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Making a living at the cinema: Scottish cinema staff in the silent era:

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Explanations for cinema’s appeal more often than not begin, and in some cases end, with the films and the stars who populated them. From early in the First World War, exploitation made much of the presence on celluloid of figures, whose familiarity was such that only first names need be employed. In November 1915 the Grand Theatre, Glasgow, mounted a ‘Charlie [Chaplin] and Mabel [Normand]’ competition, in which members of the audience were invited to act out a scene between the two Keystone. Yet the appeal of cinema-going as an embedded recreational form rested on more than stars alone. For exhibitors, including major circuits such as Green’s, variable support for films rendered them an unreliable source of income, producing weeks in which, at the box office, famine followed feast. More consistent returns were to be generated by encouraging repeat visits by patrons and these would be maximised by making the cinema-going experience as pleasing as possible. Key to this was the in-house staff who engaged in face-to-face contact with picture-goers. In 1926, the company produced a booklet for staff on Cinema Service, which among other things recommended greeting audience members with a smile, while warning against being ‘perky- pungent or fresh’.

If such advice was reserved for front of house staff, the quality of the cinema-going experience more generally rested on the broad range of cinema employees, from the manager who, especially in the early days, booked the programme and then endeavoured to sell it to potential customers; the musicians who in the silent era did much through their accompaniment to realise the film for audiences; operators (projectionists) whose
ability to run films at the correct speeds and without undue flicker made watching a comfortable experience; attendants responsible for managing the audience within the auditorium and ensuring the safety particularly of cinema’s many young patrons; to the cleaners charged with the removal of the detritus of previous screenings, which could range from tobacco ash, chewing gum, and spectacles, to, in one case, half a dozen bottles of hair restorer.\(^3\) Surveys of cinema-goers from the mature silent era, such as the questionnaires issued by Sidney Bernstein of the Granada theatre chain, confirmed that while pictures and stars remained the principal attractions, members of the audience, both male and female, attached importance to the quality of the orchestra, while for both ‘Courtesey and Service of Staff’ figured above price in their calculation of whether or not to attend.\(^4\)

For all the importance of such figures for the everyday functioning of cinema, the history of this labour force, seen in terms of its conditions of employment, its levels of pay, the degree to which it attempted to organise collectively, and its gender balance, remains substantially unwritten, with only the musicians subject to extended discussion.\(^5\) This chapter seeks to extend coverage to the generality of employees, but proceeds with certain limitations in mind. First, for reasons which will become apparent, it is a workforce which it is impossible accurately to quantify in overall terms. What we have instead are occasional snapshots, indicating the staffing of individual halls, comprising a small and not necessarily representative sample of the 600 or so venues active across Scotland. So, the Cinema House, on Glasgow’s Renfield Street, a city-centre hall with a capacity of 700 when it opened in 1911, employed a staff of nineteen, comprising a manager, an assistant manager who also doubled as chief operator, an assistant operator,
a spool winder, a booking ‘clerkess’, four ushers, two check takers, a front doorman, a head cleaner, a cleaner, and an orchestra of five. As a point of comparison, the Hippodrome in Bo’ness which opened a year later and was licensed to hold 1,400 ran with two operators, two money takers, five checkers, and an orchestra of six, along with an unspecified number of cleaners. Secondly, available documentation does not allow equal billing to be accorded all grades of employee, with star status reserved for a favoured few. Within the limits enforced by this selective approach, several broad themes are pursued: the experience of working in the cinema is considered with regard to overall career patterns and the degree to which mobility between grades was either possible or facilitated. This has implications for the temper of relations within the industry. On a tour of cinemas in the United States, the Scottish correspondent of The Bioscope, James McBride, encountered a generally harmonious relationship between employers and their staffs, so that capital and labour could be viewed as operating in partnership. How far that could apply within a Britain marked by industrial confrontation and political radicalism in the very years in which silent cinema reached maturity provides part of the matter of this chapter: to what extent did the class antagonism characteristic of Red Clydeside colour the industrial politics of the Scottish cinema trade and what features of the industry functioned either to emphasise or diminish its impact?

Alongside income and status hierarchies, differences of gender also pervaded this labour force. Women were extensively employed within the industry, making up just over half of the Cinema House’s initial complement of nineteen. Yet their role was substantially confined to providing the music (two pianists and a cellist at Renfield Street), and performing various ancillary tasks as ushers and cleaners. Their weekly wage
rarely exceeded one pound, while among male employees, only the apprentice and therefore teenage spool winder fell below that figure.\(^9\) Engagement in more responsible posts remained rare, so that in 1919 the trade paper *The Entertainer* could remark that while the adult cinema audience was over seventy per cent female, no woman fulfilled the role of booking manager to ensure that films matched the preferences of an increasingly feminised generation of picture-goers.\(^10\) This observation was all the more significant, coming as it did immediately after a period during which the demands of war and attendant problems of labour shortage in non-essential industries had created opportunities for young women in particular to move into areas of work from which they had previously been excluded. The degree to which the cinema came to offer a ‘new and democratic space’ or provided a setting in which established gender differences continued to be played out is considered towards the end of this chapter.\(^11\) Before turning to the politics of the workforce, however, a brief overview of roles and relationships across the various grades is offered.

For most of those employed in picture houses across Scotland, the industry was not their principal means of support throughout the year. Of the 390 venues listed in the 1921 edition of the *Kinematograph Year Book*, reflecting the industry at its post-war peak, and for which full details on the frequency of screenings is available, about one-third ran fewer than two shows a night, often only opening on selected days through the week.\(^12\) Here, hours worked were not such as to make the cinema a sole or perhaps even primary source of employment. Even when shows were more frequent, the presence of staff employed on a part-time or flexible basis was notable. Some were only required when shows were due to start or between screenings, so that the standard industrial

\(^9\) The costs and conditions of employment are discussed further in Chapter 1.6.

\(^10\) *The Entertainer* 1919, 25 April, 3.

\(^11\) For women’s employment in cinema, see Chapter 1.6.1.

\(^12\) Kinematograph Year Book 1921.
working week (from 1919) of forty-eight hours was experienced by few. So, while operators were paid on the basis of a forty-nine hour week, for musicians the standard that applied just after the First World War was twenty-four, with rehearsals and matinees additional to that.\textsuperscript{13} Even then, most orchestras, rather than being engaged across the year, were hired for the period of peak business from autumn to spring, missing out the slacker summer months, when takings could be depressed by a combination of potentially better weather and less attractive programmes. The Cinema House (from 1925 the Regent Cinema) was not untypical in reducing its orchestra between the end of April and the beginning of September.\textsuperscript{14} Frustration at this repeated pattern of employment may have informed the view of the Amalgamated Musicians’ Union in September 1920 that its members could not ‘be put away in a cupboard when not wanted for months at a time, and then brought out and dusted and put back into the orchestra when required’.\textsuperscript{15} Even operating boxes, where safety considerations and the need to maintain oversight of the operation of complex machinery demanded more sustained attendance and continued diligence, were often staffed by part-timers. At Pringle’s Picture Palace in Edinburgh during the opening months of the First World War, the operator Hugh Simmers was employed during the evenings only, his days being spent working as an electrical salesman.\textsuperscript{16} Such cases informed debate in wider labour circles. At a meeting of the Aberdeen Trades Council in December 1920, the delegate from the National Union of Railwaymen called, in language redolent of conventional gender priorities, for ‘one man one job’, pointing up in the process the complications created by those who secured second jobs in local picture houses.\textsuperscript{17} The methods usually employed to assign individuals to certain occupations and so begin to reconstruct their experiences and their
outlook fall down in the face of such complexity. For example, attempts at quantification from Census returns become redundant and even isolated observations such as that by the Ministry of Labour which estimated the number affected by the wage agreement concluded between the Exhibitors’ Association and the Musicians’ Union across Scotland (with the exception of Aberdeen) at 500 must be treated with due caution.¹⁸

The challenges posed for the trade by this pattern of work were not only statistical. Negotiations over wages were often complicated. In response to demands in 1916 for a five shillings a week increase in pay to compensate for the rise in the cost of living during the early stages of the war, some proprietors, such as those at the Empire and the Pavilion in Motherwell, urged that as they only offered ‘spare-time employment’, the burden should be borne by those who were the workers’ principal employers.¹⁹ For unions within the entertainment industry, the basic task of securing high and stable levels of organisation was rendered more complex. In 1928, the Scottish Trades Union Congress heard complaints from the National Association of Theatrical Employees and the Musicians’ Union of blacklegging by those, who when working as, among other things, miners, railwaymen or shop assistants were diligent in paying their union dues, but who were less so when engaged in second jobs at local cinemas.²⁰

The predominance of part-time employment sustained the view that the functioning of picture houses depended overwhelmingly on a small number of staff, whose contribution could be deemed essential. Such was the opinion of Louis Dickson of the Hippodrome, Bo’ness, in making the case in May 1916 for exemption from military service for the cinema’s Music Director, Robert Miller. Dickson sought to distinguish between Miller and most other members of staff, arguing that only three of the
Hippodrome’s complement of thirteen (plus cleaners) were key to the house’s everyday operations, rendering them irreplaceable: namely, the manager, the operator, and Miller himself.\textsuperscript{21} Such observations serve to justify the focus on these grades in the discussion that follows, but in the process light is thrown on relations across the workforce as a whole.

In shaping the fortunes of the business, the role of the manager was central.\textsuperscript{22} As James McBride observed, unlike the position in the USA, directors of cinema companies across Britain rarely had direct experience of the trade, their interests being overwhelmingly commercial, driven by the desire to maximise returns.\textsuperscript{23} By contrast, managers had, with few exceptions, spent most of their working lives in the exhibition sector or a related part of the entertainment business. Such at least is suggested by individual profiles offered by the trade press. So, J. W. J. (‘Billy’) Marsh of Glasgow’s Cinema House worked for a time as an electrical engineer before becoming an electrician in a London music hall. His cinematic career began in the operating box at the Southall Electric Theatre followed by the Cinema House, where he was appointed second operator on its opening in 1911. After six months, he was promoted to the post of chief operator, later becoming assistant manager.\textsuperscript{24} Other managers brought with them a solid grounding in the practice of showmanship. In the mid 1920s, the running of the La Scala at Saltcoats was in the hands of a former violinist on the variety stage, who had himself managed touring theatrical companies.\textsuperscript{25} Armed with such experience, managers were charged with securing programmes likely to appeal to house patrons, overseeing the maintenance of the physical fabric of the building, ensuring order, particularly at crowded Saturday evening shows, and thereby securing the house’s reputation within the local community.
In pursuing their business, managers found themselves answerable to a variety of publics: directors and shareholders, anxious as to the profitability of the concern, audience members seeking attractive entertainment with which to occupy their free time, and a workforce occasionally vociferous in defence of its status reflected both in wages and working conditions. For the Bioscope, this often seemed a thankless task:

A manager works the longest hours, receives less ha’pence relatively, and more kicks actually, and has to put up with more interference than any other member of the staff. He is called ‘manager’ because, in spite of this, he sometimes manages to hold down his job.26

In so doing, they would often experience considerable change, both collectively and individually. Over time, their role in booking films and constructing programmes progressively diminished with the growth of theatre circuits and the actions of surviving independents who increasingly moved to pool their booking arrangements to bolster their ability to secure the most attractive subjects on the best (lowest) terms. So, by 1927, it was estimated that around one-third of exhibitors across Scotland were part of circuits for booking purposes.27 This left managers to apply the knowledge and experience of showmanship garnered within the cinema trade or some other branch of the entertainment business in order to maximise the appeal of programmes. A leader in the Scottish Kinema Record in September 1922 emphasised the importance of their efforts, identifying ‘exploitation’ as a key contributor to maintaining profitability in a difficult trading environment.28 Energies were employed selectively and were more often designed to
enhance further the appeal of subjects which promised to be popular than to bolster outwardly unattractive programmes. In November 1928, the manager of the Rialto, Kirkcaldy, in anticipation of the impending screening of MGM’s version of *Annie Laurie* contributed pieces to the local press, had the theatre bedecked with heather, and required all (presumably female) ushers and check-takers to wear tartan skirts, white jumpers, and plaids. Shows were preceded by a prologue involving the performance of the song accompanied by a Highland reel.29 Appropriate product placement further acted to enhance brand awareness: at the Kinnaird Picture House in Dundee in September 1927, displays were mounted to boost the Herbert Wilcox production of *Nell Gwynn*, utilising candles bearing the lead character’s name and *Our Nell* soap. Less predictably, ‘trench’ (in reality, dog) biscuits were employed that same year to push the film adaptation of Bruce Bairnsfather’s *The Better ‘Ole* at Poole’s Synod Hall in Edinburgh, providing justification of sorts for the accompanying tag line: ‘Poole’s Programmes always take the Biscuit and so will Syd Chaplin in “The Better ‘Ole” at the Synod ‘Ole’ [emphasis in original].30 Payment structures provided a clear incentive for the systematic pursuit of exploitation. At both the King’s Cinema in Aberdeen and the Regent in Glasgow, managers received, in addition to their basic salaries, a bonus equivalent to five per cent of net profits.31

Unsurprisingly given this level of reward, managerial posts proved attractive, so that some 400 were reported to have applied for the vacancy at the La Scala in Paisley in 1928, the position going to a man who had previously worked as assistant manager with the British National Opera, and Carl Rosa Opera Companies.32 Successful managers were much in demand and could experience considerable geographical mobility, sometimes
voluntary but occasionally enforced by circuits anxious to place them in houses where their impact would be maximised. For example, the directors of Caledon Pictures Ltd. opted in 1927 to transfer the manager of the Elder Picture House in Glasgow to the nearby Lyceum in Govan. Long-distance moves were not uncommon, so that the same year the manager of the Picture House in Glasgow, part of the Provincial Cinematograph Theatres Ltd. chain, found himself transferred to the circuit’s house in Sheffield.³³ Faced with such a change, managers would have to respond to meet the tastes of their new customers. Yet in doing so they drew on the broad principles of showmanship that applied regardless of setting. A common approach to boosting business was promoted and managers within circuits were often encouraged to share ideas. From late in the First World War, managers of Green’s houses met on a monthly basis to discuss approaches likely to maximise business.³⁴

Gatherings in the interests of commercial efficiency were one thing, organisation to promote a sense of collective purpose among managerial personnel quite another. It took until the final full year of the silent era for a Kinema Managers’ Association to be formed in Glasgow and district, with an attendance of forty-two at the inaugural meeting. From that point, the Association appears to have largely fulfilled a social function, with a billiards competition held the following September.³⁵ As a force in industrial politics, by contrast, it appeared mute, a function of the rivalry for custom which precluded the kind of collusion evident in other areas of the economy.³⁶ Managers’ loyalties continued to be directed more to boards of directors and shareholders rather than to their peers, an outlook reinforced by linking wages to profitability. Showmanship remained the most
crucial of managerial functions, a practice which extended beyond the films themselves to advancing the general interests of the firm.

In pursuing the latter, managers drew on business models long-established within the entertainment sector, based on acts of generosity designed to secure loyalty within the workforce and support across the wider community. Cinemas thus regularly staged performances for the benefit of the immediate locality, acts of beneficence given due publicity in the trade and mainstream press. Opening nights provided an early opportunity to establish the house’s importance within the community. So, in March 1921, the proceeds of the inaugural performance at the Queen’s Picture House, Kilmarnock, were presented to the town’s infirmary. Local or national emergencies served to stimulate charitable efforts. As the First World War progressed, entertainments were mounted to fund the provision of comforts for the troops or served to amuse their children or their wounded comrades. In January 1917, the staff of BB Pictures organised a Social and Whist Drive for the Limbless Soldiers’ and Sailors’ Fund. On-going problems occasioned by high casualty rates sustained such provision beyond the war’s end. In July 1919, the Thursday performance at the Kilbirnie Cinema House went to support the Fallen Heroes’ Fund. In mining districts, the hardship resulting from prolonged industrial disputes in 1921 and 1926 galvanised acts of support, so that halls in Coatbridge, Bannockburn, Kirkcaldy, and Whifflet assisted in the funding of local soup kitchens in 1921, while the later more extended struggle generated comparable responses in Burntisland, Broxburn, and Shotts, among other places. On occasion, support extended beyond the financial, as when in August 1919 the manager of the Picture House, Denny, organised an outing for his patrons, and the Picture House, Kilmaurs,
supplemented the questionable attraction of an onion-eating contest by distributing clothing to needy members of the audience. Beyond charitable acts, cinemas also supported other community endeavours, the Picture Pavilion in Largs raising funds to provide jerseys for the local Largs Thistle Football Club. As the trade press occasionally felt bound to acknowledge, there was more to this than mere altruism, the good standing of houses being thought to encourage a more loyal clientele.

A commitment to the business was also to be nurtured among the workforce. In the winter months, indoor gatherings provided occasions at which trading success could be celebrated and the contribution of staff acknowledged. The annual social for employees of the Arcadia Picture House, Bridgeton, held at Bellgrove Hall in March 1926 included an address by the company chairman, while the following year the dance organised for the staff of the King’s Cinema, Perth, was overseen by the manager and the chief operator. During the summer, not even Scotland’s capricious climate could discourage firms from organising outings for their employees. Late in May 1927, the staff of the Lyceum, Govan, were treated to a motor tour around the Three Lochs before proceeding to high tea at the Queen’s Hotel, Helensburgh. The previous year, employees of the Picture House, Falkirk, had been taken to Aberfoyle, moving on to a programme of sports at Stronachlacher on Loch Katrine, competing for prizes provided by the house’s manager. Outings were usually scheduled for Sundays, never a day of regular business in this period, and served to bring staff together in a manner which the usual work routine seldom if ever did. Nevertheless, the emphasis regularly given to the generosity of employers and managers in facilitating such gatherings also served to underline the hierarchies informing the work relationship. The point was taken up by McBride, who
noted that the British industry had largely failed to follow the American practice of enabling workers to partake in profits by encouraging them to take up shares in the business. Instead, reward structures emphasised a reliance on discretionary benevolence, as firms opted either at Christmas or the end of the financial year to distribute bonuses among their staffs. This also enabled distinctions within the workforce to be acknowledged, so that in 1927 the Regent Picture House agreed payment of a £100 bonus to the manager, with future income linked in part to profits, while the following year a ‘satisfactory’ trading performance was seen to justify payment of the usual bonus to remaining staff, which was not to exceed twenty pounds in all. In the Scottish case, then, profit-sharing assumed a form that accentuated rather than moderated existing power relationships.

Within workplace hierarchies, operators occupied an ambiguous position. Their responsibility for overseeing technically complex machinery and high-tension electrical equipment made them key to the successful and safe projection of film. Yet as the *Bioscope* lamented in a series of articles late in 1926, this importance was not reflected in pay levels. At the Grand Central Picture House, Aberdeen, run by James F. Donald (Cinemas) Ltd, the operator’s wage lagged well behind those of the manager and the orchestra conductor, and even fell below the pay of most of the house’s musicians. For some, this low standing occasioned little surprise. The words of the presiding Sheriff at a sitting of the Dumfries and Galloway Military Appeal Tribunal in September 1916 may have captured a wider perception: ‘It may be only my ignorance, but I thought that all an operator had to do was to turn a handle’. Opinion within the trade was, however, clear that, as the Agent’s response had it, ‘He has a good deal more to do than that’, so that the
Bioscope pressed that action be taken to enhance the post’s standing.\textsuperscript{51} The solution was seen to lie in regulating entry to the trade through a formalised system of training, an approach that had been discussed in Edinburgh in 1920 at a meeting between the Edinburgh and East of Scotland branch of the Cinematograph Exhibitors’ Association (CEA) and the Electrical Trades Union (ETU), which aspired to represent the interests of local operators. That had resulted in proposals that entrants to the operating box serve a five-year apprenticeship, with wages beginning at one pound a week at sixteen years of age, rising to two pounds ten shillings in their final year.\textsuperscript{52} Even this did little to transform pay levels and worked if anything to confirm the discrepancy between the job’s outwardly skilled status and attendant levels of reward.

This outcome could be traced in part to the absence of a single body to press the operators’ concerns. The problem appeared to have been addressed in the later years of the First World War, as losses due to voluntary recruitment and then conscription worked to deprive cinemas of men of military age. By 1917, a shortage of operators was noted across Scotland, resulting, it was claimed, in the closure of many rural halls.\textsuperscript{53} In urban centres, managers noted the problems of retaining staff, with operators in particular being lured elsewhere by the promise of higher rewards.\textsuperscript{54} With their scarcity value thus signalled, operators moved to organise in their own defence. In the east, from Edinburgh to Aberdeen, the Electricians took up the operators’ cause. Around Glasgow, by contrast, the lead was taken by the National Association of Theatrical Employees (NATE), so that by 1919 it was claimed that some three-quarters of operators across the city were members.\textsuperscript{55} Yet by 1925, NATE was seeking the support of the Musicians’ Union in pressing for recognition by the CEA; its membership in local cinemas was described as
almost non-existent. While volatility in enrolments owed much to a change in the economic environment, the effect was compounded by continued ease of access to the operating box. Across the 1920s, both NATE and the ETU pressed for a minimum age to be established for entrants to this branch of the trade. The call by the Clyde branch of the ETU in 1930 to fix sixteen years as the minimum was, like previous such demands, posed in terms of safety. The Glen Cinema tragedy at Hogmanay the previous year, in which seventy children died, had occurred in a hall in which the assistant operator, responsible for rewinding the reel, was a fifteen-year-old boy. For the unions, however, concern also centred on the supply of labour, the influx of the war years having resumed during a decade of heightened unemployment when the cinema appeared to offer a source of regular and sustained work. This may help to explain the appeal of the fraudulent scheme run in the early 1920s by Peter Robert Mackenzie of Edinburgh, offering training as an operator on payment of a deposit of up to fifty pounds.

If the absence of controls on entry complicated attempts at organisation, the problem was compounded by a tendency to regard the operating box as a stepping-stone towards the manager’s office. Alexander Roberts, manager of the Picture House, Dalkeith, in 1917, was not unusual in having previously worked as an operator, in this case at the Hippodrome in Bo’ness. It was a progression frequently charted in the trade press, as in 1920 when the chief operator at the Wishaw Picture House succeeded to the manager’s position. The importance attaching to individual upward mobility served to weaken a sense of collective purpose among operators and continued to frustrate attempts to enhance their job status.
No such ambiguity marked the standing of cinema Music Directors. Their importance to the health of the business had long been recognised, to the extent that publicity even before 1914 made much of the quality of musical provision and the person primarily responsible for that. In outlining its appeal to patrons, the Cinema House in Edinburgh made reference in 1912 to the comfort of its seats, the ‘Perfect Courtesy from the Well-Trained Staff of Attendants’ and the ‘Perfect Ventilation’, but also stressed the presence of a ‘Perfect Bijou Orchestra of Skilled Musicians’. The following year, the centrally located Princes Cinema and the Silver Kinema in Nicolson Square underlined the quality of the musical accompaniment by reference to their respective Music Directors: Herr Ernest Kosting and K. Deablitz, the latter described as ‘a Principal of the Scottish Orchestra’. Further west, the presence of a German musician, Herr Iff, was presented as proof of the quality of music accompanying the films at Glasgow’s Hillhead Picture Salon. Into the 1920s, halls continued to give prominence to orchestral provision when setting out the range of amenities on offer. At Synod Hall in August 1928, attractions for patrons included new cinematograph equipment and lighting effects, alongside a New Orchestra under a Music Director recruited from the Plaza in London. The importance which audiences attached to such provision must, in most cases, be inferred from such publicity. More direct insights are occasionally afforded us, however. Late in 1919, picture-goers at Montrose’s Municipal Cinema were reported as complaining at the programmes mounted, on the unlikely grounds that they provided too much for the money paid, being considered too long and comprising too many films, so that intervals of ‘good music’ were considered preferable. Perhaps reflective of this view, the local press took to publishing details of the music planned for each performance.
some cases, managers went further, inviting patrons to determine the accompaniment to programmes. A Musical Committee was established at the La Scala, Aberdeen, in 1918.67

Such moves, which might be thought to pre-empt the role of Music Directors were, in practice, rare and selections of music were for the most part entrusted to the professionals, who aimed to ensure, as was observed of the showing of D. W. Griffith’s Way Down East at the New Picture House, Edinburgh, in November 1922, that the accompaniment ‘assisted materially in imparting a realistic touch to the film’.68 This was thought to be best achieved by the appropriate matching of sound and image. Where practice fell short of that ideal, criticism invariably followed. In July 1915, The Entertainer remarked with disapproval about a performance in which a death-bed scene had been accompanied by the Merry Widow Waltz.69 The problem survived the war, so that as late as 1927, an un-named correspondent to the Cheltenham Echo gave voice to a commonly held perception in noting the manner in which

the haunting strains of the exquisite ‘Chant Hindou’ was pressed into service to give special point to a sand storm, a rough-and-tumble fight, and, above all things, a close-up of the very low comedian consuming a banana.70

To ensure against such lapses, Music Directors had charge of cinema music libraries. As a result, a change in personnel would often entail an overhaul of both the available repertoire and the orchestra itself, justifying the emphasis placed in house publicity on the presence of particular personalities. In the great majority of houses, the recruitment and pay of musicians rested with the Music Director, rather than the manager and the
directors. The latter would seek to set an overall budget for the orchestra. At the Regent in Glasgow in 1928, for example, a maximum charge for the provision of music was fixed at eighty-eight pounds, but the Music Director was encouraged to keep costs down to nearer eighty.\(^{71}\)

In effect, then, musicians at most of Scotland’s cinemas were employees of the Music Director, and not of the company itself. Rather than this encouraging recurrent conflict within orchestral ranks, a shared outlook between conductor and rank-and-file musicians was more often evident. J. S. Ratcliffe, Organiser of the Scottish and North-East District of the AMU noted that Music Directors were broadly supportive of the union’s attempts to extend membership across local picture houses.\(^{72}\) Individual points of controversy provided practical instances of a shared perspective. In the summer of 1914, management at the Alhambra in Stirling dismissed the house’s pianist without reference to the Music Director. The latter thereupon resigned, leading the AMU to call out the whole orchestra in support. Within two days, both the pianist and the Music Director had been reinstated and those musicians still outside the union had agreed to observe officially sanctioned rates of pay.\(^{73}\) The constructive relationship thus demonstrated was cemented further in June 1916 by the formation of a Music Directors’ section of the AMU for Scotland as a whole.\(^{74}\) Subsequent wage agreements between the musicians’ organisation and the CEA also came to include minimum rates for Music Directors.\(^{75}\) A unity of purpose was increasingly apparent, informed by a shared desire to uphold the reputation of the house orchestra by ensuring that qualified and so fully competent players were recruited. Career dynamics also promoted a sense of solidarity. The conductor’s podium was a less likely route to the manager’s office than was the operating
box. A survey of the trade press across the 1920s reveals only one instance in which a Music Director was appointed to the manager’s position, at the Capitol in Glasgow in 1927. More often, tensions between conductor and manager emerged, most frequently around the notice given for impending programmes. Here, lack of time would prevent effective rehearsal, detracting from both the quality of performance and the broader standing of the Music Director.

This then was a workforce characterised by significant income and status differentials and subject to considerable variations in working conditions. The obstacles to effective organisation on more than a sectional basis and a consequent disinclination to mobilise in defence of collective interests appeared marked. As a result, this was never an industry subject to major set-piece confrontations. Yet broader trends in industrial politics continued to impinge, in particular a move towards more elaborate systems of collective bargaining and a growing readiness to flex collective muscle. Here, as in other sectors, the years around the First World War were crucial. In 1914, the AMU’s Scottish organiser was of the view that ‘the Glasgow managers and proprietors are all very decent’ and broadly accepting of attempts to boost union membership and establish agreed rates of pay across the city. Ten years later, the mood was altogether different, exhibitors being seen to lack a ‘spark of humanity’, as concern for profit over-rode consideration for their workers. The intervening decade had witnessed significant developments in collective organisation among both employers and staff. The relentless competition for business had long discouraged a common outlook among firms in the exhibition sector, but this was overcome in the face of a series of external challenges, from growing moral surveillance, to the readiness of legislators to see the trade as a useful source of tax
revenue, and a labour force pressing for wage increases in the face of an escalating cost of living.⁸⁰ In 1916, the AMU, as well as attempting to enforce observation of agreed wage schedules for musicians across all local cinemas, moved to secure a five shillings a week War Bonus for its members. The response was fragmentary, some companies declaring a readiness to meet the increase while others claimed an inability to fund further payments during a period of depressed trade.⁸¹ An approach to the CEA to negotiate collectively over pay was rebuffed, the employers stating that such subjects did not fall within their remit.⁸² By the final year of the war, however, such constitutional niceties were set aside as exhibitors sought to grapple with the threat of escalating wage costs occasioned by a combination of price inflation and a growing shortage of key grades of labour. Collective bargaining procedures were further consolidated immediately after the Armistice, with the formation of a Conciliation Board for the industry across Scotland covering most cinema staff, among whom a sense of collective purpose was nurtured by boom conditions across the trade.⁸³ In quick succession, joint agreements were concluded covering rates of pay for musicians, operators, and, through the efforts of NATE, cash takers, ushers, attendants, cleaners, programme- and chocolate-sellers.⁸⁴

The formation in early 1920 of an Industrial Council for all employed across the entertainment industry more generally marked the high point in the post-war acceptance of collective bargaining procedures.⁸⁵ That year, the Conciliation Board provided the mechanism by which a dispute involving the MU and Green’s, who had responded to a call for a five pounds weekly minimum for musicians by dismissing all bar their houses’ pianists, was settled.⁸⁶ Even then, the limits of conciliation in reconciling differences over wage bargaining were apparent. Proposals for increases in rates advanced by both the
Conciliation Board and the Industrial Council failed to secure support from either the CEA or the MU in 1919 and 1920 and a sense gained ground that processes worked to delay wage adjustments in a period of rapid change in the wider market. When the Conciliation Board failed to secure agreement on a reduction in pay early in 1921, exhibitors, faced with a marked downturn in business, declined to take the matter to the Joint Industrial Council unless any decision by that body were considered binding. Although agreement was finally reached by means of the Conciliation Board, the experience justified a growing readiness on the part of employers to look beyond collective bargaining machinery, culminating in three months’ notice being served in June 1923 for termination of the Board. By the middle years of the decade, as an upturn in trade encouraged unions to seek a restoration of earlier wage reductions, exhibitors continued to seek alternatives to formal conciliation mechanisms, first through resort to arbitration under the Ministry of Labour for houses in and around Glasgow in 1925, while in the following year, Edinburgh exhibitors threatened a wholesale lockout rather than concede an advance in rates. An agreement between the CEA and the ETU over operators’ pay in July 1926 brought to an end a decade of unusual collective tensions within the trade. For what remained of the silent era, negotiations would once more focus on conditions within individual houses. In many respects then, the economic instability of the period during and immediately after the Great War brought an intensity to the industrial politics of the cinema trade that challenged without ever wholly undermining expectations of broadly co-operative relations between managers and workers.
It was a period of significance also for the industry’s gender politics. Women were prominent in the provision of entertainment, a few managing the concert troupes which offered some Scots early exposure to the cinematograph while others supplied instrumental accompaniment to or vocal interludes within the cinema programme. Staffing arrangements more generally worked to confirm the domestic realities shaping most women’s lives. To them was assigned responsibility for cleaning the auditorium and attending to the needs of an increasingly young audience, an extension of the caring, nurturing role practised within the home. In 1926, a female attendant was charged with finding seats for a girl aged twelve attending the Arcadia Picture House in Glasgow to protect her against the close and it appeared improper attentions of an adult male patron. Yet even here the limitations imposed by conventional ideas of femininity were apparent, as a male attendant and the assistant manager were eventually tasked with ejecting this persistent and unwelcome picture-goer.\textsuperscript{91} With attendants occasionally subject to assault by audience members brandishing among other things razors and, in one extreme case, a hatchet, the desirability of a male presence in the theatre seemed obvious.\textsuperscript{92} So, women were rarely encountered in positions of authority in which they were able to exert an influence over the programme’s content. They could be found in the orchestra pit, but rarely wielded the conductor’s baton. Similarly, the operating box was, before 1914, substantially a male preserve. While figures for Scotland are not available, some indication of the prevailing gender balance is offered by the observation that in the early months of the Great War only two cinemas in the area overseen by the London County Council employed women as operators and one of those worked as an assistant.\textsuperscript{93} The subsequent enlistment of large numbers of employees created new opportunities for
women and the extent to which female roles were amended as a result has much to tell us about contemporary perceptions both of the nature of the work and of assumed gender attributes.

By mid 1916, the prospect of greater numbers of female orchestral players led the AMU through its house journal to offer warnings of the physical toll taken by a punishing schedule that comprised rehearsals in the morning, an afternoon matinee, and two shows in the evening: ‘many robust men have been killed off with the strain’.94 Where women had replaced men, it was claimed, while the playing was ladylike, it often lacked vigour and signs of fatigue were evident towards the end of the performance. Such arguments were not allowed to pass without comment. ‘A Lady Instrumentalist’ noted that problems emerged more from ‘a perfect deluge of incompetent amateur musicians of both sexes’ than from a greater female presence in orchestras.95 Whatever the truth, the scope for greater female recruitment appeared real, so that even positions of authority were deemed suitable. Such was the view of the Local Tribunal which adjudicated on Louis Dickson’s appeal on behalf of the Music Director of the Hippodrome in Bo’ness, which rejected his case arguing that ‘a woman could easily be got to fill his place’.96 If the trade press is an accurate guide, however, instances of such substitutions were few and were mostly confined to family members. One of the few women to become an orchestra leader, at the Palace in Aberdeen in 1915, was the daughter of the Music Director, then absent on military service.97 The approach of the musicians’ unions remained to secure agreed rates of pay for all, regardless of gender, ensuring that women were not taken on as cheap substitute labour. Despite this outwardly ‘open’ policy, by the mid 1920s, women made up only fifteen to seventeen per cent of the ordinary membership of the union’s Glasgow
branch. This may suggest that the bulk of female instrumentalists remained outside the union and continued to see performing in local picture houses more as a supplementary, part-time activity than as a potential career. References to female conductors and Music Directors remain sparse beyond 1918, underlining the limited change wrought by the war.

A similar observation applies to the operating box. In the first year of the war, the potential for extending the female presence was raised by Miss Emily Clements of Stratford East in London, in a letter to the Home Office, which advanced the suggestion ‘that a woman could act as a bioscope operator at a picture palace as well as a man’. The discussion that followed found no fundamental objection to women working in the nature of the job, doubts centering rather on safety concerns surrounding their dress, which should be ‘an overall of serge or other woollen and uninflammable material’, rather than ‘cotton and flannelette’. A covering Home Office minute raised a further point of concern in the operators’ responsibility for safety. This involved the kind of prompt action felt to be beyond the capacity of most females: ‘Women are more apt to lose their heads than men’. A more significant obstacle was posed by the lack of experience in overseeing the operation of complex machinery, with the result that Military Appeal Tribunals while rejecting the view that operators should be exempt from call-up, were equally clear that this was not work where female labour could readily be substituted. In the case of Hugh Simmers, the view was that the post could be filled by men over military age or those unfit for service. Although training was offered potential female applicants by agencies such as the Edinburgh College of Cine Operators, the trade’s own Employment Bureau gave preference to wounded ex-servicemen, an act of patriotism cementing cinema’s part in the national effort late in the war. The
appointment of a recipient of the Victoria Cross to the operating box at Glasgow’s Annfield Halls was consequently trumpeted by the trade press. At the same time, State bodies also pressed the employment of those no longer able to fight. The gender balance within the cinema remained substantially unchanged, despite the stresses of war. Although in the 1920s women were found in both managerial and proprietorial positions, their scarcity served to underscore the absence of change elsewhere.

Cinema staffs of the silent era were varied in character, marked by significant and enduring differences in income, status, and gender. They constituted a substantially part-time and unorganised labour force. Many sought work in the cinema but few anticipated a career from it. For the historian, as for picture-goers of the time, most employees remain out of view, meriting attention only in extraordinary circumstances, as when two female attendants at a Methil cinema suffered serious injury when, having washed their hands in petrol to remove paint and then run them under water, they proceeded to dry them by means of a gas jet. This chapter has largely focused on a group of key workers, but has used them to point up relations between the various jobs and grades. In the process, it reveals a workforce subject to a managerial regime which stressed the discretionary power of employers and the importance of acts of generosity, from outings to wage bonuses. For some, the end to which a cinematic career was directed was the manager’s office, muting any tendency to see relations within the workplace in antagonistic terms. The cinema was never a plausible arena for the playing out of class confrontations. Neither, however, was it wholly free of conflict especially in the years during and immediately after the Great War, as recurrent bargaining over wages generated high levels of labour organisation and repeated threats of strike action. The
retreat from confrontation, marked by the abandonment of collective-bargaining mechanisms, was rapid and profound, and created space for an older, paternalistic form of industrial leadership to reassert itself. If cinema workers were not class warriors, their collective efforts did much to shape the cinema-going experience for growing numbers of patrons across the silent era. They may have lacked the prominence given to stars of the silver screen, but their contribution to the growth of cinema as a medium of mass entertainment merits recognition.

1 *Entertainer*, 16 Oct. 1915, p. 4, announcing the competition to be held the week beginning 8 November.
4 *Bioscope*, 4 Aug. 1927, p. 20, for male patrons the orchestra ranked equally with the star.
7 National Records of Scotland (hereinafter NRS), HH30/4/4/21/1, Military Service Appeal Tribunal records (Lothians and Peebles), Notice of Appeal.
8 *Bioscope*, 2 Sept. 1926, p. 36.
9 NLS, MIA, 5/22/3, Meeting of Directors, 5 Dec. 1911.
12 *Kinematograph Year Book* (London, 1921).
13 *Scottish Cinema* (hereinafter SC) 5 July 1920, p. 29, for the conditions for operators in Aberdeen; The National Archives (hereinafter TNA), LAB 83/3315, Cinematograph Exhibitors’ Association (Scottish Branch), Notice of Conciliation Board Agreement with Amalgamated Musicians’ Union, 3 Dec. 1919.
14 NLS, MIA, 5/22/4, Glasgow Picture House Ltd., Minute Book, Meetings of Directors, 12 April 1926; 1 May 1928.
16 NRS, HH30/19/2/6/3, Military Service Appeal Tribunal Records (Lothians and Peebles), Application for Exemption.
17 *Scottish Kinema Record* (hereinafter *SKR*), 18 Dec. 1920, p. 12.
18 TNA, LAB 83/3315, Notice of Conciliation Board Agreement, 3 Dec. 1919.
20 *Bioscope*, 26 April 1928, p. 57.
24 *SC*, 29 March 1920, p. 10.
26 *Bioscope*, 22 April 1926, p. 69.
29 *Bioscope*, 21 Nov. 1928, p. iv.
30 *Bioscope*, 29 Sept., p. iv (Kinnaird); 3 Nov. 1927, p. vi (Synod Hall).
31 Cinema Museum, Lambeth (hereinafter CM), Aberdeen Picture Palaces Ltd., Minute Book, Meeting of Directors, 26 March 1919; NLS, MIA, 5/22/4, Meeting of Directors, 11 July 1927.
33 *Bioscope*, 9 June, p. 44 (Caledon); 8 Dec. 1927, p. 63 (PCT).
35 *Bioscope*, 19 May, p. 64; 12 Sept. 1928, p. 49.
38 *SKR*, 26 March 1921, p. 8.
40 *Entertainer and Scottish Kinema Record*, 26 July 1919, p. 3.
41 *SKR*, 28 May, p. 10; 4 June, p. 9; 25 June 1921, p. 5; *Bioscope*, 3 June, p. 41; 1 July, p. 33; 30 Sept. 1926, p.50.
43 SKR, 4 Feb. 1922, p. 7.
45 Bioscope, 18 March 1926, p. 60; 10 March 1927, p. 64.
46 Bioscope, 26 May 1927, p. 52; 2 Sept. 1926, p. 58.
47 Bioscope, 9 Sept. 1926, p. 21.
50 CM, James F. Donald (Cinemas) Ltd, Grand Central Picture House, Return re Employees, 14 Feb. 1927.
51 Scotsman, 12 Sept. 1916, p. 3 for the contrasting views on operators’ work.
52 SC, 8 March, p. 27; 22 March 1920, p. 24; NLS, MIA, 5/11/7, Cinematograph Exhibitors’ Association, Edinburgh and East of Scotland Section, Minute Book, Section Meeting, 21 June 1921.
54 Entertainer, 19 May 1917, p. 8; 25 May 1918, p. 9.
55 Entertainer and SKR, 14 June, p. 9; 23 Nov. 1919, p. 7.
57 TNA, HO 45/20876, Entertainments, Cinema Operators, Age and Qualifications, W.M. Biswell, District Sec., ETU to Rt. Hon. William Adamson, Secretary of State for Scotland, 29 April 1930.
58 TNA, HO 45/20876, ETU to Town Clerk of City of Glasgow, 5 March 1930; NRS, HH1/1981, Scottish Home Dept, Cinemas, Extended Notes of Proceedings in Paisley Cinema Disaster, Trial of Charles Dorward, Evidence of James McVay, p. 114.
60 NRS, HH30/17/2/25/6, Military Service Appeal Tribunal Records (Lothian and Peebles), Appeal for Exemption.
61 SC, 21 June 1920, p. 25; see also Bioscope, 15 Dec. 1927, p. 53; 26 Jan., p. 54; 18 July 1928,p. 56 for similar career moves.
63 Scotsman, 3 May, p. 2; 24 Sept. 1913, p.1.
66 Entertainer and SKR, 29 Nov. 1919, p. 1; SKR, 3 July 1920, p. 1.
67 Entertainer, 2 March 1918, p. 18.
68 Scotsman, 7 Nov. 1922, p. 10.
69 Entertainer, 24 July 1915, p. 5.
70 Bioscope, 10 Nov. 1927, p. xiii.
71 NLS, MIA, 5/22/4, Meeting of Directors, 8 Aug. 1928; see also 5/22/3, Meeting of Directors, 28 Dec. 1911, for details of the contract concluded with the house’s first Music Director.


TNA, LAB 83/3315, Terms of Agreement between CEA (Scottish Branch) and AMU (Scottish Branch), 13 May 1921.

*Bioscope*, 21 July 1927, p. 50.

*Bioscope*, 12 May 1927, p. xii.

UoS, SC, MU/1/2/8b, Jan. 1914, p. 9; see also MU/1/2/7b, Sept. 1913, p. 6, ‘Picture show proprietors seem to be a very fair set of men to deal with on the whole’.


Griffiths, *Cinema and Cinema-going*, pp. 103-109; the revival of CEA organisation in the east of Scotland is noted in *Scotsman*, 24 July 1918, p. 4.

UoS, SC, MU/1/2/9a, April 1916, p. 5; MU/4/2/1/1/3, AMU Glasgow Branch, General Meetings Minute Book, General Meeting, 9 April 1916.


Ibid., Sept, 1920, pp. 2-3; MU/4/2/1/1/4, Musicians’ Union, Glasgow Branch, General Meetings Minute Book, Special General Summoned Meeting, 8 Aug.; General Meeting, 12 Sept. 1920.

UoS, SC, MU/1/2/10b, Nov.1919, p. 4; MU/4/2/1/1/4, Glasgow Branch, Special General Summoned Meeting, 26 Sept.; General Meeting, 10 Oct. 1920.

UoS, SC, MU/4/2/1/1/4, Special Summoned General Meeting, 10 April 1921; MU/4/2/1/3/1, MU, Glasgow Branch, General Meeting Minutes, Special Summoned General Meetings, 22 May 1921; 30 April 1922; General Meeting, 8 June 1923.

UoS, SC, MU/4/2/1/3/2, MU, Glasgow Branch, General Meetings, General Meeting, 9 Aug 1925; TNA, LAB 83/3315, Terms and Conditions of Employment for Musicians employed in Cinemas in the Glasgow and West of Scotland Area, 21 Nov. 1925; *Scotsman*, 17 March, p. 7; 20 April 1926, p. 6.

*Bioscope*, 1 July 1926, p. 33.

*Bioscope*, 25 March, pp. 48-9; 25 Nov. 1926, p. 56; NRS, CS46/1926/12/60, Court of Session, Second Division, 1 April 1926. Reclaiming Note for Pursuer in Causa William McIwain against The Arcadia Picture House (Glasgow) Ltd.


TNA, HO 45/20876, James Bird, Clerk to London County Council to Under Secretary of State, Home Office, 10 May 1915.


NRS, HH30/4/4/21/2, Local Tribunal, 3 June 1916. It might be noted, with a due sense of irony, that Dickson would himself be replaced by his daughter on joining up later in the war (I am grateful to John Caughie for this information).


99 TNA, HO 45/20876, Miss Emily Clements to Home Office, 12 March 1915.
100 TNA, HO 45/20876, anon. to Clerk to London County Council, 1 June 1915; Bird to Under Secretary of State, 10 May 1915.
101 TNA, HO 45/20876, minute dated 12 May 1915.
102 NRS, HH30/19/2/6/2, Local Tribunal, 18 Sept. 1917.
103 Scotsman, 28 April, p. 1; 8 July, p. 11; 16 Sept. 1916, p. 3, for the Edinburgh College and offers of tuition; Entertainer, 2 Dec. 1916, p. 18; 3 Feb. 1917, p. 8.
104 Entertainer, 10 Nov. 1917, p. 17, for the attitude of the Pensions Committee in Aberdeen.
105 Bioscope, 8 Dec. 1917, p. 63.