

It seems inevitable that upon reaching a certain age we begin to look over our shoulders at our lives and those of our forebears, and realise that as time marches on so much is going to be lost and forgotten – unless we act now to record it. Thus swapping anecdotes about the good old days with Bob Dunbar at the 1986 ACTT conference inspired Roy Fowler to urge in the union Journal the creation of an oral history group. The rest, as they say, is history.

This idea, that a group of volunteers simply record interviews with people from every aspect of the business, grew until in 2003 the Minister for Heritage and Media, Lord Andrew Mackintosh, was one of a star-studded throng celebrating the BECTU History Project.

Now it has come full circle. Two academics – Andrew Dawson of the University of Greenwich’s School of Humanities and Social Sciences, and Sean P Holmes of the School of Arts at Brunel University – have recorded the history of the BECTU History Project.

Titled *Help to preserve the real story of our cinema and television industries: the BECTU History Project and Constructing the Past, 1986-2010*, it is a very honest, sometimes critical, account of how the project developed.

HISTORY FROM BELOW

The project’s pioneers set about recording interviews with great urgency, before they lost the chance to speak with an ageing retired cadre who still had memories of the early 20th century. Not mentioned in the paper, but remembered by some of us, was what became known as the Curse of the History Project, after a succession of interviewees departed for the great film studio in the sky shortly after their recording.

The project’s mission under Roy Fowler’s leadership was to record a memory of the British film industry, given that “history,” as he said, “is far too important (and fragile) to be left to the historians. Especially the history we call our own.” The original group included Alan

Full circle

Janice Turner reviews a study by Andrew Dawson and Sean P Holmes of the development of the BECTU History Project – from a reminiscence during an ACTT conference to an internationally important archive



boosterism”. In the 90s the project widened the range of interviews to include actors and media executives – largely outside BECTU membership.

They accurately describe how the “often gruelling process of production draws disparate groups together” and “cements common bonds.” But to describe this as “in effect, a denial that the industry has been the site of class conflict” misunderstands the complex relationships between professionals. As dispute after dispute shows, it is possible to share common creative goals and celebrate the glories of our industry while simultaneously fundamentally disagreeing over how these creative endeavours are managed, organised or remunerated.

SECURE OLD WHITE MEN

Roy Fowler recalled that the volunteers tended to seek out people they knew and Dawson and Holmes describe them as white, male, elderly, financially secure and from the London area. They report that just 19 per cent of interviewees are women.

The new chair of the project, former deputy General Secretary Roy Lockett, took bold steps for diversity in the 70s and 80s in the ACTT and has with the authors of this report been addressing this. Dawson and Holmes congratulate the Project that a “democratic and egalitarian ethos shines through, particularly in its openness and willingness to interview all connected with the industry. To this extent BHP has engaged with the industry’s authoritative voices and has gone part way to constructing an alternative, or ‘counter memory,’ to dominant industry discourses.”

They also note that the pace of interviews is slowing. This astonishing, unique success story has only materialised due to a dedicated band of union members getting together. Anyone who would like to help ensure the continued success of the History Project should drop the Project Secretary, Sue Malden, a line at BECTU head office or check out the Project’s pages on the Union website. •

Lawson, Ralph Bond, Sid Cole, Norman Swallow, Stephen Peet, Rodney Giesler, John Legard, Roy Lockett and Manny Yospa, with the backing of Deputy General Secretary Roy Lockett. Its record of more than 650 interviews is a staggering achievement.

The authors describe the relationship between the History Project and the union as “semi-detached”. The project was keen to be voluntary, independent and self-financing – but economic reality proved that union support was essential, and the union was proud to give it.

The authors link the History Project’s activities with those of the 1970s and 1980s oral history movement: “Developed by new-Left historians such as

E.P. Thompson in the 1960s as a reaction to the conservative, top-down, approach to British history and rigidities of Stalinist historiography, this new method offered a voice to the voiceless.” Stephen Peet, a retired TV documentary maker, had links with the Oral History Society and helped to disseminate these ideas within the project.

Dawson and Holmes describe tensions between elitists and those from more mundane parts of the industry, and between those who wanted to focus on artistic contribution and others for whom collective industrial action was highpoint of their careers. But they shoot rather wide of the mark when they turn to a discussion of “industry

BECTU ARCHIVE: ANONYMOUS BY REQUEST