

## Mitchell and Kenyon DVD Collection teacher notes

### Mitchell and Kenyon films as historical sources

#### History teachers and original sources

Traditionally, history teachers have focused on text-based sources, and to a lesser extent still images. Indeed, as OFSTED reports and other observations have shown, history teachers have developed great skill in getting students to engage with a wide range of source material.

- Text-based reports are analysed in detail. History students are well versed in the skill of hunting for and isolating language which gives away the aims or background of an author and casts doubt on how far we can accept at face value what we are being told. History students are also highly competent in addressing questions about sources, such as whether the picture they paint is typical or representative of the individuals, groups, countries or other subject described by the source.
- Photographs are scrutinised carefully for evidence of tampering. They are assessed in terms of whether the scenes they show really represent a period or event, or whether they are in fact showing something untypical of a place or period.
- Cartoons are analysed at the deepest levels. Most history students can spot caricature, exaggeration and similar techniques, as well as being able to identify the messages being conveyed through these 'imperfections'.

#### History teachers and moving image sources

However, on the whole, we history teachers have been less pioneering in using moving images in the same way as other source material.

- We have tended to use newsreel footage or other archive film as a means to help students see the unfolding of events rather than analysing that footage as a primary source which reveals a huge amount about the authors of the films and the times in which the films were seen by mass audiences.
- Indeed, we have rarely shown archive footage on its own. It is usually seen as part of a historical documentary in which it provides a visual context for a story written and narrated by a film-maker.
- The greater part of any archive film usually concerns major political events and is generally focused on important political leaders, monarchs and the like.
- Finally, the footage which most of our students have seen is from 1914 or later.

### **Developing moving image literacy**

The Mitchell and Kenyon films provide us with an opportunity to address all of these issues. The great majority date from 1900 to 1913. They are overwhelmingly concerned with ordinary people in ordinary surroundings, although there is an emphasis on leisure and special events rather than work or other everyday activities. The material on the DVD is shown as it was recorded and seen at the time.

As a result, the films provide an opportunity to engage with important questions about the nature of historical source material. The real bonus is that teachers can tackle this worthy task using a medium (film) which almost all students find accessible and interesting. Here are a few ideas to help students develop their skills in using moving images as an historical source, and also have fun in the process.

### **Empathy with the audience**

Students are well accustomed to seeing movies at multiplex cinemas or having films on demand on video or DVD at home. Most will struggle to understand how big an event the film show was.

- Show the students any film from the collection. A film which usually generates interest is film 622 *Bradford Coronation Day* (1902). Play the film through once on a TV screen. Then black out the room as completely as possible and, ideally, play the film using an LCD projector with the image as large as possible. Ask the students which viewing they felt was more authentic and what difference they noticed in the impact each type of showing had on the audience.
- Explain to the students that although the film is silent, the film-maker might well have given his own running commentary or even added a few jokes, such as pretending to ask a person in the film to move out of the shot (which the person then does). See if the students can provide a commentary and/or some jokes to entertain the audience.

### **Attentive observation**

At the risk of stating the obvious, it is very important that students learn to observe moving image sources in detail, just as it is important that they spot nuances and pointed language in text sources.

- A good way to promote observation is to play a film and then ask students to describe the exact sequence of events. An ideal film for this is 602 *Parkgate Iron and Steel Co., Rotherham* (1901). Ask students to read back their accounts and see what differences emerge between these accounts. Then play the film again, using the pause button. One of the great advantages of DVD is that paused images are crystal clear and that films can be played through scene by scene.

- Another good observation exercise is simply to furnish students with a series of broad themes and ask what selected films tell us about these themes. Obvious examples are: clothing, transport, buildings, work, leisure.
- An alternative approach to the same basic idea is to present students with a series of questions or, usually more engaging, a series of assertions to address. For example, you could suggest that in Mitchell and Kenyon's time:
  - Women did not work
  - Children were all at school
  - Very few people smoked
  - It was pretty unusual not to wear a hat
  - The bicycle had not been invented
  - Most transport was horse drawn
  - People loved the seaside
  - Only the very rich could enjoy days out by the sea
  - Parades were not very popular any more.

The students' job is then to explain whether or not these assertions are supported by the available evidence. This process might involve students searching through the collection of films themselves or simply studying a selection predetermined by the teacher.

### **Understanding the film-makers' intentions**

The films in *The Mitchell and Kenyon Collection* were all made for public consumption. The primary intention of all of the films was to get people to pay to watch them in projection shows (this is illustrated beautifully in the latter part of film 527 *Comic Pictures in High Street, West Bromwich* (1902)). As a result, entertainment was clearly a critical intent behind the films. However, entertainment could come in many forms. It might be the simple fascination of seeing your own or other towns on the screen. Films might be made in order to appeal to particular sentiments such as patriotism. Children were a popular subject.

The desire to entertain, inform or amuse meant that many scenes might be staged for the camera. The film-maker sometimes paid the subjects for their contribution to the film. This raises questions about how far the film represents a typical or natural portrayal of a particular place or subject. On the other hand, even the staged scenes are very effective at showing us what people of the time thought was interesting or entertaining.

One of the biggest draws was the prospect of people seeing themselves or their friends and families on the screen. With this in mind, much of the Mitchell and Kenyon footage was of large crowd scenes, such as football matches or closing time at the factory. The evening show was then prominently advertised, urging people to come and see themselves on film. These scenes probably represent quite faithfully the appearance and behaviour of ordinary

people of the time, even if that behaviour is the perfectly normal (and still very common today) tendencies to show off or be overcome with embarrassment when faced with a camera.

So how can we explore this issue of intent through the films?

- A good way is to examine a range of films from the DVD, such as: *266 Audley Grange School Blackburn* (c1904); *59 Alfred Butterworth and Sons, Glebe Mills, Hollinwood* (1901); *772 Sedgwick's Bioscope Show Front* (1901).
- Ask students to study the films and decide whether they think the prime motive in each film was to:
  - Entertain
  - Amuse
  - Inform
  - Appeal to sentiment
  - Provide local interest
  - Experiment with what could be filmed.
- Ask students to identify any films or sections of films which they think were staged for the camera.
- Finally, ask them to reflect on what the films tell us about people of the time and consider whether some films are more reliable as historical sources than others as a result of the main intent behind them. Encourage students to discuss the exact meaning of the term 'reliable', by considering the question 'reliable as historical sources for the study of what?'