

‘To Be a Woman’: Female Labour and Memory in Documentary Film Production, 1929–50

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Abstract:

Despite extensive scholarship on British documentary in the period from 1929 to 1950, the role of female documentary film-makers has received relatively little attention, partly due to their fragmented and partial ‘archival trace’. Combining neglected materials in the BECTU oral history project, the personnel records of the GPO Film Unit, and the personal papers of leading female documentarists, this article challenges the standard narrative of wartime opportunity and postwar decline that tends to characterise the examination of women’s employment more broadly in this period. It uses women’s experience in documentary film production to offer a more complex explanation of the effect of war within a wider chronological framework and within the context of workflow, labour patterns, training and networks within the industry itself. It examines female documentarists’ own accounts, through oral histories, to suggest that such sources should be ‘read against the light’ to offer insights into the memory of the Second World War, contending that the place of gender in defining individual careers both during and after the conflict remains contested, a site of the continued struggle for professional recognition, achievement and identity.

Keywords: documentary; Evelyn Spice; Jill Craigie; Kay Mander; Margaret Thomson; Marion Grierson; Muriel Box; Ruby Grierson; Second World War; women.

The Second World War, documentarist Kay Mander implied, was no different to any other period. Informality and lack of regulation afforded a degree of freedom and opportunity: she did not ‘have to bother about being a woman’. Hostile to the suggestion that gender

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was a consideration when defining her career, she felt fortunate to have been born 'in the middle period, when women didn't have to fight for certain things'. 'Being a woman... doesn't concern me', she stated (1988). Margaret Thomson agreed. While Thomson complained of documentary's 'intellectual elitism', she denied its 'anti-feminism' (1989). Mander and Thomson demanded that history consider them simply as film-makers.¹ However, other female film-makers experienced a different war. For Jill Craigie and Muriel Box, it was a transformative event in their conversion to feminism. Box considered the war a 'mental *détente*', a brief pause enabling her to 'reach a new assessment of my place in the general scheme of things' (1974: 147). Craigie too defined the war as an awakening, a period of equality and, importantly, a precursor to her role after 1945 as a prominent feminist and socialist (she married Labour leader Michael Foot in 1949). She constructed idealistic wartime scenarios where feminism was unnecessary: 'There was no feminism during the war, because all women were needed. They all got jobs... This was the best time in their lives because they were all working', and 'everybody talked to everybody else... you were pals all in it together', where the nation became 'anti-materialistic' (1995). For her, war removed gender and class barriers, only for them to be re-erected after 1945.

These differing accounts reveal the complexities of female documentarists' wartime experience, characterised as much by its diversity as its importance to women as a group (Summerfield 1993: 73). Yet existing accounts of women in wartime documentary film production tend to privilege Craigie's familiar historical narrative (ACTT 1975):² women occupied jobs vacated by men, where they gained recognition and skills; they were subsequently 'eased out... [and] almost entirely replaced by men'; gender division of roles was more rigid and women's labour more casual; male views of women's ability to carry out physically demanding tasks hardened; war raised expectations of a future in the industry beyond work in the printing laboratories or cutting room; these expectations were not met (*ibid.*). This explanation replicates the 'transformation, continuity, and polarisation theses' that characterise traditional interpretations of female employment during the Second World War. Such 'forced syntheses' have since been challenged and scholars urged to seek a 'more ambiguous and contingent picture' of women's lived realities and their desires and preferences (Summerfield 1998a: 7).

This article challenges the dominant historical account of female documentarists. It avoids compartmentalising their careers within the time frame of the Second World War and explores longer-term

factors that informed women's entry into non-fiction film-making. For instance, both male and female documentarists entered the profession in the 1930s via its informal training and employment structures and through social contacts. While the war extended opportunities for women, accelerated their progress and diversified the nature of their assignments, this was, in part, due to increased demand for information films. The idea that women simply filled positions vacated by men responding to the call-up is unhelpful and reductive, not least because, for skilled professionals over 30 with the necessary experience, film production was a reserved occupation (ACTT 1983: 21). More importantly, it obscures the multiple factors associated with women's entry to senior creative roles, ultimately prioritising gender as an explanatory factor in ways that undermine women's professional achievements. That certain female documentarists later placed such importance on their wartime experiences, believing that they existed in 'exceptional times in which the prevailing consciousness [was] altered' (ACTT 1983: 69), requires explanation and opens up questions concerning the politics of memory in gender and labour histories.

Understanding these issues is complicated by the marginalisation or omission of female film-makers from existing scholarship on the British documentary film movement (Aitken 1990, 1998; Evans 2011; Sussex 1975; Swann 1989; Wright 1974)³ and a fragmented and partial archival trace. Determining the involvement of women in specific films is extremely difficult because documentaries at this time were unit productions with a tendency to recycle unattributed footage and from which credits were frequently absent, especially for the women 'behind the scenes' (Reynolds 1998: 69). This article combines neglected materials in the oral history project run by the film and television union BECTU, the personnel records of the GPO Film Unit, and the personal papers of leading female documentarists in order to reveal otherwise hidden patterns in women's career histories. Inevitably, female documentarists' archival footprint centres on 'extraordinary' women, 'pioneers' in direction, editing and production, notably the Grierson sisters, Kay Mander, Jill Craigie, Margaret Thomson and Evelyn Spice/Cherry. While this list does not represent the majority of female practitioners in the industry, their stories reveal the experience of undertaking senior production roles and how these were interpreted and remembered.

As Penny Summerfield's research on women's employment in the Second World War has demonstrated, oral histories, such as those conducted by BECTU, shed light on women's own interpretation of their 'personal work histories' (1998b: 83–5) and can be interrogated

as problematic documents exposing the [re-]construction of 'the female self under patriarchy', or its rejection (Worden and Seddon 1995: 179). Oral histories do not offer a 'clear space out of which voices can speak', but they do provide an insight into how historical actors 'draw on the generalised subject available in discourse to construct the particular personal subject' (Summerfield 1998a: 16). This inter-subjectivity allows for female documentarists' accounts of the Second World War to be 'read against the light' as observations on the more recent past. The interviews of the 1970s and 1980s emerge as a commentary on second-wave feminism (Reynolds 1998). Memories of political activism on the part of the female documentarists during the war were often given a particular inflection by the narrator, or indeed a forced prominence by the interviewer, that brought underlying tensions between gender and professional identities to the surface. These revealed a contested memory between those that acknowledged gender and those that sought to position themselves as professionals outside of it. The labour histories of the female documentarists prompt a reconsideration of women's work in the creative industries during wartime by exploring continuity and change within the 1930s and 1940s more broadly, and by questioning how it was remembered within the context of the dynamic and evolving feminist agenda in the 1970s and 1980s.

In March 1937, the GPO Film Unit employed 31 members of staff directly and 20 contracted staff: ten were women. In general, women were recruited to recognised 'female' roles, notably shorthand typing, cleaning and negative cutting. A Miss Stedman held the post of assistant studio manager, a role comparable to that of a shorthand typist in terms of pay and promotion.⁴ The majority of women continued to be 'low-grade, semi-skilled process workers... on the ground floor of the industry in terms of pay, conditions and status' (Reynolds 1998: 68). Almost all senior positions at the Unit (directors, managers and sound technicians) earning over £5 per week were filled by men.⁵ Evelyn Spice, a director, earning £8 10s., was the exception.

Spice's profile upon entry to the profession was similar to that of other female directors. She was 28 when she directed her first film (the average age being 28.5, compared to 25 for men) and had trained in another profession, unlike many of her male counterparts who entered directly or straight from university. Spice had been a teacher in Saskatchewan and, after graduating from the University of Missouri, a journalist at Regina's *Leader-Post* before securing a position at the GPO Film Unit (Evans 2011: 80). Marion Grierson too pursued a career in journalism, at the *Regina Daily Star*, where she met Spice. Marion's

sister, Ruby, had been a teacher before joining the Strand production company in 1935.⁶ After graduating with a degree in Zoology in New Zealand, Margaret Thomson abandoned her diploma of education to take up a post working with Mary Field for Julian Huxley on the *Secrets of Life* and *Secrets of Nature* series at Gaumont British Instructional. Jill Craigie wrote for *Betty's Paper* before moving on to film scripting at the British Council. Although they were not particularly established in their careers, they took a risk by moving into the film industry which, like other professions open to women, did not promise greater stability, prestige or reward.

Others exploited employment opportunities open to them in the mid-1930s, notably in office work, in order to gain a foothold in the industry and acquire the necessary skills for career advancement. As Gregory Anderson demonstrates, women proved to be 'more flexible than men in the changing economic conditions of the interwar years' since 'their numbers could be increased and decreased with ease' (1998: 11). Female employment patterns at the GPO Film Unit reflected the wider trend in which women 'monopolise[d] the routine jobs which forced a secondary labour market in clerical work', often displacing men (*ibid.*: 11). A number of female directors who came to prominence in the mid-to-late 1930s and early 1940s entered the profession in this way. Muriel Box worked as a secretary at the Welwyn Garden Studios and for director Michael Powell and his US producer Jerome Jackson (Box 1991; Heck-Rabi 1984: 137). Kay Mander worked as a receptionist at the 1935 Berlin Film Congress and a German interpreter at London Films, as well as producing campaign sheets for Fox-British and acting as a bookkeeper at Denham Studios. On occasion, these roles permitted an accumulation of experience, such as vetting and amending film scripts, and prompted a shift into production through continuity work, since the latter demanded secretarial skills in order to record filmic lapses (Reynolds 1998: 68). Both Box and Mander went on to work in this area.

The greatest opportunities came, however, by simply being within the film network, particularly the British documentary film movement and its 'community of practitioners' (Nicholls 1991: 14).⁷ The movement began as a small enterprise. Its informal, familial structure, with a multi-skilled workforce, gave women an early opportunity to work within the emergent genre. Documentarists were employed in small, specialised units on a significant number of short films rather than a few prestige projects. Tasks were not generally segregated for senior creative staff, since the workflow and size of the workforce obviated a division of labour. The documentary tradition demanded

that all film-makers 'did everything' (Mander 1988), from 'camera work, editing, writing the script, all the jobs... technical [and] manual' (Grierson 1989). Many documentarists had been drawn from non-filmic backgrounds and the lack of collective experience was a leveller. Potential film-makers, male and female, entered the movement's unconventional training 'scheme' at its various film units. Until resigning his position as head of the GPO Unit in 1937, Grierson saw himself as building up a 'film school', which incited 'keen competition among a rising and film-minded generation' to secure employment under his direction. A 1938 report on the Unit to the Director General of the Post Office recorded that, under Grierson, 'young people came in as messengers at 15/- a week in order to get a footing and several graduated from this lowly beginning to become directors... sometimes in the Unit, sometimes outside'.⁸ Spice, for example, started at the GPO as Grierson's secretary and telephonist (Evans 2011: 82). So eager were potential film-makers to work at the Unit that 'from time to time, people have been employed without any payment at all'. Rona Morrison worked on an expenses-only contract as a general assistant from March to July 1937. This was an opportunity for Grierson to 'teach her the rudiments'.⁹ She later worked alongside directors Arthur Elton and Alberto Cavalcanti as an editor and producer on *How the Dial Works* (1937) and *God's Chillun* (1938) (Box 1991).¹⁰ From the early 1930s, women, as well as men, took advantage of this informal training that was difficult to obtain elsewhere in the industry, a tradition carried over into the war years. In this way, the movement's structure closely correlated with the early feature film industry in that it was 'flexible, amenable to networking and personal contacts, and not constrained by professional qualifications or union rules' (Reynolds 1998: 79). This reflected the sense that, in its formative years, the movement operated as a creative collective with a social purpose, namely to bring the everyday experience and heroism of ordinary man and woman to the screen. It thus transformed its modus operandi into a positive tradition invested with social and political convictions.

Sharing those convictions and the documentary ethos permitted entry to the movement and social networks, rather than gender, often determined employment. Grierson, for example, enlisted the help of his two sisters in order to meet the increasing demand for short instructional films. By the outbreak of the Second World War both Ruby and Marion had established reputations in the field. Marion joined the Empire Marketing Board (EMB) Film Unit in 1930. By 1937, she had directed eleven films in her own right, sat on the

Board of Associated Realist Film Producers and was the editor of the *World Film News*.¹¹ Ruby began her career as an uncredited director's assistant on the 1935 film *Housing Problems*, which pioneered the 'straight to camera' documentary style. By 1939, she had directed five more films. Marion introduced Spice to the GPO Film Unit, and Spice became the only female director employed there by 1937. She directed sixteen films before returning to her native Canada to join John Grierson at the National Film Board in 1939. Director Max Anderson persuaded Mander to shift from continuity to documentary production and introduced her to the documentary film group. She recalled that he told her 'If you come to the Highlander [a Soho pub] on a Friday evening, you'll meet everybody there, that's where we all get our jobs' (1988). In 1940, she was introduced to Elton at the Highlander, who offered her the opportunity to work at the Shell Film Unit. Thomson (1989) recollected that work was secured 'by word of mouth, keeping your ear to the ground'. While admitting that it was more challenging for women to secure employment, she prioritised collegiality. 'What made more of a difference', she noted, 'was the ability to get on with people. If you could, you worked. If you couldn't, you didn't' (ACTT 1983: 70). This was a view echoed by Mander (1988):

It doesn't matter if you're a woman or not. You're just a person with a certain amount of technical ability, skill, knowledge and imagination which you can apply, and, if you've got the right personality, you can persuade people to work with you, and if you haven't got the right personality, you can't. It doesn't matter whether you're male or female.

Significantly, those who did not fit into the movement, such as Craigie, found it necessary to create and operate within different networks. While she attributed her exclusion to her emerging feminism and socialism, she clearly benefited from her acceptance by others, such as film producer J. Arthur Rank, director Del Guidice, and Controller of Home Publicity at the Ministry of Information, Kenneth Clark. Evidently, social contacts were decisive in women's transition to direction, even after the outbreak of war.

This tradition carried over into the private documentary film companies after 1937. Significantly, informal training based around social contacts in the 1930s meant that 'the gate-keeping mechanisms, which have episodically barred women from some professions over the years, were not firmly in place' (Reynolds 1998: 72). As documentary became more deeply embedded within the Ministry of Information during the Second World War and as training took on a clearly defined structure (Arts Enquiry 1947: 50), few women active in the mid-1930s

found permanent positions with the GPO Film Unit's successor, the Crown Film Unit. Yet many continued to make films on contract for the Ministry through smaller firms such as Verity, Paul Rotha Productions and Realist Film, where informal networks and training persisted. As documentary became increasingly formalised from the early 1940s and into the 1950s with the advent of television, its structures moved closer to its feature film counterpart, as Sian Reynolds observed of the French example in the same period: as 'production became less informal, more sophisticated, expensive and hierarchical, women were less likely to be involved behind the cameras or involved in any way, except as performers, the object of the lens's gaze' (1998: 68).

Outside formal Ministry structures, female documentarists experienced a 'high degree of continuity between pre-war and wartime employment' consistent with others in "professional, administrative, and clerical" roles (Summerfield 1993: 76). Just as 'women's wartime access to "men's work" was extremely limited', women already employed within the sector remained under consideration for film projects (Summerfield 1998a: 3). However, such projects were in short supply at the beginning of the war. In late 1939, female documentarists, like their male counterparts, suffered from the deficiencies in mobilising film for propaganda purposes. Rather than making a seamless transition to male jobs as the call-up began to take effect (a significant number of male film-makers were exempt in any case), women, like men, initially faced unemployment. Mander took a job at the Ministry of Pensions issuing petrol coupons and Box registered at the Dumfries Labour Exchange, while Thomson left her job as a cutting assistant at Strand Films to become a maid, a Berlitz language teacher and finally a trainee electrician at Harrods, wiring lighting for display cases.¹²

Moreover, war was not a universally positive experience for women in the industry. It exposed tensions regarding women's position in the workplace, particularly as some female documentarists, now aged between 29 and 32, juggled increasingly complex family and work commitments. Many female documentarists were childless when they secured directorial positions. Those with children gave birth later, in their early 30s, by way of comparison to the national average age of 26. Reflecting upon a series of interviews with female documentarists conducted for the film and television union ACTT (the predecessor of BECTU) in 1983, Sheila MacLeod observed that 'although none of them cited childlessness as a deliberate choice made in order to further a career, they all admitted that they might not have been able to achieve what they had in conjunction with motherhood'

(ACTT 1983). As the ACTT recognised in 1975, motherhood made it difficult to sustain the 'irregular hours, rostering, shift-work, long overtime and trips away' as well as the 'social contact... and social drinking' necessary for securing work (ACTT 1975). Women in the industry in the 1930s and 1940s faced similar problems and experienced 'episodic' waves where career and family were prioritised intermittently (Summerfield 1998b: 95). In 1937, at the age of 32, Marion Grierson was unable to continue full-time work after the birth of her first child. She became increasingly frustrated that her 'family are trying to persuade me that my place is in the home, and indeed I do want to be with David [her son] and have another baby. But I feel that it would be wicked to give up what independence I have won.'¹³

Marrying within the industry afforded a degree of continuity,¹⁴ Craigie (1995) lamenting that it was 'easier for Betty and Muriel Box, because Sydney Box was a producer and he could sponsor them, and bring them along' whereas she 'hadn't got anyone like that to look after me'. However, it did not protect against the 'double burden', and this increased women's desire to 'look after' themselves and each other. Creative partnerships established in the 1930s, for example that between Spice and Marion Grierson, laid the foundations for sisterly comradeship. Their letters from the late 1930s are redolent of the bonds of sisterhood that Reynolds observed between the French film editors in the same period, where careers were bolstered by informal vertical and horizontal filiations (Reynolds 1998: 73). Letters between Spice and Grierson reveal a shared obligation to one another as friends and as women: they helped one another find placement on film projects while committing never to do one another out of a film.¹⁵ Grierson, writing to Spice in December 1938, favoured using 'a little influence to swing things in the way of women'.¹⁶ She assisted Thomson in finding work as her cutting-room assistant at the Travel and Industrial Development Association in 1937–8, while Box used her position to single out female editors for training and advice. Thomson recalled a particular 'camaraderie' between herself and two other women directors, Rosanne Hunter and Yvonne Fletcher, at Realist Films during the war.

The strongest bond, however, was that of friendship, and this became particularly important under the dual strain of war and the 'double-burden'. In December 1941, Marion wrote to Spice to suggest light-heartedly that she would relocate to Canada in order to 'throw your baby in with mine and let you work'.¹⁷ Marion admitted that being on the front-line offered her a particular advantage: the threat posed by the flying bombs provided a certain amount of space to work

when her children were evacuated to Gloucester in July 1944. She intended to 'keep them there and take in a bit of script writing'.¹⁸ Grierson (1989) later admitted that she 'would have liked to have done more [scripting]... but the film business was moving rapidly at that time, and I had to look after the children'. Sporadic work often placed women at a disadvantage in an industry defined by artistic and technical progress. Moreover, the intimacy of these networks left some, especially those outside the documentary movement, feeling isolated; thus Craigie found 'no sort of camaraderie' (Rollyson 2005: 357).

The wartime experiences of female documentarists, then, were diverse. They were united, however, in the implicit struggle for professional recognition frequently obscured by gender. As female film-makers' visibility increased, their 'uniqueness' as women in a 'male' industry subsumed their individual and collective achievements. As a rare species, female directors were the objects of attention, depicted in the popular press and memoirs as solitary practitioners. They were, recalled Graham McInnes, a former film-maker at Canada's National Film Board, 'exceptions to the norm' (2004: 151), an image prevalent in contemporary media coverage of their work. They were presented as exceptional characters who had managed to lift themselves out of the traditional, 'natural' female roles within the industry, notably cutters, secretaries or stenographers (ibid.).¹⁹ While media exposure brought attention to films by female directors, such interest could be unwelcome. Publicity often emphasised personality or appearance over achievement: for example, Del Guidice, Craigie's producer for her 1944 film for Rank, *Out of Chaos*, went to great efforts to promote the documentary, ordering 'glamour[ous] publicity shots' and presenting the film as the product of a female director in charge of an all male crew. Craigie (1995) later claimed that this rendered her a 'freak'.

Articles in popular magazines and newspapers accentuated gender difference. Male independence, physicality and bravery were juxtaposed with female appearance and humanity.²⁰ Features frequently commented on the physical demands of filming. Stories on Spice, for example, commented on the endurance required to film on the prairies of Saskatchewan, while those on Grierson noted with surprise that she was often on location alone, 'carrying the camera herself'.²¹ Wartime assignments drew attention to the perceived subversion of traditional gender roles. At Shell, Mander tunnelled through the debris of the blitz in search of bomb victims and came into contact with infected mosquitoes while making a film on malaria (ACTT 1983: 69), while the team of Thomson, Hunter and Fletcher

allowed themselves to be anaesthetised while producing a series of films for the Westminster Hospital. While aboard the *City of Benares* in September 1940 filming a short for the National Film Board of Canada on British evacuees, Ruby Grierson was killed when German submarines torpedoed the ship. Women felt pressured into adopting a more masculine approach in order to secure work. Marion Grierson wrote in a letter to Spice in 1939 that she did not ‘relish the prospect of having to be aggressive and demand position. It’s against the grain. But a man would do that. Why is everything so difficult for women?’²² Both Craigie and Mander later admitted that they believed that they were not nearly aggressive enough.

These supposedly masculine attributes (physical strength, bravery, acceptance of risk), however, were often tempered or minimised in press reports. Publicity ‘normalised’ the unique position occupied by female producer-directors. An article on Spice in *The Lady* in 1936 constrained her professional identity by reference to external appearance:

Spice is something of a surprise . . . One imagines a woman film director (if one has imagined such a being) as something crisp-voiced and hectoring, in trousers. But Evelyn Spice is a gentle-looking young woman with soft fair hair and a soft Canadian accent: no one could be shy or frightened by her.²³

Reports of women’s approach to direction emphasised humanity over drama. In one of the few references to female documentarists in subsequent accounts, Paul Rotha praised their ability to ‘handle their characters with greater sympathy’ than their male counterparts: their ‘human values’ compensated for their failure to grasp the technicalities of camerawork and their ‘careless[ness]’ in shooting material (1952: 150). Basil Wright also prioritised traditionally feminine values of loyalty, industry and humanity when eulogising Ruby Grierson in *The Spectator*.²⁴ Publicity surrounding Spice (now Cherry) positioned her as a working mother who placed family above career: the headline for an article in *Farmers’ Magazine* read ‘The Story of Evelyn Cherry: Mother Made Movies’, with the strap ‘Her love of farming took her to the top but she gave it up for her family.’²⁵ These accounts rendered the ‘exceptional’ woman socially acceptable and the female documentarist a tolerable anomaly.

Stories that pointed to the uncomfortable relationship between women’s professional and private lives at least recognised the ‘double burden’ and reflected women’s own concerns. The desire for equal professional appreciation collided with growing political activism

among some female film-makers, a consequence of their work on particular film projects, social and professional involvement with left-wing colleagues and unionisation. While war was not the universally positive experience that some claim, it at least provided an opportunity to formalise their call for acknowledgement within the industry. While Craigie (1995) reported that she became 'extremely politically minded and developed [a] social conscience', reflected in her postwar films on housing (*The Way We Live*, 1946) and the campaign for equal pay (*To Be a Woman*, 1951), Mander's politics found expression through the union movement. Her association with the Left Book Club introduced her to the film union the ACT (later the ACTT), and she was elected to its General Council in 1940. Although the ACT, one of the few unions to have a commitment to equal pay since its inception, rejected a division of labour based on gender (Boston 1980: 289), Mander saw a particular need to represent its female members, who were growing in number, especially from the film labs.²⁶ Initially, women were reluctant to become involved, fearing that strike action would result in job loss or mistakenly believing that they were protected by their husband's membership.²⁷ Mander oversaw the formation of a Women's Committee in 1940, with the specific remit of giving special attention to women's organisation and to their problems which were expected to increase as the war continued.²⁸ In September 1940, they insisted on proper safeguards to ensure that women were not used by employers as a means of cheap labour,²⁹ extending the campaign in December to call for appointment on merit and to draw attention to the discrepancy between the cost of living bonuses for male and female workers.³⁰ Women from the ACT also participated in the national union scene: the Women's Committee sent a delegate to the Eleventh Annual Conference of Representatives of the Unions in Leeds in April 1941 and contributed to the TUC's enquiry into the effect of war on women in industry.³¹

Campaigns later in the war foresaw that postwar concerns had the potential to derail the progress women had made in the industry from the 1930s. In 1944, the Women's Committee protested against the continuing practice of removing certain women from their positions upon marriage, complaining that it 'smacked strongly of Turkish harems'. They warned the unions not to

endanger freedom by discrimination between the sexes. There can be no freedom without equality. The Trade Unions and the Socialist movement must continually have in their mind's eye the equality of the sexes in all decisions they make. Unless they do so, that large army of women

workers will never join the trade unions in sufficient numbers to give us the democratic thought and power needed to achieve the freedom one so desires and the freedom we want.³²

However, their impact should not be overstated. Although political activism was woven into later accounts of the war years, Mander (1988) recalled that her Committee was largely ineffectual, a 'disaster', without agenda or unified position.

The Women's Committee was correct in assuming that the postwar era would alter the position of its female members in documentary production. However, these changes cannot be explained simply as a reaction to the progress of women during the war and the re-emergence of conservative attitudes in the postwar period. Government investment in specialised wartime film-making was reduced by the incoming Labour government. This led to lower production levels and indicated the declining influence of British documentary. Consequently, female documentarists' postwar work histories, like their war experiences, were diverse. Some continued to work in private film companies or as freelancers, such as Thomson and Craigie. Others returned to features, a difficult transition, as Sue Harper has noted, that for some meant a 'return to marginality' (2000: 191–2). Mander's realisation that gender could be a 'handicap', she claimed, came only while working for producer Michael Balcon from 1949.

Such transitions in female film-makers' working lives from the 1930s to the 1950s are captured in the oral histories recorded many years later. Due to the paucity of contemporary evidence, these accounts are the primary means of reconstructing their partial, fragmented and indeed diverse pasts. However, subsequent historical judgements confirming the standard narrative of wartime enfranchisement and postwar conservatism, appearing, for example, in industry position papers such as the ACTT's 1975 report *Patterns of Discrimination*, not only negate the opportunities of the 1930s and deny the diversity of wartime experiences but fail to understand the complex nature of oral accounts as a historical source. The war assumed a dominant and contested role in their memories of the struggle for professional recognition in ways that are problematic and significant for historians. Oral accounts are invariably shaped by both personal experiences ('a voice that speaks for itself') and the contexts in which they are recalled ('the voices that speak to it') (Summerfield 1998a: 15). In short, they can be more a reflection of the present than the past. Female documentarists retrospectively transformed their accounts

of their wartime experiences. Either they prioritised gender as an explanatory framework in order to emphasise discrimination and their (in)ability to overcome it in the context of second-wave feminism in the 1970s and 1980s, or, alternatively, they rejected the idea of gender discrimination altogether in favour of a legacy that focused on professional achievement.

Mander set her wartime experiences against the position of women in the film and television industries at the time of her interview:

As far as a woman is concerned now, the situation is much worse than it ever was before feminism was invented . . . Men are much more defensive than they used to be. The men are much less disposed to accept you at first . . . I just think that nowadays you're expected to be more aggressive, and therefore it's difficult if you don't want to be. You just get pushed to the ground. (1988)

Similarly, Bessie Bond, an ACT member representing editorial, labs, documentaries and publicity departments, commented in a 1975 interview that 'a lot of these feminist issues are exaggerated. I can see the necessity of providing crèches for union conferences, perhaps, but otherwise the whole business is overdone' (ACTT 1983: 73). Mander retreated from the idea that gender was a consideration when defining her career and argued that informal, casual 'feminism' failed to advance the cause of women. Indeed, her concern throughout her interview was to reject questions of discrimination in the industry. These were introduced by the interviewer, Sidney Cole, who steered the discussion in line with the standard narrative. Mander, on the other hand, set her views within the context of more recent feminist debates, suggesting that increased visibility and militancy served to detract from the work itself:

I've had this argument about women with so many of my more recent acquaintances, and I just think they went about it the wrong way . . . I never had, we never had any trouble . . . all of us who worked in films, we were just technicians, and we were all working together. There was never any sense that one was a woman and therefore one was different. And that is a more recent [development] . . . Look, Sid, Sid! All I felt was that I had a living to earn . . . You know, Sid, I don't think I want to talk about [this], I'm sorry. It seems to me entirely irrelevant . . . I mean, if I were thirty years younger, I would probably have an answer for you. But to me it's such a fuss about nothing, the whole thing. (Mander 1988)

Here, Mander gives precedence to her professional identity, but also hints at generational change, a factor identified by Sheila McLeod in

her interviews with Mander, Thomson and others for the ACT in the same period. She noted that second-wave feminism in the 1970s meant that:

Women are no longer content to make tacit assumptions, whether about children, choice of career, or availability of opportunity. On the contrary, these questions are agonised over, not just privately, but collectively. Although much has been achieved in recent years, the younger women I spoke to were, paradoxically, far less sanguine about the industry as a whole or the place of women within it, than were their predecessors. (ACTT 1983: 73)

Generational difference, however, does not explain why other wartime female documentarists framed their working lives in ways akin to the more active feminist agenda of the 1970s and 1980s. As in Mander's case, postwar experience, political consciousness and reactions to second-wave feminism conditioned Craigie's interview in 1995. Unprompted by her interviewer, Craigie constructed a narrative around a liberating war that eroded gender and class barriers, reflecting popular memories of the 'People's War' and her own political identity. Significantly, she directed a series of postwar politicised films that undoubtedly influenced her perception of the war and its effects on female employment, the most important being *To Be a Woman*, a paean to emergent feminism and equality of opportunity in the workplace.³³ Craigie's emphasis in her later interviews, then, emerges from both the real and imagined war in which her political views were formed. This affected her memory of the period, which she reconstituted as a formative moment for working women, the promise of which was never realised after 1945.

Interpreting women's wartime experiences in documentary film production, then, is complicated by two factors. Firstly, wartime work histories cannot be understood in isolation: they should be seen in the broader context of employment throughout the 1930s and into the 1950s and take into account the conditions specific to the industry, such as workflow, labour patterns, training and networks. While war diversified and intensified production, the informality of documentary production and its associated structures, the opportunities afforded by the shifting economic climate of the 1930s and social networks and contacts were more important to women in gaining employment in the industry than were gender or the demands of war. Although women struggled to break into certain technical roles, such as sound (a continuing problem for women in film and television), the formulation of the documentary film movement as a creative collective,

based on social contact and a shared mission, generated opportunities that were partially eroded as documentary formalised from the late 1930s onwards. Moreover, war was not the universal or levelling experience that commentators such as the ACTT claimed it to be. While war raised awareness of women's labour, it also exposed tensions in their working lives, particularly in relation to the 'double burden'. Moreover, the increased visibility of female documentarists underscored their 'uniqueness', defining them largely by gender and creating a heightened desire to assert their professional status both at the time, through union campaigns and, later, in their attempts to secure their legacy.

Secondly, capturing these wartime experiences relies on problematic sources that often say more about the present than the past. The BECTU and ACTT interviews with female documentarists reveal that the place of gender in defining individual careers in the Second World War remains contested, a site of continuing struggle for professional recognition and achievement. Such sources should be read 'against the light' in order to interrogate their meaning in a broader sense. If the history of women in documentary production remains imperfect as a result, historians wishing to understand why certain women came to prominence in the 1930s and 1940s should at least move beyond an undifferentiated and reductive master narrative that overemphasises war and seek instead to locate their experience within the broader contours of women's labour histories in the creative industries, making sense of the multiple factors that influenced their progress, many of which lie outside the framework of gender.

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Notes

1. Thomson (originally from New Zealand) pointed to the 'intellectual elitism' in the Strand Film Unit; prejudice, she felt, came not from 'anti-feminism' but from the rejection of 'colonials'.
2. See also < <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/594220/index.html> >.
3. Elizabeth Sussex's oral history of British documentary fails to include a single female interviewee, while the chapter in Anthony and Mansell (2011) focuses on one woman (Evelyn Spice) rather than on women generally.
4. Personnel records, POST 33/5454, British Postal Museum and Archive (BPMA).
5. 'Report of the Committee on Film Unit', 1937, POST 108/84, BPMA.
6. *Film Dope*, 21, p. 3, GAP: 8, Grierson Archives, Special Collections, University of Stirling (GA).

7. Bill Nicholls (1991) argues that this is a defining feature of the genre as a whole. See also Joris Ivens in *Films*, 1: 2, Spring 1940, Box 68, Stanley Hawes papers, National Film and Sound Archive, Canberra, Australia (NFSA): 'We must make up for the lack of grandeur and money by giving special attention to co-operation and advice among ourselves . . . It is another, and higher, form of collaboration in documentary.'
8. Report on GPO Film Unit to Director General of the Post Office, 10 March 1938, POST 108/84, BPMA.
9. Report on GPO Film Unit to Director General of the Post Office, 10 March 1938, POST 108/84, BPMA.
10. Personnel Records, authority 11, 16 April 1937; authority 16, 19 July 1937; letter from John B. Holmes to Hightet, 16 December 1937, POST 33/5454, BPMA.
11. *Film Dope*, 21, p. 3, GAP: 8, GA.
12. This was also the experience of male documentarists: Rotha worked in a mobile canteen in the East End of London (Swann 1989: 156), Wright for an ambulance crew (G4: 23: 4, GA Elton to Grierson, 23 October 1939, 5).
13. Marion Grierson to Evelyn Cherry, 11 December 1938, MG 31 D173, 33: 51 Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa (LAC).
14. *Ibid.*
15. Marion Grierson to Evelyn Cherry, 15 March 1939, MG 31 D173, 34: 1, LAC.
16. Marion Grierson to Evelyn Cherry, 11 December 1938, MG 31 D173, 33: 51, LAC.
17. Marion Grierson to Evelyn Cherry, 5 December 1940, MG 31 D173, 34: 3, LAC.
18. Marion Grierson to Evelyn Cherry, 5 July 1944, MG 31 D173, 34: 7, LAC.
19. P. A. Novikoff, 'Prairie Winter', *The Country Guide*, November 1937, p. 38; M. Benedetta, 'Religion made her famous', MG 31 D173, 42: 19, LAC.
20. One example being McInnes' description of Margaret Ann Adamson (NFB): 'Margaret Ann [had a] disconcertingly rough, mannish sense of humour . . . It was really marvellous entertainment to behold this striking girl, with her great mass of honey blonde hair, seriously arguing in the midst of a pack of young NFB intellectuals on the scent, often [bettering] them, albeit with graciousness so that she would not have her position weakened by becoming involved in the war between men and women' (2004: 158).
21. P. A. Novikoff, 'Prairie Winter', *The Country Guide*, November 1937, p. 38; M. Benedetta, 'Religion Made Her Famous', MG 31 D173, 42: 19, LAC.
22. Marion Grierson to Evelyn Cherry, 1939, MG 31 D173, 34, 1: 2, LAC.
23. 'Successful women: Evelyn Spice,' *The Lady*, 20 November 1936, p. 1008, MG 31 D173, 42: 19, LAC.
24. *The Spectator*, 4 October 1940, p. 339, G4: 34, GA.
25. F. Baldwin, 'The story of Evelyn Cherry: mother made movies', *Farmer's Magazine*, p. 40, MG 31 D173, 42: 19, LAC.
26. *Cine-Technician*, January–February 1941, p. 19.
27. *Cine-Technician*, October–December, 1940, p. 95.
28. *Cine-Technician*, August–September, 1940, p. 72.
29. *Ibid.*
30. *Cine-Technician*, October–December, 1940, p. 98.
31. *Cine-Technician*, January–February 1941, p. 19.
32. *Ibid.*
33. Craigie, 'Why a film?', 1949, 6EPC/02/2/54, FL 260, WLL.

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