

Arthur Melbourne-Cooper: Discussion

In *KINtop* 3 we published an article by Tjitte de Vries, »Arthur Melbourne-Cooper. Film Pionier Wronged by History« in which the author claims that GRANDMA'S READING GLASS and some other films usually attributed to George Albert Smith were in fact made by Arthur Melbourne-Cooper. The discussion we had hoped for actually took place. John Barnes and Tony Fletcher have sent us reactions to Tjitte de Vries's article. We publish these together with a response by Tjitte de Vries.

The Editors

JOHN BARNES

G. A. Smith As Seen Through the Telescope

In an article in a previous issue of *KINtop*, the Dutch journalist Tjitte de Vries claims that a group of films »listed for the first time in the Warwick Trading Company's film catalogue of 1901« were not made by G. A. Smith as commonly supposed, but were really the work of the St. Albans pioneer Arthur Melbourne-Cooper.¹

The titles of the films which Mr de Vries claims are by Melbourne-Cooper are GRANDMA'S READING GLASS, THE OLD MAID'S VALENTINE; AS SEEN THROUGH THE TELESCOPE; THE HOUSE THAT JACK BUILT; and THE LITTLE DOCTOR, the latter also known as THE SICK KITTEN – all films long since established as being made by George Albert Smith, of Hove, Brighton. We need select only one film from this list to prove the absurdity of de Vries's claim.

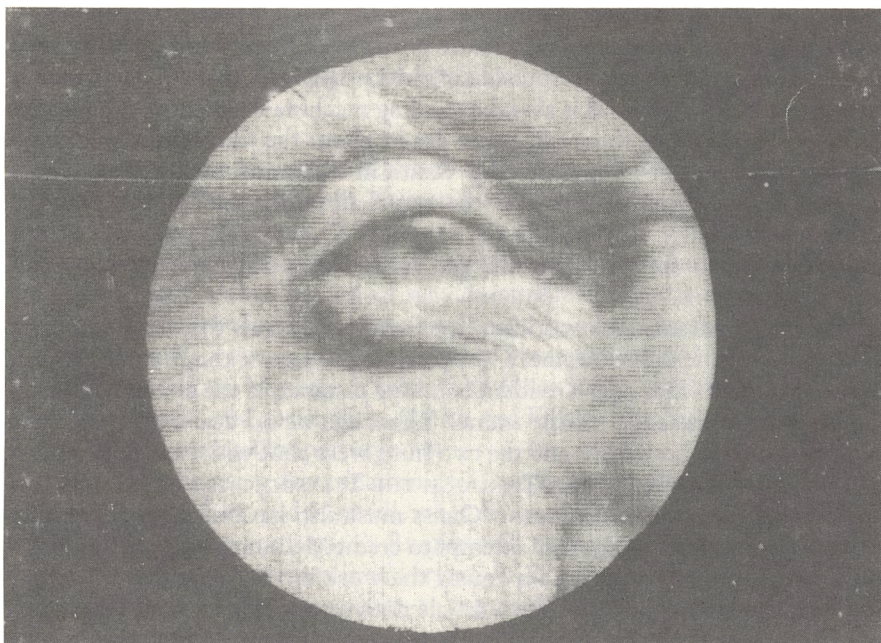
I have chosen for examination AS SEEN THROUGH THE TELESCOPE. The exact location of this film is known and I would advise Mr de Vries to stop looking for it in St. Albans and concentrate instead on Hove. To be exact, Furze Hill, Hove, outside the Lodge to St Ann's Well and Gardens, of which G. A. Smith was the lessee and where his »film factory« as he liked to refer to it, was located in the old pump house.



1. Picture postcard showing the entrance to St Ann's Well and Gardens, Furze Hill, Hove, the location chosen by Smith for his film *AS SEEN THROUGH THE TELESCOPE*. (*Barnes Collection*)



2. Frame enlargement from *AS SEEN THROUGH THE TELESCOPE*. Note the vending machine against the wall and the wooden posts, which are also visible in the picture postcard. (*British Film Institute*)



Frame enlargements from GRANDMA'S READING GLASS and AS SEEN THROUGH THE TELESCOPE. The frame lines and circular matte are identical. (*British Film Institute*)



By comparing a frame illustration from *AS SEEN THROUGH THE TELESCOPE* with a near contemporary picture postcard of Furze Hill, it will be seen that the film frame shows the outside of the Lodge, with the wooden posts of the porch plainly visible, as is also the vending machine which, too, can be seen in the postcard.² Thus there can be no doubt about the film's location, which proves that the film was made by Smith in Hove and not by Melbourne-Cooper in St Albans. If we view the actual film, we shall notice that the technique is similar to *GRANDMA'S READING GLASS*. The same use of the circular matte to simulate the enlarged images seen through telescope and reading glass.

Comparing frame illustrations of the two films reveals that the frame lines in both are identical. Furthermore, the placing and size of the circular matte is the same in each case. This is evident from the distance of the circumference of the mask from the edges of the frame.³ There can be no doubt that the same mask was used in both films and the two films were shot with the same camera.

Having identified *AS SEEN THROUGH THE TELESCOPE* as a Smith film, it is obvious that *GRANDMA'S READING GLASS* must also have been made by him. Is it not time to stop this absurd attempt to credit Melbourne-Cooper with the authorship of films which are obviously the work of G. A. Smith?

I am afraid Mr Tjitte de Vries's article does not warrant serious consideration. It not only lacks the essential primary reference sources, but relies almost entirely on family reminiscences, which any film historian knows, are of little value unless corroborated by primary sources. It is little wonder that Mr de Vries's previous papers on Melbourne-Cooper and Birt Acres were rejected by Domitor (the prestigious association of film historians).⁴

Dare I mention *THE LITTLE DOCTOR*? The so-called »Manx cat on her lap« described by de Vries can be seen quite plainly wagging its tail! Needless to say, Manx cats have no tails.

Notes

1 Incidentally, all but one of the films to which Mr de Vries refers, were listed together by WTC as early as 20 October 1900, in an advertisement published in the theatrical paper called *The Era*, p. 30, column 5. The film not listed is *THE LITTLE DOCTOR*, which seems to have been made the following year.

2 Other frames in the film show more clearly the details to be seen in the postcard.

3 It will be noticed that the masked P.O.V.-shots are joined by the same rough hand-splices, as special splicing machines were still a rarity at that time.

4 *Alpha Tidings*, vol. 1, no. 2, November 1993 (Rotterdam), p. 4.

A Response to Tjitte de Vries

»This period has been closed.«Whoever said this to Audrey Wadowska at the BFI in 1955 has something to answer for. They may have opened a can of worms!

Unfortunately Tjitte de Vries's article asks more questions than it answers. He makes many claims not all of which are proven by the article. I do not intend to explore everything here as it would require a book to tell the full story of the early years of our film making history. Nevertheless I will try to identify some of the arguments relating to *GRANDMA'S READING GLASS*, George Albert Smith and some of the British and French film historians who have upset the Melbourne-Cooper supporters.

Why the character assassination of George Albert Smith? If Smith had stated to Sadoul, Low and Manvell, when he was interviewed by them, that he remembered making *GRANDMA'S READING GLASS* and given details, then there may have been some justification in trying to show he was a charlatan. He had no specific memories of these films to tell them, instead he was interested in talking about his trick effects and experiments in »Kinemacolor«.

The non-Melbourne-Cooper version of *GRANDMA'S READING GLASS*, frames of which were given to Tjitte de Vries by Graham Head who was given the negative by Smith before he died, shows that more than one version of the film was made in this country. Tjitte de Vries quotes three others by Edison, Biograph and Pathé. How do we know that Smith's attempt wasn't made before Melbourne-Coopers or that Smith made other, more successful versions of the film? Does Tjitte de Vries's interview with Graham Head provide any useful information? If so, the article should have included extracts from the interview.

In the early years of film making it was common to have more than one version of a film made by the same company -- often because the film was popular and they needed another negative to supply prints. As well as this it was common practice for rival companies to copy films made by their competitors, particularly if they were successful. In the time before »titles« it was easy to copy another film.

At the Cinema Museum, London, there is a film *WHEN FATHER LOOKED AFTER THE BABIES* which appears to be a British version of a Lumière film. It was probably made by Robert Paul or one of his employees. The NFTVA have a film which purports to be a British version of the Lumière film *L'ARROSEUR ARROSÉ* (*WATERING THE GARDENER*). It is known that the Lumière film *SORTIE DES USINES LUMIÈRE* (1895) was filmed several times. This is known because surviving photographs compared to the surviving print show the foliage sha-

dow to be different as well as picture detail not being the same. There were at least three Lumière versions of L'ARROSEUR ARROSÉ, all with slightly different actions. RESCUED BY ROVER, the Hepworth film directed by Lewin Fitzhamon was made three times at least, since three different versions exist. So it is quite possible that more than one version of GRANDMA'S READING GLASS was made either by the same company or by others.

It is probably true that Sadoul's credit to George Albert Smith comes from the early catalogues. There is an entry for the film in the Warwick Trading Co. catalogue of 1900 that has photographs of Smith in a managerial position in the company and the film is credited to him. This does not mean that the film which turned up in Denmark in 1960 is Smith's version.

The circumstantial evidence that Melbourne-Cooper made a version is very strong. However, I would have liked more evidence from the tapes and conversations with Melbourne-Cooper, his daughter Audrey Wadowska, the Beatrice Massey interview and references to Clare Heseltine's book on Melbourne-Cooper.

The information about G. A. Smith's cash and account books is very interesting since I have only been able to trace one held by the BFI which is on permanent loan to MOMI. It covers the period 1.1.1897 to 15.1.1898. A copy was reproduced in *The Rise of the Cinema in Great Britain* by John Barnes. Barnes subsequent volumes covering 1898-1900 do not have copies of Smith's cash and account books.

I would like to know where both Barry Salt and Tjitte de Vries found the cash books up to 1903. Do they list when Smith made his version? There is the possibility that Melbourne-Cooper worked for Smith as his assistant since previously he had worked for Acres; again the cash books may be helpful in verifying this.

Is the Danish print of GRANDMA'S READING GLASS the only print to survive? If there are others, have they been compared? What happened to the correspondence between Melbourne-Cooper and the NFA, including the list of Alpha films sent to them? Perhaps Melbourne-Cooper sold his film to Smith.

Due to the lack of credits it is difficult to prove who was responsible for making a film (although even the credits of today are not reliable). Evidence in local newspapers of showings could help in this respect, otherwise it is the information kept in surviving catalogues that we have to go on, plus the memories of those pioneers who lived long enough to recall what happened.

Hopefully this period will never be closed.

Reaction to John Barnes

Film history, like any other science should be subject to constant debate and open to corrections, film history especially, because so much mythology has been created almost from the beginning by the effective publishing machinery of the industry itself. Mrs. Audrey Wadowska, daughter of Arthur Melbourne-Cooper, always doubted that *AS SEEN THROUGH THE TELESCOPE* was made by her father, so much so, that I never bothered to search for locations in St. Albans. I am glad that John Barnes provided proof that Cooper is not the maker of this one and I am grateful for Mr. Barnes' additional information.

Although I admire John Barnes very much for his books on the early years of the British film industry, I am amazed at the ease with which the memories of the Acres and Cooper families are brushed aside. »...Family reminiscences, which any film historian knows, are of little value unless corroborated by primary sources,« writes Mr. Barnes. When Arthur Melbourne-Cooper was still alive could he not have been considered as a primary source? And in April 1960 he did recall the complete story line of *GRANDMA'S READING GLASS*.

British film historians never corroborated almost any family reminiscences, because they never listened to them. I am still shocked by the sometimes even rude way Mrs. Wadowska was treated by film historians in 1978 at the Brighton Conference. There she was, with two cases full of evidential material about her father's *GRANDMA'S READING GLASS*. No one, I repeat, no one, ever looked at it. Was that neglect? Was it arrogance? Or was every one just simply prejudiced?

Look in my article at the affidavits of Mrs. Beatrice Massey, of Mr. Reginald Shirtcliffe and of Mr. Gordon Fisher concerning the identifications of the children in *GRANDMA'S READING GLASS*, *THE HOUSE THAT JACK BUILT* and *THE LITTLE DOCTOR*. And look at Smith's negative of *GRANDMA'S READING GLASS* in the Graham Head Collection.

Primary sources like company papers which I have xerox copies of show that Cooper had established his Alpha Trading Company in 1900 in St. Albans, with studios and laboratories first at Bedford Park, later at Alma Road, with a trading office in London, a show room for dealers (>agents<) in Beaconsfield Road and with cinemas (Alpha Picture Palaces) in St. Albans and Letchworth. This went on until 1911. After that he established the Heron Film Company for film productions and kept on trading under the Alpha banner.

Why has no one ever bothered to look into all this? The same applies for Acres. Why has this information always been brushed aside as unreliable family reminiscences? Would it not have been just the decent thing to do to look at it, even out of common politeness, and give it an objective assessment?

O yes, the Manx cat! I believe I wrote mongrel Manx cat and I am sorry that this adjective disappeared in the final editing of my article.

TJITTE DE VRIES

Reaction to Tony Fletcher

Tony Fletcher's interesting letter keeps the debate open and I shall try to answer his questions. It was film historians Georges Sadoul and Rachael Low who started this by crediting *GRANDMA'S READING GLASS* to G.A. Smith. Subsequently, since 1955, Audrey Wadowska tried to convince the British Film Institute that her father, Arthur Melbourne-Cooper, made the film.

Until her untimely death in 1982, Audrey Wadowska collected a mass of material concerning her father. What I am trying to do is to sort it all out and check it as far as possible. Let me give an example¹ of what Audrey Wadowska was up against and how she went about, collecting all that material. No blame to her that she went on and on collecting and searching, never finding the time to sort out, for she was defied ever so often. (I really think it would have been different if she had been a man.)

The NFA should look into their correspondence. Before my father died he made up a list of all his titles.² Not thousands, but quite a lot. He sent those to the NFA. He wanted to go to Aston Clinton and see the old films. He was there once.³ He thought he was helping them. He did not see an awful lot. He was shown *THE HOUSE THAT JACK BUILT* and he said: 'That is my film, but it is not my title. My title is *THE CASTLE OF BRICKS*.' He talked about *THE LITTLE DOCTOR* but they did not show him that. I remember they showed him *NOAH'S ARK*. My mother was there too and she said to me: 'That little girl looks like you.' But father said: 'No, that was before Audrey's time. That was Anton Nöggerath's child.' He made that film in 1909. But the (NFA) cataloguer (...), David Grenville or Grenfell, would not believe it. He said the film is from 1917. But in their lists it said 1913. I went to St. Albans, the office of the Herts Advertiser. Just before my parents got married my father was interviewed by the chief reporter and it said there⁴: They were welcomed in the Alpha Picture Palace by Mr. Melbourne-Cooper who showed them over the Picture Palace which had a studio underground and in course of production was the story of the ark and all the toys were there.

Audrey Wadowska was very surprised to hear that Graham Head told me at the Brighton Congress in 1978: »GRANDMA'S READING GLASS was made by Smith, because I have the negative which he gave to me.« Audrey told me:⁵

Graham Head used to visit us. He visited us a couple of years ago, 1975, and he told us he had always known that Smith never made that film. Because when they used to talk about the past and the reminiscences he never remembered a thing, never remembered making it, who was in it or anything. Smith had no recollections about it.

But my father remembered it. He remembered it ever so often. My aunt Bertha remembered it when we visited her in Southend. Just in conversation she remembered two films, GRANDMA'S READING GLASS and A COPPER IN THE COPPER, those two. We did not mention those films, but she did, because she was in them.

When I visited Graham Head in 1979, he showed me a tin, labelled »Reversal«. It contained a continuous strip of negative. According to Graham Head this was one of two pieces of film which Smith, a couple of years before his death, had given to him. According to Smith, one of the strips was the negative of GRANDMA'S READING GLASS. This negative, approx. 3 or 4 feet in length, shows only an eye in a black (on this negative: white) circular mask. The eye is not steady but, in the complete length of negative, moves around from one side to the other side of the circle. Graham Head cut for me four consecutive frames from one side of the strip. We both studied the material which looked quite unused. We could not detect markings that it had been in a printer. Probably no positive prints had been made from it. We both concluded that this piece of negative had no connection with the existing GRANDMA'S READING GLASS. This negative, as far as I know, is now in The Cinema Museum. My interview with Head is also on tape in The Cinema Museum, as Tony Fletcher told me himself a couple of years ago. Graham Head made his own recording of my interview with him.

A »character assassination« of Smith? Graham Head spoke very highly of Smith but during my interview of 6 August 1979 he also said:

»Smith only talked about himself. If you mentioned any other film maker he would get very angry.«

»Why?«

»Well, he would say they were nothing. Nothing.«

Gradually I am sorting and indexing all the material collected by Audrey Wadowska. Xerox copies of several items like John Grisedale's manuscript have gone to the Nederlands Film Museum and the St. Albans Museums, and

also lists of the interviews (on 73 reels) which Mrs. Wadowska recorded with extensive notes in her handwriting of what can be found on these tapes. Gradually I am making typescripts of them but, needing help from someone who understands the Hertfordshire accent of Melbourne-Cooper, I still do not have literal texts of all of them.

Listening to Mrs. Wadowska's interviews with her father is a real pleasure for someone interested in film history. Cooper clearly knows what he is talking about, his mind is clear and his memory is flowing. There are many other interesting tapes too, for instance the one described as Reel 23, with Audrey Wadowska interviewing Gordon Fisher and, later the same day, Reginald Shirtcliffe. Independent of one another they remember their friend Bert Massey. Both men are very clear about the identification of the children in the *GRANDMA'S READING GLASS*-series of films.

»Bert was a particular friend of mine. We were great friends and I always remember this film Bert was in«, says Gordon Fisher⁶ who recollects a short comedy *SHAVING BY THE NEW PROCESS*. Later, the same story outline is told by Shirtcliffe. He and Bert Massey played parts in it as young boys.

All the material is there. Audrey Wadowska's door was open to anyone who wanted to consult it, see the films and listen to the tapes. And my door is wide open too.

John Grisedale writes⁷:

An Alpha film made between May and August, 1900 was unique insofar as it introduced a new technique of filming, that of close-up shots, this being yet another innovation of Melbourne-Cooper. The film was entitled *GRANDMA'S READING GLASS* and was one hundred feet in length.

He then gives the story outline.

So runs the synopsis in Melbourne-Cooper's catalogue of a film of considerable technical importance giving greater flexibility of camera movement and heralding in a fascinating new method of approach to the cinematographic art.

The Alpha Trading Company issued only two or three catalogues, a copy of one of these is in incomplete form in Mrs. Wadowska's archive. Had Grisedale, who independently interviewed Melbourne-Cooper, seen an Alpha catalogue with *GRANDMA'S READING GLASS* in it? Or is it just a figure of speech? I have only found a transcript of four films from this, possibly the first, Alpha catalogue.

Audrey Wadowska says about the start of her research⁸:

After reading Rachael Low's book, my father was very naive. There were many gaps to fill in. Alpha and Melbourne-Cooper were not mentioned. (...) When I told my father about it (*GRANDMA'S READING GLASS*), he said it was only a 60 or 70 foot novelty and of course he explained how he sold the film to Urban and to whoever else it was and how they catalogued them, and it was not his business what happened to them like title changes, etcetera, etcetera. He got his money for them. And when I tackled him about it, he said: Well, he was only earning a living, the more he sold, the better. He could not remember the date. That was my job later. I went by the catalogues. (...) And in 1903 it came under the name of Smith. As far as I know Smith never published catalogues. It was in Urban's catalogues. My father was a youngster. He sold his films. They came under the names of Williamson or whoever it was. And that was it. My supposition is, Smith worked then in the office⁹ and it was his job to compile these catalogues. He found these films of an older date, 1903, old stock, and these ones he puts under his name, and those others he puts under his pal's, Williamson's, name. (...) We got tapes of my father talking about it (*GRANDMA'S READING GLASS*) in general, in conversation. He did not talk what you might say specifically. None of the tapes are specific interviews. We were talking and just had the tape recorder on. He just goes on and on. And his sister remembered him making it. (...) She did not describe it in detail, but she just mentioned the title and that she took part in it with Bert Massey. She is not supposed to be grandma anyway. It is actually a child playing with grandma's reading glass, both of them. There is no grandma. The story line is not printed, not composed correctly. (...) I remember reading to him Rachael Low's book saying somewhere that Smith did not remember the film. And he said: No, because he did not make it. That was his reaction to that.

This extract demonstrates the problems involved in using quotes from interviews in an article of limited space. What is needed is the book I am working on. For instance, Audrey Wadowska told me about *AT LAST! THAT AWFUL TOOTH*:¹⁰

Father used to say, Urban said it was horrifying because you saw the blood coming down this tooth. They all thought it was a human tooth, from a man's mouth. But father had bought especially from the local butcher, Oakley, in Lattimore Road, this bullock's tooth and he enlarged that. I asked him after reading Rachael Low's book: Which film came first? And he said: *GRANDMA'S READING GLASS*.

As far as I know the Danish copy of *GRANDMA'S READING GLASS* is the only version in existence. I do not know about other English versions. I realise that borrowing of ideas was common in those days and, like today with computer software, piracy was then all too common. The Paris Congress was about just that problem! Melbourne-Cooper had an essential interest in this congress, and that is exactly the reason why he was there.

The British Film Institute, – where many assistants were always very helpful to Audrey Wadowska, – was kind enough to allow me¹¹ to make xerox copies of Smith's cash book and photo reproductions of his account book. The first entry in the cash book is 1 January 1897. The dates of the last entries are in 1909, followed by two single entries in 1911 and 1912. Smith's account book starts under »Philipp Wolff 1898 From old Ledger«, starting with an entry on July 18. The latest entry is under »J. Williamson«: 3 April 1900.

Melbourne-Cooper never worked for Smith. After he left Birt Acres, in late 1895 or early 1896, he became a free-lance film maker, first using Acres' studio, later at Ridge Hill, in a barn behind the Waggon & Horses Inn, his first »agents« being Birt Acres, Robert W. Paul and fairground showmen soon followed by Warwick Trading Company, Walturdaw and many others.

Whoever made which version of GRANDMA'S READING GLASS? Forget this question for just a moment and look at little classics like TRAWLERS AHOY and MATCHES' APPEAL (both 1899), RESCUED IN MID-AIR and THE BLACKSMITH'S DAUGHTER (both 1904), MOTOR PIRATES (1906), DREAM OF TOYLAND (1907), THE SCULPTOR'S DREAM (1909) and my recent discovery FOR OLD LOVE'S SAKE¹² (1908), – all made by Melbourne-Cooper. These films show that he was an original and creative film maker, a very early independent cinematographer and an artist, a movie-making craftsman in his own right. How is it possible that the maker of these films can be ignored today?

What I would like is recognition of what film pioneers like Birt Acres and Arthur Melbourne-Cooper achieved. I think that a fruitful debate can only come after that.

Notes

1 Interview Audrey Wadowska, 1 June 1978.

2 I have a xerox copy of this list which contains 126 titles. In 1970 Audrey Wadowska sent to deputy curator Colin Ford three lists of titles: one list of 18 titles which were definitely not her father's films; one list with 31 titles of films personally identified by her father as made by him; and one list with 42 titles, identified by herself as Alpha productions.

3 Confirmed by a letter of the NFA of 9 May 1956.

4 Herts Advertiser & St. Albans Times, 13 March 1909: »The Ark is even now in course of erection, and a full complement of animals – all specially jointed so as to allow of life-like attitudes – is expected to arrive before long.

These pictures will be composed on the same principle as those illustrative of 'Toyland' which met with general approval whenever shown.«

5 Interview 1 June 1978.

6 Interview by Audrey Wadowska, St. Albans, February 1963.

7 Pages 174/175 of his ms. *Portrait in Celluloid*, 1958.

8 Interview 1 June 1978.

9 Warwick Trading Company before Urban established his own Urban Trading Company in 1903.

10 Interview 2 January 1978.

11 In August 1979.

12 Original is now in the Nederlands Film Museum for restoration.