

Humphrey Jennings (1907-1950)

war poet on the home front



FREDDY OGTEROP

Film/Video/DVD Selector

Though in two years' time we will be commemorating the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II, there seems to be a continuing interest in the subject, and not just on the part of those old enough to have experienced it at first hand. How else can one explain the availability of countless videos covering every aspect of the conflict, from the Blitzkrieg up to the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Selecting the most important titles from the material available can be a problem, especially as many distributors don't necessarily identify each entry in their catalogues very accurately and sometimes one has to take a calculated chance.

For many people it was Thames Television's *The world at war* (1975) that rekindled their interest in the subject. Produced by Jeremy Isaacs and narrated by Laurence Olivier, this mammoth undertaking consisted of 26 one-hour documentaries that drew upon the archives of the world, but relied on the reminiscences of a great many individuals to give it an extra dimension. Of course, it was by no means the first series to range so widely. As early as 1952, the National Broadcasting Company had released *Victory at sea*, another 26-part series (of 26 minutes each), that was produced in cooperation with the United States Navy.

It was television that was to provide the greatest outlet for World War II documentaries, though during the sixties a number of feature-length compilations were released in the cinema. These included

Erwin Leiser's *Mein Kampf*, Paul Rotha's *The life of Adolf Hitler*, Louis Clyde Stoumen's *The black fox* and Jack Kaufman's *The rise and fall of the Third Reich*, all of them responding to the public's obsession with Adolf Hitler. The mere availability of all that archival material almost demands that such programmes should be made. Television's appetite is ferocious and existing footage is always cheaper than having to go on location somewhere.

As a result, numerous somewhat soulless, made-by-the-numbers compilations turn up, though there are always exceptions. One of the most fascinating productions of recent years has been Carlton Television's *The Second World War in colour* (available on video as *Colour of war*). Through the decades, the vast majority of documentaries on the war featured only black-and-white footage and though one knew better, there was a feeling that the people who lived through those years lived their lives in black-and-white. The revelation of so much colour footage gave it all a new perspective.

Much of the combat footage used in such films was shot by cameramen of the various armed forces, supplemented by material shot for the newsreel companies. And sometimes there are sequences that come from actual war-time documentaries, made by filmmakers active at the time. Over the years we've been trying to obtain copies of the most important of these films, picking them up as distributors are re-releasing them on video. One of the key figures whose work we have earmarked for collection is Humphrey Jennings, described by

Lindsay Anderson as 'the only real poet the British cinema has yet produced'.

Jennings was born in 1907, the son of a middle-class architect father and a painter mother. Academically gifted and steeped in culture, he studied English at Cambridge, where he took part in drama, painted and was co-editor of a literary magazine. He graduated in 1929 and from 1934 contributed to various films produced by John Grierson's GPO Film Unit. Though in later years Grierson spoke of him with admiration, at the time they had little in common. Though Jennings shared most of Grierson's political views, he was an artist rather than a propagandist and it has been said that Grierson regarded him as an intellectual dilettante.

Jennings's first film as director was *Locomotives* (1935) and his last *A family portrait* (1950), made for the Festival of Britain. However, there



is little doubt that the documentaries he made during the war are his most interesting works and are the films for which he is remembered. In many ways his style is at odds with what is usually regarded as a typical war-time documentary. They are notably low-key affairs, with a total absence of bombastic voice-over commentaries. At times the war is almost regarded as a natural disaster and usually references to the enemy are few and far between. Because all of his films were shot on the home front, there is no combat footage and the emphasis is always on human behaviour under extraordinary stress.

As portraits of war-time Britain, they present an almost idealised picture of unified determination to resist the onslaught of a faceless enemy - and to do so with dignity. In some ways they are stereotypical of how the English are supposed to see themselves, but they are made with such grace and conviction that one is happy to go along. Even *Rule Britannia* sounds perfectly acceptable under the circumstances. Some of his interest in the behaviour of the civilian population probably stems from the time he spent, during 1937 and 1938, with Mass Observation, a volunteer anthropological group that set out to survey habits, customs and social life of the inhabitants of the British Islands.

All in all, Jennings directed twelve documentaries during World War II, first for the GPO Film Unit and then for its successor, the Crown Film Unit. At least some of their

success must be attributed to Jennings's colleagues, a number of whom worked with him time and time again, notably producer Ian Dalrympe, cinematographer HE Fowle and editor Stewart McAllister. The latter's role, especially, cannot be overestimated. In fact, on Jennings's acknowledged masterpiece, **Listen to Britain**, McAllister is deservedly credited as co-director and his seamless editing should be required studying in all film schools.

Nevertheless, it is the overall vision of Humphrey Jennings that prevails. There is a subtle understatement to all his work and usually the commentary is entirely absent or is kept to a bare minimum. **Words for battle** uses excerpts of well-known poetry or prose to accompany the images of war-time Britain. **Listen to Britain** has a brief spoken introduction by Leonard Brockington, after which it uses only natural sounds and music. Jennings never explains, exhorts or harangues his audience. His appeal is emotional and he shapes the viewer's feelings through an association of images and sounds. In addition his visuals have a lasting resonance.

Images from films like **Listen to Britain** and **I was a fireman** have become familiar through their use in countless compilations.

To date we have managed to obtain video copies of the following titles:

- 1939 - **The first days** (22 min)
Co-directed by Harry Watt and Pat Jackson, this is an account of the first weeks of the war, with the people of London adjusting to a new lifestyle, including air raid precautions, evacuations and the departure of troops (in **The GPO story - Britain at war: The first days**).
- 1940 - **Britain can take it!** (8 min)
Quentin Reynolds presents this film as a despatch from England and describes to his American audiences how Londoners are coping with the night-time bombing raids. Co-directed by Harry Watt, it is also known as **London can take it!**, under which title it was shown in the United States (in **The GPO story - Britain at war: Under fire**).
- 1941 - **The heart of Britain** (9 min)
A visit to the industrial midlands and the north at the time of the Blitz, showing how life, war production and culture persist in the face of the bombings. Shown in the United States under the title **This is England** (in **Listening to Britain**).
- 1942 - **Listen to Britain** (19 min)
An emotional and rousing portrait of the

country at war, the film presents the war as a threat to culture and tradition, while at the same time conveying their innate strength and ability to survive. It blends its evocative images with a variety of natural sounds and a range of music, from popular to classical (in **Listening to Britain**).

- 1943 - **I was a fireman** (71 min)
In the format of what today would be described as a docu-drama, this deals with the work of the Auxiliary Fire Service. The story unfolds from the early morning assembly of the crew at the fire station, to the fighting of a blaze at a warehouse at night. It features a musical score by William Alwyn and is also known as **Fires were started**.
- 1943 - **The silent village** (35 min)
In 1942, the Germans exacted a terrible revenge on the Czech mining village of Lidice for the killing of SS Deputy Chief Reinhard Heydrich in Prague. In a tribute to their colleagues in Czechoslovakia, inhabitants of a mining village in Wales re-enact the events, vowing that the name of Lidice will never be forgotten.
- 1945 - **A diary for Timothy** (37 min)
With the war coming to an end, people's thoughts turned to peace and the world that was being created for future generations. This film deals with the closing stages of the war and is in the form of a diary being kept for a newborn child. The commentary was written by EM Forster and is spoken by Michael Redgrave (in **Listening to Britain**).
- **Listen to Britain** and **I was a fireman** are also available on 16mm, as is **Words for battle** (1941), with the commentary read by Laurence Olivier.
- Also available on video is the pre-war short, **Spare time** (1939).

For further information we can recommend **Humphrey Jennings: more than a maker of films** by Anthony W Hodgkinson and Rodney E Sheratsky (University Press of New England/1982). Also of interest (if you can find it) is Jennings's own book **Pandaemonium 1660-1886: the coming of the machine as seen by contemporary observers**, edited by Mary-Lou Jennings and Charles Madge. I've also found references to a recent documentary made for Channel 4 entitled **Humphrey Jennings: the man who listened to Britain**. It was made by Kevin Macdonald, the Academy Award-winning director of **One day in September**.

