of Welsh rural life is not really

³⁴ Berry, *Cinema and Wales*, p. 531.

the point; the film is part of a wider construction of identity for rural Wales. The film also has obvious historical value as a record of a way of life which continues to be under threat, but its achievements go beyond this. It has a charm, honesty and empathy which can only leave us regretting that Lloyd Brunner were not able to build on this with further Welsh documentaries. It achieved what the CFF rarely did in regards to its substantial audience of Welsh children: it presented to them a recognisable picture of their own lives and thereby attained a commendable authenticity.³⁵

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