



Abby Meehan

Lived:

1853 - 1931

Worked as:

director, journalist

Worked In:

England

by Luke McKernan

Abby Meehan was a British fashion journalist, whose brief but distinctive engagement with film arguably gave birth to a new genre, the cinemagazine (McKernan 2008, ix-x). Her father, Bartholomew Meehan, was an antiquarian bookseller originally from Cork, who moved from Ireland to Liverpool, then Swansea in Wales, where Abby, the eldest of four children, was born in 1853. The Irish Catholic family finally settled in Bath, England. The family business was located at 1 Henrietta Street, from where Meehan and her sister Catherine established a millinery shop around 1880 (Advertisement [*Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*] 5).

Meehan had an earlier engagement with motion pictures than most. She was acquainted with Bath resident John Arthur Roebuck Rudge, a scientific instrument maker and magic lanternist. In the 1880s, he experimented with photographic sequences that could give the illusion of movement, and also collaborated with another Bath resident who dreamed of moving pictures, William Friese Greene (Carpenter 1996, 125-126). Meehan recalled, with some inaccuracy:

I have been deeply interested in cinematography in all its branches since I was a girl. I knew the late Mr. Henry [*sic*] Rudge, of Bath, the first inventor of moving pictures, very well. As a special treat he used to allow me to penetrate into the mysteries of his studio and workshop, and I soon learned much of interest concerning the wonders of the cinematograph. The first moving picture—one of a horse—was taken at Bath at that time (“Fashions on the Film” 211).

These were not true motion pictures, but Rudge’s experiments were a stepping stone toward the medium that would emerge a decade later. Henry Rudge was John Rudge’s father, and the so-called moving picture of a horse likely refers to the work of Eadweard Muybridge. Although

Meehan probably never met Friese Greene, he would later play a part in ending her short film career.

It was after the death of her father in 1892, when she was thirty-nine years old, that Meehan (who never married, and had no children) broke free. She moved to London, where she established herself as a fashion journalist. Meehan seems to have written for many newspapers and magazines, becoming a familiar figure in an industry where women writers still struggled for recognition. She launched and edited her own journal, *The Millinery Record*, in 1896, following this up with *The New Album* in 1905 and *The Sportswoman* in 1908. Three years after its creation, however, *The New Album* went into voluntary liquidation. Meehan was bankrupt the following year (“Court of Bankruptcy” 5).

Undaunted, Meehan revitalized her career through a combination of vision, patriotic appeal, and abundant energy. In a 1911 article for the *Daily Mail* on “An All-British Dress,” she championed British costumery and design over the common practice of deferring to Paris (Meehan 9). Meehan was instrumental in setting up the Ladies All-British Fabric and Fashion Association (for which she became organizing secretary), whose inaugural fashion show was held at London’s Claridge’s Hotel in March 1911. The event was marked by the publication of a souvenir book edited by Meehan: *The Ladies All-British Fabric and Fashion Book. The Official Organ of the Ladies’ All-British Fabric & Fashion Association*, a copy of which was received by Buckingham Palace (“All-British Shopping” 13). This proselytizing work was followed up by an All-British Fabric and Fashion Association event in June 1911, in Kensington Gore at the home of Mrs. Robert Yerburgh. The affair attracted the interest of Anglo-American film producer Charles Urban, whose Kinemacolor natural color film process was enjoying great success at the time. While ordinary monochrome films were shown in cinemas, Urban’s Kinemacolor films appeared more often in theaters. With higher ticket prices, these spaces marketed themselves to upper class audiences who might shrink from cinemas but who found Kinemacolor, with its focus on exotic travel, royalty, and fine society, appealing (McKernan 2013, 93-99).

Urban’s Natural Color Kinematograph Company filmed the Kensington Gore event on June 10, 1911, releasing it as a 410-foot film entitled *All-British Fashions Exhibition at Kensington Gore*. Urban was to have filmed a second All-British Fabric and Fashion exhibition held at the Royal Botanic Gardens in July 1912, but poor weather halted the plans (“A Lady’s London Letter” 2). For both ventures, Meehan’s role appears to have been that of contact and organizer, rather than film director, but she made a strong enough impact on Urban to persuade him to let her make a more ambitious fashion film. The *Kinemacolor Fashion Gazette* was designed as the film equivalent of the kind of magazines Meehan edited, just as the newly-invented newsreels were an extension of newspapers. It was to be a series, issued at least four times a year, in keeping with seasonal changes in fashion (“Editor’s Dream Come True” 1).

Fashion films had become a regular part of cinema programs by this time. The latest trends from the Paris fashion houses were featured items in the newsreel films produced by Gaumont and Pathé. These often utilized stencil color (that is, color artificially applied frame-by-frame to black-

and-white film via a stencilling process typically performed by women) to enhance the spectacle. The French branch of Kinemacolor had produced a film of Parisian models in 1912 (Cher 1912, 741), while its American counterpart produced a number of films of New York models that same year, which were billed as the “Kinemacolor Fashion Service” (“Kinemacolor for Ladies Only” 414). Meehan’s vision for the *Kinemacolor Fashion Gazette* was for it to be a regular, practical series of fashion films, as opposed to one-offs or a supply service. Such a series, if only seasonal, was an innovation, not just for fashion but for any non-fiction subject that did not fit exclusively into the category of news. It was planned as a magazine film, in form and content, a genre that was to enjoy a long life in the cinemas and remains a staple of television programming to this day.

The *Kinemacolor Fashion Gazette* was first exhibited publicly on October 13, 1913, at the Scala Theatre, in London, which was used by Urban as a showcase venue for his Kinemacolor productions before they were exhibited more widely. The film featured the models (most of whom were better known as actresses or singers) Lydia Yavorska (Princess Bariatinsky), Joy Chetwyn, Madame Bonita, Dorothy Minto, Sybil de Bray, Violet Essex, Nora Charsley, Elsa Collins, Renée Winter, and Clarissa Selwynne, with June Ford giving a demonstration of tango dancing with Ian Holt. The clothes came from a number of London and Paris fashion houses, among them Peter Robinson and Thomas & Sons (“Fashions on the Films” 213). It is likely that the now-lost *Kinemacolor Fashion Gazette* was a single reel film, running nine or ten minutes. The models were posed at relevant locations, including at a golf links, a tennis court, a hunt, the Hendon Aerodrome, and outside of Urban’s London home (Bushey Lodge) (“Editor’s Dream Come True” 2).

Press coverage of the film was extensive, in the national and regional press, as well as in film journals. The reports were generally laudatory: the *Pall Mall Gazette* noted that it was drawing crowds into the Scala (“On the Film” 14), and *The Globe* called it “a delightful living fashion plate...exceedingly well produced” (“The Scala Theatre” 6). However, the *Daily Telegraph* was less impressed. Its reporter admired the clothes, but added “from the point of view of entertainment and spectacle it must be pronounced exceedingly tedious” (“Scala Theatre” 7). The reporter also found the succession of tableaux too repetitive and the film likely to prove a “severe strain” upon the patience of younger members of the audience.

The film continued to be a part of the Scala program, and was shown in several cities across the country, until at least January 1914 (“Snippets from Southport” 148). It also formed part of a prestige “world’s fashion revue” film show for dressmakers and milliners that Meehan organized at the West End Cinema, on Coventry Street, on November 18, 1913. This event was organized in collaboration with *The Evening News* newspaper, which was celebrating its 10,000th issue. The program was a combination of the *Kinemacolor Fashion Gazette* and scenic items from the Kinemacolor library, featuring views from Switzerland, Egypt, Italy, and India, as well as scenes from historic homes and gardens (“The Fashion Revue” 7). A number of the latter had been taken under Meehan’s direction, including Claremont, Clarence House, Knole Park, Strawberry Hill, and Holly Lodge, and were part of planned series on the stately homes of England (“Fashions on the Film” 213).

Unfortunately for Meehan's cinematic aspirations, this was to be her final film venture. Urban's Natural Color Kinematograph Company became embroiled in a court battle over the Kinemacolor patent, brought on by rival color film inventor, and former Bath resident, William Friese Greene. The case reached the courts at the end of 1913, and although the original verdict was in Urban's favor, it was overturned on appeal and the patent was declared invalid. Urban put his company into liquidation, and all of his grand plans for Kinemacolor—including any hopes of further editions of the *Kinemacolor Fashion Gazette*—came crashing down (McKernan 2013, 118-122).

Meehan remained active in promoting British fashion, however. Notably, at the start of the First World War, she formed the British Women's Workers organization at 200 Marylebone Road, London, later Dorset Square, which mobilized women to produce objects to sell in support of the war effort, in particular flags, but also bags, toys, and lampshades ("New Opportunities for Women" n.p.). The goal was to find work for unemployed women, and it was organized as a profit-sharing exercise, for which Meehan gained the written support of Queen Alexandra (who purchased twenty-four flags) ("Our London Letter" 4). There were British Women's Workers exhibitions, the last of which was held in Knightsbridge in May 1916 ("British Women-Workers Exhibition" 6). However, Meehan seems to no longer have been involved by then (although one of the women who did take part was the pioneer war cinematographer [Jessica Borthwick](#), exhibiting sculptures under the name of Nell Foy).

Meehan is last recorded as a journalist in 1920, presumably retiring thereafter. Most likely, she pursued the antiquarian interests that she had long shared with her brother John Francis Meehan, a noted Bath historian and bookseller. She died in St. George Hanover Square parish, London, in 1931, at the age of seventy-eight. Although her film career was brief, and the cinemagazine film that she arguably pioneered never expanded into the series she envisaged, Meehan's enterprise and vision are worthy of notice. Sadly, very few Kinemacolor films survive today, and none of the films with which she was associated are known to exist.

See also: [Ada Aline Urban](#)

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Filmography

B. Filmography: Non-Extant Film Titles:

1. Abby Meehan as Organizer

All-British Fashion Exhibition at Kensington Gore, 1911.

2. Abby Meehan as Director

Kinemacolor Fashion Gazette/Urban Kinemacolor Fashion Gazette, 1913; *The Stately Homes of England*, 1913 [series, title uncertain, with these episodes directed by Meehan: “Claremont,” “Esher,” “Clarence House and Gardens,” “Holly Lodge,” “Knole Park,” and “Strawberry Hill”].

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