

# In Search of George Scott Jack of All Trades, Motion Picture Pioneer, World Explorer

Robert G. Clarke

Volume 112, numéro 1, spring 2020

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1069008ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1069008ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (imprimé)

2371-4654 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Clarke, R. G. (2020). In Search of George Scott: Jack of All Trades, Motion Picture Pioneer, World Explorer. *Ontario History*, 112(1), 1–25.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1069008ar>

Résumé de l'article

*Au cours de la première décennie du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle, George Scott a fondé une entreprise cinématographique à Toronto. Il a tourné le « Great Toronto Fire » de 1904, il a tenté la diffusion de films sur l'île de Toronto et il a pris le temps d'ouvrir un « théatorium » à Peterborough, en Ontario, en 1907. Scott a ensuite travaillé dans l'industrie naissante du cinéma à Londres en Angleterre, en Europe, ainsi qu'à Toronto, New York et Hollywood. Il a également tourné des films autour du monde : dans le Pacifique Sud, en Australie, en Asie du Sud-Est, au Japon et en Afrique orientale anglaise. Il mourut à Los Angeles en janvier 1929. Scott a eu une carrière cinématographique d'envergure mondiale, mais il est aujourd'hui surtout connu pour avoir produit l'un des premiers films tournés à Toronto. Dans cet article, nous allons retracer sa vie avant et après son séjour à Toronto.*

# *In Search of George Scott:*

Jack of All Trades, Motion Picture Pioneer,  
World Explorer\*

by Robert G. Clarke

**Big Toronto Fire in Moving Pictures... Splendid  
Entertainment Given at the Colloseum, 432 George Street.**

*The moving pictures this week at the Colloseum, conducted by Msrs.  
George Scott & Co., 432 George street, are the best in this line ever  
seen in the city and last night the hall was crowded all evening . . .*

Peterborough Examiner, 9 April 1907, p.10.

One day in the year 1906 a young man named George Scott arrived at the train station in Peterborough, Ont., and checked into the Munro House hotel. He had recently established himself in the relatively new motion picture business in Toronto and was looking for a place to exhibit films in the smaller city.

Most likely Scott wandered the Peterborough streets a little, chatted with downtown merchants, and contacted a number of local businessmen. He may have taken in the motion pictures that were playing to huge crowds outdoors in summertime evenings in Jackson Park,

on the city's northwest fringe. He might well have gone to the Grand Opera House on September 7 or 8 to see the travelling Archie Shepard company's "sweeping" variety of dramatic and comedy moving pictures.<sup>1</sup> He probably walked around the downtown looking for a vacant storefront space that he could take over for his own purposes.

Scott was in Peterborough only briefly. His stay coincided with the establishment of a short-lived penny arcade (which included motion pictures viewed through a peep-hole machine), and it seems likely that he played a part in that venture: he had the necessary knowledge

---

\*Many people helped in the research and writing of this article. I particularly want to thank Paul Moore, David Pfluger, Luke McKernan, Raphaël Millet, Amanda Crocker, Ruth Kuchinad, the anonymous reviewer for Ontario History, and, as always, Ferne Cristall.

<sup>1</sup> *Peterborough Evening Examiner*, 7 September 1906, 1; 8 September 1906, 8; *Peterborough Evening Review*, 8 September 1906, np; "Grand Opera House Was Opened for the Season," *Examiner*, 7 September 1906, 5.

## *Abstract*

*In the first decade of the twentieth century George Scott established a motion picture firm in Toronto. He filmed the “Great Toronto Fire” of 1904, attempted to show movies on Toronto Island, and took time out to open a “theatorium” in Peterborough, Ont., in 1907. Scott worked in the budding film-making industry in London, England, in Europe, and in Toronto, New York, and Hollywood. He also shot film around the world: from the South Pacific, Australia, Southeast Asia, and Japan to British East Africa. He died in Los Angeles in January 1929. Scott had a motion picture career of global proportions, but he is almost entirely known only for having produced one of the first films shot in Toronto. This article traces his life before and after his time in Toronto.*

**Résumé:** *Au cours de la première décennie du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle, George Scott a fondé une entreprise cinématographique à Toronto. Il a tourné le « Great Toronto Fire » de 1904, il a tenté la diffusion de films sur l’île de Toronto et il a pris le temps d’ouvrir un « théatorium » à Peterborough, en Ontario, en 1907. Scott a ensuite travaillé dans l’industrie naissante du cinéma à Londres en Angleterre, en Europe, ainsi qu’à Toronto, New York et Hollywood. Il a également tourné des films autour du monde : dans le Pacifique Sud, en Australie, en Asie du Sud-Est, au Japon et en Afrique orientale anglaise. Il mourut à Los Angeles en janvier 1929. Scott a eu une carrière cinématographique d’envergure mondiale, mais il est aujourd’hui surtout connu pour avoir produit l’un des premiers films tournés à Toronto. Dans cet article, nous allons retracer sa vie avant et après son séjour à Toronto.*

and connections, and a number of local businessmen had the money. In any case he soon established, seemingly on his own, a short-lived business on the very same premises—in the form of what appears to have been Peterborough’s first standalone motion picture theatre, or “theatorium,” as they were often called in those days. After a short while he disappeared from town, leaving few traces—all of which raises the questions: where did he come from, and what happened to him after that?

In autumn 1906 a Peterborough newspaper reported that an enterprising group of “local capitalists” was opening a penny arcade in a vacant storefront on the main street.<sup>2</sup>

This home of “Automatic Vaudeville”—“The Latest Amusement Place”—was the initiative of a previously unknown entity called the Peterborough Amusement Company. The local newspapers did not name any of those “local capitalists,” but it turned out that several of them were associated with the city’s *Evening Examiner*. Given what later transpired, and his appearance in town sometime in 1906, George Scott, of George Scott & Co. of Toronto (a capitalist, perhaps, but not a local one), may well have been a behind-the-scenes partner from the start.

The penny arcade opened its doors to the public on Saturday, 3 November 1906. The ground-floor space at 432 George Street was located towards the

<sup>2</sup> “Automatic Vaudeville’ the Latest Amusement Here,” *Evening Review*, 1 November 1906, 4.

top of the city's small main-street business and commercial area, on the east side of George north of Hunter—hemmed in by a jeweller's shop and a "merchant tailor."

The new amusement spot sported twenty-five coin-operated devices, most notably ten "moving picture machines." The equipment included "a picture post-card vendor, lifter, fortune-tellers, punching bags, pneumatic punches, weighing machines, electric shock machine, gum machine, and music machines." The company had plans for eventually introducing another twenty-five of the box-like standing contraptions. (For decades after, similar attractions could be seen in midway tents at summer fairs and exhibitions; indeed, very early on these arcades were described as "imitations of the old-time circus 'side show.'")<sup>3</sup>

According to a newspaper account, the "auto-stereoscope or picture machines—exhibit, automatically, after one cent has been dropped in the slot, a set of 15 pictures brilliantly illuminated." To allay community worries, the owners promised, "Everything refined"—and, even better, "Admission Free." The entrepreneurs made their lofty intentions clear: "The management wish it understood that everything will be on the highest possible plane. Nothing will be allowed which will in any way offend

the most refined, special attention being paid to ladies and children."<sup>4</sup> Their cautious approach reveals a couple of factors: as local businessmen they had a sense of their potential audience, of what would be acceptable; and they were most likely working with a knowledgeable partner from outside who could supply the product.

It was not that people in Peterborough were short of other attractions to draw them in. The penny arcade had significant competition that particular Saturday. The city's Grand Opera House, three blocks south, was advertising *The Man of Her Choice*, a play with "four acts and seven scenes." That little-known drama, touted in the ads as a "melodramatic sensation," apparently drew good audiences on Saturday afternoon and evening. It featured a young actor and singer named Julius Marx in its cast. At the time not quite fifteen years of age, little Julius would later go by the name of "Groucho."<sup>5</sup>

Despite the presence in town of nascent comedic genius, it was the penny arcade that proved, according to reports, to be "the most popular place in Peterborough" that day. The "new amusement place demonstrated its popularity with all classes of community," announced a headline. "Almost from the time the

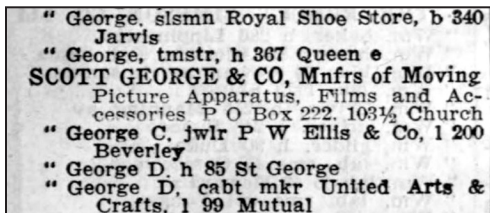
<sup>3</sup> "After Penny Arcades," *The Moving Picture World (MPW)*, 30 March 1907, 56.

<sup>4</sup> "Automatic Vaudeville' the Newest Amusement Place," *Examiner*, 1 November 1, 4; ad, *Examiner*, 3 November 1906, 12. Locations and names for Peterborough Amusement Co., the "Coliseum," and George Scott are in *Union Publishing Co.'s Peterborough Directory, 1907*, Ingersoll, Ont., 31, 116, 239, 270. The 1907 listings would have been compiled by the summer/autumn of 1906. The *Ontario Gazetteer and Business Directory, 1907-08*, 763, in the section on Peterborough, lists "Coliseum, the George Scott & Co. props."

<sup>5</sup> "Music and Drama," *Evening Review*, 5 November 1906, 8.

doors were opened, until well on to midnight," the arcade "was crowded, men, women and children having hearty laughs at the moving pictures, having their fortunes told, testing their weight, or their capacity for electric current. To the youngsters it was as good as a circus, with the advantage that it did not cost as much money." Years later an *Examiner* writer recalled, "The first week's business was so successful that it took the proprietors many long hours to count the resultant pennies."<sup>6</sup>

The newspapers first mention George Scott only in January 1907, but it seems that he was there from the start. Scott had taken up residence in Peterborough at least a few months earlier, boarding for a dollar a day at the well-appointed Munro House. His company was listed in the local city directory for 1907 as the proprietor for "The Coliseum"



*Toronto City Directory, 1906, 903.*

(at 432 George, the same address as the Peterborough Amusement Company). At the very same time the firm also had an office in the heart of downtown Toronto, at 103½ Church St., which would remain fixed in place for about a decade. The Amusement Company would, like Scott himself, arrive and disappear within a relatively short time.<sup>7</sup>

The penny arcade promised to be open every weekday and evening. The concern also spread its wings. In December the Amusement Company installed a number of its coin-operated gear, including picture machines, inside a small changing building beside the Jackson Park skating rink at the northwest end of town, at the terminus of the street railway line.<sup>8</sup> The downtown arcade, with its promise of welcome to all sexes, ages, and classes, became a site of social mingling. In her diary entry for Saturday, 14 November (a week or so after the arcade opened), a seventeen-year-old office worker, Cathleen McCarthy, recorded a highlight of her day: the sighting of a boy she had her eye on, "up at the Peterboro Amusement Co."<sup>9</sup>

In early January 1907 the arcade closed down for about ten days to make

<sup>6</sup> "Automatic Vaudeville's Successful Opening," *Examiner*, 5 November 1906, 5; "Peterborough Always Had Plenty of Amusements," *Examiner*, 3 July 1929, 12.

<sup>7</sup> Scott and the Peterborough Amusement Co. are not listed in any of the yearly Peterborough city directories except 1907. Scott's entries in the Toronto directory begin in 1905: *Toronto City Directory*, 1905, 834, with a post office number address; the Church St. address begins with the 1906 directory, 903. The business entry continues each year through 1913 but disappears in 1914. A search of the 1911 Canadian Census records revealed no entry for Scott.

<sup>8</sup> *Examiner*, 18 December 1906, 10.

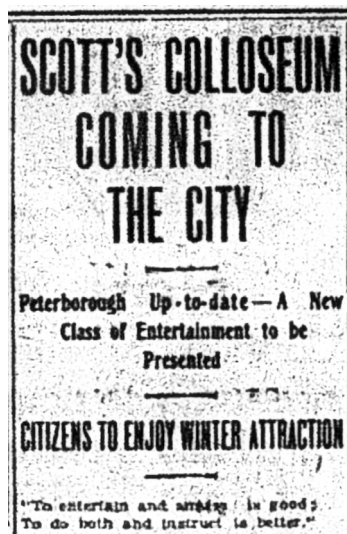
<sup>9</sup> Entry for 14 November 1906, in "Cathleen McCarthy," diary, 25 December 1905 to 16 February 1908, Fonds 572, Trent Valley Archives, vol. 1. Cathleen McCarthy would go on to work at the *Peterborough Examiner*, edit the women's pages and write various articles, including movie reviews, and was the author of the *Examiner* article cited above, "Peterborough Always Had Plenty of Amusements."



a number of improvements: an entire change of pictures in the moving picture machines—“every machine having a new scene”—and the addition of a free musical program every evening, “embracing all the latest musical hits.” Patrons could come and hear the latest song, “The Mouse and the Clock.” A new departure was to preserve Tuesday and Friday afternoons for ladies and children, with (somewhat strangely) “punching bags included.” Meanwhile, the same address had an ad for “Mr. Hicks’ Committee Rooms,” with the space apparently being used temporarily for the cause of Robert Hicks’ bid for the mayoralty.<sup>10</sup>

Scott’s name came into the mix later that same month. The Peterborough Amusement Company announced that on 29 January it was opening up within its premises “a series of refined, high-class and instructive moving picture exhibitions” for the benefit of “amusement-loving citizens.” Most tellingly, Peterborough would now have a chance to be “Up-to-date” and citizens could “enjoy [a] winter attraction.” With no mention now of penny arcade machines, the program would include illustrated songs, and “a versatile lecturer” would be there to fill in details about the moving pictures. The theatre would have continuous performances every evening in the weeks following, with matinees every Wednesday and Saturday from 2:30 p.m. to 6 p.m. The program was being delivered by George Scott.

Messrs. George Scott & Co., being the pioneers of moving picture photography of Canada for Canadians, the public can be assured to a series of meritorious exhibitions worthy of the support of all classes. The pictures are the delight and delectation of children as well as of ladies, who are guaranteed that nothing will be presented that can offend the most sensitive taste.<sup>11</sup>



Peterborough Evening Examiner, 23 January 1907, 5

Thus marked the beginnings of Scott’s Colloseum—Peterborough’s first dedicated (although makeshift) motion picture house. One of the first films shown told the story of a railway signalman’s daughter who exhibited great heroism in “thrilling incidents, fascinating situations and realistic episodes.”<sup>12</sup>

A couple of months later, after being closed for Lent for a short period, Scott’s Colloseum had a “grand re-opening.” The main attraction was *Life of a Cow-Boy* (1906), a new picture from the Edison Manufacturing Company and directed by Edwin S. Porter (famed for *The Great Train Robbery*). This “stirring western drama”—offering “realistic” and “refined entertainment”—featured

<sup>10</sup> *Examiner*, 10 January 1907, 8; *Examiner*, 3 January 1907, 11.

<sup>11</sup> “Scott’s Colloseum Coming to the City,” *Examiner*, 23 January 1907, 5.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

“Cowboys and Indians, Bronchos, [and] Stage Coach” (all filmed on Staten Island, N.Y.). Also on the bill was the illustrated song, “When the Whip-poor-will Sings, Marguerite.”<sup>13</sup>

The theatre, charging five cents a seat (down from the initial ten cents advertised in January), again showed films continuously, but now every day from two to five in the afternoon and seven to ten in the evening. It encouraged “ladies” to come to the afternoon performances and promised (like the arcade before it) to “furnish a refined entertainment for both small and great.”<sup>14</sup> From the start storefront theatres like this one had what writer Rick Altman calls a “fundamentally multimedia nature.”<sup>15</sup> In Peterborough, as in communities across North America, such theatres would go on to become “social centres”—affordable places where people could regularly gather, places they could make “their own.”<sup>16</sup> In a relatively small city such as Peterborough, such places allowed the locals to catch up with the “amusements” on display in the larger city of Toronto, and elsewhere.

The Colloseum continued through April—showing, in the week after its opening, scenes from the “Big Toronto

Fire” (*The Great Toronto Fire, April 19, 1904*), produced by Scott and his company. “Moving pictures of that fire,” says sociologist and film scholar Paul S. Moore, “are some of the earliest surviving films of the city.” Another source declared Scott’s film to be the “first film shot in Toronto.” Also on the bill that same day was an odd offering: “The Matrimonial Adventures of Count Gustav de Dion of the Legion of Honour, His Advertisement in the N.Y. Herald and the astonishing results,” plus other items, including “The Great English Cricket Match at Lords, England.”<sup>17</sup>

As the days passed the Peterborough audiences were probably treated to most if not all of Scott’s other productions, many of which included “scenes” from the streets of Toronto. In its third week the theatre screened the “Story of the South African War” and got a favourable notice: “If there is any class of amusement where one can get as good value for five cents as at Scott’s Colloseum the *Examiner* does not know where to find it.”<sup>18</sup>

The theatre’s newspaper ads petered out after 31 May, no more to be seen. That doesn’t mean the theatre was no longer running its pictures; just that it wasn’t advertising in the newspaper. The

<sup>13</sup> “Cow Boys’ Life Told in Moving Pictures,” *Examiner*, 2 April 1907, 12; ads, *Examiner*, 1 April 1907, 5; 3 April 1907, 10.

<sup>14</sup> *Examiner*, 2 April 1907, 12; 3 April 1907, 10; 16 April 1907, 10.

<sup>15</sup> Rick Altman, *Silent Film Sound* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 182.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Abel, *Americanizing the Movies and Movie-Mad Audiences, 1910–1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 134.

<sup>17</sup> *Examiner*, 16 April 1907, 10; Paul S. Moore, *Now Playing: Early Moviegoing and the Regulation of Fun* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 52; “First film to be shot in Toronto” in Wyndham Wise, ed., *Take One’s Essential Guide to Canadian Film* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 230.

<sup>18</sup> “Good Program at Scott’s Colloseum,” *Examiner*, 24 April 1907, 3; “Big Toronto Fire in Moving Pictures,” *Examiner*, 9 April 1907, 10; ads, *Examiner*, 16 April 1907, 10; 20 April 1907, 12.

business was still there in the fall of 1907, because in her diary Cathleen McCarthy records going “over to the Penny Arcade” on 1 November that year.<sup>19</sup>

Sometime not long after that the theatre, despite its initial booming success, appears to have quietly faded away, its demise unnoted by the press. It did face competition later that year from two other new theatrums on the main street: Wonderland (established in July 1907 and lasting only a few months); and The Crystal (established in late September 1907 and lasting, although with two name changes, until 1920). By 1908 George Scott & Company, the Colosseum/Coliseum, and the Peterborough Amusement Company had all disappeared from the city directory listings. In 1908 the space at 432 George St. was converted back to a cycling concern (“J.W. Young, bicycles, etc.”). A year after that a plumbing business moved in.

Today, Scott appears to be almost forgotten. Canadian film history tends to remember him only as the maker of *The Great Toronto Fire* (1904). A seminal book, *Embattled Shadows: A History of Canadian Cinema, 1895-1939* (1978) by Peter Morris, refers to Scott as “a Toronto photographer” and cites him as one of five names in a list of people who were “excep-

tions” to Canada’s passive role in moving picture history. In his article “Pleasing the Canadians,” Peter Steven makes a brief but salient point about how Toronto screenings of Canadian-content films like Scott’s *Great Toronto Fire* would have been accompanied by popular songs, “or perhaps the [city’s] popular D’Alessandro Orchestra.” Robert W. Gutteridge’s book *Magic Moments: First 20 Years of Moving Pictures in Toronto (1894-1914)* (2000) has four paragraphs on Scott, but nothing about his life and work before and after the Toronto days centring around “The Great Fire.”<sup>20</sup> The *Canadian Encyclopedia*’s “History of the Canadian Film Industry,” in a paragraph speaking of “Canadian production through 1912,” mentions that among “The few Canadians... who initiated their own productions” (making only newsreels or travelogues) was “James Scott” in Toronto. This would seem to be a reference to George Scott—and, indeed, his original first name was “James”—although Scott was not Canadian. There is nary a mention of Scott in George Melnyk’s *One Hundred Years of Canadian Cinema* (2004). In *Now Playing: Early Moviegoing and the Regulation of Fun* (2008), Moore mentions the moving pictures of the fire without citing Scott’s name.<sup>21</sup>

Who was this relatively unknown

<sup>19</sup> Entry for 1 November 1907, in “Cathleen McCarthy,” diary.

<sup>20</sup> Peter Morris, *Embattled Shadows: A History of Canadian Cinema, 1895-1939* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1978), 38, 45, 246; Peter Steven, “Pleasing the Canadians: A National Flavour for Early Cinema, 1896–1914,” *Canadian Journal of Film Studies/Revue Canadienne D’Étude Cinématographiques*, 12: 2 (Fall 2003), 9; Robert W. Gutteridge, *Magic Moments: First 20 Years of Moving Pictures in Toronto (1894-1914)* (Toronto: Gutteridge-Pratley Publications, 2000), 196.

<sup>21</sup> “History of the Canadian Film Industry,” *The Canadian Encyclopedia* <<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/history-of-the-canadian-film-industry>>





Courtesy of  
Cynthia McCarthy

*George Scott entry, 1916, "People," American Film Company, University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB), Film and Media Department, <http://flyinga.filmandmedia.ucsb.edu/index.html>. A detail from a photo of the whole AFC crew.*

Part of the mystery arises from a change of name. "George Scott" was born "James Scotney George" in Allahabad, India, on 29 April 1872. His father, Edward Claudius Scotney George (born in Calcutta about 1825), served in the British colonial government as the postmaster of Bengal.

In 1864, in London, Edward had married Louise Nurina Tomlin (born in India in 1843). Returning to India, over the following twenty-six years the couple had eleven children. James Scotney George was the fifth-born.<sup>23</sup> In the 1880s the family relocated to London, England; father Edward died there in the autumn of that same year, leaving his wife and other family members to survive on a legacy of £1,725 (the equivalent of somewhere close to £141,000 today).<sup>24</sup>

With his father gone and the remain-

George Scott? In his 2007 doctoral thesis on early war films, which touches briefly on Scott in the context of a proposed trip to shoot films in Japan in 1900, Stephen Bottomore relates that he "is the most intriguing and most elusive of the camera operators" of those early years.<sup>22</sup>

[cl.wikipedia.ca/en/article/the-history-of-film-in-canada](http://cl.wikipedia.ca/en/article/the-history-of-film-in-canada)>; George Melnyk, *One Hundred Years of Canadian Cinema* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004); Moore, *Now Playing*, 52. For mentions of Scott and *Great Toronto Fire*, see also "100 Great and Glorious Years of Canadian Cinema," *Take One*, Summer 1996, 16; Kemp R. Niver, *Motion Pictures from the Library of Congress Paper Print Collection, 1894-1912* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 248; Howard Lamarr Walls, *Motion Pictures 1894-1912* (Washington: U.S. Copyright Office, 1953), second page of errata. See also Scott Mackenzie, *Screening Québec: Québécois Moving Images, National Identity, and the Public Sphere* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2004), 115, for a mention of Scott and his film, but no other details.

<sup>22</sup> Stephen Bottomore, "Filming, Faking and Propaganda: The Origins of the War Film, 1897-1902," Ph.D. diss., Utrecht University, 2007, ch. 12, 7, <<https://dspace.library.uu.nl/bitstream/handle/1874/22650/index.htm%3Bjsessionid=0D3DE973751F58470AB9705CB07E89E0?sequence=6>>. In his paragraph on Scott, Bottomore does not draw a connection to *The Great Toronto Fire*.

<sup>23</sup> My knowledge of the "Scotney George" family history is thanks to Amanda Crocker's diligent search of Ancestry.ca. Thanks also in that regard to Ruth Kuchinad at the Trent Valley Archives, Peterborough.

<sup>24</sup> Edward Claudius George (1825-1886), Principal Registry, 2 November 1886, England & Wales, National Probate Calendar (Index of Wills and Administrations), 1858-1995, Ancestry.ca; National Archives Currency Converter: 1270-2017, <<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency-converter#currency-result>>. The

ing family of nine (mother, five brothers, and three sisters) now established in Lambeth, South London, James Scotney George attended the Birkbeck Literary and Scientific Institution (originally known as the London Mechanics' Institute), where he won a first prize in German at the age of nineteen.<sup>25</sup> A few years later, in his early twenties, he was working in the London office of Maguire & Baucus, a U.S. firm of agents who had taken up the delights of the new technological age: in this case distributing the films and projectors being turned out by the pioneering Edison Company in the United States. At Maguire & Baucus, James Scotney George, a youthful jack of all trades, was now going by the name of George Scott.

Charles Urban, a dynamic U.S.-born film producer and distributor, told a story about meeting Scott in August 1897.<sup>26</sup> The American had just come across the sea to London to take up a position at Maguire & Baucus; he was at the time an almost equally young man (only about seven years older than Scott). Upon arriving at 8:45 a.m. for his first day at the office, Urban found a locked door and no sign of life. He hung around until, about 9:30, he witnessed the arrival of "a young man in a frock coat with a silk hat (top-



*Warwick Trading office staff, around 1898. Urban is standing on the left; the woman in the middle at the typewriter is probably Alice Rosenthal (sister of cameraman Joseph Rosenthal); the others are uncertain, but, given that the office did not have many on staff at that time, the young man sitting at the table and examining the film may well be George Scott. Photo courtesy of Luke McKernan; from the Charles Urban papers at the National Science & Media Museum, U.K., Science & Society Picture Library. The photo also appears in McKernan, *Yank in Britain*.*

per, I think they called them)."

This stylish young man, ignoring Urban, picked up the day's mail from the floor and unlocked the door. Urban said hello and told him who he was. The young man, "George Scott," introduced himself as "assistant manager, book keeper, film salesman, machine demonstrator, packer and delivery clerk." Around the office, as Urban found out, he had a nickname: "Scotney George," which the American thought perfectly suited his character.<sup>27</sup>

converter provides figures of £114,169 for 1880 and £141,535 for 1890.

<sup>25</sup> The 1891 England Census lists the family in the Civil Parish of St. Mary, Municipal Borough of Lambeth and Parliamentary Borough of Norwood; "Examinations, April, 1892, Prizes and Certificates Awarded to Candidates," Birkbeck College results, 14, has the name "James, Scotney George": *The Journal of the Society of Arts*, vol. 40, no. 2086 (11 November 1892), 1-37, Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/41333996>>.

<sup>26</sup> This account relies heavily on Urban's own words as they appear in *A Yank in Britain: The Lost Memoirs of Charles Urban, Film Pioneer*, ed. Luke McKernan (Hastings, East Sussex: The Projection Box, 1999).

<sup>27</sup> McKernan, ed., *Yank in Britain*, 42, 56; also, Scott's name and designation "officer manager" are in a list of "Personnel" in the Charles Urban website, <<http://www.charlesurban.com/index.html>>.

Clearly, George Scott was learning all facets of the budding motion picture production and exhibition industry. Not long after that, Charles Urban began to produce his own films and market his own U.S.-invented projector, the Bioscope. Working with Urban, Scott learned to shoot films in the midst of all his other tasks.

According to Urban's account, in 1899 he "loaned" Scott to a man named Walter Gibbons, who was using a Bioscope to show moving pictures in a circuit of British music halls. Urban recalled that "George Scott had become quite an efficient Bioscope operator by this time."<sup>28</sup> Scott soon had his fingers in other exhibition pursuits as well. At around this same time he and another man, A. Rosenberg, were defendants in a case brought against them by the Edison-Bell Consolidated Phonograph Company; they were charged with infringing on the Edison patent of a "Graphophone" (an improved version of a phonograph machine). The judge ruled that Rosenberg and Scott, while not necessarily guilty of fraud, had failed to pay the appropriate fee for the required licence and that they must not be allowed to use the machine for exhibition purposes. Significantly, the

court document reporting the case specifies the name of one of the defendants as "*James Scotney George* (trading as *George Scott*)," indicating that he had by then set up in business on his own.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, by 1900 the firm Geo. Scott & Company had established offices at Charing Cross in London. Among other things Scott was apparently considering an expedition to China to take pictures, "animated and ordinary," of the current crisis there.<sup>30</sup>

Urban left Warwick in 1902 to set up his own firm, the Charles Urban Trading Company, specialising in a variety of travel, educational, and scientific films produced in locations around the world (including famous coverage of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5). This firm would become "the most prominent British film company of the period."<sup>31</sup> Scott appears to have remained loosely associated with it. In a 1916 interview he related that he had, in those early days, exhibited pictures in Holland and Belgium. Perhaps he was doing this for the Urban Company. He also claimed to have "opened factories and studios in London and Paris" before going to New York and, subsequently, Toronto, again setting up "factories" in both countries.<sup>32</sup>

In those early years Scott made a key

<sup>28</sup> McKernan, ed., *Yank in Britain*, 56; McKernan, personal correspondence via email, 22 May 2018.

<sup>29</sup> "The Edison-Bell Consolidated Phonograph Company, Ltd., v. Rosenberg and Scott," *Reports of Patent, Design, Trade Mark, and Other Cases*, London, 1898, 608, <<https://books.google.ca/books?id=ROtCAQAA MAAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>>.

<sup>30</sup> Bottomore, "Filming, Faking and Propaganda," ch. 12, 7. It is not known whether this trip did take place.

<sup>31</sup> Charles Urban website, <<http://www.charlesurban.com/index.html>>. See also Luke McKernan, *Charles Urban: Pioneering the Non-Fiction Film in Britain and America, 1897-1925* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013); Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907*, vol. 1, *History of the American Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994 [1990]), 345.

<sup>32</sup> "Veteran George Scott," *New York Daily Mirror*, 1 July 1916, 32.



Urban office, 48 Rupert St., London, 1903, in *We Put the World Before You by Means of the Bioscope and Urban Films*, Charles Urban Trading Co. catalogue, 1903, 3, [Internet.org](http://Internet.org).

connection through the Urban Trading Company's distribution of films made by the iconic French filmmaker and illusionist Georges Méliès, best known for his *A Trip to the Moon* (1902). Scott would have come to know both Georges and his brother Gaston; he would eventually end up working with Gaston Méliès in New York.

Another Urban initiative was to send a team of filmmakers to Canada to shoot moving pictures. The project, commissioned by the Canadian Pacific Railway's "colonial agent" and aimed at encouraging emigration, resulted in what became the landmark "Living Canada" series. As his team, Urban sent F. Guy Bradford and Bradford's brother-in-law, Clifford Denham, as well as Joseph Rosenthal, who acted as chief cameraman; they were

sometimes referred to as "the Bioscope group." After the project was completed, Bradford and Denham remained in Canada and eventually toured Ontario (and across Canada) with their films. Apparently Denham and Guy began to think that they could find "quite a successful exhibition field" in Canada given that they had filmed so many pictures across the land (and especially views of the big cities). Again, this trip has a link to George Scott; a clipping from the U.K. newspaper *Morning Leader* (reprinted in the 1905 Urban catalogue) says that Scott, as the "Urban Bioscope representative," was "at present engaged on a cinematograph tour of the Pacific line" and just happened to be in Toronto when the fire broke out.<sup>33</sup>

Then again, adding to the mystery, Scott's own account years later had him first landing in New York and establishing a film lab there before moving to set up his business in Toronto. He later claimed to be "the first to have a factory in Canada."<sup>34</sup> Other family members—his mother and at least three of his siblings—had migrated to Canada around 1900, taking up residence and working a ranch in Kamloops, B.C.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>33</sup> *Morning Leader* (London), nd, cited in *We Put the World Before You by Means of the Bioscope and Urban Films*, Charles Urban Trading Co. catalogue, 1905, 88; pages courtesy of Luke McKernan. For the Urban–Canadian Pacific trip and Denham, see Hye Bossin, "Canada and the Film: The Story of the Canadian Film Industry," in *1951 Yearbook: Canadian Motion Picture Industry* (Toronto: Film Publications of Canada); Gerald Pratley, *Torn Sprockets: The Uncertain Projection of the Canadian Film* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1987), 23; Morris, *Embattled Shadows*, 34; "Toronto, Canada, Claims Birthplace of 'Little Mary,'" *MPW*, 15 July 1916, 410.

<sup>34</sup> "Veteran George Scott," *New York Daily Mirror*, 1 July 1916, 32.

<sup>35</sup> Information on the George family history from [Ancestry.ca](http://Ancestry.ca). The Kamloops connection also appears as





"1904 fire ruins from foot of Bay St.," *City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 1244.*

In any case, what we do know for sure is that when the "Great Fire" broke out in Toronto in April 1904, Scott was there; and with the help of an assistant he went out onto the streets at midnight to see if "anything could be obtained... by the light of the blazing city." The result, according to Library and Archives Canada, "was one of the first films to document a Canadian disaster as it was happening." Firefighters and onlookers were apparently amazed to see the two of them setting up their equipment and filming the burning buildings on Front Street. At the time the Charles Urban catalogue touted it as "the most exciting fire series ever Bioscoped."<sup>36</sup>

The film circulated through North

America and Great Britain. After it was screened in London the *World* newspaper described it as causing "great excitement to the spectators." The *Western Mail* commented: "Mr. George Scott, who was fortunate enough to be present at this terrific conflagration, utilized his opportunity to the full." The film "left a sad feeling behind, but of the excellence of it there is no doubt." Another review

noted, "The long expected views of the Toronto fire disclosed a new feature of a bioscope enterprise—photography by firelight." More than one review pointed out the film's "weird" or "quaint" Rembrandt-like effects.<sup>37</sup>

Scarce a sound was heard from the large audience... the awful scene was brought home to those present with fearful realism.... At the fall of the curtain... applause was heartily accorded for the realistic manner in which these appalling scenes were reproduced."

— *Morning Advertiser*, nd.

Perhaps buoyed by this success, Scott decided to set himself up in Canada. By 1905 he had opened his office on Toronto's Church Street as George Scott & Company. Over the years the firm

cited by Scott, "nearest relative or friend," in "List or Manifest of Alien Passengers for the United States Immigration Officer at Port of Arrival," Liverpool to New York City, arriving 5 December 1913, Ancestry.ca.

<sup>36</sup> Library and Archives Canada, "George Scott & Co.," <<http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/CollectionSearch/Pages/record.aspx?IdNumber=357127&app=filvidandsou>>; *Morning Leader*, nd, in *We Put the World Before You*, 1905, 88; also in "Press Comments" in Stephen Herbert, *A History of Early Film*, vol. 1 (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 165. The 1905 Urban catalogue entry for *The Great Toronto Fire* says "Bioscoped by Mr. George Scott, Toronto."

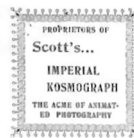
<sup>37</sup> *We Put the World Before You*, 1905, 87, 88; Herbert, *History of Early Film*, 165. The film is on YouTube.



*A frame from Scott's film, Great Toronto Fire (1904), YouTube. Letterhead, Toronto, 1906, City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 200, Series 688, File 16, Three Communications.*

listed itself as “Mfrs of Moving Picture Apparatus, Films and Accessories.” The equipment being sold (and advertised on his letterhead) included his “Imperial Kosmograph” (probably some kind of camera?) and “new Metascot Film . . . Animated Photographs.”<sup>38</sup>

Starting, perhaps, with the Toronto fire film, Scott went on to make other pictures. In May 1906 he applied to the Island Committee of Toronto City Hall to show films (presumably outdoors) on Centre Island that summer, telling the committee: “We are the pioneer manufacturers of moving pictures in Canada.” In his letter to city hall Scott lists a number of the films his firm had produced, claiming that the result amounted in effect to good advertising for “the City of Toronto in the various moving pictures of local events.” In addition to *The Great Toronto Fire*, these films included “Open Air Horse Parade, Arrival of Lou Scholes, New Turbinia, Trip in Street Car down Yonge St., Fat Stock Parade in Toronto Exhibition, etc., etc.” Scott claimed that these films had been “sent and exhibited



MAIN OFFICE AND WORKS 103½ CHURCH ST.

**GEO. SCOTT & Co.,**

CINEMATOGRAPHERS

Manufacturers and Dealers in Electrical, Scientific, and Photographic Appliances

ADDRESS COMMUNICATIONS, P.O. BOX 222



TORONTO, ONT., 190

all over England.”<sup>39</sup> Other titles from this time include *Glimpses of High Life* (1905, with holiday scenes of Toronto) and *Scenes in and about Toronto* (1907).<sup>40</sup>

As the letterhead and his other initiatives indicate, Scott was clearly a self-promoter of the first rank. He had most likely gone to Peterborough in 1906 looking for a place to screen both his own films and others he distributed, and it seems a fair assumption that despite initially raking in the nickels, given its relatively short duration the business there did not go all that well. Scott stayed on in Toron-

<sup>38</sup> Letterhead, City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 200, Series 688, File 16, Three Communications. The address for Scott at 103½ Church St. appears for the first time in the *Toronto City Directory*, 1906, 103; the 1905 directory, 834, lists a Post Office address only. See also Gutteridge, *Magic Moments*, 209.

<sup>39</sup> Letter, 8 May 1906, from Scott to Ald. Chisholm, Chairman, Island Committee, City Hall, City of Toronto Archives.

<sup>40</sup> Gutteridge, *Magic Moments*, 196.

to for only a few more years; although his office at the Church Street address continued to be listed in the Toronto city directories until 1913, he indicated on one official document that he had been in New York from around 1910.<sup>41</sup> There is also evidence that he ventured into the United States in 1904 and 1907.<sup>42</sup>

Despite making the claims in 1906 about his company's stature as a "pioneer" in manufacturing moving pictures in Canada, introducing new motion picture technology, and his seemingly great hopes for exhibition, after less than a decade Scott discarded the business and left for the United States.<sup>43</sup>

Scott abruptly resurfaces in announcements of a fantastic filmic enterprise being undertaken by Gaston Méliès, who, working with his brother, had established a Méliès office in New York City.

By around 1909 Gaston had founded his own moving picture company, known as "G. Méliès," producing his own films out of Brooklyn before moving west to Texas and later to California.

Méliès continued to maintain an office and lab in New York, and sometime during this period Scott began working there, possibly as early as 1910-11.<sup>44</sup> In the summer of 1912, Méliès—tired, he said, of making Westerns—organized a crew of about twenty people to travel around the world for two to three years.<sup>45</sup> The plan was to make both fiction (or "dramatic") films, using local people as actors as much as possible, and "scenic" or "educational" views of the areas visited. For the trip, Méliès took along a director, writer, stage manager, eight actors, and two cameramen and assistants (and his wife, Hortense-Louise).<sup>46</sup>

Among the people Méliès hired was

<sup>41</sup> "List or Manifest of Alien Passengers," Liverpool to New York City, 5 December 1913.

<sup>42</sup> "List or Manifest of Alien Passengers," Yokohama to San Francisco, 30 January 1918; "List or Manifest of Alien Passengers," Southampton to New York, 3 April 1921.

<sup>43</sup> The claim about being "the pioneer of moving pictures in Canada" came from Scott's letter to Ald. Chisholm at Toronto City Hall, 8 May 1906, City of Toronto Archives. I've found no evidence that he had a family of his own in Toronto.

<sup>44</sup> A number of sources published in the 1910s identify Scott variously as having "managed the Melies factory for many years" or as being "for many years technical foreman of the Melies Company"; one has him working with Méliès for a period of five years. "Méliès Globe Trotters Reach Tahiti Islands," *MPW*, 24 August 1912, 774; "George Scott," *MPW*, 17 January 1914, 279; "Veteran George Scott," *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 1 July 1916, 32; "Toronto, Canada, Claims Birthplace of 'Little Mary,'" 410. The letters of cameraman Hugh McClung, on the Méliès trip, mention both that Scott had been working in New York and doing so "for a number of years": excerpts from McClung, letters to his sister in Los Angeles, 7 April 1913, 1 May 1913, courtesy of David Pfluger, University of Zurich, Switzerland. See also Frank T. Thompson, *The Star Film Ranch: Texas' First Picture Show* (Plano: Republic of Texas Press, 1996). Scott's name goes unmentioned in the Méliès documentation until the Asia trip, so it is difficult to know for sure how long he worked with the French filmmaker. He appears not to have been working in Texas.

<sup>45</sup> "Tired of Cowboys," *The Dominion* (N.Z.), 19 August 1912, 9.

<sup>46</sup> For accounts of the trip's beginning, see: "Doings at Los Angeles," *MPW*, 3 August 1912, 438; "Melies off for the South Seas," *MPW*, 17 August, 647. For a contemporary account of the Méliès project, including his earlier work in Texas—and especially the issue of representation of the subjects of his films—see David

*George Scott is “missing” – he would join the group later, in Tahiti – but mentioned: “Méliès Globe Trotters Reach Tahiti Islands,” Moving Picture World, 14 August 1912, 774.*

George Scott, who was specifically put in charge of making educational films. Another well-known cameraman of the time, Hugh McClung, was to take care of the fiction pictures.



Méliès showed confidence in Scott’s abilities. With his years of experience Scott had finely honed technical expertise, and he could speak French—so, unlike the American members of the crew, he could both converse directly with Méliès and his wife and at times serve as an interpreter. Heading out to locations in the South Pacific, Scott was to “travel much alone, taking with him only a carrier to help with the apparatus,” and to venture “into the interior” of various places to make special films.<sup>47</sup>

Most of the group sailed off from San Francisco on 24 July. Scott left separately from New York, arriving in Tahiti around

the beginning of September. From Rarotonga, Méliès wrote home, “Scott will try to record the dances here....”<sup>48</sup> The work met with various problems from the start. For instance, in New Zealand, as Méliès wrote:

Scott and an interpreter went to the river Wanganui which is great with its rapids. But I have been told that the waters are so high that the rapids are covered [not visible]. He should also have gone to the fantastic caves which he would shoot with magnesium [using the very bright magnesium fire to light the scene], but it seems to me that with the constant rain the trails are impassable. He should join us here tonight but I doubt that he could do anything with this constant rain.<sup>49</sup>

Pfluger, “Maata Who?” in *Presences and Representations of Women in the Early Years of Cinema, 1895–1920*, ed. Angel Quintana and Jordi Pons (Ajuntament de Girona, Spain: Fundació Museu del Cinema-Col·lecció Thomàs Mallol, 2019). Other sources for this trip include: “Gaston Méliès and His Lost Films of Singapore,” *Biblioasia*, <<http://www.nlb.gov.sg/biblioasia/2016/04/03/gaston-melies-and-his-lost-films-of-singapore/#sthash.708EXAAk.dpbs>>; and Raphaël Millet, personal correspondence via email, 27 November 2018. Millet, through Nocturne Productions, made two documentaries on the trip: *Le Voyage cinématographique de Gaston Méliès à Tahiti* (2014), and *Gaston Méliès and His Wandering Star Film Company* (2015).

<sup>47</sup> “Méliès Globe Trotters Reach Tahiti Islands,” *MPW*, 14 August 1912, 774.

<sup>48</sup> Gaston Méliès, letter to Paul Méliès, 4 September 1912. Méliès’s letters to Paul Méliès, July 1912–May 1913, originally appeared in “La voyage autour du monde de la G. Méliès Manufacturing Company,” Jacques Malthête, Assoc., “Les amis de Georges Méliès,” 1988. I thank David Pfluger, who translated and sent selections related to Scott.

<sup>49</sup> Gaston Méliès, letter to Paul Méliès, 26 September 1912; editorial asides in square brackets added by Pfluger.

The trip as a whole proved far more difficult than expected. Hot temperatures played havoc with the film stock, and heavy rains took their toll. During the filming at the Wanganui River, “It rained like hell.” Méliès indicated that in addition to camerawork Scott did a good deal of the lab work—and much on-the-spot problem-fixing. When the company went on to Java, Scott and an assistant travelled further on the same ship, to Singapore, where, according to Méliès, “They will develop some footage already taken and wait for the rest of the company to arrive with more film to develop.”<sup>50</sup>

By the spring of 1913 Méliès was mentally and physically exhausted, with the team in tatters and suffering from discord. The fiction cameraman, McClung, recorded in a letter that Méliès had treat-

ed him “shabbily on two occasions.” McClung and Scott were competitive and antagonistic—with Méliès sometimes favouring Scott and at other times McClung.<sup>51</sup> Although the group made and sent home sixty-four films, a good deal of the footage turned out to be damaged and/or unuseable: perhaps only five of the films survived. Despite copious advertising of the pictures produced, the trip turned out to be a financial disaster; for the most part the films failed to find an audience in the United States.<sup>52</sup>

On 24 March 1913 most of the group boarded a ship in Yokohama and began the long voyage home to Los Angeles. Méliès and his wife got on a liner to France.<sup>53</sup> Scott sailed for New York on the tenth of May.<sup>54</sup> A later report—based on an interview displaying Scott’s

<sup>50</sup> Gaston Méliès, letters to Paul Méliès, 31 October 1912, 12 December 1912, 16 December 1912. After the completion of filming in Singapore, Méliès left Scott there to develop the film that had been shot; letter to Paul Méliès, 6 February 1913. In that same letter, written from Cambodia, Méliès said he would like to liberate Scott from lab work in order that he could do more “educational views.”

<sup>51</sup> McClung, letters to his sister, 17 April 1913, 1 May 1913, indicate the tensions; According to Eileen Bowsler, *The Transformation of Cinema, 1907-1915*, vol. 2, *History of the American Cinema* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), 30, Gaston Méliès was known as “something of a rascal” in the trade.

<sup>52</sup> “Festival to Honor 1900s Filmmaker in Cambodia,” *Khmer Times*, 29 November 2015 <<https://www.khmertimeskh.com/news/18191/festival-to-honor-1900s-filmmaker-in-cambodia/>>. According to this article, the Library of Congress in Washington has two of Méliès’s films; and another two fragments of films shot in the Angkor area surfaced in 2013. During the trip Méliès took out full-page ads on the inside last page in the trade magazine *Moving Picture World* for his company’s productions.

<sup>53</sup> Singapore Film Locations Archive, “Méliès ‘Round the World’ Films Made in Singapore (1913),” <<https://sgfilmlocations.com/2014/08/08/melies-round-the-world-films-made-in-singapore-1913/>>; Millet, dir., *Gaston Méliès and His Wandering Star Film Company* (2015). By the end of the trip in May 1913, the Star Film Company had been reduced to Gaston and Paul Méliès. Not long after that Méliès put his Santa Paula, Cal., studio up for sale. In the winter of 1913 he and his wife moved to Corsica, where he died in April 1915 of shellfish poisoning. As Méliès researcher (and collector) David Pfluger points out, by the end of the trip, “Gaston Méliès was mentally and physically run down . . . and selling the studio was a quick and easy solution to end his venture in the US.” He may never have planned to return to California. By that point, too, it seems, Scott was no longer in his employ. Pfluger, personal communication via email, 20 May 2019.

<sup>54</sup> Gaston Méliès, letter to Paul Méliès, 29 April 1913. Scott made yet another overseas trip that same year, travelling to England and back; “List or Manifest of Alien Passengers,” Liverpool to New York, 5 December 1913.



tendency for self-promotion—colourfully pointed out:

In his travels he has traversed thirty-eight thousand miles in every mode of conveyance imaginable by land and water, in palanquins, sedan chairs, pousse-pousses, in sampans, on rafts, on a wheel-barrow, on donkeys, camels, in the springless char-a-boeufs, on elephants, etc.



The article observes that Scott apparently met with injury in a “great

elephant hunt” in Cambodia, where the group, most notably, made what is probably the earliest surviving film of the huge Angkor Wat complex, which had only recently been partially excavated by French archeologists. “He was brought out of the forests and in the governor’s special launch was taken to the hospital just in time to save his life.” The trip, though, had otherwise gone well: “Mr. Scott and his party met with the greatest courtesy every where in Cambodia and the utmost kindness from the governors and great officials down, and as a pleasing souvenir each received a decoration from the king.”<sup>55</sup>

*George Scott (third from left) in 1915: from a photo showing Hollywood producer Thomas H. Ince “and a Battery of His Ablest Camera-Men.” “Reel Tales about Reel Folk,” Reel Life, 29 May 1915, 20.*

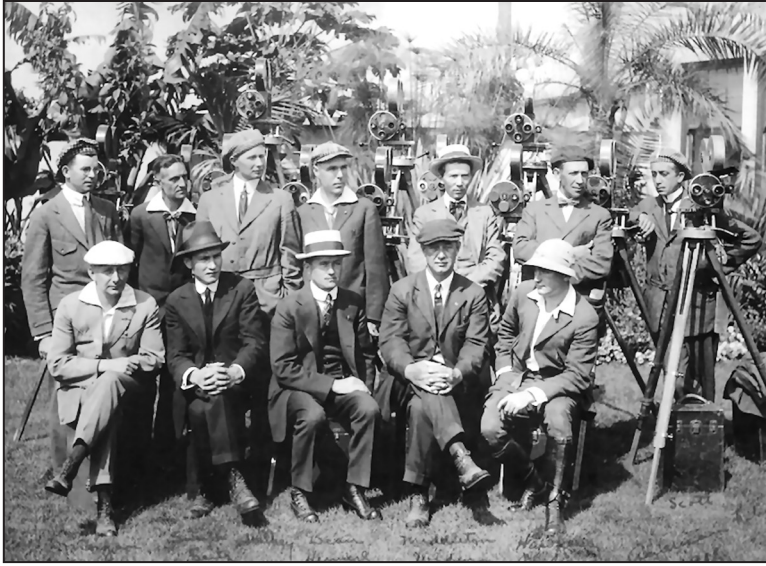
It was, however, McClung who, with the help of the locals, had twice climbed 105 feet up a tree (reportedly taking “his life in his hands”) to photograph the ruins of one of the three most prominent temples, Angkor Thom. McClung undoubtedly received both a Cambodian diploma honouring his work as “technical director of the cinematographic enterprise of Gaston Méliès” and a medal.<sup>56</sup> Scott may have been guilty of embellishing his role.

Back in the United States, Scott continued to find work in Hollywood and elsewhere. It was a period when,

<sup>55</sup> “George Scott,” *MPW*, 17 January 1914, 279.

<sup>56</sup> “M’Clung Is Mandarin[,] Monarch Likes Photos,” *Los Angeles Express*, 3 May 1913, np. The story about a decoration or medal received from the Cambodian king appears to have become part of the folklore of the expedition, although honours were undoubtedly given: the medal that McClung received is still in the possession of his granddaughter; and McClung made a photo of a Cambodia diploma he received, dated March 1913 and indicating McClung as “technical director of the cinematographic enterprise of Gaston Méliès.” Pfluger, personal communication via email, 10 May 2019, 10 July 2019.





The AFC camera unit, 1916. Scott is in back row, far right. Courtesy Dana Driskel, University of California at Santa Barbara. This photo also appears in "Flickers and Flashes," *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 1 July 1916, 32.

before unionization in the trade, most cameramen drifted in and out of jobs.<sup>57</sup> In 1914 Scott was in charge of the camerawork on a United Keanograph Film Mfg. Co. production, *Money*. That year he was also part of a Los Angeles film crew organized by Thomas H. Ince of the New York Motion Picture Corporation. He got a job in Santa Barbara with the American Film Company (known also as "Flying A") doing camerawork on a fifteen-part serial, *Secret of the Submarine* (1916). He did the photography

on *Straight Shooting*, the first feature-length picture of renowned director John Ford (billed as Jack Ford on the film), released August 1917 from the Universal studio.<sup>58</sup> As summarized in a 1916 article, he was known for his world travels and specialization in "nature pictures," had "filmed the Kolb and Dill 'Glory' picture, was photographer both at Inceville and Universal City and for the past two years has been connected with the Ameri-

can Film Company."<sup>59</sup>

He appears to have been busy, and sought after. In 1917 came a report that "George Scott, well-known cameraman of the West Coast," had been engaged by the Brofsky Film Company to travel to Japan—with the intention of making films there to place in the company's Japanese theatres. "Mr Scott will be head of the photographic department of this company."<sup>60</sup> The trip once again matches the profile established of a man with a camera, an appetite for work, and a

<sup>57</sup> Richard Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture, 1915–1928* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1990), 122.

<sup>58</sup> "Money," *MPW*, 1 August 1914, 708; "Reel Tales about Reel Folk," *Reel Life*, 29 May 1915, 20; "American Film Company," University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB), Film and Media Department, <<http://flyinga.filmandmedia.ucsb.edu/index.html>>. The film *Straight Shooting* survives (viewable on YouTube), with Scott's name credited on the opening panel of credits. See also "Straight Shooting: A Whale of a Western Drama," *Moving Picture Weekly*, 11 August 1917, 19.

<sup>59</sup> "Veteran George Scott," *New York Daily Mirror*, 1 July 1916, 32.

<sup>60</sup> "In and Out of West Coast Studios," *Motion Picture News*, 11 August 1917, 1017.



*Filming in Japan, c. April 1913: Scott at the camera. Courtesy of David Pfluger.*

willingness to travel far and wide. Scott returned by ship from Yokohama in January 1918, listing his occupation as “moving pictures” and his last permanent residence as Los Angeles. In the entry requested for “name of nearest relative or friend,” he gave the name of “Mrs. Bessie Muller,” who lived in Hollywood and was part of the film-making community he had come to know there.<sup>61</sup>

Soon after that George Scott, seemingly ever on the move, got yet another such gig—this one with the Universal Film Manufacturing Company. In September 1919 the trade announced: “Universal Will Explore the World with

Camera,” and “Motion Picture Camera to Reveal Unexplored Africa.” Officially known as the Smithsonian Africa Expedition—based on its association with the Smithsonian Institution—the project was said to be “one of the largest in scope since the famous Stanley expedition that went forth in search of Livingstone half a century ago.” The film director on the project was William Stowell, a well-known actor of the time. Scott, “one of Universal’s most expert photographers and noted for his photographic feats with foreign expeditions in the South Sea Islands, Indo-China and the Far East,” would assist him as chief photographer.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>61</sup> “List or Manifest of Alien Passengers,” Yokohama to San Francisco, 30 January 1918.

<sup>62</sup> “Motion Picture Camera to Reveal Unexplored Africa,” *Reel and Slide*, September 1919, 12-13; “Universal Will Explore the World with Camera,” *Exhibitors Herald and Motography*, 2 August 1919, 30-31; “Universal’s Cape to Cairo Expedition,” *Moving Picture Weekly*, 26 July 1919, 22-27. The expedition was not unique to Universal; two other production companies, one from Paramount, also went abroad to film far-off lands and peoples. “Universal Leads; Others Copy,” *Motion Picture News*, 21 February 1921, 1905; “Photographer to Speak on African Tour,” *Motion Picture News*, 9 October 1920, 2033.



*The African expedition, Scott on left. "Universal Will Explore the World with Camera," Exhibitors Herald and Motography, 2 August 1919, 31.*

The tentative itinerary was as ambitious as that of the Far East expedition of 1912-13, if not more so, intending to cover much of the continent. In October Scott sent Carl Laemmle, Universal's president, a cablegram from Johannesburg saying he had shot 10,000 feet of film already. That same month he reported that he had been out taking scenes of a diamond mine.<sup>63</sup>

Unfortunately for the expedition, disaster struck not long into the trip. In November two members of the party travelling to Elizabethville were killed in a train wreck—including actor and director William Stowell. Three others were injured. ("Several natives" were also killed, the article noted.) At the time

Scott was in Boira, in Portuguese East Africa.<sup>64</sup> By April 1920 the remaining crew had reached Tabora, said to be on the boundary of the Congo country and German East Africa, with another 350 miles to get to the east coast. "The expedition is meeting with great success so far as securing scenic film, and all speak enthusiastically of the trip." In October the industry trade paper *Wid's Daily* reported that at least one member of the expedition was returning to the United States, and that, from some 55,000 feet of negatives cut, Universal City was compiling 22 reels "of scenics to be released under the auspices of the Smithsonian Institute."<sup>65</sup>

The company remained in Africa

<sup>63</sup> "Motion Picture Camera to Reveal Unexplored Africa," *Reel and Slide*, September 1919, 13; "Shoot 10,000 Ft. in South Africa," *Film Daily*, 15 October 1919, 2; "Universal Expedition Takes Scenes of Diamond Mine," *Motion Picture News*, 1 November 1919, 3300.

<sup>64</sup> "William Stowell and Dr. Armstrong Killed in Africa," *Moving Picture Weekly*, 20 December 1919, 12; "Story of Bill Stowell's Death in Belgian Congo," *MPW*, 28 February 1920, 1475-76; "Universal Cameramen Back from Africa," *Motion Picture News*, 21 February 1920, 1877; "Denny Going to South Africa," *Wid's Daily News*, 5 January 1920, 1.

<sup>65</sup> "News Notes from the West Coast," *Motion Picture News*, 17 April 1920, 3518; "Coming Back: Universal-Smithsonian Expedition Returning - 22 Reels Ready," *Wid's Daily News*, 27 October 1920, 4; also,

through part of the following year. Scott made his way back to the United States via England, arriving in New York on 2 April 1921.<sup>66</sup> An elaborate *Los Angeles Herald* news piece later reported that Scott had “returned to his Hollywood residence . . . after several years of strenuous adventure in British East Africa.” He was “glad to be home again,” especially after experiences such as “being bitten by the dreaded tsetse fly on the dangerous 110-mile walk from Ninule to Rejaf, connecting Lake Albert with the Lower Nile.” According to the paper, Scott told of:

how he studied the art of the bushmen in their caves in Rhodesia; how he was forced to exist solely on bananas, the exclusive diet of the natives, while tracing the Nile from its source in the kagera marshes for 2000 miles to Khartum in the Sudan; how he visited the native “tailors” of German East Africa, where clothes are made of beaten tree bark, and how he was welcomed by a great chief and 2000 of his subjects, together with dancing girls on the lower part of the Great Victoria Lake.

He made fun of “naïve” Ugandan chieftains who constructed elaborate high entrance gates to their royal enclosures “in order to keep out the enemy” while the fences on either side were only four or

five feet high and could be easily jumped over. He mentioned his “many encounters with hippopotami, rhinoceri, lions, leopards, and buffalo, the latter being among the most vicious of the animals.” He found it difficult to photograph the wildlife given that they “are so nearly the color of the landscape.”<sup>67</sup>

In the end the African expedition, like the Méliès project to the South Pacific/Far East, was less than successful. Universal Studios considered the whole foray into Africa to be one of its “unfortunate experiences.” The trip provided “very interesting scientific films”—and most likely furnished clips that the studio used in a bevy of 1920s films that involved African plots—but led to a “considerable financial loss.”<sup>68</sup>

Scott turned up in the news a couple of times after that. In January 1928 a court awarded him the huge sum (for the time) of \$40,000 in damages: it seems “a permanent shave” at a beauty shop in Hollywood had mutilated his face. That same month he gave a lecture at the Broadway Palace based on his experiences in Cambodia: “The Royal Elephant Hunt and Mystery of Lost City.”<sup>69</sup> A couple of months later he was advertised as giving a similar talk to the Kiwanis Club

---

“Universal,” *Motion Picture News*, 4 September 1920, 1913. Universal did produce a serial, *The Diamond Queen*, in 1920, directed by Edward Kull, with scenes in South Africa, which might reflect some of Scott’s camerawork. Another film from the trip, *Shipwrecked by Cannibals*, was screened in Los Angeles in June 1920; “Universal Leases Astor Theater,” *Wid’s Daily News*, 25 June 1920, 1. Articles mention Horn and his return and editing work on the films, but not Scott.

<sup>66</sup> “List or Manifest of Alien Passengers,” Southampton to New York, 2 April 1921.

<sup>67</sup> “Scott, Back, Tells of Experiences in Jungles of Africa,” *Los Angeles Herald*, 17 October 1921, B1.

<sup>68</sup> “To Film Pamela Wynne’s Novel ‘Ann’s an Idiot,’ in Honolulu,” *Universal Weekly*, 8 November 1924, 10.

<sup>69</sup> “Los Angeles,” *Variety*, 25 January 1928; “Loew’s State, L.S., with Peabody and ‘Steer’ Won out at \$29,000,” *Variety*, 25 January 1928, 8.



**DAILY SHOW**  
7:45 P. M.

**MATINEE**  
SATURDAY

**LOMPOC THEATRE**

TWO SHOWS  
SATURDAY AND SUNDAY NIGHTS  
7:00 AND 9:00 P. M.

**"PICK OF THE PICTURES"**

TUESDAY AND WEDNESDAY, MARCH 20 and 21—  
TED McNAMARA and SAMMY COHEN, the comedy team of  
'What Price Glory,' in  
"The Gay Retreat"  
A comedy classic of War, Daze and Parisian Nights  
Animal Comedy—"WILD PUPPIES."  
"The Lost City"  
GEORGE SCOTT in Person  
Special 5-reel Historical Research of the Vanished Race of  
THE LOST CITY

THURSDAY, MARCH 22—  
AL WILSON and E. TARRON in  
"Skyhigh Saunders"  
Another air story with a pair of flying fools that will keep you  
"Up In The Air"  
Comedy—"ON DECK" Serial Chapter No. 9 'Vanishing Rider'  
Special Lindbergh Subject—"AROUND THE WORLD  
WITH LINDBERGH."

*Lompoc Review*, 20 March 1928.

sometimes called "spot coloring." After the inventor's death in 1928, Scott was said to be the only living person who knew the formula for the process.<sup>71</sup>

On 10 January 1929, George Scott was found dead in his gas-filled studio apartment at 1658 North Vine Street in L.A. He had, apparently, been dead from carbon monoxide poisoning for several days. He left no note, but, police said, the last entry in his diary indicated he was in failing health. The brief accounts of his death identified him as a "well-known technical" and "expert" cameraman, an explorer, and a member of the Adventurers' Club and the American Society of Cinematographers. None of the news pieces made mention of his origin or earlier career. A number said he was a brother-in-law of Max Handschiegl and had exclusive knowledge of the famous process for colouring film. He was said to have been survived only by his sister, Mrs. Handschiegl, who had turned over to him a power of attorney over her late husband's affairs. In a trial scheduled for February, Scott was "to have figured prominently in a lawsuit growing out of asserted infringements of the patent."<sup>72</sup>

How much of this sparse reporting is true remains unknown. Mrs. Max Handschiegl was not his sister, which means

in Lompoc, Cal.:

George Scott, noted explorer and one of the few white men who has been entertained in Cambodia, Indo-China, with a royal elephant hunt, will be at the Lompoc Theatre this evening and tomorrow evening in person to talk on the scenes shown in the extraordinary motion picture, "A Royal Elephant Hunt and the Mystery of the Lost City."<sup>70</sup>

He was clearly living, to some extent, on his past exploits. He had also become known as an associate of Max Handschiegl, a printmaker and engraver. Originally from St. Louis, Handschiegl had perfected a prominent and much-used process for colouring motion pictures,

<sup>70</sup> *Lompoc Review*, 20 March 1928, np.

<sup>71</sup> The Handschiegl connection is mentioned in "Mystery in Explorer's Death Here," *Los Angeles Times*, 11 January 1929, 23; and "Explorer's Death Due to Fumes," *Los Angeles Times*, 12 January 1929, 21. For Handschiegl, see also Koszarski, *Evening's Entertainment*, 128, 130; *International Projectionist*, November 1931, 13.

<sup>72</sup> "Mystery in Explorer's Death Here." For other death notices, see also: "Explorer's Death Due to Fumes"; "Director Found Dead," *Exhibitors Herald-World*, 6 January 1929, 54; "George Scott," *Variety*, 16 January 1919, 59; "George Scott, Cameraman, Killed by Gas at Home," *Motion Picture News*, 19 January 1929, 180D; "Hol-





*Los Angeles Times*, 11 January 1929, 23.

that Max Handschiegl was not his brother-in-law. Mrs. Handschiegl had, in a previous life, been Mrs. Bessie Muller, a widow, when she married Max Handschiegl in 1921. Her connection with George Scott goes back at least a little before that time—when he returned from Japan in 1918 his stated destination was Bessie Muller’s home in Hollywood. He probably got to know Bessie Muller (who was born in Hungary and immigrated to the United States in 1907) because she also worked in the film industry, as a “cutter.”<sup>73</sup>

Even more surprisingly, after his death George Scott rejoined his family,

in spirit if not in body. A grave marker for James Scotney George—with the death date of Jan. 7, 1929—was registered in the interior of British Columbia, where his original name joined his mother’s and others in the family plot in Pleasant Street Cemetery, Kamloops.<sup>74</sup>

Indeed, much is unknown about this man, George Scott. We do know that he was about average height for his time: either five-foot-eight or five-foot-ten (the record varies). He had a dark complexion, brown eyes, and, at least in his later life, grey hair. For some reason on his left forearm he had a bad scar, which served as an identification mark over the years. He identified himself as a cinematographer in 1913 and 1921; and as someone who worked in “moving pictures” in 1918.<sup>75</sup>

Scott appears to have been ambitious, an inveterate self-promoter, and an adventurer who in the end left little behind. We have to assume that his business enterprises in London, Toronto, and Peterborough did not go particularly well—why else would he have gone from one to another and abandoned the “George Scott & Co.” brand completely? Yet in a way he was typical of the norms of that period with its “emergence of cinema.” It was a time of rapid change and tran-

---

lywood Scene of Mystery Death,” *Ottawa Journal*, 11 January 1929, 1.

<sup>73</sup> “List or Manifest of Alien Passengers,” Yokohama to San Francisco, 30 January 1918; U.S. Census data, 1920, identifies Bessie Muller, Cassil Place address, as being born in Hungary in 1896, immigrating in 1907, occupation cutter.

<sup>74</sup> Find a Grave.com website, <<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/93216041/james-scotney-george>>. The site gives his birth date as “unknown” but has the correct death date.

<sup>75</sup> “List or Manifest of Alien Passengers,” 1913, 1918, 1921.

sition. In the realm of technology various new inventions and gadgets (like Scott's own Imperial Kosmogroph and Metascot film) were continuously bursting upon the scene and then just as rapidly vanishing. In the field of exhibition "theatoriums" were being abruptly established and just as quickly (and quietly) abandoned: of the three nickelodeons opened in Peterborough in 1907, for instance, only one survived for more than a year.

After his early business initiatives Scott seems to have drifted into being a cameraman and lab man for hire, with plenty of work available for him in the 1910s—and not just work, but travels to then-exotic places. We know very little about his personal life. He appears to have remained unmarried for life. It seems that he never intended to take up permanent residency—much less citizenship—in the United States: the 1918 passenger list for his trip from Japan indicates that he had been spending time in the States "in transit" (and, interestingly, that he had been there from 1907) and that he still considered himself a British subject.<sup>76</sup>

Based on his job history, he seems



to have been eminently reliable and skilled with the technology and techniques of the young industry. Did he get along with his co-workers? He certainly rubbed fellow cameraman Hugh McClung the wrong way; and in one of his letters McClung also suggests that Scott had problems with colleagues in New

York.<sup>77</sup> Gaston Méliès certainly thought well of Scott, expressing strong confidence in his abilities as a trusted employee. A flagging Méliès commented in a letter home from New Zealand that Scott and another colleague were "doing their best to help me out of my fatigue." Even a bitter McClung, while denigrating his rival's work in general, remarked that "poor Scott is as good as gold and means well and I admire him very much, for he is loyal and true."<sup>78</sup>

A couple of recent commentators have praised his work on Ford's *Straight Shooting*. "Credit must be given," says one, "to the cameraman George Scott for his ability to successfully capture Ford's vision so seamlessly." A blog by a Western genre enthusiast notes:

There is some good location shooting, when Ford and cinematographer George Scott showed their skill, and you can sometimes

<sup>76</sup> "List or Manifest of Alien Passengers," Yokohama to San Francisco, 30 January 1918.

<sup>77</sup> McClung, letter to his sister, 1 May 1913.

<sup>78</sup> Gaston Méliès, letter to Paul Méliès, 2 October 1912; McClung, letter to his sister, 17 April 1913.

<sup>79</sup> "Southwest Silents – John Ford before John Ford," <<https://southwestsilents.com/2013/06/05/john-ford-before-john-ford/>>; Jeff Arnold's West, <<https://jeffarnoldblog.blogspot.com/>>

glimpse the great outdoors through the windows of the interiors. It's well done. The outlaws' lair is filmed at Beale's Cut, Newhall and is dramatic.<sup>79</sup>

Scott was not entirely lost to Peterborough's historical record. A mention of his brief presence in town turned up in a July 1929 *Peterborough Examiner* article.<sup>80</sup> The writer, Cathleen McCarthy, said, however, that Scott opened "a little animated picture theatre" called Wonderland (it was the penny arcade/Colloseum) and that he was "now in the moving picture business in New York." Scott's recent death had not made the news in Peterborough (it did appear, off the wire, in the *Ottawa Journal*). But McCarthy's failure to get the facts straight does tell us something—that the links between the various parts of his life had gone missing, and that he remained a more or less near-forgotten figure. Indeed, other subsequent looks back (in 1939 and 1950) at early Peterborough motion picture theatres make no mention of him.<sup>81</sup>

In April 1938 a "George Scott" garnered a mention in *International Photographer* as one of three "pioneer specialists in trick photography."<sup>82</sup> Whether that was another memorable facet of

his work—or whether this was even *our* George Scott—remains unknown.

In any case, the newly discovered George Scott is, to begin, a rare example of the largely lost history of early cinema in Canada—and particularly in both Toronto and the smaller city of Peterborough. His 1904 film can still be seen—deposited in Library and Archives Canada and the U.S. Library of Congress collection and available on YouTube. Yet this independent showman was also a global phenomenon, an example of one of many people who made early films around the world as part of an emerging film industry—repackaged, for example, in the Urban Trading Company's early U.K. catalogues and applauded in the United States for his journey to the "Lost City" of Cambodia.

The jaunty young English fellow who once so nicely sported a silk topper—the protégé of Charles Urban, the self-proclaimed "pioneer manufacturer of moving pictures in Canada," the enterprising theatre proprietor, the Méliès associate, the Hollywood cinematographer and adventurous world travelling cameraman—is a complex character certainly worth more than a casual mention in Canada's cinema history.

---

search?q=Straight+Shooting>.

<sup>80</sup> "Peterborough Always Had Plenty of Amusements." The article has no byline, but was clearly written by *Examiner* staffer Cathleen McCarthy, who (using the byline "Jeanette") wrote movie reviews and specialized in Peterborough "amusements" from around 1924 to 1937.

<sup>81</sup> "Floor Covered with Sawdust Seats Were Planks in City's First Play House," *Examiner*, 28 February 1939, 10; "Opera, Marx Bros., Circuses, Noted Actors, Came to Town," *Examiner*, 14 July 1950, 13. Both articles wrongly credit Wonderland as the city's first motion picture theatre (and the Marx Brothers had not come to town).

<sup>82</sup> "Rear Projection Big Advance," *International Photographer*, April 1938, 32.