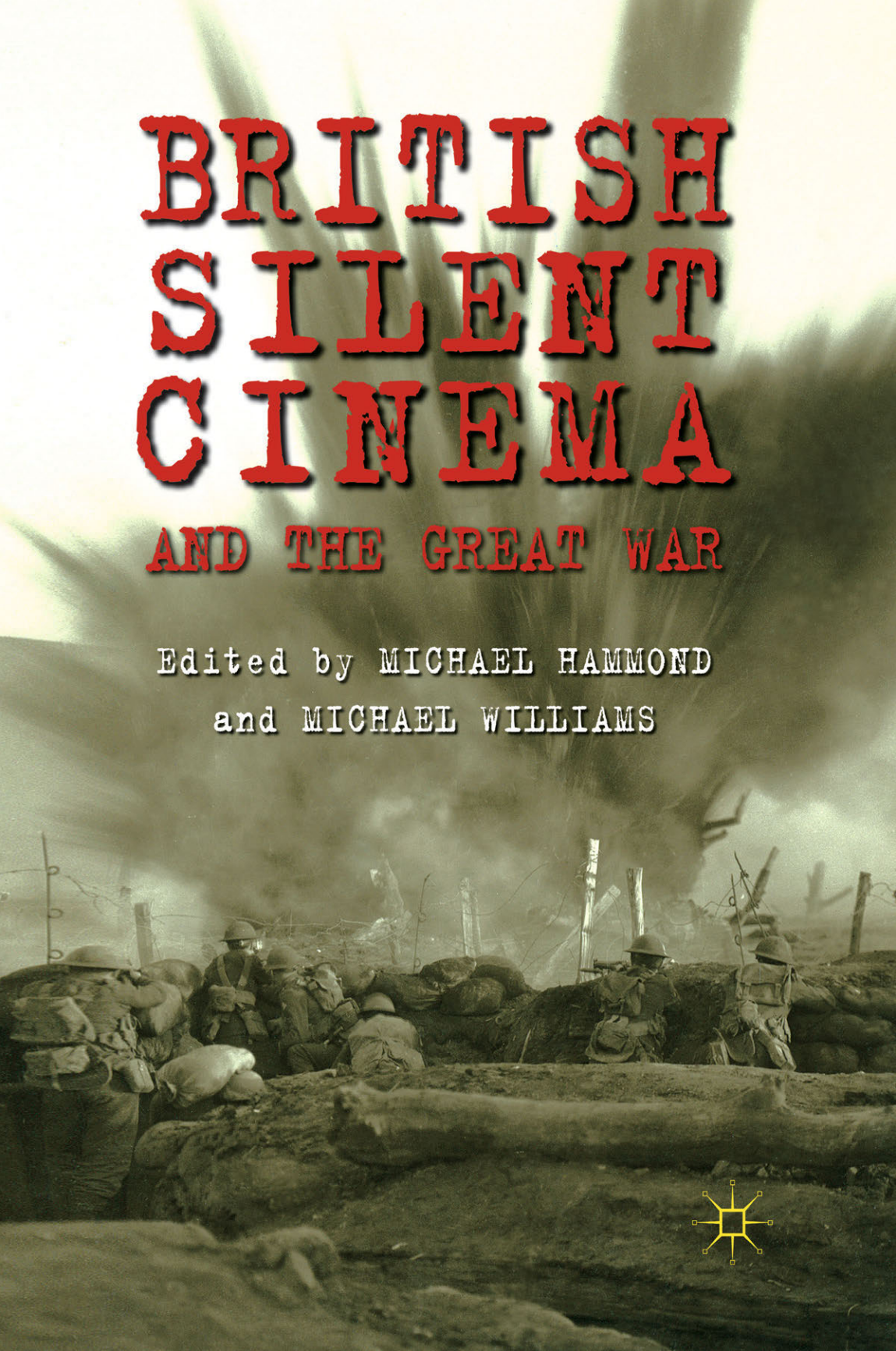
BRITISH SILENT CINEMA

AND THE GREAT WAR

Edited by MICHAEL HAMMOND
and MICHAEL WILLIAMS



British Silent Cinema and the Great War

Also by Michael Hammond

THE BIG SHOW: BRITISH CINEMA CULTURE AND THE GREAT WAR

THE CONTEMPORARY TELEVISION SERIES *(co-edited with Lucy Mazdon)*

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IVOR NOVELLO: SCREEN IDOL

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Michael Hammond
and
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Notes on Contributors

Neil Brand is best known as one of the world's finest silent film accompanists. He has written extensively on the First World War in plays and essays, as well as articles on film music and the book *Dramatic Notes: Foregrounding Music in the Dramatic Experience* (1998).

Jane Bryan wrote her PhD thesis on British film fan magazines of the 1910s at the University of East Anglia, where she has also taught silent cinema history and worked on the British Cinema History Research Project.

Bryony Dixon is a curator at the BFI National Archive with a specialism in silent film. She has researched and written on many aspects of early and silent film and co-directs the annual British Silent Film Festival, as well as programming for a variety of film festivals and events worldwide.

Christine Gledhill is Visiting Professor of Cinema Studies at the University of Sunderland. She has published extensively on feminist film criticism, melodrama and British cinema, including *Reframing British Cinema, 1918–1928: Between Restraint and Passion* (BFI, 2003).

Toby Haggith joined the Imperial War Museum's Film Department in 1988, where for the last ten years he has been head of non-commercial access and responsible for devising the Public Film Show programme in the cinema. He is now a Senior Curator in the Department of Research. He has a PhD in Social History from the University of Warwick.

Michael Hammond is Senior Lecturer in Film at the University of Southampton. He has published widely on British cinema and Hollywood cinema. He is the author of *The Big Show: British Cinema Culture in The Great War* (Exeter University Press, 2006). He is presently working on a British Academy-funded project, 'The After Image of the Great War in Hollywood, 1919–1939'.

Paul Moody is completing a PhD at the London School of Economics on national identity in pre-Second World War British cinema.

He teaches Film and Television History for the Open University and delivers practical video and audio training for Brunel University's Journalism Department.

Lawrence Napper is a lecturer in Film Studies at King's College, London. His book *British Cinema and Middlebrow Culture in the Interwar Years* was published by the University of Exeter Press in 2009.

Laraine Porter is Senior Lecturer in Film Studies at De Montfort University and also teaches at University of Leicester. She is the co-ordinator of the British Silent Cinema Festival held annually in Leicester, Nottingham or London and has co-edited five previous volumes on silent British cinema that have arisen from the festivals.

Amy Sargeant is Reader in Film at the University of Warwick. She has written extensively on British silent and sound cinema.

Roger Smither worked at the Imperial War Museum for 40 years, and was Keeper of its Film and Video Archive from 1990 until his retirement in 2010; also of its Photograph Archive from 2002. He has written and edited a number of books and articles, including the Kraszna-Krausz Award-winning 'This Film Is Dangerous: A Celebration of Nitrate Film' (FIAF, 2002).

Gerry Turvey was formerly a lecturer in Film Studies in higher education. He is a trustee of the Phoenix Cinema, North London, and his book *The Phoenix Cinema: A Century of Film in East Finchley* was published by the Phoenix Cinema Trust in 2010.

Michael Williams is a Senior Lecturer in Film at the University of Southampton. His monograph *Ivor Novello: Screen Idol* was published by the BFI in 2003. Other work includes writing on landscape and sexuality in British cinema; Belgian filmmaker Bavo Defurne; film adaptations of *The Talented Mr. Ripley*; and Anton Walbrook. He is currently writing a book on film stardom, myth and classicism.

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1

Goodbye to All That or Business as Usual? History and Memory of the Great War in British Cinema

Michael Hammond and Michael Williams

We come to the writing of this book at the moment that the Great War passes from living memory. With the death of Claude Choules in May 2011, the last known surviving combat veteran of that war, it is more than ever the realm of the archive to which we must turn in search of witness. Yet even with almost a century passed since the armistice, few events remain so deeply scored into the popular imagination; as one newspaper reflected: 'the first world war is still a live and raw memory, though today almost none of us lived through it'.[1] In the nine decades since the war's end, the cinema, along with television and now the internet, has been central in disseminating, and therefore shaping, the image of the Great War in popular memory. This book provides important insights into the role that British silent cinema played in this, for it is the silent cinema that set out the 'landscape' of images and narratives during the war and in the subsequent decade. Those images and narratives were, as we shall see here, at once drawing on pre-war traditions established by the new media of film and devising new strategies of story telling and image making that the cataclysmic nature of the war demanded. The issue during the war was how to represent it; following the war it was how to remember it.

There are two questions at the heart of studying the role of the Great War in British film culture between 1914 and the coming of sound. The first is one that attends any study of an art form during a particular period or in relation to a larger historical event: 'What role did the event, in this case the Great War, play in the development of cinema aesthetically and as a central cultural force?' The second looks outward from the period of the War itself to ask (to borrow

from Paul Fussell): 'What impact did British cinema have in the construction of the Great War in modern memory?'[2] These two questions are addressed in various ways by the essays in this volume and also stand in a kind of conversational relationship. The 'cultural force' of the first question refers to the rapid rise of cinema as a socially recognized form of popular entertainment in the years 1914–29, while the second question speaks to that significant figure of expansion as evidence of how cinema became a powerful contributor to the shaping of the public memory of the war.

In exploring these questions we have divided this collection into three sections. Part One, 'The War', focuses on the years 1914–18 to examine the impact of the war on film production and exhibition practices in Britain, as well as aspects of the experience of audiences, whether cinema going in London, or reading film fan magazines. Part Two, 'Aftermath: Memory and Memorial', moves discussion on to the 1920s in exploring the complex ways in which the war was remembered and modulated for this post-war decade. Finally, this collection presents the unique insights of leading figures involved in preserving and presenting the Great War to contemporary audiences through the nation's film collections. Part Three, 'Notes from the Archive', thus presents viewpoints, both historical and personal, of film historians, archivists, festival programmers and musicians to connect the history of the war as preserved within collections such as the British Film Institute's National Film and Television Archive and the Imperial War Museum with the experiences and memories of audiences past and present.

This shaping of the present by the past is all the more significant as it was during the years of the Great War that cinema became fully developed as a cultural institution. This was the case not only with the production wing of the industry but also with the rise of the thriving cultures of the trade press and fan magazines and, perhaps most importantly, with the way in which local audiences were cajoled, catered for and listened to by the distribution and exhibition sectors. While public scepticism about the quality of entertainment, its perceived dangers or benefits continued to exercise debate, by the war's end cinema was established as an acceptable social environment. In many ways cinema, both as a social space and as an art form, emerged from the war as a marker of the new, modern world that the war had ushered into existence. In this sense cinema contributed simultaneously to the sense of

looking forward and to bidding farewell to the past, encapsulated in Robert Graves' famous phrase 'goodbye to all that'.[3]

However, the post-war period also inherited much from the wartime and pre-war traditions. Despite the broad social acceptance of cinema, producers and exhibitors alike were consistently having to make the case for its positive role as entertainment and as education. The 1920s saw continued development in terms of aesthetic and technological innovation in production. Both of these, in part, grew out of the pressure of developing respectability in terms of film as art. This was, to be sure, a strategy adopted to keep pace or fend off the competition from the US. The influx of European films and personnel, particularly from Germany, was a part of this overall plan, as was the contribution by British innovators such as Anthony Asquith, the young Alfred Hitchcock and George Pearson. By the mid-1920s cinema had attracted the interest of modernist critics indicated by the work of the journal *Close Up*.[4] In that sense the 'drive to respectability' was as acute in the 1920s as it was during the war.

Michael Hammond has argued elsewhere that the war's effect on British cinema culture was complex and wide ranging.[5] While it is a truism to note, as Rachael Low does, that the war ushered in the dominance of Hollywood cinema on British (indeed European) screens, the detail of this yields much more than the simple narrative that pitches the struggling production wing against the commercially driven, taste-pandering practices of the local British exhibitors.[6] Seen from the exhibitors' point of view it is not simply that British audiences preferred US product. They were concerned in fact with a more fundamental problem, the matter of staying in business at all. The possibility that the war would disrupt business or indeed that cinemas could be closed by the government was a real possibility in August 1914. Exhibitors responded to this by allowing the cinemas to be used in recruiting drives, by providing their tea rooms to be used by soldiers to write letters home, and by holding special screenings for soldiers home on leave or on their way to the front and for returning wounded and Belgian refugees. They included on their programmes war news in the form of newsreels; they screened official war films such as *The Battle of the Somme* (1916) as well as the propaganda shorts made for the War Office by the Hepworth Company. News from the front was highly valued and exhibitors were quick to capitalize on the widespread public desire to see images

of their boys in action. In short, while exhibitors were programming Mary Pickford and Charlie Chaplin films and were succumbing to the beginnings of the booking practices that favoured Hollywood product, they were also drawing on and adapting the practices of the music hall manager and the showman, which were tried and true methods of attracting family audiences and inculcating the cinema as an acceptable social space in the community.

Perhaps the most obvious and effective combination of the War Office with the exhibition industry was in the production and exhibition of *The Battle of the Somme*. Hammond elaborates on this in this collection, pointing to the way in which the production drew on the already existing aesthetic strategy of the 'industrial process film' and the interest in each locale in seeing images of the local regiments at the front. The contribution that exhibitors made to British cinema culture was no less than to establish, through the practice of what Leslie Midkiff DeBauche has called 'practical patriotism', the role of cinema in the local community.

A sunken road in "No Man's Land" occupied by the Lancashire Fusiliers. (Twenty minutes after this was taken these men came under heavy machine-gun fire.)

Still image from *Sir Douglas Haig's Great Push*, a special magazine published to coincide with the release of *The Battle of the Somme*. Reproduced here are the titles taken from the film.

As Jane Bryan explores in this collection, *Pictures and the Picturegoer* adopted a policy of 'practical patriotism' that worked in tandem with the exhibition and production sector. Gerry Turvey's outline of the British and Colonial Kinematograph Company demonstrates how little effort was required to alter these fictional tropes to fit the patriotic requirements of the moment. This incorporation of support for the war effort in British cinema culture at the time was set within the larger frame of the attitude of the entire commercial and industrial infrastructure during the war. This attitude was characterized by the phrase 'business as usual', which we have appropriated for this collection. David Lloyd George, as Chancellor of the Exchequer at the outbreak of the war, had used the phrase in a speech to businessmen. Hence the war effort was initially conceived in a way that drew on nineteenth-century economic liberalism, which held that the laws of the worldwide economic system would not permit the fracturing of markets and collapse that total war might bring about.[7] Exhibitors and the industry generally were more nervous about the forced closure of cinemas for the duration of the war than they were about the collapse of global markets. For them the war could not have come at a less convenient time. The exhibition sector of the industry had seen the first boom in the building of fixed-site cinemas begin in 1909 and reach a peak in 1913. Cinemas were becoming larger and more ornate, local and regional circuits were being set up by middle-class entrepreneurs and further investment had been made in planning larger venues, many of which were poised to commence construction in the autumn of 1914. The assurances of 'business as usual' were cold comfort to these recent entrants to the cinema business. They represented a new type of investor in the industry and were attracted by the growing popularity of cinema, with the collateral of the property itself a risk-reducing factor. This new investor was in many if not most instances part of the local community. Their response to the war was to attempt to inculcate the war effort into their cinema and to appeal specifically to the local community.

One of the ways that they did this was through the Roll of Honour films, which featured still photographs of local men who were at the front. These were put together by local film or photography companies, or, as in the case of Will Onda in Preston, the exhibitors themselves; they were shown as part of the film programme and at the outset of the war were popular with audiences. As with the Rolls of

Honour, which had initially been compiled by unions, railway companies and public services, the films moved inevitably from being rolls of those serving to listing those who had been killed or wounded. Cinemas shared in this new tradition, although as the war dragged on it was clear that there was some incongruity between the cinema as a place of entertainment and its use as a place of local mourning. By 1917 few cinemas were continuing to show these films.

These films now stand as a little-known, if not ephemeral, memoir of the trajectory of the national memorializing process. They were shown in much the same manner as the portraits of the king and the generals and admirals had been, the still image accompanied by the strains of patriotic airs at the beginning of the programme. The few accounts we have of these suggest that they were greeted with cheers.[8] Whether there was anything like the more anguished responses recorded at the screenings of the official war film *The Battle of the Somme* has yet to be uncovered.[9] It is clear from the fact that Will Onda's last films were made in 1917, and that none of the existent films in the archives at the Imperial War Museum or at the National Film Archive dates to later than 1917, that these films belonged to the earlier, more hopeful years of the war. Film exhibitors would have no doubt been sensitive to their local audiences, not only because of the generally held view that excessive public displays of mourning were not patriotic but also because they might lose audiences; thus solemnity replaced enthusiasm.[10]

The fate of the Roll of Honour films indicates a developing 'public memory', which was at once the recognition of a 'debt that could never be repaid' and an embrace of progress and a hopeful future. This had a deeper resonance in the contemporary public discussion of the role of cinema during wartime, to which the exhibition community was acutely attuned. As Paul Moody points out in his chapter, it was a discussion that tenaciously held on to previous suspicions and criticisms about the cinema in relation to the moral health of the nation. Ultimately, through a response to the shifting meanings inherent in films that reminded the audience of the war, exhibitors found that their greatest public service was to provide entertainment as an escape from the anxieties of everyday life. This was recognized in a more official way through the publication of the National Council of Morals Cinema Commission (NCPM) report of 1917. The commission found that the cinema had three 'functions': 'recreative, educational

and propagandist'. Of these the commission recognized the primary role of the recreative but also urged 'educational and other authorities [to] consider how far they can assist in raising the whole status of the cinema'.[11] The Cinema Exhibitors Association and the trade press interpreted this as a positive gain and in many ways this was so. However, Moody's research into police reports and private correspondence suggest that the NCPM report may have been more selective in recognizing behaviour in cinemas at this time. His evidence indicates that there was legitimate cause for concern and that the darkness in cinemas offered opportunities for 'indecency' that were often ignored. One implication that arises here is that by aligning themselves with the war effort, cinema exhibitors were able to downplay the apparently justifiable criticism of the cinema as a site of social danger.

Cinemas had already contributed to the war effort by screening official war films and also by the number of films from the Hepworth film company that made a direct contribution. As Roger Smither points out in his piece in this collection, these links between the government and the film companies and exhibitors were precursors to the role that cinema was to play in the Second World War. In both, Smither argues, there was an emphasis on the citizen's duty and the fact that the nation was in it 'together'. While romantic depictions of the front in 1914 and propaganda cartoons and films depicting the beastly Hun were produced, Smither notes that there was considerable attention paid to the home front. In these films there was an emphasis on the role of women and on the importance of thrift and cultivation of home-grown food, the same concerns that were topics of the public information films of the Second World War. Equally, while entertainment was the primary aim of private business, there was the hope that educationalists and the industry could find some common ground for cooperation. The Hepworth Company offered a number of examples of fictional scenarios starring its featured players. One such film was *Broken in the Wars* (1918), a short made for the War Office. It was scripted by Temple Thurston, who had been introduced to Cecil Hepworth by representatives of the government to write propaganda scripts for the short films 'with a propaganda flavour' that the company was making.[12] The film starred Henry Edwards as Joe, Chrissie White as his wife, 'Mrs. Joe', Alma Taylor as Lady Dorothea Hamlyn and the MP John Hodge, whose scheme for setting up invalided soldiers in business was the subject of the

film. Its treatment of the subject of the war itself and governmental concern about the enormous number of returning veterans provides a unique example of how the combined efforts of the Hepworth Company and the War Office anticipate similar cooperation in the years 1939–45, yet draws on both generic conventions and the question of governmental responsibility for veterans.

The film opens in pre-war peacetime in Joe's cobbler's shop, where he and his wife are working. A title 'Lady Dorothea Hamlyn had nothing to do and did it particularly well' sets up the division between the tradesman and the aristocracy. Setting the scene in this way establishes the ignorance of Lady Hamlyn, which will be overturned by the war and the attendant suffering, represented by Joe and his wife. The film returns to these two with an introductory title 'Then War'. They are sitting reading the newspaper. In a gesture of realization of his duty, Joe looks just off camera and up, a moment of noble response and a gesture towards heaven. This gesture and look also implicate the viewer in an appeal and in an affirmation and recognition of the shared experience of answering the call as a volunteer. Because the film was made at the war's end, his gesture is as much an acknowledgement of sacrifice already made as it is an appeal. The focus of the narrative is not to enlist service but to play out the predicament of those who have enlisted.

On his return from the war, Joe is permanently on crutches and his wife writes to Lady Hamlyn, 'who has done so much to help her', asking to see her. By now Lady Hamlyn has undergone a transformation, brought about by the realization of the national emergency, and has taken up her role as mediator between the village and the government via her connections. This is emblematic of the move to war work undertaken by women of the landed gentry. Lady Hamlyn agrees to a meeting and hears of the other woman's predicament. In a didactic gesture directed towards the audience, she points to 'Mr. John Hodge's scheme providing money to help wounded soldiers to set up business on their own account'. She tells Mrs. Joe to bring her husband in next Tuesday to see Hodge. They return to Lady Hamlyn's on the appointed day and meet with John Hodge MP (played by himself). He says: 'Here is clearly a case where something can be done'. In a loaded remark, Lady Hamlyn says: 'Surely the state ought to provide for cases of this sort'. The MP's reproachful response is: 'It's no state duty to find capital to start people in business'. To that Mrs. Joe replies: 'We don't want no

charity. Bill can make 'is business pay all right if only 'e can get a start'. Hodge was one of two Labour ministers appointed by Lloyd George to head a Ministry of Labour. This scheme depended on charitable contributions and conformed to the government's preference for voluntary schemes rather than direct financial support.[13] The exchange assumes a kind of consensus attitude to charity among the middle and working classes that conveniently circumvents the more uncomfortable issue of state pensions for the wounded.

In its presentation of potential social conflict, *Broken in the Wars* anticipates themes that will be played out more thoroughly in the fiction films of British cinema in the 1920s. This includes *The Guns of Loos* (Sinclair Hill, 1928), a drama filmed in the aftermath of the General Strike and celebrated by Lloyd George for its propagandistic value. It portrays the effects of striking munitions workers on the men at the front, and highlights the uneasy alliance formed between the aristocratic and working classes, the western and home fronts and, as Michael Williams explores, the damaged and whole bodies produced by the war. In that sense we can see how the war's impact as a 'memory' functions in the narratives, as Christine Gledhill outlines in this collection. However, the actuality films, such as those documenting the unveiling of local memorials with which Toby Haggith's chapter is concerned, are also important if lesser-known examples of the way in which the Great War was memorialized through cinema. As in the case of *Broken in the Wars*, the tensions between the desire to make sense of the war in terms of 'progress' – that is, 'goodbye to all that' – and the persistent pull of the past in the more quotidian attachment to business practices at every level of the industry acts as the backdrop against which the history of silent British cinema as an aesthetic and cultural form in the post-war years is played out.

In their contribution to the archival section of this collection, Bryony Dixon and Laraine Porter draw on extensive and detailed understanding of the films held in the British Film Institute National Archive throughout the period 1914–29. From this vantage point they are able to outline how the concerns and themes of films dealing with the war began to shift through the 1920s, and particularly the impact that the memory of the war had on changes in both production and exhibition practices. As archivists and festival programmers, Dixon and Porter are ideally placed to observe how this transformation continues to inform their work in exhibiting these films to audiences