

**Challenge to Fascism: Glasgow's May Day (1938)**  
**Directed by Helen Biggar, Produced by Kino Film Group**

*Challenge to Fascism: Glasgow's May Day* was Helen Biggar's (1909-1953) last film [1]. It follows the preparations for Glasgow's 1938 May Day March and the march itself. The film was shot with three 16mm static cameras, manned by Biggar, her old tutor from Glasgow School of Art [2] Willie Maclean, and G. Bartlett of Glasgow Kino Group. It was the equivalent of one of the first crowd-funded films after Biggar placed an advert in the Scottish Co-operative newspaper seeking assistance to raise £50 to make it.

The film begins in a smoky room where the route of the march is discussed by the men of Glasgow Trades Council and Borough Labour Party Glasgow May Day Joint Committee. These first scenes are interspersed with a map of the route showing the city centre, plotting a line from George Square to People's Palace. The committee's discussions are then transcribed by secretaries at the Glasgow Trades Council. Biggar shows a woman typing as a man points out key points of a notice about the march with the stem of his pipe. The film captures the pace of the message being relayed, with a jump cut to a poster stating '*May Day Procession Demonstration Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> May, arrive 12.30pm prompt\**' then to the trades workplaces, where foremen communicate information on the march to the workers. Biggar sets the scene of Glasgow's industries, showing details from its shipyards and building sites.

From establishing the circulation of information about the march, Biggar moves on to document the preparation in the preceding month. Here lies the uniqueness of the film—Biggar, with her art school background, shows artists alongside trades and portrays domestic labour alongside the predominantly male workforce. Women sew; men paint placards, including the slogans '*Chamberlain Must Go!*' and '*Unity!*'; labels are stuck on wrapped bundles of leaflets; the outside 'K' from 'Kino' is sanded down in preparation for the Kino Film float. On the day before May Day, the horses are cleaned and bridled at the blacksmiths. Two children watch as the wheels of a trailer are washed to make it ready to be a float. Biggar begins the morning of the May Day March with a shot of Glasgow tenement windows. Inside a flat, a dining table is set with four bowls and a loaf of bread. The Mother pours the porridge as the children look on. To emphasise the importance of the date, there is a close up of May 1 on their wall calendar.

Biggar then sets the scene of the gathering point for the march with an aerial shot of George Square, which is still quiet. The family who were portrayed earlier leave their close in Sunday best, holding hands. The procession assembles in George Square, with Biggar beginning the build-up to the start of the march. A group of men lift a banner for a trial run. Pipe band members are assembled but at ease. The messages on banners are shown again: '*Unity is Strength*', '*The Guarantee of Security*'. The crowds, which include families, grow in size. People are very well dressed in woollen suits and overcoats. There are representatives of the armed regiments, milling around. Activists sell newspapers. Banners are raised in preparation for marching. The pipers begin.

The procession starts at 12.30pm. A policeman directs people to march in an orderly manner. Biggar shows the spectators at the side of the road to give a sense of the density of people and the support for the cause. The camera focuses on a series of floats and their slogans, including: Maryhill SSS (Socialist Sunday School), Kinning Park Co-operative Society, Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers, miners carry tilly lamps, TGWU Building Trades for Labour Glasgow Branch, the Society of Dyers, Central Divisional Labour Party '*Support Holidays With Pay*', Scottish Socialist Party Govan Branch with their slogan '*Workers of the World Unite*' and '*Arms for Spain*'.

The film returns time and time again to the use of text such as documents, floats, placards, and banners to consistently reinforce the message. Biggar is also careful to represent solidarity of the trades with other walks of life, for example, showing university students and academics marching in their gowns '*Glasgow Students Support Glasgow Comrades*'. Volunteers from the International Brigade wave the Spanish Republican Flag. People hang out of windows of the surrounding buildings or, if at road level, stand on things to get a better

look at the procession. There is an inherent order and dignity of protest. There is a limited number of police.

The final inter-title card states '*The Enormous Procession fills the two miles route from George Square to Glasgow Green*'. The political message for support for Spain is clear with the slogans and placards in a montage: '*Arms for Spain*', '*Help Spain*', '*Throw Your Money For Spain Here*' and '*Unity Will Save Spain*'. Biggar finishes the film focussing on a series of crowds gathered around different impassioned orators, including a representative for the International Brigades asking for volunteers.

'*Challenge to Fascism*' was made during a highly politicised era in a politically engaged city, where ordinary people were emboldened by idealism, faith and democracy. The Scottish working class movement was alarmed at Franco's coup d'état. Naturally exhibiting an inherent internationalism that rejected fascism, it took the struggle of the Spanish republic to heart. There was outrage when Chamberlain signed the Non Intervention Agreement in 1936, with the consequence that the UK stood by as Hitler and Mussolini armed Franco's nationalists. Money for arms and aid was raised with over 500 Scots joining the International Brigades to fight Franco in the Spanish Civil War. Many more travelled to Spain to support Republican efforts to help the Spanish people.

Helen Biggar grew up in a politicised household. Her father, Hugh Biggar, was a house builder who was one of the founding members of the Independent Labour Party. It was her home life that provided intellectual stimulation— she was encouraged to learn about, and to discuss, both politics and foreign affairs. Political ideals were not just talked about but practiced: when women over thirty got the vote in 1918, Hugh Biggar re-registered the family flat under his wife Florence's name to ensure she fulfilled the property qualification.

Biggar's filming and political subject is very different from the other women filmmakers of the time with its overt political message. Her confidence came from clear knowledge and understanding of the political and a commitment to the Socialist and the Spanish Republican cause. She clearly learned the art of constructing political argument from her parents, using this to express her own visual radicalism and a filmic rhetoric, which shows and reinforces her ideals. We see an alternative culture, a significant body of people, make sincere efforts to reject the government's foreign policy and to stand and fight with ordinary working people like them in Spain. This film must have been deeply challenging for the establishment, given that in 1938, The Films of Scotland Committee- advised by John Grierson (1898-1972) - was telling a different story of Scotland for the Empire Exhibition at Bellahouston Park in Glasgow. *Challenge to Fascism* with its roaring orators and political message is the noisiest silent film. This is how a revolution looks, exemplified by this re-telling of people organising and standing together.

Jenny Brownrigg and Shona Main (2016)

## FOOTNOTES

[1] Biggar assisted Norman McLaren (1914-1987) with set props for his first film *Camera makes Whoopee* (1935), a surreal montage of film and animation of the preparations for the GSA ball. She joined him in the Glasgow Kino, a filmmaking group that combined filmmaking with revolutionary politics. Together they made the film *Hell UnLtd* (1936), a rage against the arms trade and capitalism. The war years made independent filmmaking very difficult. Biggar moved to London and worked in Theatre Unity Theatre Group, moving on to wardrobe design for Ballet Rambert. Biggar's life is chronicled in *Helen Unlimited: A Little Biggar* (2014), Anna Shepherd, published by Billie Love Historical Collection.

[2] Biggar received a diploma from the Glasgow School of Art School in 1929 in textile design and received a small travelling bursary of £10 in 1930.