

A History of Women in the British Film and Television Industries

<http://research.ncl.ac.uk/womensworkftvi/>



Connie Willis (seated) on the set of 'The Man Who Knew Too Much' (1956)

Photo courtesy of The Cinema Museum

Quotations © BECTU

"Max said ... 'If you come into The Highlander on a Friday evening, you'll meet everybody there. That's where we all get our jobs'." *Kay Mander (b. 1915) Director and continuity: BECTU Interview 57.*

"There was an advertisement in the paper saying, 'Wanted: very bright secretary, very ladylike...' very this, that and the other, every sort of speciality in the world." *Tilly Day (b. 1903) Continuity: BECTU Interview 30.*

"I opened my salary slip one week when I was with Mr Bloom and I found a £10 note in it, so I wrote to him privately and thanked him. When he saw me he said, 'My girl, don't thank me. It's we who thank you. If it was not for you people that have dedicated your lives to this business, there wouldn't have been a cinema.'" *Ella Mallett (b. 1884) Musical accompanist: BECTU interview 40.*

This new study of the history of women who worked in the British film and television industries is exploring the contribution women made between 1933 and 1989.

It is drawing on archive sources held by the union (BECTU) and new accounts (oral histories and writing) by women themselves. The project's lead researcher, Dr Melanie Bell, explains: "While a minority of women worked 'above-the-line' as directors and producers, thousands were employed 'below-the-line' as hairdressers, continuity 'girls', production secretaries or assistants, negative cutters, editors, wardrobe assistants, make-up artists, researchers, librarians and more. Yet the contributions of women in these roles barely feature in existing historical accounts. This project is exciting because it will finally provide us with a fuller picture of women's contribution to the industries."

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Why do we need this research?

Recent reports have highlighted the lack of opportunities for women filmmakers in Britain, with few female directors working in the action, fantasy and thriller genres that dominate the box office. Television drama fares no better, with less than ten per cent of contemporary drama being directed by women. What are the reasons behind this? How could the situation be changed? The debate has focussed on the current picture, but can explanations for the present be found in the past?

How are we going about it?

Our research is examining the period from 1933 to 1989, a time of considerable change for women and for the industries themselves. We are using a wide range of sources, including trade union records, production files, industry journals, biographies, letters, and oral history interviews, to extend our understanding of women's contribution to film and television production in Britain, and to create a lasting historical resource to be hosted online by the British Universities Film and Video Council.

How can you help?

If you are a woman who worked in film and/or television before 1989 we would like to hear from you, whether you worked as a secretary or director or any grade in between. Whatever your role – and whether you might like to contribute in writing or talk to us directly – we would be delighted to hear from you.

We are Dr Melanie Bell (Principal Investigator), Dr Vicky Ball (Co-investigator), Sue Bradley (Research Associate in Oral History) and Frances Galt (PhD student).

Our project partners are BECTU (Broadcasting, Entertainment, Cinematograph and Theatre Union) whose archive is providing us with important sources, and the British Universities Film and Video Council, which is producing a database and web-resource that will make the materials we produce available to others.

A History of Women in the British Film and Television Industries is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. It is a collaborative partnership between Newcastle University and De Montfort University and will run from January 2014 to June 2017.

For more information or to discuss how you might contribute, please send your details via the form on the project website: <http://research.ncl.ac.uk/womensworkftvi/> or contact:

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We look forward to hearing from you.