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The Land without Music

THE SOUND OF HAMMERS

We came from Aston. There wasn't a whole lot of flowers being handed out.

'Geezer' Butler, bassist and songwriter of Black Sabbath, interviewed on *Heavy Metal Britannia*, 5 March 2010

One Friday afternoon in 1965, Tony Iommi chopped off his fingers. It was his last day at the sheet-metal factory, and he was just back from his lunch break. Normally he worked as a welder, but the woman who operated the giant steel press next to him was away, so that morning the foreman had put him on the machine instead. Even years later, Tony could still remember the wobbly foot pedal that he had to press to bring the great guillotine slamming down on the sheet of steel. He had never used it before, but the morning went well enough. At lunchtime he went home – he was, after all, only 17 – and told his mother that since it was his last day, he might as well not bother going back for the afternoon. She was not impressed. 'You want to go back and finish the day off, finish it proper!' she said. So back went Tony, dreaming, like so many teenagers in 1965, about being on stage, guitar in hand, thrilling the crowds beneath the lights. He was still daydreaming when he sat back down at the machine, pushed on the pedal and brought the full weight of the steel press down on his right hand. Instinctively he pulled his hand away, and to his horror he caught a glimpse of the ends of his two middle fingers, just sitting there on the machine. Later, when he was in hospital, someone from the factory thoughtfully brought the severed fingertips over in a matchbox, but by this time they had turned black.[1]

Up until the point he cut his fingers off, Tony Iommi had enjoyed a typical working-class upbringing in inner-city Birmingham. Born into an Italian family in 1948, he grew up in a world that was poor by twenty-first-century standards, but was far more comfortable – affluent, even – than what had gone before. For the first few years, he lived above his grandfather's ice-cream shop. Later, after his parents had bought a little grocery shop of their own, they moved to Aston, which he remembered as 'an awful, gang-infested, rough part of Birmingham'. The house was cold and clammy, and he hated bringing friends back because their sitting room, which they used as a stockroom, was full of tins of beans. But life was not all damp and drudgery. He had a set of lead soldiers, and every time his father went away for work – he doubled as a carpenter, and worked on Cheltenham Racecourse – he brought back another soldier for little Tony's collection.

Tony's real joy, though, was music. Like so many of the pop and rock stars of the 1960s and 1970s, he came from a musical family, and his father and his uncles loved to play the accordion. For Tony, however, the supreme pleasure lay in retreating to his bedroom and tuning in to Radio Luxembourg on his little radio. His favourites were Cliff Richard and the Shadows; as a keen amateur guitarist, he liked them much more than Elvis or the Beatles. When he was sixteen he joined a local band called the Rockin' Chevrolets, who wore red lamé suits and knew all the Shadows' songs by heart. By now he had left school: never a very keen pupil, he worked first as a plumber's assistant, then in a factory, then in a music shop, and finally at the sheet-metal works. In fact, he quite liked the sheet-metal works. 'I enjoyed working in the foundry,' he recalled, many years later. 'It was hard work but it was rewarding. I became quite good as a welder. It was as noisy as hell with all the crashing of the metal, the hiss of the steam and the sizzle of the welding. Real heavy metal.' But then he was offered the chance to join a much more professional local band, the Birds & the Bees, who had been booked on a tour of Europe. For a teenager who dreamed of copying the Shadows, it was too good a chance to turn down. And then, on his last day at the factory, he cut the ends of his fingers off.[2]

At that point, his musical career might have been over. But it was the factory manager, whom Tony remembered as 'an older, balding man with a thin moustache called Brian', who saved him. Visiting him in hospital one day, the manager handed over a Django Reinhardt record

and told him to put it on. 'This guy plays guitar,' the manager remarked, 'and he only plays with two fingers.' Tony did as he was told. 'Bloody hell,' he thought, 'it was brilliant!' And if Django could do it, then so could he. Against his doctor's orders, he tried playing with bandaged fingers, but it was impossible. So he fell back on the skills he had learned during his short spell at the steel factory:

> I got a Fairy Liquid bottle, melted it down, shaped it into a ball and waited until it cooled down. I then made a hole in it with a soldering iron until it sort of fitted over the finger. I shaped it a bit more with a knife and then I got some sandpaper and sat there for hours sandpapering it down to make it into a kind of thimble ... Then I found this old jacket of mine and cut a piece of leather off it ... I cut it into a shape so that it would fit over the thimble and glued it on, left it to dry and then I tried it and I thought, bloody hell, I can actually touch the string with this now!

Even decades later, after he had become one of the best known rock guitarists on the planet, Tony Iommi still used the same technique, only using prosthetic thimbles made especially for him. He even used pieces from the same old leather jacket that he had first ripped up in 1965. 'There isn't much of it left now,' he wrote more than four decades later, 'but it should last another few years.'

There was, however, one more crucial change before Iommi could play comfortably again. Guitars in the mid-1960s invariably had tight, heavy strings that gradually shredded the leather from his thimbles; what was worse, his mutilated fingers were simply too weak to bend the strings for any length of time. Again and again, with the meticulous patience of a master craftsman, he would take his Fender Stratocaster apart, searching for a way to relieve the pressure on his fingers. Eventually he gave up and asked his local shop to give him banjo strings, which were much lighter than the usual guitar strings. And as he slackened the strings, turning up his amplifier to compensate, so he began to develop an entirely new sound, all his own. Some guitar groups of the mid-Sixties had already experimented with a grittier, more aggressive sound: the Kinks' breakthrough hit, 'You Really Got Me', which had come out in August 1964, is a famous example. But by using lighter, deliberately down-tuned strings, Iommi was now producing a lower, louder, heavier sound than anything in the charts at the time. To put it very crudely, the

combination of his missing fingertips and his mechanical tinkering had invented heavy metal.[3]

It is tempting to wonder what might have happened if Iommi had been concentrating that afternoon at the steel press. No doubt he would have gone on tour with the Birds & the Bees, but since they never broke through to stardom he might never have achieved his dream. Perhaps he would have ended up back at the factory. As it was, though, his story became a kind of 1960s version of the triumph-over-adversity tales that used to be served up to Victorian children. In the first months after his accident, Iommi worked as a typewriter repairman. Then, in the late summer of 1968, he formed a blues band, Earth, with three other Birmingham lads: Bill Ward, 'Geezer' Butler and 'Ozzy' Osbourne. Despite their subsequent wayward reputation, they were actually a very good example of the importance of parental support in rock and roll success: not only did Iommi's mother help them to buy their van, but Osbourne's father signed a pay bond for their new Triumph amp. A year later, they renamed themselves Black Sabbath; the story goes that Butler had seen the Boris Karloff horror film of the same name at a local cinema, but Iommi later insisted that they had never seen it, and the name 'just sounded like a good one to use'.

Black Sabbath's early lyrics were, to put it kindly, a bit unsophisticated. In his autobiography, Iommi admits that Osbourne often sang whatever came into his head, and that at least half the band did not know what 'Paranoid', the title of perhaps their most famous single, actually meant. But it hardly mattered. When their first album, *Black Sabbath*, came out in February 1970, its heavy, distorted sound and vaguely occult associations propelled it to number eight in the charts. Their next album, *Paranoid*, released only eight months later, went to number one and stayed in the American charts for seventy-two weeks. By now Iommi, who was still living with his parents in a working-class area of Birmingham, had more money than anybody in his family had ever dreamed of. He promptly bought himself a Lamborghini. Then he bought his father a Rolls-Royce, which the dealers delivered to the house. 'Can you imagine me going to work in that?' his father exclaimed. 'What would all the people say, and the neighbours, what are they going to think?' To his son's consternation, he refused even to get in it. In the end, it had to go back.[4]

Heavy metal is not, of course, to everybody's taste; in fact, it is not even to mine. From the beginning, its audience was overwhelmingly

male and working-class, which made it stand out in a record market dominated by teenage girls. What was more, its belligerent sound and often primitive lyrics made for a stark contrast with the arty, self-consciously 'progressive' rock beloved of most music critics in the early 1970s, who snobbishly wrote it off as mere noise, made by cavemen for cavemen. Indeed, as a genre, it has never really escaped from beneath the shadow of Rob Reiner's film *This Is Spinal Tap* (1984), an affectionate parody which cemented the stereotype of heavy metal musicians as knuckle-headed dimwits called Derek. Yet heavy metal is an outstanding example of the worldwide impact of British popular culture in the last half-century. Black Sabbath's record sales alone come to an estimated 75 million, while other British bands such as Judas Priest and Iron Maiden have sold similar totals. In the 2011 census, some 6,242 people listed heavy metal as their religion, and when Black Sabbath released their album *13* two years later, it reached number one not just in Britain, but in Canada, Denmark, Germany, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and – most lucratively, and therefore more importantly – the United States. Perhaps it is little wonder, then, that when Birmingham inaugurated a Hollywood-style 'Walk of Stars' in the city centre, just a few yards from the gleaming golden statues of the fathers of the steam engine, Matthew Boulton, James Watt and William Murdoch, they turned to Black Sabbath. The first star, in July 2007, was awarded to Ozzy Osbourne. Tony Iommi got his just over a year later. And in recent years Birmingham's media have been keen to emphasize the connections between the city's most famous musical export and its long industrial heritage. 'It seems only fitting', declared the *Birmingham Post* some forty-eight years after Iommi's accident, 'that a city at the heart of the Industrial Revolution should also be the birthplace of heavy metal music.'[5]

Even in the early 1970s, music critics often pointed out the connections between Black Sabbath's music and their West Midlands background. 'Birmingham is a natch for rock 'n' roll,' wrote the *New Musical Express*'s Rob Partridge in 1974. 'It is dour and grubby, the biggest industrial city in Britain. Birmingham is flanked by coal fields, steel mills and car and engineering plants. Something a little like Detroit, in fact.' At the time, though, the band themselves were far from starry-eyed about living in Birmingham; when they thought about their native city, they thought about getting out. 'I hated it, living there,' Iommi said later. 'I think that influenced our music, as far as where we come from and the

area we were from. It made it sort of more mean.' Yet they were simultaneously conscious of their status as provincial outsiders, fighting against the cultural trends that emanated from supposedly swinging London. To youngsters like Iommi and Osbourne – and probably most of their West Midlands contemporaries – the hippyish, free-love, flower-power ethos of the late 1960s seemed like something from another planet. 'We lived in a dreary, polluted, dismal town and we were angry about it,' Osbourne told *Q* magazine decades later. 'For us the whole hippy thing was bullshit. The only flower you saw in Aston was on a gravestone. So we thought, let's scare the whole fucking planet with music.'[6]

This does not quite explain, though, why heavy metal came from Birmingham, rather than Hereford, or Hull. The answer is that Birmingham, more than any other city, had become synonymous with the sound and the spectacle of industry. Indeed, the story of heavy metal offers a perfect example of the debt that modern British popular culture owes to the achievements of the Victorians.

Thanks to Birmingham's canal network, steam engines, closeness to the Shropshire and Staffordshire coal belt, and its entrepreneurial, workshop economy, no city in Britain became a more potent symbol of the Industrial Revolution. As early as 1791, the agricultural and travel writer Arthur Young declared that Birmingham was 'the first manufacturing town in the world', while eighty years later *Willey's History and Guide to Birmingham* enthused that the city's manufactures were 'almost infinite in their variety . . . from a pin to a steam engine, from pens to swords and guns, from "cheap and nasty" wares sold at country fairs by "cheap Johns" to the exquisitely beautiful and elaborate gold and silver services which adorn mansions of the rich'. To many observers, of course, Birmingham seemed a monstrous place: for Charles Dickens, it was one of the principal inspirations for Coketown, the industrial Hades in his novel *Hard Times* (1854): 'a town of unnatural red and black like the painted face of a savage . . . a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever, and never got uncoiled'. It even made an impression on the 13-year-old future Queen Victoria, who passed through Birmingham in August 1832. Afterwards she wrote a memorable entry in her diary:

> We have just changed horses at Birmingham where I was two years ago and we visited the manufactories which are very curious. It rains very

> hard. We just passed through a town where all coal mines are and you see the fire glimmer at a distance in the engines in many places. The men, women, children, country and houses are all black. But I can not by any description give an idea of its strange and extraordinary appearance. The country is very desolate everywhere; there are coals about, and the grass is quite blasted and black. I just now see an extraordinary building flaming with fire. The country continues black, engines flaming, coals in abundance, every where, smoking and burning coal heaps, intermingled with wretched huts and carts and little ragged children.[7]

Just as twenty-first-century travel writers are drawn to Chinese cities such as Shanghai and Guangzhou, seeing them as irresistible, if hellish, symbols of dynamism and progress, so their Victorian equivalents followed the road to the West Midlands, their eyes almost popping with wonder at the blazing spectacle of industrial modernity. Approaching the city through the Black Country in 1860, for example, the Royal Society's librarian, Walter White, could barely contain his excitement at the 'roaring-furnaces . . . pouring forth their fierce throbbing flames like volcanoes', or 'the hundred chimneys of iron-works' with their 'fiery tongues'. Yet what really struck White was not so much the spectacle, infernal as it was, as the *sound*. Here is his description of the Birmingham Battery Works:

> I could scarcely refrain from stopping my ears when led to the Battery, where three large hammers, moved by machinery, are smiting at the rate of five hundred strokes a minute, and with tremendous din. The hammer-head is wedge-formed, like a V, the thin end being the striking part. By each hammer sits a man, at the level of the floor, fashioning brass bowls, kettles, and pans under the noisy blows . . . Poor battery-men! compelled to sit with their heads close to the hammers. Only by plugs of cotton in their ears do they preserve themselves from speedy deafness.

Other nineteenth-century visitors also found their ears ringing from the din. After visiting Birmingham in 1835, the French historian and travel writer Alexis de Tocqueville, best known today for his book *Democracy in America*, thought the city was 'an immense workshop, a huge forge, a vast shop', where 'one hears nothing but the sound of hammers and the whistle of steam escaping from boilers'. And has there ever been a more evocative description of the terrible noise of industry than in *The*

Old Curiosity Shop (1841), when Dickens's Little Nell, wandering desperately through the Midlands, finds herself in Birmingham?

> On every side, and far as the eye could see into the heavy distance, tall chimneys, crowding on each other, and presenting that endless repetition of the same dull, ugly form, which is the horror of oppressive dreams, poured out their plague of smoke, obscured the light, and made foul the melancholy air. On mounds of ashes by the wayside, sheltered only by a few rough boards, or rotten pent-house roofs, strange engines spun and writhed like tortured creatures; clanking their iron chains, shrieking in their rapid whirl from time to time as though in torment unendurable, and making the ground tremble with their agonies . . .

A few lines later, Dickens describes the machines as 'wrathful monsters . . . screeching and turning round and round again'; further down, he tells us that the sound was at its worst at night, 'when the noise of every strange machine was aggravated by the darkness'.[8]

The Birmingham of Tony Iommi's youth was, of course, a very different place from its nineteenth-century predecessor. It was both cleaner and quieter, for a start. But it is surely not too fanciful to see a link between the sound of the Victorian industrial giant and the noise produced by the city's heavy metal stars more than a century later. Black Sabbath's drummer, Bill Ward, told an interviewer that he used to lie awake at night listening to the rhythmical pounding of the machines in a nearby factory and drumming with his fingers on the headboard. Similarly, Sabbath's great local rivals, Judas Priest, who played their first gig in Walsall in 1970, often identified the area's industrial soundtrack as the defining influence on their music. Their singer, Rob Halford, whose father worked for a Walsall metalworking firm, recalled that at school:

> We'd be doing English, and we'd be next to a metal foundry, and the steam hammers would be banging up and down, and the whole desk would be shaking . . . Walking home, the air was full of all these bits of metal grit, and you could taste it, and you could breathe it in . . . You literally breathed in metal.

His bandmate Glen Tipton, who worked as an apprentice at British Steel, agreed. 'We really did grow up in a labyrinth of heavy metal. Huge foundries, big steam hammers,' he remembered. 'You could always hear

the steam hammers. There was always a steel mill within audible distance.' Perhaps it was little wonder, then, that Judas Priest's lyrics were saturated with references to the West Midlands' industrial past, especially in their album *British Steel* (1980). The title, in fairness, is a bit of a giveaway. 'Pounding the world like a battering ram / Forging the furnace for the final grand slam,' runs 'Rapid Fire'. 'Hammering anvils straining muscle and might / Shattering blows crashing browbeating fright.'[9]

For both Judas Priest and Black Sabbath, 1980 marked something of a high point. In the United States alone, Judas Priest sold a million copies of *British Steel*, a feat matched by Black Sabbath's album *Heaven and Hell*. By this point, Sabbath had sacked Ozzy Osbourne for drunkenness, but it barely seemed to dent their popularity: when they played at the Los Angeles Coliseum that July, they attracted a sell-out crowd of 75,000 people. The irony, though, is that at precisely that moment, on the other side of the Atlantic, the industrial world in which they had grown up was falling apart. The rot had set in years, even decades earlier, but when the economy tipped into recession within months of Margaret Thatcher's arrival as Prime Minister, it was the manufacturing industries of the Midlands that paid the heaviest price. On 4 July, three weeks before Black Sabbath's triumph at the Los Angeles Coliseum, *The Times* reported that in some parts of the West Midlands more than one in four people were out of work. A table in that day's paper told the dreadful tale, charting, month by month, the factory closures – Wolverhampton, Wednesbury, Bilston, Tipton, Halesowen, Oldbury, Walsall, West Bromwich – a few hundred out of work here, a few thousand there. In Birmingham alone, 20,000 people had lost their jobs in just a few months. Every week another workshop closed its doors, another chimney came down, another factory fell silent.

And worse was to follow. By the time of Mrs Thatcher's re-election in June 1983 – a victory won in part because of her electoral popularity in the West Midlands – the area had lost some 330,000 jobs in four years. 'The names of firms which have slashed jobs or shut plants', said the *Sunday Times* in May 1983, read 'like a roll-call of the biggest names in British industry: British Leyland, BSA, Swan, Alfred Herbert, GKN, Lucas, Typhoo, Bird's, Dunlop.' It was a blow from which the West Midlands never really recovered. As late as 1976, Birmingham had been the most productive city in England outside the south-east; just five years later, it

was the least productive. Almost overnight, the world that Dickens and de Tocqueville had described with such horrified fascination, the world symbolized by the sweat and grit and din of industry, the world that had given birth to heavy metal, had almost entirely disappeared. Where there had once been the sound of hammers, there was only silence.[10]

If Tony Iommi had not cut off his fingertips, therefore, his life might have worked out very differently. There is an argument that talent will out; perhaps he was so good a guitarist that he would have made it eventually. But the history of rock music is so full of accidents and coincidences that if Iommi had gone on that European tour with the Birds & the Bees, and had never stayed behind to nurse his fingers and detune his guitar, there is every chance that his career might have taken a much less spectacular course. Far from playing the Los Angeles Coliseum in 1980, he might have been just another number, another greying figure shuffling, through no fault of his own, into the ranks of the unemployed. As it was, though, the former welder became a symbol not of Britain's industrial failure, but of something that the men and women who lived in Birmingham during its Victorian heyday could never have anticipated. For even as the forges and foundries of the West Midlands were falling silent, the British were inventing a new role for themselves, as entertainers to the world.

THE ONLY COUNTRY THAT COUNTS

> *The fact is, the Americans realised almost instantaneously that the cinema was a heaven-sent method for advertising themselves, their country, their methods, their wares, their ideas, and even their language, and they have seized upon it as a method of persuading the whole world, civilised and uncivilised, into the belief that America is really the only country which counts.*
>
> Lord Newton, speaking in the House of Lords, 14 May 1925

When Danny Boyle was planning the opening ceremony of the 2012 Olympics, it seemed only natural to emphasis Britain's musical achievements. By this point, few people remembered that for much of its history Britain had been derided abroad as a musical wasteland. 'These people have no ear, either for rhythm or music, and their

unnatural passion for piano playing and singing is thus all the more repulsive,' wrote the German poet Heinrich Heine after touring Britain in 1840. 'Nothing on Earth is more terrible than English music, save English painting.' At least he had the courtesy not to mention English cooking. The most memorably damning verdict, however, came in 1904 from another German critic, Oscar Schmitz, whose celebrated title rather said it all: *Das Land ohne Musik* ('The Land without Music'). But by the end of the twentieth century, that view, which had never been very fair anyway, was completely untenable.* As Boyle explained after the Olympics, he had chosen to emphasize British pop and rock because, as 'any economist could tell you . . . it's made us a ton of money. After America, we are the biggest exporter of music in the world.' And indeed the facts bore him out. In the year London welcomed the Olympics, British artists accounted for more than 13 per cent of album sales worldwide, the country's highest figure of the century. For the second year in a row, Adele's album *21* was the world's bestselling album, the fifth time a British artist had taken the top spot in six years, while One Direction took both the third and fourth slots. Not surprisingly, the BPI – the official trade association of the British music industry – was in boastful form. 'Music is fundamental to Britain's identity as a nation,' declared its chief executive, Geoff Taylor, 'and the world is singing with us.'[11]

Today the idea of Britain as one of the world's leading exporters of music seems part of the natural order of things. A century ago, however, Britain's image was rather different. To put it crudely, when people abroad thought about Britain they thought about dreadnoughts, not dances, and ball bearings, not ballads. Indeed, there is probably no better way of summing up Britain's reputation before the Second World War than Napoleon's apocryphal line about it being 'a nation of shopkeepers':† hard-headed, pragmatic, calculating, mercenary, stoical, courageous and just a little bit dull. Even the British tended to think of

* Schmitz had, of course, been talking about music in the classical tradition. So perhaps, if he had lived to an unnaturally Biblical age, he might be arguing today that pop and rock don't count. Even so, given the riches of British classical music in the last century – Elgar, Vaughan Williams, Britten, Tavener – he would surely find it hard to defend the idea that Britain is a land without music.

† Actually, it was probably Adam Smith who coined the phrase, in Book IV of *The Wealth of Nations* (1776).

themselves in similar terms: as the *Annual Register* put it in 1867, the nation owed 'her great influence . . . to her commanding position in the arena of industry and commerce'. And yet, even at Britain's imperial and industrial height, there was a creeping dread that it might all be slipping away. Once the American Civil War and Franco-Prussian War were out of the way, the reunified United States and newly united German Empire steadily eroded Britain's economic lead. To mark Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1897, Rudyard Kipling composed a remarkably gloomy poem, 'Recessional', warning that all the nation's pomp might soon be 'one with Nineveh and Tyre', and just two years later Britain found itself bogged down in the Boer War, which struck many observers as a dreadful harbinger of imperial decline. It was at precisely this point that some critics began to warn of a new and insidious cultural threat, which – borrowing a word popularized by the French poet Charles Baudelaire – they called 'Americanization'.[12]

In 1902, the year Britain finally defeated the Boers, the sensationalizing newspaper editor W. T. Stead published a book entitled *The Americanisation of the World*, which opened in resounding style:

> The advent of the United States of America as the greatest of world-Powers is the greatest political, social, and commercial phenomenon of our times. For some years past we have all been more or less dimly conscious of its significance. It is only when we look at the manifold manifestations of the exuberant energy of the United States, and the worldwide influence which they are exerting upon the world in general and the British Empire in particular, that we realise how comparatively insignificant are all the other events of our time.

Stead himself was surprisingly cheerful about the prospect of American cultural and commercial dominance. Most critics, however, were less sanguine. Talk of Americanization usually reflected a deep sense of insecurity: what people really dreaded was that the buoyant, booming United States, with all its economic power and cultural confidence, would do to Britain what Britain had done to so many others. When the philosopher Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson visited the United States on a lecture tour in 1901, for example, he warned his friend C. R. Ashbee, the founding father of the Arts and Crafts movement, that he had learned two things: '(1) that the future of the world lies with America. (2) that radically and essentially America is a barbarous country . . .

without leisure, manners, morals, beauty or religion . . . a country which holds competition and strife to be the only life worth living.' Indeed, it is a sign of how deeply this fear was beginning to permeate that in November 1914 the young T. S. Eliot, who had been born and bred in St Louis, Missouri, spoke in a debate at Merton College, Oxford, about 'the threatened Americanisation of Oxford'. 'I pointed out to them frankly', he wrote to his cousin in an exaggerated American drawl, 'how much they owed to Amurrican culcher in the drayma (including the movies) in music, in the cocktail, and in the dance.' Eliot even had the gall to tell his British audience that 'the few Americans here' were cultural missionaries, 'bending our energies toward your uplift'. Evidently his listeners took it in good part: Eliot's side won the debate by two votes.[13]

But it was in the decade after the First World War that the threat of Americanization really loomed large. After four years of bloodshed, Britain was a country in shell-shock: grey, weary, disillusioned and divided. The United States, on the other hand, seemed a society brimming with self-confidence: the land of ragtime and jazz, fizzing with energy and excitement. 'I am counting the days till I can get away and have decided from now on to live in America,' wrote P. G. Wodehouse in 1923. There was, he said, something 'dead and depressing about London . . . all I want to do is to get back and hear the American language again'. Today we often see Wodehouse as the most quintessentially English of twentieth-century writers; in fact, he had first visited the United States before the war, carefully tailored his style for the profitable American market and spent many of his best years writing for Broadway and Hollywood. When Wodehouse went to California in 1930, MGM paid him a staggering $2,500 a week, far more than he could ever have earned in Britain, and the equivalent of at least £20,000 a week today. But he was only one of many British writers who made the voyage west between the wars, drawn not just by the enormous financial rewards, but by the sheer glamour and excitement of the movies. The dramatist R. C. Sherriff, best known today for his moving First World War play *Journey's End* (1928), went to Hollywood in 1932 to work for Universal, while J. B. Priestley, of all people, tried his luck on the West Coast three years later. In 1937 Aldous Huxley, too, moved to Hollywood, where his efforts to turn *Alice in Wonderland* into a film went down very badly with Walt Disney, who said 'he could only understand every third word'. By now there were enough British expatriates

in Los Angeles to form the Hollywood Cricket Club. Among those to pull on the whites, incidentally, were David Niven, Errol Flynn, Cary Grant and, terrifyingly, Boris Karloff.[14]

While British talent went west, American products were coming in the opposite direction. As Britain struggled to rebuild from the trauma of the First World War, Hollywood had seen its opportunity. With a far bigger domestic market, and therefore far greater revenues – an American film typically made ten times more money than its British equivalent – the Californian studios could afford much larger production and marketing budgets. Their power was now simply irresistible: as early as 1925, some 95 per cent of all cinema tickets sold in Britain were for American films. And with the recovering British economy now importing more American products than ever, from Heinz baked beans to Kellogg's cornflakes, films were widely seen as the supreme symbol of the shifting balance of power. Hollywood's products, boasted Will Hays, the president of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, were 'silent salesmen of American goods'. By contrast, many British observers saw Hollywood's growing influence as a terrible harbinger of imperial eclipse. Here, for instance, is the *Morning Post* in 1923:

> If the United States abolished its diplomatic and consular services, kept its ships in harbour and its tourists at home, and retired from the world's markets, its citizens, its problems, its towns and countryside, its roads, motor cars, counting houses and saloons would still be familiar in the uttermost corners of the world . . . The film is to America what the flag was once to Britain. By its means Uncle Sam may hope some day, if he be not checked in time, to Americanise the world.[15]

For many historians, the moment that really brought these anxieties to a head came in 1927 with the release of Al Jolson's picture *The Jazz Singer*, which marked the end of the silent film era and the advent of the talkies.* For years British critics had worried that audiences were picking up American slang from the on-screen titles, but now that people were not just seeing but *hearing* American English, the debate took on a new urgency. Even before *The Jazz Singer* had reached British shores,

* It was not, though, the first film with sound. There had been short films with sound since 1921. Interestingly, even *The Jazz Singer* had surprisingly little sound: apart from the songs, the dialogue comes to barely two minutes.

Stanley Baldwin's government had legislated for a controversial quota system, under which 7½ per cent (later increased to 20 per cent) of distributors' films had to be made in Britain. Among the bill's keenest supporters was the Conservative MP for Enfield, Lieutenant-Colonel Reginald Applin, DSO, OBE. Now almost 60, Lieutenant-Colonel Applin had seen action in the Boer War and had commanded the Anzac machine gunners at Passchendaele. A man of spectacularly right-wing opinions who ended up moving to South Africa, he held a very low opinion of American films. 'The scenes in the cabarets and the women and that sort of thing,' he told his fellow MPs, 'are not the kind of thing we British people want to see.' Readers who enjoy stereotypes will be pleased to hear that he then read out a recent column from the *Daily Express*:

> The plain truth about the film situation is that the bulk of our picture-goers are Americanised to an extent that makes them regard a British film as a foreign film, and an interesting but more frequently an irritating interlude in their favourite entertainment. They go to see American stars; they have been brought up on American publicity. They talk America, think America, and dream America. We have several million people, mostly women, who, to all intent and purpose, are temporary American citizens.[16]

In recent years some writers have done their best to stick up for the quota and even to talk up the cheap 'quota quickies' that poured out of British studios to fill the gap. But given that the quota was meant to erode British audiences' appetite for Hollywood's products, the fact remains that it was a failure. When Mass-Observation conducted a survey of filmgoers in Bolton in 1937, they found considerable hostility to home-grown products. As so often, there was a wide gulf between the anxieties of the elite and the tastes of the masses. American films, one Bolton youngster said, were '100% better than British ones'. They were 'far superior to British ones on every point, agreed another: 'acting, direction, humour, yes, everything!' 'English films', lamented a third, 'have no tension about them, no life, when anyone sees an English film it's nearly always got a mist in it same as a foggy day. Why don't they spent a bit of money and get some proper scenery.' The general consensus, reported Mass-Observation, was that British films were 'dull and lifeless'; by contrast, American films were 'slick, polished, fast-moving, often spectacular'. It was no accident, then, that at Portsmouth's luxurious American-style Regent Cinema, the management showed

311 Hollywood films as first features, but only 142 British. Indeed, many cinema managers were greatly put out at having to give up screen time to British films under the quota system. 'I see no reason', said the chairman of Bolton's Cinematograph Exhibitors Association, 'why I should bolster up incompetence by being forced to give 15 per cent of my screen time for British films on which I know I shall lose money. The British public, in the main, does not like them, and shows its dislike at the box office as my records prove.'[17]

For Hollywood's critics, what made this so alarming was that the cinema was now by far the most popular form of entertainment in the country, leaving plays, books and records far behind. In the late 1930s, some 20 million people, the majority of them women, went to the cinema every week, a figure almost unimaginable today. Indeed, the demand was such that there were 110 cinemas in Birmingham alone, as well as 70 in Leeds and 96 in Liverpool. It was no wonder that in 1936 a parliamentary report described the cinema as the crucial factor 'in the education of all classes of the community [and] in the spread of national culture', concluding that 'the propaganda value of the film cannot be overemphasized'. Many young filmgoers naturally imitated what they had seen on screen, from girls copying the clothes and hairstyle of Greta Garbo to boys copying the slang and swagger of James Cagney. Some British films tried to use this as a selling point: the posters for one of the first British talkies, Alfred Hitchcock's thriller *Blackmail* (1929), proclaimed: 'See & Hear It – Our Mother Tongue As It Should Be Spoken!' But to many commentators, the continuing spread of American English ('Yeah', 'Sez you', 'OK', 'Attaboy') seemed a terrifying sign of Britain's cultural subordination.[18]

In the same year that Hitchcock moved into sound, a writer in the *Radio Times* complained that 'the American invasion of the entertainment world' had been responsible for 'changes of taste, for the blunting of dialect . . . for new manners of thinking, for higher pressure of living, for discontent among normally contented people, for big ideas, and for "Oh yeah!"' A year later, the Tory MP Major-General Sir Alfred Knox told his colleagues that, since the quota system had palpably failed, they should further limit 'the import of American talking films' in order to 'protect the English language as spoken by the people of this country'. At the other end of the political spectrum, George Orwell similarly bemoaned the 'false values of the American film'. Indeed, for Orwell,

nothing symbolized this better than the transition from E. W. Hornung's Edwardian 'Raffles' stories to James Hadley Chase's hard-boiled novel *No Orchids for Miss Blandish* (1939). 'The whole book, *récit* as well as dialogue, is written in the American language; the author, an Englishman who has (I believe) never been in the United States, seems to have made a complete mental transference to the American underworld,' wrote Orwell in his famous essay 'Raffles and Miss Blandish' (1944).

> The career of Mr Chase shows how deep the American influence has already gone. Not only is he himself living a continuous fantasy-life in the Chicago underworld, but he can count on hundreds of thousands of readers who know what is meant by a 'clipshop' or the 'hotsquat', do not have to do mental arithmetic when confronted by 'fifty grand', and understand at sight a sentence like 'Johnny was a rummy and only two jumps ahead of the nut-factory'. Evidently there are great numbers of English people who are partly americanized in language and, one ought to add, in moral outlook.

For Orwell, as for Major-General Knox, all this was thoroughly regrettable. Even the 'schoolboy atmosphere' of the Raffles stories, he thought, was preferable to the 'cruelty and corruption' of the Americanized thriller.[19]

What gave all this added piquancy was the fact that the United States had once been a British colony. But now it was Hollywood's filmmakers who appeared as ruthless imperial occupiers, with their British audiences cast as helpless colonial subjects. As the writer Wyndham Lewis put it, 'the tables have effectively been turned'. The irony, of course, was that world maps were still splashed with British imperial pink. But with the Irish Free State having broken away, India moving towards greater self-government and the nation's finances exhausted by depression and war, Britain's imperial position was weaker than it looked. Indeed, some commentators blamed American films for undermining Britain's patriotic and imperial spirit. As early as 1925, the Conservative peer Lord Newton warned that since Hollywood products tended to be of an 'anti-British character . . . we are suffering materially and morally, not only here but throughout the Empire'. And ten years later, having returned to Britain after fourteen years abroad, the arch-conservative Major Rawdon Hoare issued a state-of-the-nation tirade identifying the cinema as one of the chief agents of national decline. 'Small boys', he complained, 'no longer read with gaping mouths about the adventures of great men who helped to build our Empire', but instead sat 'amid

gilded luxury' watching the latest Hollywood stars. Even petrol pump attendants, Major Hoare noted, spoke with affected American accents. 'What good can all this do to England? Will it create patriotism? Will it create a desire to keep our great Empire together? I doubt it.'[20]

THE PASSION OF J. ARTHUR RANK

> *If I could relate to you some of my various adventures and experiences in the larger film world . . . it would, I think, be as plain to you as it is to me that I was being led by God.*
>
> J. Arthur Rank, *Methodist Recorder*, 26 March 1942

The man who took it upon himself to rebuild the domestic film industry, repel the tide of American imports and turn popular culture into a gigantic advertisement for British virtues could hardly have been a more unlikely figure. Indeed, everything about him seemed wrong. To actors, directors, producers and journalists, he was a baffling figure, a Victorian relic unaccountably thrust into the modern world. A man of deeply conservative opinions, he lived like a country squire and was regarded as one of the finest shots in the country. He always travelled with three briefcases, which held his most important business papers, and kept a box of chocolates in his desk drawer. A man of burning religious passion, he believed he was being guided by God, was obsessed with the Holy Spirit and once insisted that the capital's finest monument was Cleopatra's Needle, 'because it is the only monument in London upon which the eyes of our Lord Jesus Christ have gazed'. Even at the height of his fame he still taught his weekly Sunday school class, and in Hollywood he sometimes cut short meetings with studio executives so that he could write postcards to his pupils; yet he was such a boring speaker that he once sent the church pianist to sleep. He knew virtually nothing about films and rarely went to the cinema; his greatest dream was not that one of his films might win an Academy Award, but that one of his dogs might win a prize at Cruft's.* And yet, by the end of the Second World War, J. Arthur Rank was simply the most powerful man the British film industry had ever seen.[21]

* Alas, they never did.

The story of J. Arthur Rank is the perfect example of the closely entwined relationship between the industrial successes of the Victorians and the cultural triumphs of their twentieth-century successors. But while Tony Iommi and his friends turned the sound of the steelworks into a global musical export, Rank built his film empire on the principles of manufacturing, from the laws of supply and demand to the importance of presentation and packaging. The key thing about him, in fact, is that he was not really a filmmaker at all. He was a miller. His family had been flour millers in Hull since 1825, and his father, Joseph Rank, had built up the largest milling business in the country. Rank senior was a man of almost implausibly Victorian credentials; as one of his son's biographers later put it, he 'would not have been out of place in Charles Dickens's Coketown'. After falling out with his family, he started his own independent mill, grinding the wheat, collecting the flour and delivering the sacks entirely by himself. Crucially, he was an innovator, gradually introducing gas engines, roller millers and triple expansion engines that made his mills the most modern and efficient in the country.

And as the supreme Victorian exponent of self-help, Samuel Smiles, might have predicted, Joe Rank's hard work and self-discipline brought their inevitable reward. Within just thirty years, he went from being the smallest miller in the country to the biggest miller in the world. Little wonder, then, that he believed so strongly in the gospel of work. Dour and driven, a man of all-consuming Methodist faith, he remarked that the 'guiding principles' of his life were 'firstly, attention to business, and secondly, living within one's income'. Like all good Victorian capitalists, he had a strong sense of social obligation. The company had a pioneering pension scheme for its workers, while Joe Rank himself donated hundreds of thousands of pounds to various charities and some £300,000 to the city of Hull alone. He found 'more real joy in handing out', he once said, than he 'ever found in raking in'. Yet all this was based on a typically Darwinian view of human nature. 'We cannot get away from the law of the survival of the fittest, whether we like it or not,' Rank senior told *Milling* magazine in 1922. 'It is a natural law, and human nature without competition would soon become effete.'[22]

By the time J. Arthur Rank was born in 1888, his father was already one of the richest men in the country. The youngest of seven children, Arthur was not conspicuously bright; his father used to call him a 'dunce', a jibe that seems to have cut deep, since he often brought it up in later life. After

boarding school, there was no question of university; instead, Arthur started in the mills, sweeping the floors and carrying sacks of flour. Soon he was in charge of his own mill, a brand-new establishment in Hull, equipped with the very latest technology. At this stage nobody could possibly have predicted his impact on popular culture. Indeed, as late as 1930, when Rank turned 42, he seemed a deeply uninteresting figure, living quietly in Surrey, the soul of comfortable, middle-class respectability. A solid, taciturn and conservative man, who held a senior position in his father's firm and liked shooting, playing bridge and a round of golf, he would have made an excellent murder victim – or perhaps an implausible suspect – in an early novel by Agatha Christie. But there was, perhaps, one notable thing about him. Like his father, J. Arthur Rank was devoutly religious. On Sundays the Rank children not only sang hymns and read the Bible at home, but spent four hours in church, attending two Sunday school classes and two services. (Intriguingly, given Rank's later involvement in the film industry, he was not allowed to go to the theatre or to public dances, which were seen as sinful.) Although Arthur temporarily abandoned going to church as a young man, he soon returned to his father's faith; indeed, his Sunday school classes ran every week for almost half a century. In 1952 his first biographer, Alan Wood, described him as 'a miller, a millionaire, a Methodist and a Yorkshireman'. It is hard to be sure which of those labels Rank valued most, but my money would be on the third.[23]

It was Rank's faith that brought him into the film business. Ever since the mid-1920s the *Methodist Times* – in which Rank owned a considerable stake – had attacked Hollywood for its 'cynical pandering to depraved imaginations'. Talking pictures, argued the paper's film critic, G. A. Atkinson, had 'stripped woman not only of clothing, but of morals, decency, truth, fidelity and every civilized quality or virtue'. In 1932 two more Methodist writers, R. G. Burnett and E. D. Martell, published *The Devil's Camera: Menace of a Film-Ridden World*, in which they declared that most Hollywood stars were 'ready to go to any length in decadence and nakedness' in order to please 'the little group of mainly Jewish promoters' who controlled the film industry. (Tellingly, their book was dedicated 'to the ultimate sanity [i.e. health] of the white races'.) Yet some evangelical Christians believed that they could turn film to their advantage: in Lambeth, one Methodist preacher, the Reverend Thomas Tiplady, had been using films to attract younger audiences since 1928.

'The cinema', Tiplady argued, 'is the greatest invention since the printing press and the Church must put aside all moral, intellectual and artistic snobbery and, either directly or indirectly, bring this invention into the service of Christ.' This was J. Arthur Rank's kind of talk. For all his piety, he was a man of the world: the Rank mill empire, after all, had been built on technological innovation. He had already asked his secretary to find Christian films that he could show to his Sunday school class, and had been disappointed to hear that there were virtually none. In 1933, therefore, Rank helped to set up a new voluntary body, the Religious Film Society, to work in churches and Sunday schools. He even came up with the idea for their first twenty-minute film, *The Mastership of Christ* (1934), which starred the East End preacher William Henry Lax. It was, Rank himself admitted later, 'lousy – there is no other word for it'. But now he had got the bug: his later films would be rather better.[24]

The secret of Rank's success was that he saw films as a commodity like any other. Like so many evangelical preachers before and since, he believed that spreading the Word of God was like selling a product. Films, too, could be produced, marketed and sold like bags of flour. And very quickly the business of making films roused Rank's competitive instincts. Within barely two years, not content with funding straightforwardly religious films, he had decided that it would be better to make mainstream ones for a wider audience, gently introducing them to 'moral' and 'wholesome' values without subjecting them to a sermon. Through films, he said, he would 'help men and women make this world a better place to live in'. So it was that, in 1935, in alliance with the Tory peer Viscount Portal, he set up the General Cinema Finance Corporation. And then, with dizzying speed, the rest of the business fell into his lap. Dominated by 'quota quickies' and the cheap comedies of George Formby and Gracie Fields, the industry was ripe for conquest. Most British film companies were badly run and horribly under-funded, which made them easy pickings for somebody with Rank's deep pockets and hard head. And so, year after year, he built up his empire: the Pinewood studios here; a distribution company there; a share of Universal; the suburban Odeon cinema chain; the Gaumont-British cinema chain; the Denham studios; the Lime Grove studios; and so on. Nobody – at least, not in Britain – had ever built a film empire so quickly or with such ruthless acumen. It was as though, quite suddenly, he had discovered

his father's famous entrepreneurial spirit – only with cinemas, studios and production companies standing in for old Joe Rank's flour mills.[25]

To many people in the film industry, Rank came not as a saviour but as a capitalist carpetbagger. Fancying themselves as civilized, creative types, far above the tawdry demands of commerce, they hated the fact that they owed their living to a Victorian industrialist. His shy manner did him no favours: in a business dominated by cigar-chewing, wisecrack-dispensing showmen, the Methodist flour miller cut a bizarrely reticent figure. After seeing Sir Laurence Olivier's *Hamlet* (1948), one of the most prestigious films the Rank Organisation ever made, as well as the first British film to win the Academy Award for Best Picture, Rank said simply to the star: 'Thank you very much, Sir Laurence.' This was not good enough for Olivier, who had been expecting a torrent of praise and never forgave him for such an outrageous slight. (There is, perhaps, a parallel here with Charles Saatchi's reluctance to talk about his enthusiasm for the Young British Artists, of which more later.) On the left in particular, Rank's name was mud. The socialist paper *Tribune* regularly damned his 'bad taste', while the Association of Cinematograph Technicians regarded him as the modern equivalent of a 'monopolistic factory-owner in Victorian times'. Even many of Rank's own employees resented his power: the director Roy Ward Baker later recalled that 'if, say, some arc lamps went wrong or there was a half-hour hold-up, [the crew] would all shrug their shoulders and say, "Oh well, it's only another few bags of flour"'. Most famously, the actor James Mason, who had made his name in a series of Rank Organisation films during the Second World War, made a blistering attack on his patron after decamping to Hollywood at the end of 1946. Rank, he said, had 'no apparent talent for cinemas or showmanship' and surrounded himself with people 'who know nothing about the creative side of film-making'. As a result, Mason declared, 'Arthur Rank is the worst thing that has happened to the British film industry'.[26]

This was, of course, horribly unfair. If, as many critics believe, the 1940s were the golden age of British cinema, then much of that is down to Rank. It was Rank who put up the money for David Lean's *Brief Encounter* (1945), *Great Expectations* (1946) and *Oliver Twist* (1948); for Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (1943), *A Canterbury Tale* (1944), A *Matter of Life and Death* (1946) and *The Red Shoes* (1948); and for Olivier's *Henry V* (1945) and *Hamlet* (1948). It was even Rank who paid for the Ealing comedies that have

become synonymous with Britain in the age of post-war austerity: had it not been for his bags of flour, there would have been no *Passport to Pimlico* (1949), no *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (1949), no *The Lavender Hill Mob* (1951), no *The Man in the White Suit* (1951), and no *The Ladykillers* (1955). By any standards this was a pretty extraordinary list, and although most of Rank's productions never reached such exalted heights, the plain fact is that without his money British cinema would have been infinitely poorer. Of course Rank himself had nothing to do with writing or making these films. His great virtue, though, was that he gave more talented people the freedom to do it themselves. As Lean put it in 1947, 'we can make any subject we wish, with as much money as we think that subject should have spent on it. We can cast whichever actors we choose, and we have no interference with the way the film is made.' In the same year, *Time* magazine claimed that 'not since the time of the Renaissance Popes have a group of artists found a patron so quick with his wallet, so slow with unsolicited directions and advice'. And even Rank's great rival, Alexander Korda, believed that had it not been for the Yorkshire miller the British film industry would probably have been dead before the end of the Second World War. 'Any who deny what Arthur has done,' Korda said, 'they know nothing.'[27]

Rank's empire reached its zenith in April 1946, when the Rank Organisation held its first 'World Film Convention' at the Dorchester Hotel in London. This was Rank's equivalent of the Delhi Durbar. By now he employed 31,000 people, turned over £45 million a year and controlled five studios, five newsreel firms, a host of production companies and almost 650 cinemas across Britain. What was more, his goal of rolling back the advance of Hollywood had been at least a partial success, for in 1946, for the first and only time in history, British films did better at the domestic box office than their American counterparts.* Yet for Rank that was only half the battle. The real challenge, as he saw it, was to break the American market itself.[28]

The Rank family had a long history of resisting American imports. In 1902 Joe Rank had visited the great mills of the American Midwest to learn from their innovations, and the Ranks had always supported

* This was also the year in which cinema attendance peaked in Britain, with 1.6 billion admissions. For comparison, the equivalent figure in 2013 was 166 million admissions, almost exactly ten times smaller.

protection for British farmers from cheap American bread. Now J. Arthur Rank was prepared to take the fight to the enemy: Hollywood, or, as he called it, 'Fairyland'. Interviewed by the *Cine-Technician* in 1943, he explained:

> It is all very well to talk of being able to make good pictures here without bothering about American or world markets, but in all honesty the continued existence of British film production depends on overseas trade. And to get that trade you must have power . . . the whole future of British films is bound up in the question of overseas trade. Without it we must be resigned to a position as bad as – or worse than – the position before the War . . . Without that foreign trade, all other things are idle dreams.

There was, perhaps, more to it than commercial calculation. Rank's collaborator John Davis once said that his boss's greatest motivation was patriotism – 'a love of England and projecting the British way of life'. There was probably a religious dimension, too: as Rank would have been the first to admit, his Christian principles did not stop at the coast. 'What I am trying to do', he told one reporters, 'is change the American cinema-goer. It takes a lot of time and it needs a lot of films . . . But it can be done. It must be done.' And so it was that, at the beginning of 1944, Rank set up Eagle-Lion Distributors, with instructions to sell 'prestige' films to every continent on earth. 'Our films', declared its boss, Teddy Carr – like Rank, a native of Hull – 'must show the British way of life, what we represent, where we stand and why, and what we mean by what we say.'[29]

The problem, however, was that British films had a terrible reputation across the Atlantic. One American exhibitor told a Rank emissary, who was on a fact-finding tour, 'that the day he has a British film in his kinema [*sic*], he will get out of the business'. The scorn was reciprocated. 'In America, they like to make pictures about things that might happen once in twenty centuries,' Rank remarked. 'We like to make them about reality.' But American audiences did not want British reality, which had been tried at the American box office and had utterly failed. There was, though, an obvious solution. As long ago as 1928, one correspondent in the American film journal *Close Up* had suggested that British studios ought to concentrate on emphasizing those qualities for which their national character was famous abroad: 'Restraint, for instance, reason, taste possibly, and tradition.' Of these four qualities, by far the most promising was the last: tradition. There had been a sign of things to come in 1933, when

Alexander Korda's film *The Private Life of Henry VIII* had broken the run of box-office duds, winning an Oscar for its star, Charles Laughton, and earning a first British nomination for Best Picture. It was also enormously profitable, earning five times its budget on its first world tour. American audiences might not like British reality, then, but they did like British history, as long as it was presented with lip-smacking Tudor jollity. To filmgoers in Hicksville, Ohio,* historical accuracy was beside the point. What they wanted was the kind of atmosphere – extravagant hats, serving wenches, the Tower of London, a fat man eating a haunch of venison – that they associated with old England. This was a fairy story, of course. But as Rank knew very well, it was fairy stories that had built Hollywood in the first place.[30]

BAND OF BROTHERS

> Henry V, *I must put in a class of its own, never has such a film been made and I do not think it will ever be made by an American studio.*
>
> 17-year-old girl, interviewed in J. P. Mayer, *British Cinemas and Their Audiences: Sociological Studies* (1948)

The film which came to symbolize Rank's assault on Hollywood could hardly have had a more distinguished pedigree. Boasting the talents of Britain's most celebrated actor and its greatest playwright, *Henry V* was the ultimate 'prestige' project, and has a good claim to be one of the most influential British pictures ever made. As so often, however, Rank had very little to do with it, besides providing the money and institutional backing. There are various accounts of how the film came to be made: one even claims that Winston Churchill personally asked Olivier to make it as a propaganda boost for British troops fighting the Nazis. In his autobiography, however, Olivier recalled being summoned to the Ministry of Information and being told by the minister's sidekick, Jack Beddington, that he would be released from the Fleet Air Arm to make *Henry V* as 'popular propaganda'.

The play was indeed perfect propaganda, not just because of the

* A real place, by the way.

martial subject matter – a plucky band of English and Welshmen overcoming a horde of effeminate foreigners – but because it had become a well-established focus for patriotic sentiment, having been performed at the Old Vic every year during the First World War. As for Olivier, he was a natural choice to star and direct, since he had not only played Shakespeare's national hero at the Old Vic in 1937, but had recited various stirring passages on the radio since the outbreak of war in 1939. A treatment was already in circulation, written by Olivier's former BBC radio producer, Dallas Bower. The film's producer, meanwhile, was Filippo Del Giudice, a former Vatican lawyer with a taste for expensive cigars. Having fled Mussolini's Italy, Del Giudice had founded a production company, Two Cities, which wound up making big-budget pictures such as *In Which We Serve* (1942). Like Rank, Del Giudice thought the best way to crack the American market was to concentrate on films with 'the Rolls-Royce stamp'. Like Rank, too, he knew remarkably little about actually making films: one of his former colleagues recalled that Del Giudice never looked at the script, never came to the studio and never even watched the rushes. But he knew how to part audiences from their money – a sadly underrated skill in the British film industry.[31]

Today it is almost impossible to mistake *Henry V*'s origins as a wartime propaganda film. Not only does it open with a dedication to 'the Commandos and Airborne Troops of Great Britain', but the film presents Henry's invasion of France as a moral crusade, staunchly supported by his English subjects and buttressed by his stirring speeches at the siege of Harfleur ('Once more unto the breach, dear friends / . . . Cry "God for Harry, England and Saint George!"') and before the Battle of Agincourt ('We few, we happy few, we band of brothers'). Olivier's Henry is the ideal English hero: brave, cheerful and effortlessly graceful. One American critic wrote that he incarnated 'the public school virtues that were supposed to have built the British Empire'. Meanwhile, anything that undermined the sense of collective British patriotism was cut: not only did Olivier and his colleagues take out a subplot about a conspiracy to assassinate Henry, but they also excised a reference to the Scots as the enemy, as well as a passage in which the king orders his troops to kill their prisoners. On top of that, the filmmakers explicitly drove home the parallel between Agincourt, with the English army alone against overwhelming odds, and the recent achievements of the Royal Air Force. 'Surely this is comparable with Britain's hour in the

autumn and winter of 1940, when a "pitiful few" during the Battle of Britain went up into the skies, hour after hour, week after week, and kept a powerful invader at bay,' noted the screenwriter Alan Dent, who helped Olivier with the script. 'These modern warriors of the skies . . . had that same courage and won the day as King Henry and his soldiers won theirs centuries ago. This parallel is very significant and of immense exploitation value from the viewpoint of the ordinary public.'[32]

But *Henry V* was far more than a wartime morale booster. Its style and structure could hardly be more sophisticated: it opens with a fabulous overhead shot of Elizabethan London – which would, of course, have been all the more stirring to audiences who had just endured the Blitz – before we find ourselves at the bustling Globe Theatre during a performance of the play. As the film continues, the setting subtly shifts from painted theatrical backdrops to increasingly realistic exteriors; and then, after Agincourt, the theatrical gradually takes over again, so that we end back at the Globe and another sweeping model shot of London. The Agincourt scenes are as exciting as anything in the history of cinema to that point, the atmosphere heightened by William Walton's tremendously stirring music. As many critics pointed out, Olivier's scenes recall the famous battle on the ice in Sergei Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky* (1938), in which the Teutonic Knights charge across the frozen surface of Lake Peipus to a pounding Prokofiev soundtrack. As always, though, stylistic excellence came at a cost. Although the budget had been set at £325,700, the final cost was just under £475,000, the equivalent of perhaps £73 million today.* To get it finished, Del Giudice had to borrow more money from Rank. In return, Rank demanded three-quarters of *Henry V*'s profits and effectively annexed Del Giudice's company. Their relationship, not surprisingly, was never easy, and after three years of fighting about budgets, Del Giudice walked away from the film business. According to his friend Peter Ustinov, the final breach came while they were talking in the gents one day, and Del Giudice managed to urinate on Rank's feet.[33]

The story of the release and reception of *Henry V* speaks volumes about the enduring pressures on the British film industry, caught between the demands of making upmarket pictures and the need to

* To put that into a twenty-first-century context, *Henry V* cost about as much to make as the last *Harry Potter* film.

make a profit. Although Rank himself claimed that the film brought 'special credit and added prestige to the British Film Industry', he was worried about its commercial prospects and asked Olivier to cut it down from 140 to around 100 minutes. Olivier, needless to say, refused. Even the distribution firm, Eagle-Lion, which Rank had set up specifically to deal with 'prestige' pictures, treated it very gingerly, initially showing the film only in a few West End cinemas before a nationwide release in the summer of 1945. Yet *Henry V* attracted tremendous reviews. *The Times* called it 'a great film', the *Manchester Guardian* hailed its 'boldness, colour and sweep', and the *Sunday Graphic* even congratulated Olivier in giving Shakespeare back 'to the people to whom he wanted to belong', picturing 'audiences in little market towns, wartime ports and garrisons and destroyers'. Indeed, there is no doubt that many ordinary people loved it. When the sociologist J. P. Mayer interviewed audience members about their favourite films in the summer of 1945, many of them – especially if they were bright and self-improving – mentioned Olivier's film. The film was 'the beginning, I hope of a series of Shakespeare plays brought to the screen', said a 24-year-old Admiralty typist: 'what a pleasure to hear our English language spoken correctly and in such beautiful tones.' 'I adored Olivier's *Henry V*,' agreed another woman, a 28-year-old clerk. 'Why can't British films be always up to this standard. I have seen it four times already and shall see it again, more than once.'[34]

All the same, Rank's anxieties were very well grounded. It would be easy to mock him as a tight-fisted philistine who knew nothing of the value of Art, but he probably had a better idea than Olivier of what the great majority of the public wanted. As the historian James Chapman points out, cinemas outside the West End reported poor audiences. The manager of the Birmingham Odeon told Del Giudice's staff that he was 'nervous' about showing it; in Muswell Hill, the audience was 'bored and restive'; and the future film encyclopaedist Leslie Halliwell watched it in his native Bolton in 'the most scattered and paltry house I remembered seeing'. In another northern cinema the film was even 'booed off the screen', forcing Rank to issue a statement backing 'the intelligence of the British people'. Olivier's attitude, however, was spectacularly dismissive. His intention, he said, had always been to make an 'artistically successful' film, not a 'financially successful one' (which must have been news to Rank). 'Our primary object', Olivier added, 'must be to give the minority pleasure, and the majority the possibility of grasping that pleasure.' Today

that sounds horribly snobbish; at the time, though, it tallied pretty closely with the views of cultural grandees such as John Maynard Keynes and Lord Reith. But evidently Rank was not persuaded. 'I have explained to Rank before', Olivier sighed, 'that this film is for the good of his name, not his pocket.' If Rank and his staff could not see that *Henry V* was more important than crowd-pleasing melodramas such as *The Wicked Lady*, 'then he and his organisation will have done no more for British films than Bungalows have done for architecture'. As Rank would surely have pointed out, however, a lot of people liked bungalows.[35]

What turned *Henry V* into a money-spinner was the reaction in the United States. Many American executives believed the film would never work: one told Del Giudice that American audiences would never understand it, while another observed that Henry's marriage proposal to Princess Katharine, which takes some 2,000 words, would be too long for Pittsburgh steel workers who 'were accustomed to make their proposals in two words or none at all'. But Rank's men marketed it brilliantly. The film was shown in college towns for one night only, as if it were a touring British stage production, and in small venues, ensuring that they would be packed. As word of mouth spread, the distributors then booked bigger halls. Reviews, meanwhile, were ecstatic. 'I am not a Tory, a monarchist, a Catholic, a medievalist, an Englishman, or, despite all the good it engenders, a lover of war,' wrote *The Nation*'s James Agee, one of the most influential American critics; 'but the beauty and power of this traditional exercise was such that, watching it, I wished I was, thought I was, and was proud of it.' After just twelve months, the film had already made a profit of some £275,000. And its appeal was not limited to the English-speaking world. The director Franco Zeffirelli, who later made celebrated versions of *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Romeo and Juliet*, saw it in Florence just after the war. Olivier, he said later, 'was the flag bearer of so many things we did not have. I'd been educated and brought up in a fascist country. He was the emblematic personality of a great free democracy. The whole world was opening up for us and this *Henry V* was the beginning of a new era for us.'[36]

Although *Henry V* was nominated for Oscars for Best Picture and Best Actor, Olivier won only an honorary award for his 'outstanding achievement as actor, producer and director'. With characteristic immodesty, Olivier believed that this had been fixed to prevent an Englishman from taking home all the awards: it was, he said, 'an absolute

fob off'. But he did not have long to wait: in 1948 his version of *Hamlet*, made by much the same team, won him Oscars for Best Picture and Best Actor. Today British triumphs at the Oscars are relatively common: at the time, however, Olivier's victory seemed a stunning achievement. Indeed, from the perspective of the twenty-first century, *Henry V* looks like an early and enormously accomplished example of an enduring blueprint for British success. The values that American critics associated with Olivier's Shakespeare films – history, tradition and high culture – are precisely the same values projected by most successful British (or part-British) pictures of the last thirty years, from *Chariots of Fire*, *Gandhi* and *A Room with a View* in the 1980s to *The Remains of the Day*, *The English Patient* and *Shakespeare in Love* in the 1990s, or *Atonement*, *The Queen* and *The King's Speech* in the 2000s. It hardly needs pointing out how often the same themes recur: the monarchy, the Second World War, Shakespeare, country houses, rather as if the film industry were an offshoot of the national tourist board. No doubt this is a bit unfair: many of these, after all, are excellent films, subtly questioning the very things they appear to celebrate. Of course it would be easy to put together an alternative list of British films by directors such as Terence Davies, Ken Loach and Mike Leigh, who have ploughed very different furrows. Even so, there is no denying that Rank, Del Giudice and Olivier had hit on an approach that has come to define British cinema, and perhaps Britain itself, in the eyes of the world. To put it very simply, Rank had found the formula. And in this respect he was arguably one of the most important and influential British cultural figures of the century.[37]

For Rank, however, the appeal of the film industry was beginning to wane. Creating 'prestige' films was inherently risky because they were so expensive; to make matters worse, his producers had a bad habit of going wildly over budget. Unlike cheap melodramas, films like *Henry V* alienated many British cinemagoers. 'For some time now,' one film fan wrote to the *Picturegoer* in May 1947, 'it has seemed to me that here in England we are making films for a small group of long-hairs rather than for the public.' Even the sight of Rank's famous gong, agreed another reader, inevitably brought a 'muffled yawn' and the remark: 'Oh dear, now we are going to be educated.' When Rank's producers got it wrong, the consequences were devastating. Gabriel Pascal's adaptation of George Bernard Shaw's *Caesar and Cleopatra*, released in 1945, cost a staggering £1.25 million (roughly £200 million in today's money, even

more than *Avatar* or *The Dark Knight Rises*). Although it did extremely well in the United States, the British reviews were terrible, and its vast publicity costs meant it never made a profit. Then, at precisely the moment Rank was looking to tighten his belt, the Attlee government introduced a new film quota and an 'ad valorem' tax on American pictures, which threw the industry into chaos. By the end of 1949 the Rank Organisation was actually making a loss, which would have been unimaginable a few years earlier. For the time being, at least, the age of the 'prestige' pictures was dead, and by the mid-1950s the Rank Organisation was churning out cheaper films starring the likes of Norman Wisdom, Kenneth More and Dirk Bogarde, which would never work in the United States but were guaranteed a decent domestic audience. And as television ate into cinema attendances, the Rank empire began to do the unthinkable. Now, instead of opening cinemas, they were shutting them. By 1962, when Rank retired as chairman, one in four of his cinemas had closed its doors.[38]

Whether Rank really minded about any of all this, though, remains a mystery. His priority, after all, had never been films; it had always been flour. By the Second World War, Rank mills provided about a third of Britain's flour, and when his older brother Jimmy died in 1952, Rank effectively abandoned day-to-day control of his film empire to return to the milling business. As his grandson, Fred Packard, later recalled, films simply 'did not interest him that much – he was far more interested in flour'. Milling's gain, however, was the movies' loss. Not only had Rank saved the British film industry from extinction in the 1930s, he had come closer than anybody before or since to establishing a permanent foothold in the American market. He was not, of course, a vain man. But perhaps, from time to time, he wondered how the world would remember him.

Fred Packard later told a story about being on holiday with his grandfather in Scotland. One day the 12-year-old Fred idly carved his initials and the date into the wall of the toilet in the grand house where they were staying. His crime was discovered, and he was promptly summoned to see his grandfather. The terrified Fred walked slowly down a long, narrow corridor, where, at the end, he could see Rank waiting in a lurid dressing gown. When Fred arrived, Rank looked down at his grandson. There was a pause, and then Rank said: 'Don't carve your name in dark and gloomy places. Carve your name with pride for all the world to see.' When Fred told that story at his twenty-first birthday party, his grandfather had tears in his eyes.[39]