

THE FUTURE OF BRITISH FILMS

Mr. Rank's Representative Comes To Look Us Over



J. ARTHUR RANK
Pleased by the British Election results?

TO picturegoers in New Zealand as well as in many other countries, the name of J. Arthur Rank is already almost legendary. Or, since legends usually attach to people after they are dead, and Mr. Rank is still very much alive, it might be more correct to say that he has become a fabulous figure, this 57-year-old Methodist who, starting with films to show in Sunday schools, has in a few years established virtually complete control over the British film industry in all its phases, but who is said to make even more money from operating the flour-mills which he inherited from his father; whose ambition is to put Britain on the map by means of movies that are better and if necessary bigger than any made in Hollywood; who is buying up or building theatres all over the world; who has already shown us something of what he can do in such productions as *Colonel Blimp*, *Demi-Paradise*, and *The Way Ahead*, and who will give an even more impressive demonstration of his power when *Henry V.* is released; and who, finally, is reputed to be already so wealthy that every time he spends £1 it costs him only 6d, because the other 19/6 has already gone in super-tax!

Part of the legend or fable that is J. Arthur Rank arrived in Wellington the other day on a brief visit. Not the magnate himself; he is much too busy; but his special representative in these parts, Alan J. Williamson, who has come to look us over on Mr. Rank's behalf. Having from time to time had a good deal of critical comment to make about Mr. Rank's apparently monopolistic tendencies, I rather wondered what sort of reception I might get from the great man's emissary. And the interview, as it happened, did not open auspiciously for either of us. That, however, was the fault of the hotel clerk who assured me that Mr. Williamson was out when I arrived on time, whereas he was actually in his room expecting me. The result was that for 45 minutes I sat in the lobby waiting for him to come in, while

he sat in his private room waiting for me to come up. But once this deadlock was broken by a long-delayed flash of intelligence on the part of the clerk, and explanations had been made, it was all easy and pleasant sailing. For Mr. Williamson, an Englishman who has been looking after British films in Australia for a long time, and is well-known to film men in this country, is a very genial and approachable person who discusses his subject with intelligence as well as affection.

Effect of Labour Government

"To get it right for the record for a start, because you film men often have multiple personalities, in what capacity have you come to visit us?" I asked.

"Well, officially I'm the Australian and New Zealand representative—they sometimes say Australasian, but I don't like the word—of Eagle-Lion Films, which act as the world-wide distributors of all productions made by the Rank studios, as well as handling all other Rank interests. How's that?"

"Good. It's the Rank part that interests us, although his career and reputation are already pretty well-known. This may be a rather ticklish question—what effect, if any, is a Labour Government in Britain likely to have on Rank's empire?"

"Well, I met a big film executive in Sydney recently who had been in company with Mr. Rank when the British Election results came out—and he said that Rank showed no sign of anything except, well, almost pleasure at the result. When you talk of monopolies in connection with Rank, you've got to consider the question from all angles. Actually Rank encourages competition rather than hinders it; but to compete with Hollywood his enterprise has got to be organised on a world-wide scale: there can be no links missing in the chain, and no weak ones. As for the change in England, the new Government has obviously been chosen by the people, and when that happens you've got to work in with it. If the Government decides on a change of policy for the film business, the film business will, of course, have to change its policy. There's no argument about that; but, in fact, Labour administrations everywhere are just as alive as anybody to the national and international importance and power of the film. The Labour Government in Australia, for example, has been taking steps to form a National Film Board; and you've had the same thing here for some time. During the war, the British Government showed considerable interest in some films, and things went along very smoothly."

Some Control Needed

"You'll recall, Mr. Williamson, that some time back, when questions were asked in the House of Commons about the 'Rank monopoly,' there was a suggestion that the British film industry might come under some form of trusteeship or corporate control, like the BBC. Have there been any developments of that idea?"

"None that I've seen. But speaking for myself and not necessarily for Mr. Rank, I would always subscribe to the view that because of the impact which films make on the public mind—a greater impact than that of printed matter—and because of their importance in the sphere of international relations, there should be some form of Government, or rather, of national control—especially for some films."

"Such as . . . ?"

"Well, we British have a habit of laughing at ourselves, but the habit is not always understood by other peoples. Take *Colonel Blimp*—that's only one example of what I mean, and perhaps not an ideal one. The power of the film is so vital and so far-reaching that I think any Government would be foolish to give up all control of it. All the same I believe that the British Government recognises that Mr. Rank is a man of vision, a man with patriotic ideals."

Heir to the Throne?

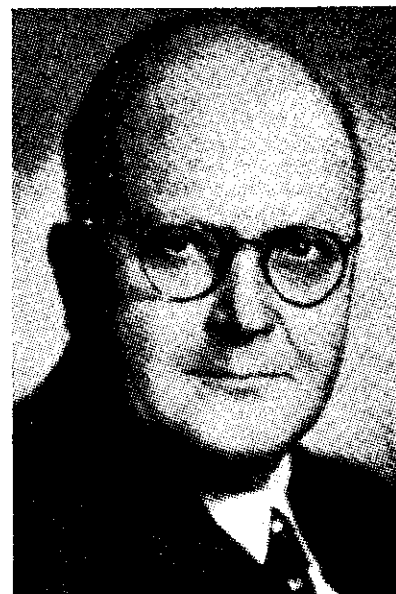
"Yes, but a government must have vision too. Although Mr. Rank himself may be quite acceptable, there does arise the long-term question of who may follow him to power. When you have a commercial empire like this, the succession to the throne becomes very important, doesn't it?"

"Yes, I admit there's a problem there, and it has to be recognised in all such cases. But, in fact, there is no stifling of individualism in the Rank enterprises. The various companies are separately controlled, and producers and directors and so on are given a free hand. In any case, I doubt if real dictatorship in the film world is possible. Cinemas are public services and if they didn't serve the public with the correct fare they would soon antagonise the public and force them to stay away. Any man who tried on a big scale to use the movies to serve his own interests or viewpoint would, I think, pretty soon come a cropper."

Films for Children

From this we turned to a discussion of children's cinema clubs, one of Mr. Rank's pet schemes. Mr. Williamson explained that in these clubs, which are springing up all over Great Britain children pay subscriptions for membership instead of the ordinary admission fees, and on enrolment are issued with membership cards, entitling them to attend the special Saturday morning shows.

"Under a club supervisor, who is usually the local theatre manager, the youngsters form their own committees," continued Mr. Williamson. "Thus they are taught civics and the rudiments of democratic control. Club meetings start with a community sing, to warm things up, and then a special film programme is put on. There will be educational or interest items, a specially edited news-reel, and of course, a carefully chosen feature film—very often a Western, because that's a pretty healthy form of entertainment as well as being very popular. There may perhaps be a personal appearance by some famous comedian and also perhaps a talk, not more



ALAN J. WILLIAMSON
"You've given me a lot to think about"

than three minutes, on some subject, such as care of the teeth or road safety. After expenses are paid, any surplus goes to improve the clubs. There are all sorts of allied activities—for instance, I know a case where the children were given the run of a studio and allowed to produce and act in a film which they had written themselves.

One in Australia

"And these special children's features which Mr. Rank is reported to be so keen on making—what about them?"

"Well, I'm supervising the production of one just now in Australia. The idea is to show the children in England how Christmas is spent in the Australian bush. It's an adventure story about several white youngsters and an aborigine child, and how they find a lost horse and get a reward. Jolly good fun."

"We're spending more than £20,000 on it. It will be in three two-reel episodes. Films like this, showing children in one place how children live in another, are needed for the clubs, and we're hoping to get your National Film Unit here to undertake some work for us along those lines. But it would probably be necessary to send out somebody to work on it who knew the English children's viewpoint and had studied the kind of thing they want. For example I saw one of your National Film Unit's items about a Hawke's Bay Show. It was very good; but the commentary as it stands would not be suitable for English children, because they haven't the knowledge of conditions out here which the commentator takes for granted in a film for New Zealanders. You see, points like that have to be watched all the time."

"Can I take it that the general idea behind these special children's films and these cinema clubs is to try to overcome some of the present problems of censorship?"

"Exactly. The question of censorship and films for children is enormously difficult and complicated, and what is

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