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# The Control of the Cinema in England and Wales.

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## Introduction.

Many people are uneasy about certain types of films at present shown, both to grown-up people and to children.

Many therefore cry out that "Something ought to be done about this." They do not realize that already a great deal has been done by the Government and other authorities, and that a number of carefully considered safeguards already exist. It is all-important that these should be better known and understood by the general public, in order that they may be used to full advantage.

At the same time, stringency alone will not serve the purpose desired. The only sure key to the betterment of the "Pictures" lies in the hands of those who attend them.

Unfortunately, among those who now make complaints about the nature of some of the films shown are too many who rarely, if ever, go to the "Pictures." This failure of a considerable section of the public to patronize the films has gone on for some twenty years. During this time the Producers have supplied films of the type which ensure box-office success with those other sections of the public who diligently attend.

*What has been done, and what safeguards exist.*

## The British Board of Film Censors.

In the pre-war years it was already evident to a few far-seeing educationists and social workers, and also to the Cinema Trade, that it was necessary to safeguard this new form of amusement in some manner, and to associate together all those who exhibited "moving pictures," so as to ensure that only films acceptable to British audiences should be shown.

Various proposals were discussed and eventually, with general approval, the *British Board of Film Censors* was established by the Trade, it being understood that the *name of the President of the Board* (now popularly called the "Film Censor") *should be submitted to the Home Office, and have approval before he was appointed.* The President should then appoint his examiners, *with the stipulation they must not be, either directly or indirectly, interested in the Cinematograph Trade.*

Pamphlet

This procedure has been adhered to throughout and still holds good. Mr. Redford, at one time examiner of stage plays under the Lord Chamberlain, was the first President of the British Board of Film Censors; Mr. T. P. O'Connor, "Father" of the House of Commons, succeeded him; the Right Hon. Edward Shortt, P.C., K.C., a former Home Secretary, now holds this office.

In Great Britain every film (topical news only excepted), whether imported or produced in Britain, has to be submitted to the British Board of Film Censors, who either pass it intact, order it to be altered, or veto it entirely. Each film is judged on its merits, but in each report to the Trade any reasons for exception are given in detail. A certificate is given for each film passed and a copy of this must be thrown on the screen every time the film is shown. Films are classed as "*suitable for adult audiences*" and a large "A" appears on their certificate; or they are passed for "*universal exhibition*" and a large "U" appears on their certificate, and this means that such films are not considered unsuitable to be shown when children are present. With regard to the "A" films, the theme or story may be perfectly legitimate and wholesome for adults, but either the theme or certain of the scenes depicted are considered by the Censor as unsuitable for children.

It is understood that members of the "*Cinematographs Exhibitors' Association*" (and practically every exhibitor in Great Britain is a member of this Association) *shall not show any film which has not obtained the Certificate of the British Board of Film Censors*, and must accept as final and absolute the ruling of this Board. A "special permit" from the Local Licensing Authority for exhibition of a film for some specific purpose (e.g., a religious film; a health film, &c.) is the only possible exception to this rule.

### Local Licensing Authorities.

*A second safeguard exists in the fact that the Local Authorities also control films exhibited.* The Cinematograph Act of 1909 enjoins that all buildings where films are publicly exhibited must be licensed by the Local Authority annually. This Authority holds the Cinema Manager responsible for the safety and condition of his premises; and requires that nothing offensive to public morals or religion, or what is seditious, is exhibited therein.

Local Authorities may grant licences "on such terms as they may determine." Practically all Local Authorities,

therefore, insert a clause in their annual Cinema Licences which stipulate that *only films passed by the British Board of Film Censors* may be shown in those premises, "*always subject to review by the Authority.*"

The Local Cinema Authorities form a very real second line of censorship. Moreover, the public have the right and opportunity of expressing, at open sessions held at stated intervals, their opinions in regard to films exhibited in their local area. The full utilization of these powers both by the Local Authorities and the public, together with the censorship of the British Board of Film Censors, is considered by many experienced observers to be preferable to a State or Government Censorship.

### The Home Office Cinema Consultative Committee.

In December, 1931, the Home Secretary (the Right Hon. Sir Herbert Samuel) formed a Consultative Committee composed of representatives of Local Licensing Authorities (under the Chairmanship of Lieut.-Colonel Sir Cecil Levita, ex-Chairman of the London County Council, who has for many years studied the Cinema question in this and other countries), to *enable Local Authorities to consult with each other; with the Home Secretary; and with the President of the British Board of Film Censors* concerning both administrative matters (such as the question of children seeing "A" films, &c.), and also concerning certain standards in regard to the films and programmes provided.

This important body has power to consider all problems concerning the Cinema, including those of censorship; they have access to very full data; make any enquiry; and may receive from all sources suggestions and representations which are based on serious consideration and study of the questions involved. It will frame and present to the Home Office a report of its views.

### British Opinion and Cinema Producers in U.S.A.

The United States of America still produce some 80 per cent. of the world output of films, and by far the greatest number of the films shown in our own country are produced in the States. It should, therefore, be known that the *Public Morality Council* (on which body are representatives of the Anglican and Roman Catholic Communion, the Salvation Army, the Free Church Council, and the Jewish Church, together with such societies as the Mothers' Union, the Girls' Friendly Society, the National Council of Women, and the White Cross League, &c.), since 1929,

has made arrangements with the President of the American Motion Picture Producers' and Distributors' Association, Incorporated, by which this Council conveys to Mr. Will Hayes (the President) expressions of English opinion regarding films. Already the representations made by these means have been noted by American Producers. Our natural desire is to see an increasing part taken by British Producers in the film industry, and to assure success to British films based on recognized British standards of social life.

### The Final Safeguard—Criticism and not Censorship.

We must not expect *censorship* to do the work of *criticism*. Censorship, in whatever form it may be exercised, exists to prohibit that which is explicitly subversive of public morals. It does not exist to exclude that which is merely vulgar, risky, or dubious. *This is the function of criticism which public opinion alone can define and exercise.*

We would again repeat that it is our duty as a people to encourage attendance at good Cinema productions, and by our box-office patronage to convey to the Producers a public demand for films whose subjects and social standards we consider sound and wholesome both for young and old.

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