Introduction

There is nothing new in proposing the 1940s as arguably the enduring high point in the history of British cinema. Books continue to appear about the great names of the period, such as David Lean and Michael Powell; but, as well as the 'quality cinema' associated with these directors, there was also a popular output from film-makers who have not yet been subject to such detailed treatment. There are also excellent books that focus on the period at large,[1] but they are apt to be more concerned with the prestige arm of British film or with thematic concerns.

The purpose of the present book is to draw attention to four directors whose career trajectories had a good deal in common and can tell us much about what British filmgoers were flocking to see in this crucial decade when they were at their most prolific. They are Leslie Arliss, Arthur Crabtree, Bernard Knowles and Lawrence Huntington. All were born at the turn of the century (Arliss in 1901, the other three in 1900); all had been active in a range of film-making functions in the 1930s; and each would do his most proficient and popular work in the 1940s. After that they prolonged their careers, if not their reputations, in 'B' movies, co-features and television, but even in these reduced circumstances their long-honed professionalism would see them through. If none of them hurdled the decade with the comparative ease of their contemporary Lance Comfort, they are all responsible for some of the better moments to be found in the lower depths of post-1940s cinema in Britain. At whatever levels, they all persisted into the 1960s, and to have maintained thirty-year careers in the often crisis-ridden British film industry says something for their persistence – and entitles them to a closer examination. Taken together, they may offer a commentary on the changing fortunes of British cinema over the period of their prolificacy – and perhaps some insight into why this declined.

These are not biographical studies, but, as well as offering some detailed discussion of their major films, the aim is also to reflect on

the contexts in which they operated, contexts both industrial and social, though the emphasis will be on the kinds of preoccupations and dexterity revealed by a close analysis of their films. There will be some account of the involvement of each member of the quartet in the lead-up to his most significant period. It is not intended to offer a detailed account of all the films with which they were associated in the 1930s but, rather, to identify some tendencies in their work that may help to account for their later successes.

They were as much a part of the crucial war and post-war decade as the more obviously prestigious names who have been so much written about. As well as examining the films themselves, both as entities and for how they resonate with the cultural and social climate of the time, part of the aim will be to place them in the spectrum of British film-going at that time when audiences were at a record high. It will be useful to distinguish the sorts of output associated with this quartet from that commonly associated with the idea of Britain's 'quality cinema'.[2]

All four emerged as proficient commercial directors in the 1940s, but this should not elide the different paths by which each reached this status. For instance, Arliss continued as a screenwriter and directed a couple of modest pieces (*The Farmer's Wife* and *The Night Has Eyes*) before staking his claim to box-office success with *The Man in Grey* in 1943. Huntington also maintained his screenwriting career along with directing five minor genre entertainments before his 'A'-film breakthrough with *Night Boat to Dublin* in 1946. Former cinematographers Crabtree and Knowles pursued this aspect of their art before making their directorial debuts in 1945 with, respectively, *Madonna of the Seven Moons* and *A Place of One's Own*. The individual chapter on each will trace the sort of 'preparation' each engaged in before his major work as director: certain aspects of that preparation will recur in each, others will be marked by divergence in matters of both work and reputation.

Popularity as a phenomenon is always worth considering for what it tells us about society at large at any given time. No doubt film-makers – not just directors but, obviously, producers and studios as well – are always interested in, hopeful that they have tapped into, what will attract the film-going public. The public in its turn will show by its response at the box-office to what extent the film-makers have been successful in this matter. Just what was it about, say, *The Man in Grey* that occasioned such popular success – and that led to a cycle of films in the costume melodrama genre? Was it just a matter of respite from the difficulties of the wartime period? Or was it also because such films, in more oblique ways than the more obvious realist (and critical) successes of the time, offered other ways of reflecting on lived experience?

What follows is not essentially a sociological examination of 'film and society', but it is impossible in considering the key films of the chosen directors not to be aware of resonances that go beyond – and grow out of – the narrative trajectories of the individual films. As film-making conditions changed, they had to find different opportunities, and these opportunities also reflect on changing audience tastes and production possibilities. Above all, this book aims to focus on four craftsmen who made significant contributions to the ongoing pattern of British film over several decades. These are names that have too often been allowed scant, if any attention in the critical discourse relating to the period of their prolificacy. Admiration for, say, *Brief Encounter* or *The Way Ahead* does not necessarily preclude appreciation of the skills involved in *Madonna of the Seven Moons*.

Of course, I have made reference where appropriate to valuable critical writing about films directed by the four highlighted in this study and have also been interested in what various actors and other collaborators have had to say about their work for these directors. In general, though, I have been more concerned with researching how they were received by popular contemporary magazines such as *Picturegoer* and *Picture Show*, and what trade papers like *Kinematograph Weekly* and *Today's Cinema* made of them. These might be thought to have had their fingers on the pulse of what was likely to appeal to large, receptive audiences.

Notes

1 For example, Charles Barr, *Ealing Studios*, London: University of California Press, 1977; Robert Murphy, *Realism and Tinsel: Cinema and Society in Britain 1939–48*, London: Routledge, 1989; Charles Drazin, *The Finest Years: British Cinema of the 1940s*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2007.

2 Term used by John Ellis in 'The Quality Film Adventure: British Critics and the Cinema 1942–1948', in Andrew Higson (ed.), *Dissolving Views*, London: Cassell, 1996.