

Independent Miss Craigie

Synopsis

Jill Craigie was one of the first women to direct films in Britain. Her fragmented career is marked by energetic struggles to get her films made and distributed from the early 1940s to her final film in 1995.

The tensions between her loving, yet sometimes painful, commitment to her husband, former Labour leader, Michael Foot, and her own creative and political goals, speak to the challenges women still face today in film production.

Narrated in the first person, *Independent Miss Craigie* uses the director's personal collection of letters, papers, and photographs counterpointed with her films, interviews, rich IWM archive of women's war work and personal photographs by her daughter, Julie Hamilton. Chapters of the film chart her journey in carving a place in the almost entirely male world of a film directing in the 1940s, making her key films, and forging extensive friendships and personal relationships with figures such as Henry Moore.

Arriving without contacts in the capital in 1930, after an unhappy girlhood in boarding school, Jill Craigie honed her writing skills on the women's magazine, *Betty's Paper*, where, alongside responding to readers' problems, she wrote horoscopes as 'Professor Philastro'. She collaborated with her second husband Jeffrey Dell, as co-writer on *A Flemish Farm* (1943). Like other women, she also got a break into film through the growth of information and propaganda films produced during World War Two and began writing scripts for the British Council.

A chance discovery of Sylvia Pankhurst's *The Suffragette Movement*, which she read while an air raid warden, sparked a life-long fascination with this key moment of women's history, about which Craigie wrote several scripts and a radio play *The Women's Rebellion*, produced in 1953. It also informed her lasting commitment to feminism and socialism. The handful of films she made in 1944 –1951 (including *Out of Chaos*, *The Way We Live* and *Blue Scar*) provide a fascinating glimpse of aspirations to build a better, more equal Britain after World War Two, inspired by the socialist beliefs she shared with the reforming government elected in 1945.

Unlike many of the films of the British Documentary Movement, which she worked outside of, the campaigning edge of her work is combined with a keen sense of humour. Unusually, she managed to produce documentary through Two Cities, a Rank subsidiary, which was mainly focussed on prestige features, before setting up one of the first independent companies Outlook Films with William MacQuitty in 1947.

The destruction of the war spurred popular interest in art and architecture in Britain and Craigie won the support of Filippo Del Giudice (the producer of Oliver's *Henry V*) who nurtured new British talent at Rank in the early 1940s to make two make two

pioneering films. *Out of Chaos* (1944) was one of the first arts documentaries, where Craigie collaborated with artists such as Paul Nash, Graham Sutherland, Stanley Spencer, as well as Henry Moore, to whom she took a shine. She then worked as TV presenter and panellist in the burgeoning new medium, while active in founding CND and supporting Labour and her husband Michael Foot's career as an MP and minister.

Independent Miss Craigie, dramatizes previously undiscovered letters, between Craigie and the artists, given to director Lizzie Thynne. These show how she collaborated with them to document their process of evoking 'how war feels' and translating painting into film. Her producers took every opportunity to use glamorous photographs of Craigie to promote her films. The press even reassured readers that her unusual intrusion into the male world of film directing, did not mean she neglected her appearance. Our documentary highlights how the depiction of Craigie suggests the tensions not only in her own career, between exploiting her femininity and wanting to be taken seriously as a professional, but the contradictory position of women who were needed in traditionally male occupations in wartime but who were discouraged from staying permanently in the often rewarding and sometimes better paid work that they obtained.

We follow Craigie's battle with the John Davis at Rank to keep the shoot of *The Way We Live* (1947) going, and to involve the local community, not only in acting in the film but lobbying for the innovative plan to rebuild the city of Plymouth, the second most blitzed city in Europe. Like some contemporary directors, Craigie was committed to a participatory way of working with the people whose lives she was documenting but also to inspiring and supporting her most talented, non-professional actors to become 'stars', especially since most people's idea of film was based on Hollywood drama rather than documentary.

Independent Miss Craigie explores Craigie's brilliantly witty, and astoundingly precocious, polemic on equal pay, *To Be Woman* (1951), her last cinema film. Persuading the Equal Pay Campaign that her proposed film would be an asset to their campaign, they lobbied their members for donations for the production. A precursor to crowd-funding, this appeal was successful and the film was widely shown to advance the cause. Women teachers, who had provided the most support for the film, won equal pay in 1955.

By contrast, Craigie then demonstrated her impressive versatility by writing the scripts for two highly popular feature comedies, *The Million Pound Note* (1954) starring Gregory Peck and *Trouble in Store*, with Norman Wisdom. These movies cleverly satirized the British class system although she was unhappy with the latter and took her name off it. Craigie's left-wing politics were also evident a third feature, *Windom's Way* (1957), a thriller set in South East Asia, where a British doctor (Peter Finch) is caught up in an anti-colonial revolt and champions the local plantation workers.

Craigie approached Michael Balcon, the head of Ealing Studios in 1958, in a bid to get him to let her direct films reflecting the experience of young women, and not only 'angry young men'. Balcon's disinclination to hire women directors, combined with the shifts in cinema as it faced competition from television, meant she was made no

headway. As for television Craigie wrote that she was 'bursting with ideas' for the small screen from the 1940s. She made short reports on women's work for 'Sunday Afternoon' on the new ITV channel in 1955 and then a brief foray into the BBC, where she was employed despite being 'no chicken' to make two documentaries in 1967; one on the problems of the new housing estates, *Who are the Vandals?* and a quirky piece on the new fashion of long hair for men, *Keep Your Hair On*. It was to be another 30 years before she got to make her final film, with her grandson Jason Lehel as producer, and Michael Foot as presenter, on another topic to which she was passionately committed, the West's failure to prevent ethnic cleansing in Yugoslavia.