

 Emily Rutherford* *Merton College, Oxford, UK*

.....

Researching and Teaching with British Newsreels

Abstract

Following the free online publication of several digitized newsreel collections, this article seeks to articulate a place for newsreels as a primary source base in twentieth-century British history, and to provide some basic guidance for students, teachers, and researchers who might wish to integrate newsreels into their work. It briefly traces the history of the newsreel industry in Britain, the conditions of newsreel production and distribution, and newsreels' audience. It discusses how a digital newsreel archive came to be constructed and how it has been used in the past for both academic and pedagogical purposes. It argues that researchers and teachers can overcome scepticism about newsreels' unreliability as primary sources, engaging with the sources critically to a variety of ends. It demonstrates these claims with a case-study about films of inter-war university 'rag' festivities, and with a variety of practical suggestions about how to incorporate newsreels into undergraduate teaching.

Introduction

A common refrain in scholarship on the British newsreel industry is that newsreels have not lived up to their potential as a primary source base for modern British historians.¹ Efforts to systematize and digitize newsreel archives began in the 1970s; today, anyone in the world can access

*emily.rutherford@merton.ox.ac.uk

I am grateful to the editors of *Twentieth Century British History* for their support of this article. Among many who helped to fill in gaps in my knowledge I am especially indebted to Laura Carter for sharing with me her expertise on history education and the uses of popular history in twentieth-century Britain. The material on student rags began life as part of my PhD dissertation, 'The Politics and Culture of Gender in British Universities, 1860–1935'. I am especially grateful to Susan Pedersen, Camille Robcis, Brianna Nofil, and Jake Purcell for their comments on that material as it appeared in my dissertation.

¹ See e.g. Ciara Chambers, 'The Irish Question: Newsreels and National Identity', in Ciara Chambers, Mats Jönsson, and Roel Vande Winkel, eds, *Researching Newsreels: Local, National and Transnational Case Studies* (Cham, 2018), 278; Linda Kaye, 'If You Build It, Will They Come? Researching British Newsreels', in *Researching Newsreels*, 297; Mike Huggins, 'Projecting the Visual: British Newsreels, Soccer and Popular Culture 1918–39', *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 24 (2007), 82.

hundreds of thousands of newsreel clips on YouTube. The digitization of documents such as major national newspapers, Parliamentary Papers, and the Mass Observation archive has transformed both research and teaching in modern British history. Researchers and students outside Britain are able to access primary sources remotely, equalizing conditions of access. Techniques such as metadata tagging and Optical Character Recognition (OCR) scanning allow researchers to analyse unprecedentedly large quantities of data in new ways, opening up new avenues for research.² One might imagine that newsreels might more readily have become part of this new digital research ecosystem. Yet what little scholarship there has been on British newsreels remains the province of media studies scholars, not historians. A small group of dedicated experts have subjected the newsreel industry itself to sustained analysis, but newsreels have not been integrated into the wider study of social and cultural history in twentieth-century Britain.

This article seeks to articulate a place for newsreels as a primary source base in twentieth-century British history, and to provide some basic guidance for students, teachers, and researchers who might wish to integrate newsreels into their work. It is borne out of personal experience: I accidentally happened upon the British Pathé database when looking for visual evidence of inter-war university student life, but lacked context to understand the nature of newsreels as sources and what claims I might usefully make with them. In this article, I seek to provide such context. First, I briefly trace the history of the newsreel industry in Britain, the conditions of newsreel production and distribution, and newsreels' audience. Then, I discuss how a digital newsreel archive came to be constructed and how it has been used in the past for both academic and pedagogical purposes. For previous scholars, the nature of the archive has appeared to pose limitations on how newsreels might inform our broader understanding of twentieth-century Britain. But I suggest that researchers can work with these limitations, and that they can be especially useful for instructors seeking to introduce students to historical research and the challenges of working with primary sources. I illustrate this claim with a brief case-study from my own research, illustrating what newsreels might be able to tell us about inter-war student life.

The British Newsreel Industry, 1910–1979

The British newsreel industry began in 1910, when the French company Pathé established a subsidiary in Britain. Pathé had invented the distinctive newsreel format in Paris in 1908, splicing together several short clips

² On digitized newspapers and the transformation of conditions of research, see Adrian Bingham, 'The Digitization of Newspaper Archives: Opportunities and Challenges for Historians', *Twentieth Century British History*, 21 (2010), 225–31.

of topical, factual material into a single reel of film. The format was based on the popular illustrated newspapers and newsmagazines of the period, that used pen-and-ink illustrations and photographs to represent the news to viewers in an entertaining and accessible way.³ As cinemas increased in popularity, newsreels became an integral part of cinema programmes, shown before the main feature film alongside other shorts such as cartoons. Pathé exported its Paris-produced newsreels globally. But the foundation of British Pathé allowed for the production of more national and local content. By 1912, British Pathé produced two original newsreels per week, as it would for the next 58 years.⁴

The inter-war period was the heyday of the British newsreel. The programmes became longer and more various. In 1929 a new company, British Movietone News—a subsidiary of the American production company Fox Films, locally owned and editorially controlled by *Daily Mail* and *Daily Mirror* owner Lord Rothermere—produced the first British newsreels with sound. Rival production companies proliferated (a socialist organization even briefly produced the ‘Workers’ Topical News’ in 1930–31), but by the mid-1930s there were five major companies that essentially had a monopoly over news on film. In addition to Pathé and Movietone, these included Gaumont-British, Paramount, and Universal. All except Gaumont-British were at least part-owned by major American film production companies.⁵

Producing a newsreel was an enormous and logistically complicated undertaking. Cameramen (accompanied from the 1930s by sound engineers), stationed around the country and sometimes around the world, shot the film, often going to great lengths to get the right shot. The film then had to be transported by aeroplane back to London, where large teams of editors overseen by senior content editors rapidly cut and spliced it into a broadcastable form. The industry in general was heavily masculine, with fewer women even in clerical roles than was the case in print journalism or the BBC. Drawing on longstanding tropes of imperial careerism, cameramen represented themselves as brave adventurers, participating in a culture defined by hard drinking and courting danger.

³ Frederick A. Talbot, ‘The Animated Newspaper’, in Luke McKernan, ed., *Yesterday’s News: The British Cinema Newsreel Reader* (London, 2002), 13–20; ‘Running the Topical Films’, in McKernan, ed., *Yesterday’s News*, 42; Anthony Quinn, *A History of British Magazine Design* (London, 2016), 22.

⁴ Ciara Chambers, Mats Jönsson, and Roel Vande Winkel, ‘Introduction’, in *Researching Newsreels*, 2–3; Nicholas Hiley and Luke McKernan, ‘Reconstructing the News: British Newsreel Documentation and the British Universities Newsreel Project’, *Film History*, 13 (2001), 186.

⁵ Nicholas Pronay, ‘British Newsreels in the 1930s: 1. Audience and Producers’, in McKernan, ed., *Yesterday’s News*, 144; Hiley and McKernan, ‘Reconstructing the News’, 191; Luke McKernan, ‘A History of the British Newsreels’, British Universities Film and Video Council, accessed 23 May 2021, <http://bufvc.ac.uk/wp-content/media/2009/06/newsreels_long_history.pdf>.

Editors and cameramen alike competed aggressively with rival companies to be the first to report a particular story or to secure the best vantage point from which to film a particular event.⁶

Almost all newsreels hewed closely to what became a highly standardized format. They were typically between 5 and 10 minutes in length, with each clip lasting around 60 seconds. Clips were heavily directed and edited, with shots planned out ahead of time and sometimes even interviews pre-scripted. Stock footage was often reused in later reels, and reels themselves might continue to circulate for weeks after their release. The content emphasized uncontroversial and generally upbeat topics such as official ceremonial occasions featuring members of the Royal Family and other prominent dignitaries, sporting events, and humour and human-interest stories—though would also cover more sombre topics such as natural disasters. In silent films, narration was provided by title cards. Although the format of early sound varied, by the mid-1930s a combination of cheery music and a male narrator with an Received Pronunciation accent was standard. Several newsreel narrators became household names.⁷

In some respects, inter-war newsreels developed on similar lines to other mass media. They shared the tabloid press's and weekly magazines' growing emphasis on bold, bright visuals, as well as on human interest stories and celebrity culture. Like print media and the BBC, they sought to connect with their audience by showcasing the voices of 'ordinary' people, though like other media often did so in staged, mediated ways.⁸ Indeed, media historians have argued that the inter-war period saw 'convergence' between different forms of media, as film, illustrated magazines, and radio all engaged with and built on one another. While newsreels had initially been envisioned as animated magazines, in the 1930s photo-illustrated magazines like *Picture Post* and radio magazine programmes saw themselves as imitating newsreels.⁹

⁶ Arthur Pereira, 'Chez Pathé: The Story of a Gazette in the Making', in McKernan, ed., *Yesterday's News*, 62–65; Philip Norman, 'The Newsreel Boys', in McKernan, ed., *Yesterday's News*, 1–11; Robert Humphrey, 'The News-Reel Cameraman', in McKernan, ed., *Yesterday's News*, 117; Sarah Easen, 'A Game Women Cannot Play...? Women and British Newsreels', in McKernan, ed., *Yesterday's News*, 281–89.

⁷ Chambers et al., 'Introduction', 5; Hiley and McKernan, 'Reconstructing the News', 191, 195; Cy Young, 'The Rise and Fall of the News Theatres', *Journal of British Cinema & Television*, 2 (2005), 232.

⁸ Quinn, *British Magazine Design*, 22, 89; Adrian Bingham and Martin Conboy, *Tabloid Century: The Popular Press in Britain, 1896–present* (Oxford, 2015), 42–43, 97–98; Peter M. Lewis, "'A Claim to be Heard": Voices of Ordinary People in BBC Radio Features', *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique*, 26 (2021), 3.

⁹ D.L. LeMahieu, *A Culture for Democracy: Mass Communication and the Cultivated Mind in Britain between the Wars* (Oxford, 1988), 232, 256, 262; Siân Nicholas, 'Media History or Media Histories?', *Media History*, 18 (2012), 379–94.

But newsreels were unlike other news media in their reach across the population—especially before radio ownership became truly widespread in the late 1930s.¹⁰ Inter-war British cinema audiences numbered in the millions; in 1934, as much as half the population visited the cinema every week. Unlike the popular press, which sought to capture readership in part through taking up specific editorial positions to appeal to specific constituencies, newsreels understood themselves to be reaching through the cinema a much wider cross-section of the population. They therefore presented themselves as apolitical, but as concerned with consensus and the maintenance of the social order.¹¹ Though the cinema was popular across all sectors of society and regions of the country, audiences skewed Northern, young, working-class, and female.¹² Production companies also undertook market research, tailoring newsreel content to suit their perception of cinema audiences. For example, Mike Huggins has suggested that the inclusion of women's sport in newsreels may have originated in a desire to reach majority-female cinema audiences, alongside other content targeted at women such as fashion and celebrity news.¹³ In general, in the inter-war period newsreels were consistently one of the most popular items in the cinema programme, attracting a wide audience across demographic categories.¹⁴ In major cities, newsreel companies even established dedicated newsreel cinemas, where audiences could drop in briefly to watch a continuously looping reel of short news items—attesting to newsreels' popularity in their own right.¹⁵

During the Second World War, newsreels companies collaborated with one another and with the Ministry of Information, largely disseminating an optimistic narrative about the war's progress designed to boost home front morale.¹⁶ Newsreel cameramen recorded some of the war's most iconic moments, including the evacuation of Dunkirk and the liberation of Belsen concentration camp—in the process provoking considerable cultural anxiety about the effect of such graphic images on cinema audiences, especially children.¹⁷ Yet the comparatively onerous film production

¹⁰ On interwar radio audiences see Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918–1951* (Oxford, 1998), 457–58.

¹¹ Nicholas Pronay, 'British Newsreels in the 1930s: 2. Their Politics and Impact', in McKernan, ed., *Yesterday's News*, 152.

¹² McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, 419; Huggins, 'Projecting the Visual', 81; Mike Huggins, "'And Now, Something for the Ladies": Representations of Women's Sport in Cinema Newsreels 1918–1939', *Women's History Review*, 16 (2007), 681.

¹³ Huggins, 'Representations of Women's Sport', 686–87.

¹⁴ Huggins, 'Projecting the Visual', 81.

¹⁵ Young, 'The Rise and Fall of News Theatres'.

¹⁶ Jeff Hulbert, 'The Newsreel Association of Great Britain and Ireland', in McKernan, ed., *Yesterday's News*, 257–67; Philip Norman, 'The Newsreel Boys', in McKernan, ed., *Yesterday's News*, 10–11.

¹⁷ Hannah Caven, 'Horror in Our Time: Images of the Concentration Camps in the British Media, 1945', in McKernan, ed., *Yesterday's News*, 206–19.

process meant that newsreels could not deliver breaking news as quickly as radio or daily newspapers. At the same time, cinema-goers exhausted by the war came to prefer the escapism of fictional films. By the end of the war, newsreels had declined significantly in popularity.¹⁸

The advent of television heralded the end for newsreels. The BBC could transmit live coverage of events in their entirety, as well as producing its own newsreel-style magazine programmes. In the 1950s, as television ownership increased, households came to prefer this more immediate way of accessing the news, and several newsreel companies folded. Once the BBC and ITV introduced colour broadcasts in the late 1960s, newsreels no longer had any advantage over television. Pathé went out of business in 1970. Movietone was the last newsreel company standing, but it too closed in 1979.¹⁹

Building and Using the Newsreel Archive

Newsreels' slow and long-foreseen decline aided early efforts at preservation and study of their archives. Pathé and Movietone were still in business when they handed over their archives to film history researchers at University College London (UCL), who began to assemble and catalogue an archive of newsreel 'issue sheets': documents created by production teams that included synopses of the content and the names of the crew members involved. This project was in part driven by enthusiasm for newsreels as a teaching tool, in the context of a wider moment of pedagogical innovation in secondary and higher education. Progressive educators had argued for the use of instructional films in history teaching as early as the 1910s. Both school and university teachers in the 1960s and '70s drew on this earlier discourse when arguing that newsreels could offer students a vivid window into the past, engaging students who were underserved by traditional teaching methods and who would benefit from a visual learning style.²⁰ University teachers may also have been especially open to reimagining curriculum and pedagogy during the period of expansion and reform of higher education that followed the

¹⁸ McKernan, 'A History of the British Newsreels'; Young, 'The Rise and Fall of News Theatres', 237. The Mass Observation contributor Len England produced several file reports in 1940–41, documenting newsreels' coverage of the war and audience engagement with them. Three of these are anthologized in McKernan, ed., *Yesterday's News*; all are available through Mass Observation Online.

¹⁹ McKernan, 'A History of the British Newsreels'; Hiley and McKernan, 'Reconstructing the News'.

²⁰ B.J. Elliott, 'Genesis of the History Teaching Film', *Teaching History*, 19 (1977), 3–6; Charles Hannam, 'The Case for the Short Film', *Teaching History*, 16 (1976), 296–99; Jack Duckworth, 'Film and the History Teacher', *Teaching History*, 19 (1977), 8–9. Laura Carter discusses historical instructional films in her forthcoming *Histories of Everyday Life: The Making of Popular Social History in Britain, 1918–1979*; I am grateful to Laura for sharing her insights with me ahead of the book's publication.

publication of the 1963 Robbins Report. The Open University (founded 1969) was one of the most prominent innovations of that era. It developed new models for distance learning, including BBC television broadcasts that brought instructional films (which themselves sometimes drew on stock footage from newsreels) to audiences at home.²¹

The OU's first professor of history, Arthur Marwick, developed new curriculum grounded in 1930s newsreels, promoting the idea that film could be not only a medium for imagining what the past might have looked like, or for narrating an interpretation of the past to viewers, but also a primary source in its own right.²² Concerns about 'bias' and 'accuracy' had long dogged newsreels (as they had still photography), as critics worried that retouching or the reuse of stock footage would mislead viewers.²³ In the 1970s, both school and university teachers continued to express reservations about this, for example doubting whether heavily censored films produced essentially as propaganda could be a reliable basis for teaching students about the Second World War.²⁴ Marwick, however, made two interventions. He observed that films were no different from other primary sources in being produced from specific perspectives or under certain historically specific conditions, and thus students could be encouraged to analyse them like any other primary source. And he suggested that newsreels could serve as 'unwitting testimony': important not only because they recorded the Hindenburg disaster or the Normandy landings, but because they offered evidence in passing for fashion, popular pastimes, and social assumptions about, say, class or regional identities. He called for teachers to use newsreels in the classroom in this vein, and also for researchers to draw on newsreels as social and cultural history sources.²⁵

Marwick joined other historians, and representatives from newsreel companies and public archives, at a 1968 London conference about newsreels as historical sources. This conference led to the foundation of the British Universities Film Council, which in 1983 became the British Universities Film and Video Council (BUFVC). With grants from the Social Science Research Council and the Higher Education Funding Council for England, the BUFVC produced first a microfilm series of the

²¹ Allan Jones, 'The Rises and Falls of Adult Education on the BBC', *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique*, 26 (2021), 9.

²² Kaye, 'Researching British Newsreels', 288; Laura Carter, 'Higher Education and the Pedagogies of Communicating Elite Knowledge in 1970s Britain', in Joaquim Moreno, ed., *The University is now on Air: Broadcasting Modern Architecture* (Montreal, 2018), 137–47.

²³ 'The Faking of Newsreels', File Report 16 January 1940, Mass Observation Online, <<https://www.massobservation.amdigital.co.uk/Documents/Details/FileReport-16>>, accessed 23 May 2021; McKernan, ed., *Yesterday's News*, ix; LeMahieu, *A Culture for Democracy*, 75.

²⁴ Hannam, 'The Case for the Short Film'; Duckworth, 'Film and the History Teacher'.

²⁵ Kaye, 'Researching British Newsreels', 288.

issue sheets that the UCL project had compiled and a three-volume *Researcher's Guide to British Newsreels*, and subsequently a searchable electronic index of some 160,000 issue sheets, which it released on CD-ROM in 2000.²⁶ The same index, which now includes numerous additional documents and links to external resources, is today available online through the BUFVC website. It is searchable by keyword and by metadata such as location and date. Through the BUFVC database, researchers can find out about every newsreel film made in Britain, follow a link to a digitized version online or to the location of the physical film in an archive, if it has survived; and also access tens of thousands of newsreel production documents, including commentary scripts and shot lists, and other information about the history of the industry.²⁷ These latter documents are perhaps most likely to be of interest to media historians or business historians interested in the history of these companies and of newsreels' processes in their own right. But researchers interested in performing cultural analysis of the films might also wish to find out about the film series in which a given clip was released, how widely it was distributed, and what other news items it might have appeared alongside. The comprehensiveness of the BUFVC search index also allows for quantitative analysis of the total corpus of newsreel films and production documents.

For those who are primarily interested in visual evidence of twentieth-century British society and culture, online databases of the films themselves might be more helpful. The archives of the two largest British newsreel firms, Pathé and Movietone, have been available on YouTube since 2009 (Pathé) and 2015 (Movietone), but both also have their own dedicated database websites. At time of writing, the image quality is often better on YouTube, but the dedicated websites offer better search functions.²⁸ The Reuters Archive hosts digitized clips from several more British newsreel companies, including Gaumont-British, British Paramount, and Universal.²⁹ Users are able to search databases for keywords and for limited metadata such as date, and to create a user account which allows them to bookmark clips and make playlists. The dedicated databases offer more information about each film than YouTube does—

²⁶ Hiley and McKernan, 'Reconstructing the News'.

²⁷ <<http://bufvc.ac.uk/newsonscreen/search/>>, accessed 23 May 2021. A list of physical and digital archival holdings of newsreel films is available (at time of writing) at <<http://bufvc.ac.uk/newsonscreen/learnmore/filmarchives>>, accessed 23 May 2021. The BFI National Archive holds the vast majority of surviving original newsreel film reels, with the exception of films covering the Second World War, which are to be found at the Imperial War Museum.

²⁸ <<https://www.britishpathe.com/>>, accessed 23 May 2021; <<http://www.aparchive.com/>>, accessed 23 May 2021. The Movietone online archive is now owned by the Associated Press Archive, but the AP website allows users to search only the Movietone collection.

²⁹ <<https://reuters.screenocean.com/>>, accessed 23 May 2021.

most importantly, the date of broadcast. But users should be warned that there are sometimes cataloguing errors, and that the newsreel industry's regular reuse of stock footage may also mean that information such as dates is not strictly accurate. Researchers may wish to cross-reference with the BUFVC database to ensure greater accuracy.

Newsreels historian Linda Kaye has suggested that it is in part due to the condition of these databases that the 1960s–70s promise of newsreels has not been fulfilled. The pre-internet mix of microfilm, CD-ROMs, and printed books did not give researchers easy direct access to newsreel films themselves. The systems were not user-friendly, and the patchy nature of the metadata made it difficult for users to contextualize the information that they were viewing. While the newer online databases are more usable, they remain dogged by concerns about 'accuracy' and 'objectivity', especially with respect to mislabelled or reused footage. According to Kaye, newsreels are therefore categorically different from other digital primary sources like newspapers, which are typically more reliably catalogued and which allow users easily to view contextual information such as where on the page a given newspaper article appeared and what other articles or advertisements appeared around it.³⁰

Despite early optimism about the place of audiovisual sources in teaching and research, then, newsreels have gained a reputation for being 'unreliable': less useful to researchers than some alternatives such as newspapers, and too difficult to frame appropriately when presenting them to students who are new to historical research. Yet part of the work we regularly do as historians is to read sources between the lines or against the grain, grappling with what they can and cannot tell us; and to teach our students how to do the same. Historians have long been accustomed to centring questions of authenticity and subjectivity when drawing on, for example, Mass Observation or other social surveys.³¹ The work of historians such as Adrian Bingham and Siân Nicholas has offered models for how to analyse the cultural narratives disseminated in news media and audience engagement with them.³² The remainder of this

³⁰ Kaye, 'Researching British Newsreels', 297; see also Chambers et al., 'Introduction', *Researching Newsreels*, 6–7.

³¹ For Mass Observation see e.g. James Hinton, *The Mass Observers: A History, 1937–1949* (Oxford, 2013); Hinton, 'The "Class" Complex: Mass-Observation and Cultural Distinction in Pre-War Britain', *Past & Present*, 199 (2008), 207–36; Nick Hubble, *Mass-Observation and Everyday Life: Culture, History, Theory* (New York, 2006); Penny Summerfield, 'Mass-Observation: Social Research or Social Movement?', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 20 (1985), 439–52. See also Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, *Class, Politics, and the Decline of Deference in England, 1968–2000* (Oxford, 2018); Jon Lawrence, *Me, Me, Me: The Search for Community in Post-war England* (Oxford, 2019).

³² Adrian Bingham, 'Ignoring the First Draft of History?' *Media History*, 18 (2012), 311–26, at 315; Adrian Bingham, 'Reading Newspapers: Cultural Histories of the Popular Press in Modern Britain', *History Compass*, 10 (2012), 140–50, at 142–44; Nicholas, 'Media History or Media Histories?'

article will offer some practical suggestions for how we might do the same with newsreels, both in the classroom and to guide new avenues for research.

How Can Teachers Use Newsreels?

As Marwick suggested, successfully integrating newsreels into the classroom entails striking a balance between the impression of an immediate, authentic insight into what twentieth-century Britain ‘really’ looked like, and fostering a healthy scepticism about that impression. On a basic level, newsreel footage can offer the large number of students who study British history outside Britain some beginning reference points for the visual landscape of twentieth-century Britain. A terrace of Edwardian houses, a shopping centre in a post-war new town, brick chimneys belching coal dust over an industrial city, or a village cricket match may be unthinkingly familiar to students who grew up in Britain, but entirely new to students elsewhere and very different to what they are used to seeing in their own national contexts or even what they might assume Britain to look like.

In the USA, for example, students’ prior knowledge of and interest in Britain sometimes originates in costume dramas like *Downton Abbey* and *The Crown* that are also broadcast on American public television. Newsreels—in which royal appearances and state occasions are certainly overrepresented—offer plenty of opportunities to tap into student interest in the Royal Family. But a Pathé film of Princess Margaret attending a school prize-giving in Berkhamstead in 1949, for example, is not just a film of Princess Margaret: viewers might make such basic but essential observations as that the children wear school uniform and sit in rows in the assembly hall, or that the woodworking class the princess tours is boys-only despite the school being coeducational.³³ Given these observations, students might begin to reflect on, and become critical about, why Pathé chose to film this particular occasion, and just what story the newsreel is offering viewers about post-1944 universal secondary education. But their ability also to gain a basic impression of the appearance of a school in 1940s Hertfordshire should not be discounted. Making the visual landscape of twentieth-century Britain accessible to students who have no direct experience of the British built environment or cultural norms can help to equalize conditions of access, to challenge assumptions that those who grow up in Britain somehow have a more ‘authentic’ insight into British history, and also simply to introduce the alterity of other times and places to students new to studying the past.

³³ ‘Princess Margaret Visits School’, 15 December 1949, *British Pathé*, <<https://www.britishpathe.com/video/VLVASAS80X4J35MX7DU7TSPQJ5XF-PRINCESS-MARGARET-VISITS-SCHOOL/>>, accessed 23 May 2021.

At the next level of analysis, teachers can encourage students to think about the ideological work that newsreels do, the apolitical but conservative vision of Britain that they offer, how (in sound films) narrative voice-over frames and interprets the footage. An informal social media survey of colleagues that I undertook suggested that, for those lecturers who do use newsreel material in the classroom, this is the primary way in which they are asking their students to engage with it.³⁴ Critically analysing a newsreel film could be a useful exercise for introducing students new to the study of history to working with primary sources, while also productively drawing on media-criticism skills with which many who have grown up in the social media age are already well-equipped.

Students who are first learning to read primary sources are sometimes tempted to reject out of hand those that they deem to be 'biased'. But a lecturer might model an analysis of a newsreel in class to demonstrate to students a more productive approach. For example, one 1952 Pathé film about a new council housing development in Leicestershire is a useful window into the post-war welfare state's privileging of the male breadwinner ideal. It includes clearly staged shots of a housewife cooking in the kitchen, serving a meal to her husband and children, and making a bed; shots of the husband shovelling coal and sitting by the fire; and the domestic ideal signalled through the narrator's description of the housing scheme's goal to 'put every man by his own fireside'.³⁵ Clearly, this particular film is doing ideological work—work for which students can be prompted to read. But it is not *only* a piece of propaganda. In documenting a specific event—those houses in Leicestershire really were built; the architect really did design them to suit a certain normative family structure—it demonstrates how social and behavioural norms can be produced through physical space, how the post-war male breadwinner ideal really did sanction and make visible some family structures and not others. And it allows students who have never seen a post-war council house in the flesh to have some apprehension of what one might look like.

Finally, as databases freely accessible online, newsreel collections can be wonderful starting points for students learning how to do their own historical research. Teachers frequently direct students to online resources such as Mass Observation, Parliamentary Papers, and digitized newspapers: these discrete databases can help students to set boundaries around their projects, and to learn about the different questions one might need

³⁴ Emily Rutherford, Twitter post, 2 August 2020, <<https://twitter.com/echomikero/status/1289989390391889920>>, accessed 23 May 2021.

³⁵ 'New Houses to Solve Problem', 28 January 1952, *British Pathé*, <<https://www.britishpathe.com/video/new-houses-to-solve-problem/>>, accessed 23 May 2021. I am grateful to Susan Pedersen for introducing me to this film, which she uses in her twentieth-century Britain lecture course.

or want to ask of different types of primary sources. Such databases have also been enormously important to those who teach British history outside the UK and whose students might never have the opportunity to travel to Britain to do archival research in person. They assumed further significance in the COVID-19 era, when travel restrictions meant that even those who lived in Britain could not travel to archives. Digital newsreel collections can become a further such resource, both for more guided research assignments in the context of a class and for independent work at undergraduate or master's level.

How Can Researchers Use Newsreels?

Most of the extant scholarship on newsreels has been written from the perspective of film, cinema, and media history. There are a few notable exceptions: J.A. Ramsden's 1982 essay about Stanley Baldwin's skilful use of the newsreel as a campaigning medium, for example, suggests a promising avenue for research on newsreels in political history.³⁶ In recent years, however, a small body of work has used newsreels to treat other themes. This is owing in part to the greater accessibility of the films in the age of high-speed broadband, but also perhaps to how the new imperial and new cultural history of the 1990s and 2000s created a scholarly conversation around pageantry, ceremony, invented traditions, and popular imperialism. Historians have discussed the role that newsreels played in constructing imperial and national ideologies, especially in the context of the Irish and the Indian independence movements that coincided with the height of newsreels' commercial success.³⁷ They have also drawn on newsreels to address topics such as representations of the monarchy, celebrity culture more widely, and football fan culture.³⁸ This body of scholarship shares some common emphases and assumptions. It focuses on the topics most frequently featured in newsreels and on the ways that

³⁶ J.A. Ramsden, 'Baldwin and Film', in Nicholas Pronay and D.W. Spring, eds, *Propaganda, Politics and Film, 1918–1945* (London, 1982), 126–43.

³⁷ Philip Woods, "'Chapattis by Parachute': The Use of Newsreels in British Propaganda in India in the Second World War', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 23 (2000), 89–110; Philip Woods, "'Business as Usual"? British Newsreel Coverage of Indian Independence and Partition, 1947–1948', in *Media and the British Empire* (Basingstoke, 2006), 145–59; Seán Crosson and Dónal McAnallen, 'Croke Park Goes Plumb Crazy', *Media History*, 17 (2011), 159–74; Ciara Chambers, "'British for the British—Irish Events for the Irish": Indigenous Newsreel Production in Ireland', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 32 (2012), 361–77; Ciara Chambers, 'The Irish Question: Newsreels and National Identity', in *Researching Newsreels*, 265–83.

³⁸ Luke McKernan, 'The Finest Cinema Performers That We Possess', *The Court Historian*, 8 (2003), 59–71; Jenny Hammerton, 'Performers in the News: Stars of Stage and Screen in Early Pathé Newsreels and Cinemagazines', in *The Showman, the Spectacle and the Two-Minute Silence: Performing British Cinema before 1930* (Trowbridge, 2001), 93–94; Martin Stollery, 'The Newsreel Commentator, the Actor, the Intellectual, and the Broadcaster: Celebrity and Personality Voices in Classic British Documentary', *Celebrity Studies*, 4 (2013), 202–18; Huggins, 'Projecting the Visual'; Huggins, 'Representations of Women's Sport'.

newsreels might represent an 'official' or elite perspective, celebrating imperial might and glamorous high-status individuals such as royals and film stars.

Newsreels are a fantastic source for analysing imperial pageantry, the monarchy, celebrity culture, and other topics related to how late-imperial Britain represented itself to the world. It is in some sense surprising that the publication of digitized newsreel databases did not see an outpouring of research on these topics. But there is also plenty of opportunity beyond this to draw on newsreels to enrich our understanding of twentieth-century British history—perhaps especially for the period of newsreels' commercial heyday, between the two world wars.

I have sought to do this in my own efforts to use newsreels to understand the masculine culture that dominated student life at northern English and Scottish universities between the wars. Between 1920 and 1939, Pathé made fifty-four films of student 'rags': annual celebrations associated with collections for charity that from the early 1920s became a staple of the student social calendar. Most of the films are of fancy-dress parades and pageants that took place in the centres of cities like Manchester, Liverpool, Glasgow, and Durham. A few record football matches with teams in the hundreds, fights over rival institutions' mascots, and other activities that tread a fine line between sport and violence.³⁹

We can ask questions of the Pathé rag films that address the conscious ideological underpinnings of the newsreel industry and newsreels' status as popular mass media. Why did Pathé film rags? What can the content and composition of the films tell us about the filmmakers' ideological assumptions? What role might they have played in a newsreel that also included clips of more 'serious' national and international news? How might the films have been received by cinema audiences from all walks of life, especially in an era when less than 2 per cent of the 18–25 age cohort attended university?⁴⁰ And we can ask other questions about the wider cultural norms and assumptions that the films unconsciously transmit. Why did cities allow rags to happen? Why did women students who participated in rag festivities not wear fancy dress? What kinds of fancy dress costumes did men students wear, and why did female impersonation and blackface feature so centrally in them? Why did so many rag rituals culminate in violence? A particular culture of undergraduate

³⁹ I have collected all the films British Pathé made of student rags at <<https://www.britishpathe.com/workspaces/ca6b1fe313fd86b1ac439d49d00a8a4a/zXwgsYZj>>, accessed 23 May 2021. Carol Dyhouse briefly mentions these films in her *Students: A Gendered History* (London, 2006), 186.

⁴⁰ On inter-war university student demographics see Carol Dyhouse, *Students: A Gendered History* (London, 2006), 4; Gillian Sutherland, 'Education', in F.M.L. Thompson, ed., *The Cambridge Social History of Britain, 1750–1950* (Cambridge, 1990), 162.

masculinity flourished at urban universities between the wars, in other words, which newsreels then broadcast to the nation—solidifying, in turn, a popular conception of what sort of person the ‘student’ was.

Let’s take two films as examples: one, undated, from Liverpool; another, from June 1922, from Durham.⁴¹ The Pathé database tells us that the Liverpool film was found in a miscellaneous collection of ‘old negatives’—we do not know when it went out, or what other news items it played alongside, if it was even broadcast at all. The two-and-a-half-minute film begins with a procession of students, some of whom are carrying a large banner reading ‘The Sacrifice of Sister Jane’. The banner functions as a title card, suggestive of how the camera operator might have shaped the event’s staging behind the scenes. The procession features numerous young men: some in dark coats with umbrellas, some in white doctors’ coats (indicative of the prominent role that medical students played in rags)—and some, in fancy dress as clergymen with white surplices, one wearing a bishop’s mitre made out of cardboard, bearing Sister Jane herself. Sister Jane is an effigy, wrapped in a sheet with a painted face and a paper crown. With long hair and rouged cheeks, the face is clearly intended to be a woman’s. The procession makes its way to a platform, where speeches are made and a ‘blessing’ is offered by one of the men dressed as a priest. Then the young men set the effigy alight and pour petrol on it. As it is consumed by flame, the men link arms and dance in a circle around it.

We know more about the Durham film: it was broadcast nationwide on 29 June 1922 in Issue 889 of the *Pathé Gazette*. It was the fifth of seven stories in that issue, coming after items about King Victor Emmanuel of Italy paying a state visit to Denmark, horse racing, and the funeral of a British army officer assassinated by IRA partisans, but before items about May Day celebrations in the Scottish Borders and a photography club in County Wicklow.⁴² It opens with a title card, which reads, “‘The Invasion of England’—‘Varsity students humorous version amuses thousands of spectators’. The two-minute-long film begins with a procession of men students in fancy dress across a Durham bridge, watched by spectators of all genders and ages. The procession includes a large papier-mâché sea monster, a marching band, and men dressed as knights, cavemen, clowns, and Romans in togas. In the next scene, students enact the ‘invasion of England’ by standing up in canoes on the River Wear and hitting each other with canoe paddles, trying to capsizes each other’s boats.

⁴¹ ‘Students Rag Day – Liverpool’, n.d., c. 1920–1930, *British Pathé*, <<https://www.britishpathe.com/video/students-rag-day-liverpool>>, accessed 23 May 2021; ‘Invasion of England’, 29 June 1922, *British Pathé*, <<https://www.britishpathe.com/video/invasion-of-england>>, accessed 23 May 2021.

⁴² ‘Invasion of England: Students’ Humorous Rag’, BUFVC database, <<http://bufvc.ac.uk/newsonscreen/search/index.php/story/82630>>, accessed 23 May 2021.

Crowds watch from the banks. The next scene of the pageant takes place on Palace Green in the shadow of Durham Cathedral, and takes the form of a marriage ceremony between Caesar and Boadicea intended to symbolize marriage between the Romans and the Britons. A shorter man dressed in armour and a very tall man dressed in a white dress and large, befeathered woman's hat are married by a man dressed as 'Father Neptune'. The camera moves to a close-up shot, and the film includes two sequential close-up takes of 'Caesar' and 'Boadicea' kissing to signify their union. The film closes with the cavemen (Britons?) dancing.⁴³

Beyond both being student rags, these two films share some common themes. One is their recourse to a repertoire of English history, folklore, and tradition. The early twentieth century saw numerous efforts to shape popular engagement with English history and folklore, such as through historical pageants and museums, and through the activities of Cecil Sharp and other members of the first English folk song and dance revival.⁴⁴ These efforts often had politically conservative underpinnings, and often saw widespread popular engagement. The many student rags of the 1920s that included a historical pageant element—such as the 1922 Durham rag, or rag pageants from University College Nottingham that centred variously on Robin Hood and the American Thanksgiving story—can be understood as part of a wider 'pageant fever' of the period.⁴⁵ And there are subtler and more varied echoes of the English folk tradition: fancy dress stock characters reference pantomimes and mummers' plays; the circle dance that the young men engage in at the end of the 'Sister Jane' film evokes the folk dancing that folk revival enthusiasts had succeeded in introducing to schools nationwide.⁴⁶ At many universities, rags occurred on holidays such as Shrove Tuesday or

⁴³ The intended allegorical meaning of all of these scenes is provided by the writeup of the event in the *Durham University Journal*: 'The June Week "Rag"', *Durham University Journal*, 23 (1922), 460.

⁴⁴ Laura Carter, 'Rethinking Folk Culture in Twentieth-Century Britain', *Twentieth Century British History*, 28 (2017), 543–69; Laura Carter, 'The Quennells and the "History of Everyday Life" in England, c. 1918–69', *History Workshop Journal*, 81 (2016), 106–34; Angela Bartie et al., "'History Taught in the Pageant Way": Education and Historical Performance in Twentieth-Century Britain', *History of Education*, 48 (2019), 156–79; Angela Bartie et al., eds, *Restaging the Past: Historical Pageants, Culture and Society in Modern Britain* (London, 2020).

⁴⁵ Bartie et al., 'History Taught in the Pageant Way', 156. For the Nottingham rags see 'Robin Hood and His Merry Men', 22 March 1923, *British Pathé*, <<https://www.britishpathe.com/video/robin-hood-and-his-merry-men>>, accessed 23 May 2021; 'The Pilgrim Fathers Come Back', 12 March 1928, *British Pathé*, accessed 23 December 2020, <<https://www.britishpathe.com/video/the-pilgrim-fathers-come-back>>, accessed 23 May 2021.

⁴⁶ Anne Bloomfield, 'The Quickening of the National Spirit: Cecil Sharp and the Pioneers of the Folk-Dance Revival in English State Schools (1900–26)', *History of Education*, 30 (2001), 59–75; Vic Gammon, "'Many Useful Lessons": Cecil Sharp, Education and the Folk Dance Revival, 1899–1924', *Cultural and Social History*, 5 (2008), 75–97.

Bonfire Night that were long associated with misrule, practical jokes, and violence. The English folk tradition with which they were in dialogue was at once organic and invented, hearkening back to centuries-old rituals that in the 1920s were being newly reframed as part of a small-c conservative ethos of popular nationalism and political and social consensus.⁴⁷

The Pathé films played an active role in this process of reframing. Clips of student rags fitted in alongside other coverage of regional folk customs. For example, rag celebrations often included comedy sporting events, such as football matches with teams in the hundreds; on film, these could look indistinguishable from the ‘often violent’, ‘longer-established Shrovetide street or “mob” soccer games’ that also featured in newsreels.⁴⁸ Rag films played alongside films of May Day and harvest celebrations, morris dancing, and other events presented as part of quaint—and thoroughly English—local custom.⁴⁹ One effect of this was to render student celebrations a part of local folk tradition: as familiar to newsreel audiences as the crowning of the May Queen, rather than as the province of a small, especially elite segment of the population.

Another effect was to reinforce the politics of conservative consensus, nationalism, and unionism that newsreels typically sought to transmit. Audiences saw a rag procession instead of a trade union demonstration, or a historical pageant that telegraphed a particular story about British national identity—just as they saw, as mentioned above, the activities of a County Wicklow amateur photography club rather than serious political engagement with the nascent Irish Free State. In this respect, coverage of rags fit in to a broader trend toward ‘human interest’ stories in the interwar mass media: an invention of the tabloid press, designed to engage a wider popular audience.⁵⁰ But newspaper coverage of rags differed: focusing disproportionately on students in Oxford, Cambridge, and

⁴⁷ On interwar popular cultural conservatism see Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature, and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London, 1991). On ‘festival licence’ and conservative politics in the context of the 1926 General Strike see Rachele Saltzman, *A Lark for the Sake of Their Country: The 1926 General Strike Volunteers in Folklore and Memory* (Manchester, 2012).

⁴⁸ On newsreels’ coverage of football see Huggins, ‘Projecting the Visual’, 90. For other rag sporting events on film see ‘Students’ Rag — Brighton’, n.d. (c. 1920s), *British Pathé*, <<https://www.britishpathe.com/video/students-rag-brighton>>, accessed 23 May 2021; ‘A Joyous Rag’, 17 December 1925, *British Pathé*, <<https://www.britishpathe.com/video/a-joyous-rag>>, accessed 23 May 2021; ‘“Rag” Days... Joy Day!’, 2 March 1926, *British Pathé*, <<https://www.britishpathe.com/video/rag-days-joy-day>>, accessed 23 May 2021.

⁴⁹ On the importance of local histories to the English folk revival see Bloomfield, ‘Quickening of the National Spirit’, 70–73.

⁵⁰ LeMahieu, *A Culture for Democracy*, 23.

London, newspapers often sought to generate class or cultural conflict, fomenting outrage about rags that crossed the line from 'high spirits' into 'hooliganism'.⁵¹ Newsreels—aware of their national reach and their popularity with a diverse cinema audience—presented rags as items of local news from around the country, always as harmless entertainment and sometimes as a source of civic pride.

Yet we should be wary of assuming that just because newsreel companies sought to telegraph particular ideologies, they were necessarily successful in doing so. For example, Ciara Chambers has shown that audiences during and after the Irish War of Independence actively objected to—or simply ignored—the pro-unionist framing of British-produced newsreels.⁵² Audiences were savvy consumers of media, capable of reading between the lines to glean information or entertainment, regardless of how a particular news item was framed. Moreover, the content of a film could defy the production team's efforts to paint a rag as harmless, quaint local custom. The English folk tradition in the interwar period did not only signify a conservative version of national identity rooted in an imagined rural idyll. It was also the setting for murder mysteries and fantasy literature, a site for hauntings, horror, and death.⁵³ There is not only quaintness, but also haunting darkness to the film of the young men who dance in a circle while watching the effigy of 'Sister Jane' burn. This is underscored by newsreels' tendency to cut quickly from one brief clip to another. As visions of crowds, fantastical costumes, and strange rituals accumulate, the effect is of a disjointed, kaleidoscopic, modernist spectacle—evoking Weimar expressionist cinema as much as English invented tradition.⁵⁴ The case of student rags, then, reminds us to be attuned to the conscious ideological framing of newsreels, but to exercise caution in allowing that ideological framing to overdetermine how we interpret the films. Even when we lack empirical data about audience reception, we can see how the imagery of newsreels might have existed in dialogue with other parts of the cinema programme, as well as with other imagery and customs that cinema audiences might have encountered in their daily lives. Future research along these lines might even contribute to our understanding of 'ordinary' people's engagement with and

⁵¹ My research has found this to be true for national newspapers—especially, though not only, tabloids such as the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Express*, and the *Daily Mirror*—as well as several local papers.

⁵² Chambers, 'The Irish Question'.

⁵³ On modernist enchantment of the English pastoral see Michael Saler, *As If: Modern Enchantment and the Literary Prehistory of Virtual Reality* (Oxford, 2012), esp. ch. 5. On English neo-paganism see Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Oxford, 1999). On village settings for detective fiction see Light, *Forever England*, chs. 2 and 4.

⁵⁴ On the intermingling of rural romanticism and urban modernism in this period (in this case, in historical pageants), see Tom Hulme, 'Historical Pageants, Neo-Romanticism, and the City in Interwar Britain', in Bartie et al., *Restaging the Past*, 158–79.

reworking of ideologies, propaganda, and political languages, especially amid the political instability of the 1920s and '30s.⁵⁵

On the other hand, another common feature of the Liverpool and Durham rag films tells us how newsreels can offer insights beyond the media artefacts themselves: in this case, about the culture of inter-war higher education and how it featured in a wider popular imagination. Inter-war rags represented student sociability as resolutely masculine. Although women students were in general active participants in organized student life, they often chose to refrain from participating in the most public-facing rag traditions, instead finding alternative ways of supporting rags' charitable remit.⁵⁶ Sometimes, this was out of concern for reputation and perceptions of respectability; at other times, more basic questions of safety in city centres thronged with thousands of drunk young men; at still others, simple lack of interest.⁵⁷ The rag traditions that newsreels highlighted underscored this perception of rags as a masculine occasion. Not only do no women (other than Sister Jane) appear in the film from Liverpool, it is difficult to see how they could have felt welcome in a ritual so organized around men's wholesale destruction of a feminine-encoded mascot.⁵⁸ Similarly, the female impersonation that featured in many rag parades and pageants, like the Durham 'Invasion of England' pageant, allowed men students to create performances that played with and celebrated the rituals of heterosexuality (in the pageant, Caesar and Boudicca kiss to symbolize their marriage) without the involvement of women-student actors. Fitting into conventions of inter-war popular entertainment, a man dressed in costume as a woman could kiss another man without any association with deviance or criminality.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ On the relationship of popular culture to politics in the inter-war period see McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*. On popular responses to fears of civil unrest see Jon Lawrence, 'Forging a Peaceable Kingdom: War, Violence, and Fear of Brutalization in Post-First World War Britain', *Journal of Modern History*, 75 (2003), 557–89; Saltzman, *Lark for the Sake of the Country*.

⁵⁶ On women students' involvement in charity and volunteerism see Georgina Brewis, *A Social History of Student Volunteering: Britain and Beyond, 1880-1980* (Basingstoke, 2014).

⁵⁷ See e.g. cases from Durham and Manchester: 'Women's Union Minutes', 1924–1929, UND/GE2/AA5, Durham University Archives; 'Women's Union General Meetings Minute Book', 1921–1928, SUA/1/3/2/2, Manchester University Archives; 'Women's Union Minute Book', 1924–1926, SUA/1/3/19, Manchester; letters to and from Phoebe Sheavyn re. rag fancy dress, January–February 1925, AWS/2/4/1, Manchester.

⁵⁸ For more on the violence of the 'Sister Jane' tradition see a letter from James Brophy to a Mr Allan, reminiscing about his student days in the 1930s: 3 April 1987, D404/2, Liverpool University Archives.

⁵⁹ On the varied meanings of female impersonation in theatre and film, see Chris O'Rourke, "'What a Pretty Man – or Girl!': Male Cross-Dressing Performances in Early British Cinema, 1898–1918', *Gender & History*, 32 (2020), 86–107; Laurence Senelick, 'Boys and Girls Together: Subcultural Origins of Glamour Drag and Male Impersonation on the Nineteenth-Century Stage', in Lesley Ferris, ed., *Crossing the Stage: Controversies on Cross-Dressing* (London, 1994), 80–95; Jacob Bloomfield, 'Splinters: Cross-Dressing Ex-Servicemen on the Interwar Stage', *Twentieth Century British History*, 30 (2019), 1–28. Female impersonation was central to many rag

In the process, those men created a space that was starkly sex-segregated, in which women students themselves might feel unwelcome; and they contributed to enduring popular perceptions of 'student life' as the province of misbehaving young men.

There are women spectators in the background of the Durham film, as there are in many other newsreel films of rags. But it is not possible to tell whether they are affiliated to the university—certainly, they do not wear academic gowns, as women students participating in rags often did in order to signal their respectability. At some universities, women students began to participate in rag processions and charity collection efforts from the early 1930s. But cameramen tended to pan past women in academic dress in favour of the more entertaining spectacle of men students dressed as pirates, babies, or 'harem girls'.⁶⁰ Viewers of the Liverpool and Durham films would not necessarily know that both universities had admitted women to degrees since the 1890s, or that by 1930 approximately 28% of all British undergraduates were women.⁶¹ At a time when higher education was an unusual experience, newsreel films of rags brought an awareness of student life to an enormous mass audience. Whether spectators viewed these events with amusement, derision, or a bit of both, the choices that Pathé's producers and camera operators made in the name of entertainment may have contributed to an image of student life as distinctively masculine. These popular perceptions, resonating much more widely than among those who participated directly in higher education, may well have had lasting effects on women's higher education participation, on national education policy, and on town/gown relations in individual local contexts.

I have highlighted here only some of the insights an observer might glean from the fifty-four films of inter-war student rags in the Pathé database. Other approaches to this material might also take in post-war rags, or do more to contextualize rags among other newsreels focusing on folk traditions, comedy, and mass entertainment. And while I have focused on gender here, there is also a great deal to be said about the centrality of blackface to rag fancy dress and pageants, how newsreels represented this on screen, the place of blackface within wider British mass entertainment culture, and what this might tell us about race and empire more

performances, and to student theatre and other performance activities. I discuss student drag in detail in my book project about gender relations in British universities after coeducation.

⁶⁰ See e.g. 'Degree Day is Joy Day!', 2 November 1931, *British Pathé*, <<https://www.britishpathe.com/video/degree-day-is-joy-day-2>>, accessed 23 May 2021; 'This Took Place in Aberdeen!', 30 April 1931, *British Pathé*, <<https://www.britishpathe.com/video/this-took-place-in-aberdeen>>, accessed 23 May 2021; 'The Rag of Rags', 1 February 1932, *British Pathé*, <<https://www.britishpathe.com/video/the-rag-of-rags>>, accessed 23 May 2021.

⁶¹ Carol Dyhouse, *No Distinction of Sex? Women in British Universities 1870–1939* (London, 1995), 248–49.

broadly, as well as about the popularity of American styles of mass entertainment that became widespread in Britain from the 1920s.⁶² Thinking beyond student rags to the more than 220,000 films in the Pathé database and nearly 50,000 in the British Movietone database, the range of potential topics is limitless.

Conclusion

British newsreels have only in the past decade become universally accessible to researchers and students, with the publication of online databases and with the widespread accessibility of broadband connections fast enough to allow anyone to stream a video clip online. Historians have yet to make extensive use of this rich resource and its potential as ‘unwitting testimony’ of twentieth-century British history. Concerns about ‘objectivity’ and ‘accuracy’ have dogged newsreels since their inception. But knowing more about production conditions can help researchers to contextualize newsreels and to understand what claims it is possible to use them to make. Newsreel producers used their films to telegraph certain political and ideological stances, but viewers may have ignored or resisted official narratives, making their own meanings from the films. Newsreels can help us to understand the impressions that ordinary people living across Britain and the Empire might have gained of topics very distant from their own experiences—whether that was a global political event, a rural invented tradition obscure to city-dwellers, or university student life. They also provide a unique form of visual evidence of change over time across many decades of twentieth-century British history: of sport, fashion, farming practices, the urban landscape, gender, class, race, empire and decolonization. There is every reason to situate newsreels alongside historical newspapers, Parliamentary Papers, Mass Observation, and other electronic databases that have in recent years revolutionized research in twentieth-century British history.

Yet—as 1970s scholars first intuited—newsreels’ greatest contribution to modern British history may be as a teaching tool. Newsreel databases offer ready-made starting points for students just learning how to navigate primary-source research, throwing up modest methodological challenges along the way. They can join other online resources in providing opportunities for archival research to students who study British history around the world who are not able to travel to Britain themselves. And in the classroom, newsreels can represent modern Britain visually to

⁶² On the long-lasting and widespread popularity of blackface minstrelsy in Britain see Michael Pickering, *Blackface Minstrelsy in Britain* (Aldershot, 2008), esp. Ch. 8; Christine Grandy, ‘“The Show Is Not about Race”: Custom, Screen Culture, and the Black and White Minstrel Show’, *Journal of British Studies*, 59 (2020), 857–84.

students who have never seen a cricket match or a post-war housing estate. In the process, we who teach modern British history around the world can continue to make the subject accessible and exciting to students who did not grow up in Britain. This is certain to enrich the field in the decades to come.