

## Filming Lloyd George

It is September 1918 and things have turned decidedly ugly on the streets of Birmingham. A large and threatening crowd has gathered outside the Town Hall and is endeavouring to force its way inside. Uniformed police are pushing the rioters back, and a steady flow of casualties is being ferried to hospital.

You don't have to take my word for any of this; there's footage of the whole thing. Except that none of it is quite as it seems. The blood is real enough, and so are the casualties; but what is happening is a movie. As the people surge back and forth, they are being directed by an unseen man with a megaphone, perched somewhere high up in Victoria Square.

All this was part of arguably the most significant film in British silent movie history. The man behind the megaphone was Maurice Elvey, who directed some 200 features over the course of 25 years. Elvey worked alongside Victor Saville, Leslie Howard and Ivor Novello, and mentored both David Lean and Carol Reed. Elvey's work, beginning in 1913, ran the full gamut from science fiction to swashbuckling romance, and included bio-pics of Florence Nightingale and Lord Nelson.

The Birmingham sequence was to take its place in Elvey's most epic adventure of them all. In ten episodes, lasting a total of two-and-a-half hours, Elvey would tell the story of David Lloyd George: *The Man Who Saved the Empire*.

Elvey's film was the product of Ideal Films, one of the country's leading production and distribution companies. Norman Page played the lead role, and the script was by the leading historian and recently knighted Sir Sidney Low.

The very idea appears preposterous. In September 1918 war was still raging on the Western Front and the nascent and threadbare British cinema was already in thrall to the better funded American industry. Yet all the sequences for Lloyd George were shot in less than a month, and the whole thing was ready for release by the middle of October.

But what was most extraordinary of all was that this was a film (probably the very first) about a living politician, and one who just happened to be Prime Minister. The tale of the man who rose from humble Welsh origins to become the greatest statesman in Europe could hardly fail to appeal to Maurice Elvey's socialist beliefs. If the Americans had done Lincoln, he would do Lloyd George.

The scene filmed in Birmingham covered Lloyd George's infamous appearance at the Town Hall in December 1901 to protest against the Boer War. The town of Birmingham, fiercely loyal to Joseph Chamberlain, the war's architect, reacted like a lynch-mob, and the future PM had to be smuggled out of the hall, dressed as a policeman. It was perhaps the most dramatic – and most photogenic – event in his political career.

The director told an interviewer in 1967, shortly before his death, that with so little in the way of human resources available to him, Elvey did what he always did. He advertised in the local press, and the Birmingham public came down in their thousands. "Of course they loved it – it was free entertainment on a Saturday afternoon," he added.

The police too were extras and suffered the brunt of the violence. For some in the crowd, perhaps, it was a perfect opportunity to "take a pop at a copper" and to do so with impunity.

This was probably the earliest feature-film to visit Birmingham. More importantly, it was British cinema's attempt to meet the challenge of the Americans – in particular the epics of D. W. Griffith – head on. And yet the film was never released. What happened ?

The fate of the Lloyd George film perfectly illustrates the febrile atmosphere of war-torn Britain. First the film company found themselves fighting (and winning) a libel action against the popular magazine *John Bull*, which claimed that Ideal Films was a hot-bed of pro-German sympathisers. Allegations that the directors were "foreign" or "Jewish" were thrown out of court.

Secondly, the newly appointed Minister of Information – Lord Beaverbrook – took exception to the film's socialist sub-text. To the newspaper magnate, cinema was becoming a dangerous democratic presence, and needed careful supervision. Even this most patriotic of movies was seen as a threat.

But, most crucially of all, Lloyd George himself was persuaded that a film of his life-story was not something he should be associated with. With a general election in the offing, once the war was over, too sympathetic a portrayal of the sitting incumbent might be perceived as tilting the ballot-box in his favour.

And so *The Man Who Saved the Empire* was seized by government solicitors and made to disappear. When Maurice Elvey gave his final interview in 1967 he believed his *magnum opus* had gone for good.

Remarkably, though, it had not. In fact, the negative remained in the hands of the Prime Minister, and in due course passed to his grandson, Lord Tenby. In 1994 Lord Tenby handed over 137 reels of unidentified and unlabelled nitrate to the Wales Film and Television Archive, and so Elvey's missing masterpiece was re-discovered.

*The Story of Lloyd George* finally received its world premiere at Cardiff in May 1996, all of 78 years after it was made. And thus all those thousands of Birmingham extras at last had their thirty seconds of fame.