

“Coaxing Nature to the Screen”: Frank Percy Smith and the Transformations of British Natural History in the Pre-WWII Era of Technological Innovation and Mass Entertainment

WRoCAH funded Collaborative Doctoral Award between the School of Philosophy, Religion and History of Science, University of Leeds, and the National Science and Media Museum



Lead Academic and Partner Organisation Supervisors



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Project summary

In the 2020s, the world looks to David Attenborough to reveal the wonders of nature on the screen. But in the 1920s that position was held by the London-born amateur naturalist turned "kinematographic wizard" Frank Percy Smith (1880-1945). Drawing on little-explored archival holdings on Smith at the National Science and Media Museum, the project will use Smith's extraordinary career to open up new perspectives on how technological innovation - especially in the sound and vision technologies showcased in the Museum's new galleries - has transformed the knowledge, practice and personnel of British natural history in the long twentieth century.

PhD Project description

The project is a historical inquiry into the remaking of British natural history in the wake of the new sound and vision technologies associated with cinema. It will be anchored in a study of the career of Frank Percy Smith, a pioneer of

nature documentaries who invented several techniques (including time-lapse photography) that brought never-before-seen perspectives on the natural world to mass audiences. Without university training or credentials, Smith fought hard to be taken seriously for his contributions to natural knowledge while at the same time producing work with sufficient mass appeal to be commercially viable. Both sides of his achievement - and the tensions between them - are visible in the title of a full-page newspaper profile of him in 1936: "Coaxing Nature to the Screen: How Science is Wrestling Secrets from Her."



The key research questions are:

- (1) What does an archivally informed reconstruction of Smith's career reveal about how his era's new technologies transformed the content, contexts and constituencies for British natural history?
- (2) What were the conditions - cultural and economic as well as intellectual and technical - that permitted the emergence of a scientifically significant yet commercially successful career such as Smith's?
- (3) In what ways does J.-B. Gouyon's (2019) analysis of post-WWII British natural history filmmaking need modification for the previous era?

The research will be based on the Smith holdings and associated object collections at the National Science and Media Museum (NSMM). Alongside study of the Smith holdings, which include correspondence, working papers, photographs, drawings, newspaper cuttings and ephemera (e.g. playbills for his films), the research will encompass work with other British archives (including film archives) and reading in period newspapers, magazines, scientific journals etc. as well as in the scholarly secondary literature.

This project will produce the first systematic study of Smith's career from within scholarly history of science while remedying gaps in two literatures, on British natural history (patchy for the early twentieth century, when amateurs like Smith often led in integrating new technologies) and on natural-history filmmaking (which for this period is heavily US-focused). Its timeliness derives from the recent scholarly ferment on twentieth-century British scientific filmmaking as well as from the inclusion of a display on Smith in the NSMM's new Sound and Vision galleries.

The materials collected by the NSMM are so diverse that the project student will be able to put their stamp on the project by concentrating on particular

themes in line with their interests and background. From the start, the project supervisors will encourage the student to find their own way into the project by pursuing distinctive emphases.

The expertise of the supervisors is well suited to the project. At Leeds University, Prof. Gregory Radick is a leading historian of twentieth-century biology and co-supervisor Prof. Jonathan Topham a leading historian of popular science. At the NSMM, Dr Annie Jamieson combines expertise in the Smith holdings, curatorial expertise in media technologies and scholarly expertise in the history of science (in which she holds a PhD in the development and public reception of new photographic techniques in early-twentieth-century Britain).

About the National Science and Media Museum

Located in the West Yorkshire city of Bradford – the UK’s City of Culture for 2025 – the NSMM is one of five museums constituting the national Science Museum Group (SMG), along with the Science Museum in London, the Science and Industry Museum in Manchester, the National Railway Museum in York, and Locomotion in Shildon. The Museum has seven floors of galleries with permanent exhibitions focusing on photography, television, animation, videogaming, the Internet and the scientific principles behind light, colour and sound. It also hosts temporary exhibitions – currently of recent works by David Hockney – and maintains a collection of 3.5 million pieces in its research facility.

Notable objects and archives include: the first photographic negative; the earliest television footage; the world's first colour moving pictures; Louis Le Prince's 1888 films *Roundhay Garden Scene* and *Traffic Crossing Leeds Bridge*; a collection of 35,000 objects and images donated by Kodak Ltd; a collection of around 1,000 historical objects from the BBC; the photographic archive of the Daily Herald, comprising millions of images; the photographic archive of Tony Ray-Jones; original toys from the BBC series *Play School* – the first programme on BBC2; and objects and designs used in the making of Hammer horror films. After extensive refurbishment the Museum reopened its doors in January 2025 and is currently preparing for the July opening of the stunning new Sound and Vision Galleries, which includes information about Frank Percy Smith and his innovations.

Engagement, outreach, dissemination and impact initiatives

The student will engage in several research and public engagement activities to further our understanding of Smith and to communicate their research to the public. These comprise:

1. Developing the catalogue of the Smith archive, notably by providing extensive descriptive metadata to promote access to Smith's papers, correspondence and films.

2. As part of Bradford City of Culture 2025 (when Bradford is simultaneously a UNESCO City of Film), and beyond, assisting with public events and film screenings at the Museum's Pictureville Cinema, to accompany the Museum's new Sound and Vision galleries, which will be finished in the first half of 2025 after a £6m building project.
 3. Contributing an online resource on early nature documentaries, as part of SMG's established programme of "Objects and Stories" features online, accompanying other entries arising from research projects, such as "Cinema and Psychology," which explores the intersections between psychology and the world of cinema.
 4. Producing at least two blog posts that would add content to the "National Science and Media Museum Blog."
 5. Writing at least one 6-8,000 word paper to be published in "Science Museum Group Journal."
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Financial support

Studentships for doctoral research are 40 months in duration for full-time study. Awards are subject to satisfactory academic progress. Awards must be taken up in October 2025; no deferrals are possible as this is the final round of recruitment to WRoCAH CDAs. Awards will comprise fees at Research Council rates and a tax- and national insurance-free maintenance grant (£20,780 in 2025/26). The grant pays the fees at the Home/UK rate; international students are, however, eligible to apply for this Studentship, and the University of Leeds will cover the difference between the Home/UK and International fees. Awards may be taken up on a part-time basis if a student is eligible to undertake part-time study; international applicants may be required to study full-time under the terms of their visa.

Qualifications

Strong applicants will have a good first degree in an appropriate subject, as well as a Master's degree (or be working towards one), usually at Distinction level, or professional experience relevant to the scope of the project. We are looking for a well-qualified student with a background in any of the following disciplines: history of science and/or technology; history of film and photography; history of Britain in the twentieth century.

Requirements of the Studentship

This opportunity is being offered as a full time studentship but part time study may be an option subject to agreement with the supervision team.

WRoCAH students are required to undertake a bespoke training package and to complete a Researcher Employability Project of at least a month and a Knowledge Exchange Project. The student on this project will additionally undertake a programme of museum-based training to develop valuable skills in the heritage sector, including object and archive handling, hazards in collections, cataloguing, and more.

All WRoCAH students must submit their thesis for examination with the funded period. This is a requirement of the Arts & Humanities Research Council, which provides the funding for WRoCAH, and is a condition of accepting a Studentship.

Before applying for any WRoCAH Studentship, please first ensure that you have read the WRoCAH webpages about the WRoCAH training programme and requirements, as well as other funding opportunities

<http://wrocah.ac.uk/>

How to apply

By 12 noon Wednesday 5 March 2025, applicants are required to submit to WRoCAH an Expression of Interest, which should include:

1. A CV with details of academic qualifications
2. A covering letter comprising a two-page statement to convey your motivation and enthusiasm for the project, and to demonstrate your suitability for your intended PhD studies with the University and Project Partner.

The covering letter should specifically highlight the following:

- Your interest in the project and details on why you have chosen that University and Project Partner.
- How you will apply your current skills, knowledge and experience to undertake a PhD and the approach you would take to develop the project.
- How the project fits into your career plans and ambitions.

- 17 March 2025: decision on short-listing
The short-list of candidates to be invited for an interview will be announced on Monday 17 March 2025.
- *Short-listed candidates must complete a PhD programme application before interview.* If you are short-listed for an interview you will be sent details of how to apply for a place at the University of Leeds. At that point you will need to submit the names and contact details of two referees, copies of transcripts of your academic qualifications and (if applicable) an IELTS certificate.
- 7-30 April 2025: interviews

Interviews will involve the academic supervisor, Project Partner supervisor and a member of the WRoCAH Studentships Committee. They will be conducted online.

For more information about this project contact

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